In 2017, Willie Ross School for the Deaf celebrated its 50th year of existence, so 2018 represented a time to look forward as we build upon the solid footing established by our founding parents, staff, executive leadership and Board of Trustees.

Willie Ross enjoyed another successful year at the school, but much of 2018 was devoted to planning as we continue to respond to the needs of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community in our region.

Opportunities to spread our reach beyond our physical campuses grew in 2018 with a demonstrable rise in use of our Outreach Division in serving school districts. We provide district-based certified teachers, direct services in the realm of speech and language, and in-school sign language instruction. These services reached throughout Western Massachusetts to include the Berkshires, and Willie Ross was engaged to provide ASL classes at Smith Academy in Hatfield.

We also expanded our Audiology Services division last year in order to serve more people in the community by hiring new staff.

The biggest news in 2018 had to do with the launching of the quiet phase of our $1 million capital campaign to expand our campus and facilities in Longmeadow. We are proud to report that we passed the halfway mark to our goal during 2018 and are confident we will raise the $1 million needed in this calendar year to undertake much-needed improvements to our Longmeadow campus and administrative facilities.

The renovation will include new space for interpreters, an updated audiology center, a redesigned main entrance, improved wheelchair access, new space for the school’s Creating Access to Real World Employment for Students (CARES) program and upgraded administrative technology.

None of this would be possible without the ongoing generosity of our donors, who have helped sustain Willie Ross and help us thrive through the years. We take time in this annual report to celebrate Russ Nubile, one of those humble donors who has helped make a difference for our school community.

We recognize every day that we have been blessed by amazing donors, staff and Trustees in serving this very special school community. We thank everyone who makes a difference as we embark on the next chapter in our school’s journey.
Expanding Audiology Services to the Public

In 2018, Willie Ross strengthened its Audiology Services division with the addition of Dr. Decia DeMaio, joining Dr. Joy Guay, Debra Scanlon and Albert Breeding on the clinic team. Expanded services are now available for pediatric and adult hearing evaluations and hearing aid fittings. Patients must be at least three years old for on-site evaluations for the services rendered in the Sidney M. Cooley Administration Building.

Dr. DeMaio specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of hearing loss in patients of all ages. She also specializes in hearing aid fittings and hearing aid adjustments. Dr. DeMaio received a Bachelor of Science in Communication Disorders from the University of Massachusetts in 2013, and a Doctorate degree in Audiology from the University of Massachusetts in 2017.

For Mary Gomez, the news that her newborn son William was deaf sent her into a tailspin. “That was a shock. I was in denial for a while… for three months I didn’t talk to anyone, this was my first experience with a deaf child. Then I decided, it’s not about me, it’s about William.”

By the time Mary’s next child, Melanie, was born deaf a few years later, Mary was in a different place. Having moved to New York and enrolling her children in a school for the deaf, she became a fierce advocate for her children and the deaf community.

Unsatisfied with their education in New York, Mary did what came naturally for her—Googling schools for the deaf. It was online that she discovered Willie Ross School for the Deaf. A native of the Dominican Republic, Mary laughs when she talks about learning American Sign Language while she was still adjusting to learning English. She jokes that her language now is a combination of ASL and “Spanglish,” the term used for those incorporating English and Spanish when they speak.

As for her children and their experience at Willie Ross, Mary says, “This is the best decision I ever made. I made a better life for my children, a better school. This was life-changing for our whole family.”

How Willie Ross changed the lives of Mary Gomez and her two deaf children

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Willie Ross is now at Rochester Institute of Technology, which has a school for deaf students within the college community, and Melanie is enrolled in 11th grade in Willie Ross’ mainstreaming program in the East Longmeadow Public Schools.
The quiet phase of fundraising and planning for the expansion and renovation of the Sidney M. Cooley Administration Building, the hub of all of our work to serve our children and families, occupied much of 2018.

According to Bert Carter, President and CEO of the school, “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.”

Once completed, the refurbished and expanded building will include new space for interpreters, an updated audiology center, a redesigned main entrance, improved wheelchair access, new space for the school’s Creating Access to Real World Employment for Students (CARES) program and upgraded administrative technology.
One of the areas of growth for the school is in the area of outreach to school districts that determine whether a deaf or hard-of-hearing student can be adequately served in their home school district. The core belief at Willie Ross is that all deaf and hard-of-hearing children have the right to the highest quality education so they can reach their full potential.

WRSD Outreach Services provide direct services to students and families that include licensed audiologists and certified teachers of the deaf, as well as in-school and in-home sign language instruction.

Under the leadership of Greg DeLisle, Outreach is serving children and families from all over Western Massachusetts and into northern Connecticut. WRSD Outreach has also initiated ASL classes in Hatfield at Smith Vocational School.

The growth of Outreach expands WRSD services and assures our relevance in the region in serving deaf students.

Five students graduated from WRSD in 2018: Miguel Salas-Nieves, Damian Rivera Maldonado, Justin Carrington, Bryan Ramos-Navarro, and William Peña, Jr. Carrington, Peña, Jr. and Ramos-Navarro were all students at WRSD’s Partnership Campus at East Longmeadow High School. At the time of graduation, Carrington worked at the local Big Bunny grocery store; Peña, Jr. planned to attend the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, majoring in Mechanical Engineering; Ramos-Navarro planned to attend Gallaudet University, where he received a merit scholarship, majoring in Physical Therapy; River Maldonado planned to work at Lyndale Garage, where he interned for the past four years, and Salas-Nieves planned to work for a year and then attend Holyoke Community College, eventually planning to transfer to Gallaudet University to become a technology teacher.
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