

# THE GOOD NEWS

FROM ALUMS & FRIENDS & FAMILIES

Providing tuition assistance to students at Community of Saints Regional Catholic School



## Dollar-for-Dollar Match on Every Donation Until June 30

You only have a few more weeks to have your contribution matched dollar-for-dollar! Contribute now and help us reach our goal to support tuition assistance. See page 2 for details.

We can't do this without you. Thanks for your generous support!

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Brothers and classmates, Benoit and Philip Gjengdahl

Photograph by Emily Kowal

## How Benoit Came to COS

**O**n January 12, 2010, a powerful earthquake struck near the capital of Haiti, devastating huge swaths of the country. Ten months later, Haitians suffered the world's worst cholera epidemic in modern history. Hundreds of thousands fell ill, with thousands of Haitians dying from the disease. One of those who died was a young mother with a baby boy she'd named Sandley, but who was later given the name Benoit.

The child's mother passed away shortly after arriving at a small hospital run by the Missionaries of Charity, the religious order founded by Mother Teresa. Her baby was one of many suddenly orphaned after arriving with their mothers at the hospital.

To care for the children, the Sisters converted the third floor of their hospital into a makeshift orphanage. Between 20 and 30 children lived in the improvised space. Families in other countries wished to adopt the children but after an initial rush, adoptions were slowed and even halted for a time as the government of Haiti sought to restore order.

The boy, now named Benoit, spent four years at the orphanage. The Sisters did their best, but it was a difficult childhood.

In the fall of 2014, Benoit moved to St. Paul to be with a family who hoped to adopt him. Things didn't go as planned, but within a few months, he met the Gjengdahl family in West St. Paul.

On the surface, Kathy and David Gjengdahl were an unlikely match for Benoit. They already had nine children, ages one to twenty-two. "We weren't looking to adopt," Kathy said. "We were just providing respite care for our friends who Benoit was living with, but quickly we saw that he was such a gift to our family and we felt God asked us to love one more."

Benoit was five years old when he moved in with the Gjengdahl's in May of 2015. He immediately became fast friends with Philip Gjengdahl, who was the same age. "Philip always wanted to have a friend over to play and now he has a brother," Kathy said. "They're inseparable."

*Continued on page 6*



## MESSAGE FROM **father steve**

**Dear Alums, Friends and Families of Community of Saints:**

Sunday, April 30, was a great day for Community of Saints. In the morning, alums from St. Matt's, St. Mike's, and St. John Vianney came to pray together at the 11 a.m. Mass in the COS Chapel and afterward to enjoy some refreshments and the time to talk and visit with each other. The event was great! One St. Mike's alum came from Atlanta. The oldest alum present was from St. Matt's and graduated from 8th grade 83 years ago. The spirit was high and the enthusiasm was palpable.

On Sunday evening, COS Alums & Friends & Families was awarded the 2017 Community Champion Award by the Minnesota Independent School Forum. For 40 years MISF, the largest statewide membership organization serving independent and private schools in Minnesota, has been the access point for the private and independent school community with a goal to raise awareness and increase capacity to deliver excellence.

Alums & Friends & Families was singled out from all the independent and private elementary and secondary schools which are part of MISF to receive this award. This award "celebrates the work of an individual or group that has benefited a school and the community in which the school is located."

**You** made this recognition possible. This is yours! Your generous support allows many families to take advantage of a Catholic education. Without you many would not consider a Catholic school because of financial issues. With your help we are able to lift the financial barriers that otherwise would have barred so many families. You make the difference. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

With gratitude,

Father Stephen Adrian, Canonical Administrator of Community of Saints



**Fr. Steve Adrian accepts the Community Champion Award award from Tim Benz, President of MISF**

**A&F&F committee members (from left to right)**

**Front row:**

**Mary Jane Ferber,  
Fr. Steve Adrian,  
John Riehle,  
Bridget Kramer**

**Back row:**

**Tom McKeown,  
Sue Alleva,  
David Hottinger,  
Joe Cullen,  
Doug Lieser**



## Dollar-for-Dollar Matching Grant Until June 30

We've changed our fiscal year from September 30 to June 30 to better align with the school's fiscal year. That means you only have a few more weeks to contribute to this year's tuition assistance fund. Please help us make our goal!

If you give by June 30, your gift will be matched dollar-for-dollar. This \$50,000 challenge grant has been sponsored by several community members who were worried about us having to meet our annual goal in just nine months instead of the usual twelve.

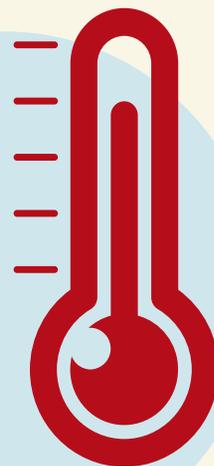
Contribute using the enclosed envelope or make a secure gift online by visiting [www.communityofsaints.org/supportourschool](http://www.communityofsaints.org/supportourschool). If you have any questions please call Doug Lieser at 651-457-2510 x119.

A&F&F's commitment is that every family who wants a Catholic education for their child at Community of Saints will receive one. Your contribution to our tuition assistance fund makes that possible. Thank you for your generous support!

**Our goal is  
\$150,000 –  
we're  
very close!**

**Help put us  
over the top.**

**Deadline is  
June 30.**



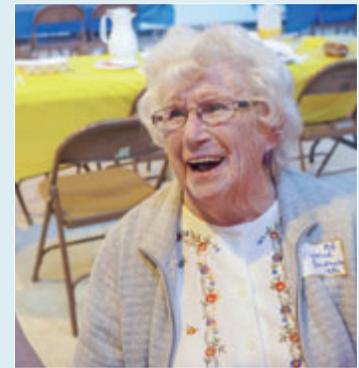
# Reunion Sunday Mass and Breakfast



Photographs by Peg Lindlof

Over 100 alums, school families, and friends celebrated Mass at Community of Saints Chapel on April 30 to celebrate Reunion Sunday. Special guest of honor was Florence Bandholz, St. Matthew's School alum from 1934!

Reunion Sunday is an annual event celebrating the long history of Catholic education in our community. It's an opportunity for alums from the parish schools of St. Michael's, St. Matthew's, St. John Vianney, and Our Lady of Guadalupe to reconnect, share stories about their school days, and enjoy fellowship with students and families at Community of Saints. Thanks to everyone who was able to join us!



**Florence Bandholz graduated from St. Matt's grade school in 1934 and continued her education at the school through 10th grade. She was the most senior alum present at Reunion Sunday — Congratulations Florence!**



# The First 5 Years at COS – A Brief Look Back

*In June of 2013, Community of Saints held its first 8th grade graduation and now those students are graduating from high school (see page 5). For a look back at the school's first five years, I spoke with COS principal, Bridget Kramer, middle school teacher and assistant principal, Athena Novack, and former principal and current development director, Doug Lieser.*



**(From left to right) Assistant Principal Athena Novack, Principal Bridget Kramer, and Development Director Doug Lieser**

**Q: When you think back to 2012–13, the school's first year, what was the biggest challenge?**

**Athena:** We had three distinctly different schools with three different identities coming together. The question was how do we, as Community of Saints, build our own identity?

**Doug:** I agree. The first year, everything was seen through the identity of which school each of us had come from. Everyone was trying to be Community of Saints while at the same time, holding on to the identity of their previous school.

**Athena:** I had a bit of an advantage since I didn't come from one of the three schools, so that gave me a little different perspective. I think it took about three years to internalize the COS identity, and that goes for staff, parents, and students. That sense of identity now is very strong.

**Q: How would you describe Community of Saints' identity?**

**Bridget:** We're a very inclusive school. We're holistic in our approach to education. That's not something we just talk about, we really look at the whole child. And we have an amazing staff.

**Doug:** The staff gets to know every kid, their strengths, their challenges, their families.

**Athena:** Ask the 8th grade students and they'll tell you the same thing.

**Doug:** Just today we had visitors here talking with our 8th graders and that's exactly what the students said. 'We're a small school, teachers really get to know us, and they want us to do well.'

**Athena:** They really understand that teachers are on their side. It can be a journey through middle school to get them to that point, but by 8th grade, they get it.

**Q: COS has established an impressive list of partnerships for a school that's only five years old. How did that happen?**

**Bridget:** It took a couple years to get our name out there, including just helping people find us on Google maps. But as more and more parents felt that this is their school and we felt confident in our identity, Doug began to build relationships. Now, people come to our school, they like what they see and like what we believe in. They want to be a part of it and support what we're doing.

**Doug:** We also have to give credit to A&F&F. One of the big reasons we've attracted support from the Schulze

Foundation and from the WEM Foundation and some of the other organizations that have partnered with us, is that we've had such a strong base of support through A&F&F. That's really been a unique and important part of how we've been able to create financial stability at the school while making this commitment to families that no one will be turned away just because they can't pay tuition. Our partners see that and they value it.

**Q: There were a lot of challenges when the doors opened in 2012 but five years later, the school seems to be growing stronger in terms of more stable funding and increasing enrollment. Was there a point where you felt you'd turned a corner?**

**Bridget:** April 2015. It was toward the end of my first year as principal. One thing you need to understand, which I didn't realize until I became principal, is that when the Archdiocese launched COS, the school had zero dollars in reserve.

**Doug:** I explained to Bridget the way it worked is we'd start the school year with no money and we'd end the school year with no money. I told her that money would come in from tuition and A&F&F and other sources during the school year, so you'll be able to pay the bills, but the cash flow will be really challenging because there is nothing extra.

I remember showing you (Bridget) that there was \$10,000 in the bank and \$13,000 in bills and I said, "Prioritize what bills you pay." As principal, you just had to have faith that the money would come in, but it was stressful.

**Bridget:** That spring was especially difficult because donations to the Catholic Services Appeal Foundation were down and that meant CSAF wasn't able to give us our full subsidy, which we had been counting on. And then things changed.

We got word that Pat Palmer, who'd been a strong supporter of the school, had included COS in her will. We were told to expect a check for about \$35,000, which we thought was amazing. When the envelope came in and I

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One of the big reasons we've attracted foundation support...is that we've had such a strong base of support through A&F&F.

opened it, I saw the check was for \$203,000. I looked at it three times, then I went to get Doug out of a meeting and showed it to him. We couldn't believe it.

**Doug:** There were a lot of things that happened about the same time. We got a bequest from Alice Bobick, which was very generous and totally unexpected. And that was when the Schulze Foundation offered us the \$50,000 challenge grant, which was new money and that led to 200 new donors to A&F&F, which was a really big deal.

**Bridget:** That whole period was a game changer for the school. I feel comfortable paying bills right now – I couldn't say that before. And not having to worry so much about cash flow frees us to focus even more on our mission, the reason the school is here – helping our students.

**Q: What do you hope to accomplish in the next five years?**

**Athena:** We're on a good trend with enrollment and we expect to see that continue to rise. I expect we'll see more community involvement, and see it go both ways. There are

ways we can serve this community and there are ways we can welcome the community into our school.

**Bridget:** And as we grow, we will need to look at physical upgrades to the school, so I think that's something we hope to achieve in the next five years.

**Q: What are your thoughts now as Community of Saints' first graduating class heads off to college?**

**Bridget:** The 8th graders we had our first year were a great group of kids. They took everything in stride and showed a lot of character and maturity to be open to a completely new school experience for their last year of grade school.

**Athena:** When I look at our students graduating from 8th grade this year, they're a very different group, but they're ready for high school. They're ready to take that next step.

**Bridget:** I can't wait to see what they're doing in four years.

## COS Class of 2013 Graduates from High School

In the past four years, a lot has changed for Community of Saints Regional Catholic School. Teachers have come and gone, principals have changed and four classes of 8th graders have moved onto high school. This year, COS's first 8th grade graduation class is graduating from high school. Here's a look at what their plans are for next year.

**Josh Blaiser:** Will attend St. Paul College for Auto Mechanics and Welding.

**Xochitl (Rosario) Castor:** Will attend St. Paul College to study Culinary Arts.

**Sam Dunsmore:** Prior to attending a four-year college, Sam will spend a year in Michigan working as a volunteer through a gap program sponsored by Kairos, a faith-based organization.

**Sarah Garcia:** Will attend Northland College to study Pre-Dentistry and minor in Spanish.

**Alex Haeg:** Will attend Inver Hills Community College to complete general studies and then plans to attend St. Scholastica to study Physical Therapy.

**Carter Hinz:** Will attend North Dakota State University to study Computer Engineering.

**Sabrina Kardos:** Plans to take a gap year volunteering at United Hospital and earning money for school and expects to attend Argosy University to earn a degree as a medical technician.



(From left to right) Top: Alex Haeg, Sabrina Kardos, Dante Luopa, Sam Dunsmore, Amanda Reding, Carter Hinz. Middle: Xander Malmgren, Sarah Garcia, Ruiz Acosta, Gabby Sanchez, Roger Morgan. Bottom: Teresa Sieve, Josh Blaiser, Nicki Pfuhl, Rosario Castor

**Dante Luopa:** Has enrolled in an Electrician Apprenticeship program through the St. Paul Union.

**Xander Malmgren:** Will attend Pine Tech College and is currently interested in law enforcement.

**Roger Morgan:** Plans to attend community college to complete general requirements and transfer to a four-year college to graduate.

**Nicki Pfuhl:** Plans to attend St. Paul College and continue working.

**Amanda Reding:** Attending St. Norbert College to study Mass Communications with an emphasis in Public Relations. Also plans to major or minor in Spanish.

**Gabby Sanchez:** Will attend Inver Hills Community College to complete general studies and then plans to enroll in a four-year university to study Education.

**Teresa Sieve:** Will attend Dakota County Technical College.

**Ruiz Acosta:** We were unable to reach Ruiz for comment.

Continued from page 1

**...COS a Good Fit**

In addition to adopting Benoit, the Gjengdahl’s made another big decision that summer. After homeschooling for 17 years, they registered Philip, Benoit and daughter Regina, at Community of Saints. The boys were enrolled in kindergarten and Regina in 3rd grade. Kathy has a teaching degree and loved the experience of educating her children, but after prayerful discernment, she concluded the school was a good fit right now.



**David and Kathy Gjengdahl with their 10 children and Kathy’s mother.**

“We met with the people at school and they were very welcoming,” Kathy said. “Besides being a Catholic school, the cultural diversity of COS was a factor, not just for Benoit but for the other children, too. Diversity doesn’t happen by accident,” Kathy observed. “You need to seek it out.”

Another reason for choosing COS was tuition assistance. “The financial assistance has been a huge blessing,” Kathy added. “We’re not wealthy people.” She and David shared a story from 2010 when David was laid off and it took several months until he got a new job. “We had seven children, one more on the way, and no income,” David recalled. “But God provided,” Kathy chimed in.

**COS a Trauma-Sensitive School**

COS is particularly well-equipped to meet the needs of a child like Benoit, who has experienced many different challenges in his short life.

“Four years ago, COS became a trauma-sensitive school,” said Doug Lieser, who was principal at that time. “What that means is that all of our teachers and staff have received special training to address the specific needs of children who have experienced trauma in their lives.” Doug explained that COS has been at the forefront of the movement because many COS students have been affected by trauma, which can mean things like living in poverty, witnessing violence or experiencing the

death of a family member.

“We don’t know everything Benoit experienced in Haiti, but just in the last two years he’s had a lot of big changes in his life — moving to the U.S. and becoming a member of a large family,” Lieser explained. “These are good things, but they require him to adapt to many new situations.”

In addition to being trained to detect behavioral signs that a child is experiencing high levels of stress, COS staff are also trained in cultural proficiency. Both trauma-sensitive and cultural proficiency training place a priority on providing a steady, consistent environment so children know what to expect. “We also want our students to know that adults here are on their side, it’s not an authoritarian relationship,” explained Lieser. “When children are struggling, we don’t shame them. We try to show them the impact of their behavior and help them to be more successful. It’s all very intentional and consistent throughout the school.”

**Happy with Children’s Progress**

As their children complete their second year at COS, Kathy and David are happy with their progress. “They love their teachers and the kids in their classes,” Kathy said, adding that Regina had been shy at first, but after two years, she observes a real difference in her daughter. “Regina has excelled and grown in confidence.”

First grade teacher Sue Maher notes that both Benoit and Philip have a strong faith and are very supportive of other students. “Benoit, in particular, will do anything to keep people from having conflict,” the teacher said. “He’s very kind and wants everyone to be happy.”

Kathy loved homeschooling and can’t rule it out for the future, but she appreciates the experiences the children have at COS. “I’ve seen my kids grow in many, many ways,” Kathy said. “I’ve seen them be lectors and participate in school Masses. Those are experiences I couldn’t provide at home.”

Kathy reflected back to the time when Benoit first entered their lives.

“He’s an amazing little boy and he fits right into our family,” she observed. “The Lord just kind of opened this door. We’re very grateful.”



**Philip, Benoit and Regina Gjengdahl**



## Pastor of OLG Teaches 8th Grade Religion Class

Fr. Andrew Brinkman, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, wants to help COS students encounter Jesus Christ in their lives. To do that, he offered to instruct the 8th grade religion class one day a week. "It's not enough to come once in a while," he explained. "Teaching has allowed me to create a relationship with these students. With trust and familiarity comes openness to what the person is saying."

As the students graduate and head off to high school, he reflects on what he'd like them to get from the experience. "I hope the kids will walk a way with a greater desire to seek truth, seek Jesus Christ in their life, and that they would establish a good relationship with a priest." The class was also a learning experience for Fr. Andrew. "I've never formally taught before," he admitted. "It's a lot harder than I expected."

## Leadership Team Takes on Literacy

This year's COS Leadership Team wants to build literacy skills in the school, community, and the world. Here's how they're doing it.

- Hosted book swaps where kids could bring in one or more books to exchange with others.
- Raised money and books for "Books for Africa."



- Leadership Literacy Tutors met weekly with K-2 students after school to help improve literacy skills.
- Organized Buddy Reading time, pairing younger and older students for fun reading time.
- Raised money from activities like Valentine grams to build a Free Little Library on school grounds for the neighborhood.

## CITY CHAMPS!

**COS 6th grade boys basketball team beat Holy Spirit in overtime to claim the Catholic School championship. Congratulations on a great season — can't wait for next year!**

(From left to right) Top Row: Simon Abdu, Dominic Garcia, Desmond Kirk, Isaiah Anderson, Isaac Garcia. Bottom Row: Keith Woodson, Christian Lubajua, Rahjeme Favors-Bridgeford, Gabe Aviles-Sanchez, Elgin Martin. Not pictured is coach Jose Garcia.



**COMMUNITY OF SAINTS  
REGIONAL CATHOLIC SCHOOL**

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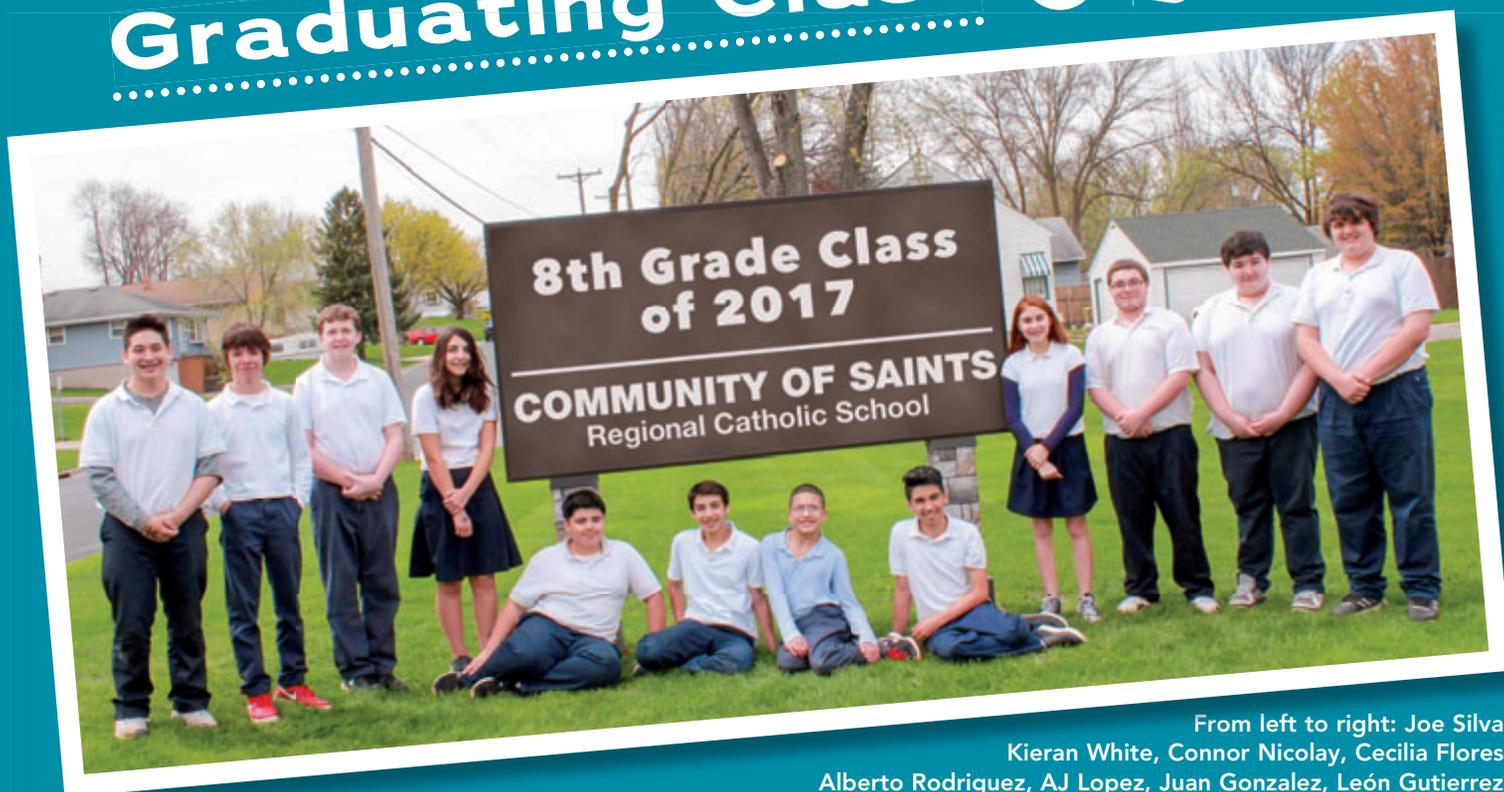
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# **CONGRATS!** *to the* **Graduating Class** **OF 2017**



From left to right: Joe Silva, Kieran White, Connor Nicolay, Cecilia Flores, Alberto Rodriguez, AJ Lopez, Juan Gonzalez, León Gutierrez, Amaya Haider, Sam Schweda, Carlos Lang, Lucas Sabanjo.