Look what we discovered inside the wall

Building Our Bright Future

Just a couple of years ago we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Willie Ross School for the Deaf and shared how, building upon the strong foundation of our first half-century, we envisioned a bright future.

It was during our gala that year that the new Founders Fund was lovingly established by the Guertin family. We also launched our capital campaign that has led to the transformation, now well underway, of our Longmeadow campus with a much-needed upgrade.

That bright future began to take shape in 2019 when a $1.2 million renovation was quite visibly launched and, once completed, will feature new space for interpreters, an updated audiology center, improved wheelchair access and other long-overdue upgrades to our administration building that was, quite literally, close to falling apart.

The new building represents a physical manifestation of the dedication, care and vision from our Board of Trustees, teachers, support staff, parents and the community at large that has sustained us for all these years.

There is much more good news to share.

We are happy to report that our outreach services have expanded dramatically—going from 165 students served five years ago to 352 receiving outreach services in 2019.

In late 2019, Willie Ross hired new staff member Joel Skelton, who has been tasked with the responsibility to expand our presence and outreach through events, social media and in targeted grants.

Our classrooms, both at our Longmeadow and East Longmeadow Partnership campuses, are alive with students, and as we provide more services off campus, we continue to strengthen the best staff and teachers in the field. Soon, the revitalization of our Longmeadow administrative and audiology services building will be completed.

We are happy to report our shared successes in this year’s annual report and to recap a year that has our school on the path toward that brighter future in meeting the needs of the children and families we serve.

There is much to be proud of as we enter a new decade, and we would not be able to have this sustained success without each of you who are part of the Willie Ross School community and family.

J. Robert Kirkwood, M.D.
Chair of the Board of Trustees

Bert Carter
President & CEO
Last fall at our annual WRSD Gala, Dr. Erica Broman was honored for her service to the school. The recognition was overdue for the former longtime trustee and supporter of Willie Ross. The School also honored Shurtleff Children’s Services, a generous supporter of the school for many years.

Erica’s tenure with Willie Ross occurred during a period of many ups and downs for the school, and she became known as a steady force on the Board of Trustees. She promoted Willie Ross to the general community, and since ending her tenure on the Board of Trustees remains one of our longest and most loyal supporters.

Erica serves as Vice President of Institutional Development and Director of the Western State Foundation at Western State University. She previously served as Executive Director of the Holyoke Community Foundation College for more than fourteen years.

Shurtleff Children’s Services Foundation has supported the School for over four decades, including grants to support our programs and operations. The purpose of Shurtleff Children’s Services is to promote the health and welfare of children in the region.

We thank Dr. Erica Broman and Shurtleff Children’s Services for being an important part of our story.

The Sidney M. Cooley Administration Building, named after Judge Sidney M. Cooley who was a great and loyal friend to the School, has served our community well. But over the last few years it was decided the time had come to refurbish the building that housed both administrative offices and our audition services. Our successful capital campaign, launched in 2018, has led to the start of rehabilitation and expansion of the building in 2019.

Now well underway, the renovation and expansion will add a second story to the Cooley Building that will feature new space for interpreters, an updated audition center, a redesigned main entrance, improved wheelchair access, new space for the School’s School to Career services and upgraded administrative technology.

This comprehensive renovation will also include new landscaping of the property and replacement of windows and insulation to increase energy efficiency. The project is expected to be completed by the end of 2020.

According to President & CEO Bert Carter, “We have been operating within an aging and inefficient infrastructure for a long time, and this capital improvement plan will allow us to provide a 21st century learning environment for our school community.”
Parenting ten children certainly had its challenges. But for Armand and Aline Guertin, the realization that their son, Vincent, was deaf, presented no barrier for them as they and a small and committed group of other parents launched a school for the deaf.

It was the mid 1960s when a rubella epidemic swept the eastern United States, resulting in birth defects for the babies of pregnant women exposed to the virus, including deafness. The parents of Willie Ross, the namesake of the school, the Guertins and other parents each had a child born deaf, and united in a common cause. Together, they established the Willie Ross School for the Deaf. Prior to this, children had to be bused out of the region or into an overnight residential program, unable to join in family life.

According to Vincent’s sister, Janine Laverdiere, “Our parents were involved because they wanted our brother who was deaf from birth to have a good education so that he could succeed in the world. Our parents were one of the founding parents of the school – from finding a place to open a school to hiring the teachers.”

Her brother, Pierre Guertin, says, “Our parents were shocked when learning Vincent was deaf. Many others were impacted by a prevalent rubella virus. This collective group of parents supported each other. Willie Ross was a community well before a school.”

For the family, the memories of starting the school that would serve Vincent and others are indelible. Sister Celeste Planzo says, “We would visit the Longmeadow campus before it opened, watching it take shape. I was impressed by what a small group of passionate, caring parents was able to accomplish.”

“Once the school was up and running, including at an initial temporary facility, the young students’ faces showed their excitement about learning and being with each other,” Celeste says.

So it is fitting that one of the School’s founding families, who saw their brother flourish as one of the first students at Willie Ross School, has established the Founders Fund to support the school going forward.

As Celeste says, “We’re committed to seeing the school continue to succeed because we see how much it helped my brother. He is very independent. He not only has the love and respect of his family, but his employers, friends and colleagues as well. He was recently recognized as Employee of the Year by Giant Foods in Pennsylvania where he works.”

The family’s generous gift of $25,000 establishes the fund and will allow Willie Ross to reach out to other individuals for support.

“Our family made a financial gift to challenge others to join us as the first contributors to the newly-established Founders Fund. The Fund celebrates the founders and hopefully encourages others in the community to join in providing funds. Additional unrestricted funds enable the staff to enhance the students’ education and experience,” Pierre says.

Janine sums up the ultimate goal of financial support for the school and the reason for her family’s generosity, saying “I see firsthand the wonderful education that my brother had while attending Willie Ross School, and our family would like that tradition to continue.”

The Guertin Family, Among Our Founders, Continues to Advance Willie Ross With Establishment of Founders Fund
Walking in the Same Shoes

Joel Skelton
Coordinator of Community Engagement

Joel Skelton comes to his new position at the Willie Ross School from a very personal place. “My hearing loss is unique. It’s called central auditory processing disorder. While I can hear my environment, my brain often can’t make sense of what’s going on,” Joel says. And as a result, and because he was able to pass hearing tests, Joel never was afforded the use of an interpreter when he was in grade school. As a result, his academic performance suffered.

Joel recounts, “I was forced into mainstream classes and although I had IEPs and was ‘subject’ to the deaf center’s administration, I could not use their resources except for an FM system that did not help at all. I did not have implants, although I did try hearing aids once. They were not successful.”

After receiving the benefit of interpreters in high school, Joel excelled, went on to earn a college degree at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. “I was forced into mainstream classes and although I had IEPs and was ‘subject’ to the deaf center’s administration, I could not use their resources except for an FM system that did not help at all. I did not have implants, although I did try hearing aids once. They were not successful.”

After receiving the benefit of interpreters in high school, Joel excelled, went on to earn a college degree at the prestigious Rochester Institute of Technology, and along the way learned and lived a valuable lesson.

Walking in those shoes as a former student who did not have all of the available communication methods and supports allows Joel to appreciate the WRSD approach to learning in a special way. Joel is well positioned to tell the Willie Ross story, informed by his own journey, in the position of Coordinator of Community Engagement, newly-created in 2019.

Joel’s very personal experience will inform and guide him about WRSD’s approach to helping students succeed. “What appealed to me about WRSD was its commitment to and policy for Total Communication—communication methods that are best suited for the individual child.”

In his new position, Joel will be expanding the school’s presence on social media, through events and in grant writing. He will, no doubt, be guided by his own experience that education should recognize that every student is unique. Indeed, the Willie Ross approach to employ all methods that are best suited for the individual child.

Receiving the appropriate education at Willie Ross can be a game changer, as it was for Joel. “The academic support they provide for their students based on the individual needs of each student is very impressive along with their School-to-Career program to help students be successful in the workforce after they graduate from Willie Ross,” he says.

And about his service now on the Board of Trustees, Jason says, “The Willie Ross board consists of long-term members who are dedicated and have a strong commitment to advance the school’s mission. I am honored for the opportunity to serve.”

New Trustee Profile

Jason Sergentanis Gives Back

Jason Sergentanis is President of Northeast Contractors, Inc., which specializes in earthwork-construction all over New England. Jason is a successful businessman, a devoted family man and is also one of the newest members of the WRSD Board of Trustees.

What makes Jason’s service as Trustee unique is that he is a former student of the school. “Willie Ross School supported me when I was a student and now I have an opportunity to provide my support to Willie Ross School. I am very familiar with the school and their philosophy,” Jason says.

Through his own experience, Jason recognizes just how important schools for the deaf, especially Willie Ross, are to those needing deaf educational programs and services.

“Public school systems may not have the proper services in place for deaf and hard of hearing children and they turn to Willie Ross School for the services they need,” he says. “Willie Ross School has the professional development services to help the deaf or hard of hearing child be successful academically,” he says.

2019 Grads

Five students graduated from Willie Ross School for the Deaf in 2019. At the time of graduation, Zeng Tuo Correra planned to return to his hometown for another year of work study experience; Jessica Acevedo-Viruet planned to transition to Viability Inc.’s adult services; Bruce Lussier’s plans were to join the workforce; and Tyler Rusciano and Kamal Kasimov planned to attend Holyoke Community College.
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Total 2019 Revenue: $4,513,668

2019 Revenue by Source

- Tuition Revenue
- Summer Program Revenue
- Outreach Contract & Program Revenue
- Outreach-Sign Language Revenue
- Outreach-Audiology
- Fundraising Donations, Grants & Events

2019 Expenses by Program

- 766 (Tuition) Program
- Outreach Programs
- Administrative
- Fundraising

Total 2019 Expenses: $4,215,045