Celebrating 50 Years of Deaf Education
1967 - 2017
On October 12, 2017 our community came together for an extraordinary night to celebrate 50 years of an extraordinary school community. Started as an idea conceived by a small group of parents looking for a different and better way to educate their deaf children, the past 50 years of progress at the Willie Ross School have been nothing short of remarkable.

Through all of the ups and downs in our history, one thing remains perfectly clear and was on ample display at our 50th Anniversary Gala Celebration: our school is a place filled with love. From our alumni, teachers and administrative staff to our students and their families, the affection for our school, for each other and for our community was the real story of our evening to celebrate. The appearance by actor Anthony Natale was a highlight, both at the school before our Gala where he met with our students and at the evening celebration where he shared his story about overcoming obstacles in pursuing a career as a deaf actor.

This year’s annual report allows us to reflect on this watershed year in our history—including the SummerFest event held as part of a year-long celebration of our half-century in existence. Our summer picnic allowed us to connect with community members from Longmeadow, East Longmeadow and the region. We also share photos and reflections offered by an alumnus, a student and also a parent from that special October evening as we looked back on our past success. At the same time we are always looking forward, knowing that our services and our total communication approach in working with our students prepares them for life and future success once they leave our campus.

We remain confident about our school’s future, and gratified that our first 50 years have meant so much to the many lives we have touched.

Finally, we want to thank everyone who had a part in our incredibly successful 50th Anniversary Gala—Kathy Tobin for serving as master of ceremonies, Anthony Natale for his inspiring presence and Emily Hodos who helped in all of our planning for the SummerFest and the Gala. And, of course, thanks to our amazing students, their families, our incredible staff, teachers, Board of Trustees, donors and supporters. You all are the reason we are here.

Sincerely,

Attorney Susan C. Phillips
Chair of the Board

Bert Carter
President & CEO

A Message from Bert and Susan

Serving Students & Families for Half a Century; Looking Towards a Bright Future

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Attendees of our October Gala were treated to a presentation by deaf actor Anthony Natale, famous for his roles in Mr. Holland’s Opus and Jerry Maguire. In television, Anthony played a recurring role in ABC Family’s hit drama Switched at Birth. He has also performed in numerous stage productions, is an ASL master and Certified Deaf Interpreter.

Prior to our Gala event, Anthony visited with our students and teachers during the school day and also appeared on WWLP-TV’s Mass Appeal program to promote The Willie Ross School and to share his story. At our Gala celebration he inspired the audience by reflecting on the journey that took him from a school for the deaf in Canada to roles in feature films and a successful career. His message: all can succeed by believing in themselves.

The Gala provided an opportunity to look back, through the eyes of alumnus Bruce Beston; appreciate the present with an inspiring presentation by high school and mainstreaming student Bryan Ramos-Navarro; and parent Yesenia Burgos shared the outlook for the future of her child who is a current kindergarten student at our main campus.
President and CEO Bert Carter has made a concerted effort to reach out and re-engage Willie Ross School alumni. That effort has led to on-campus social gatherings and to production of a video where some of the school’s very first students shared their memories about attending the school in its early years.

Bruce Beston, a program manager for the Center for Human Development, shared his thoughts on the role of Willie Ross in his life both in the video and from the stage at the Gala celebration at the Hall of Fame.

“My parents were part of the founding parents group here that started the school, and I was a member of the first class that attended the school. When my parents realized I was deaf, they wanted to make sure I was receiving a fair, appropriate education, and a lot of the deaf schools, particularly in Western Massachusetts at that time, you’d have to live there, they were residential programs.

“But my parents wanted me to be a member of their family, so they wanted me to come home every day. They found that they weren’t the only parents who wanted that environment for their children. They wanted their children to attend a day school, just like anybody else.”

This small group of parents was determined to see the school succeed and, according to Bruce, their influence is still felt today. “It was a very close-knit group. The school and the parents really worked as a partnership, and that partnership was so key… that relationship was so important… that it trickled down and influenced the education here at the school to this day.”

The special environment created by those founding parents had an impact beyond the classroom as well. “I was raised to help other people, and I really have to thank this school for making me who I am today,” Beston says.

The 50th Anniversary celebration would not have been complete without a reflection from a parent. Yesenia Burgos, mother of seven-year-old Christopher, spoke about her journey as the mother of a child with many obstacles to overcome.

Christopher was diagnosed at birth with hearing loss due to cochlear dysplasia, and Yesenia immediately knew she had to be his voice and his biggest advocate. After countless appointments with audiologists and other specialists, Christopher had two working hearing aids and the additional diagnoses of ADHD and speech apraxia.

After entering the public school system, it quickly became clear to Yesenia that the pace was too fast for Christopher and he was falling behind. Even with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place and other in-classroom supports, it was eventually decided that Christopher needed an out-of-district placement, and the family eventually discovered The Willie Ross School for the Deaf.

For Yesenia, her dream for a brighter future for her child began to take shape in June 2017 when Christopher started at Willie Ross. Yesenia shared with the audience that Christopher is a different child now because he finally feels like he has a place where he belongs and is able to relate to other children in his class.

As part of the Willie Ross family now, Yesenia and Christopher have high hopes that he is on the path to a bright future, with education and support from peers and educators as the necessary foundation.

In expressing her gratitude to the school, Yesenia reminded all in attendance that, in the end, the Willie Ross School community is all about changing life prospects and futures, “one child at a time.”
SummerFest Community Celebration

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the school, Willie Ross hosted SummerFest, a community celebration open to all on Saturday, July 15, 2017 at Greenwood Park on Maple Road in Longmeadow. The event served as a thank you to the communities of Longmeadow, home to the school’s main campus, and East Longmeadow, where the Partnership Campus is hosted in East Longmeadow Public Schools. Friends from those communities and from the Willie Ross School community enjoyed a beautiful summer day filled with fun, food and fellowship.

The event was free and open to all and included a barbecue, family-friendly entertainment, field games, art activities, face painting and a bounce house. Alumni, students and parents of students also were given an opportunity to share their personal testimonies and reflections on what the school has meant to them at a video station that was set up at the event.

Founders Fund Established

In honor of WRSD’s 50th Anniversary, and announced at the October Gala, the Guertin family established the Founders Fund to support student enrichment programs. With a generous 1:1 matching gift, a goal of raising $50,000 for Willie Ross School’s future was established. To date we have reached 82% of our goal.

To make a gift to the Founders Fund please send your contribution to:
The Willie Ross School for the Deaf
32 Norway Street
Longmeadow, MA 01106

Our 2017 Graduates On TV22

WWLP-22 News covered our 2017 graduation. Willie Ross students Yosmailin Caminero-Rijo and Caridad Cruz-Morales, of Springfield, and Jordan Alicea of Huntington, graduated from WRSD in June 2017. At the time of graduation, Caminero-Rijo was planning to enter the workforce, Cruz-Morales was planning to work with Community Enterprises in their deaf work program, and Alicea was planning to attend Holyoke Community College’s Criminal Justice Program.

2017 Revenue by Source

Total 2017 Revenue: $3,577,159

2017 Expenses by Program

Total 2017 Expenses: $3,473,984