



## Catholic School Graduates and Self-Advocates Served as Gala Chairs for Catholic Coalition for Special Education 2018 Spring Benefit

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(Kensington, Maryland) – An air of expectation pulsed through the atrium of the Embassy of Italy on March 9, 2018 as guests awaited the introduction of this year’s gala chairs for the Catholic Coalition for Special Education’s signature fundraising event.

This year’s chairs were six amazing self-advocates who had graduated from Catholic schools thanks in part to the grants and expert support offered by CCSE: Caroline Bodley, Lucy Collins, Madeline Guay, Scotty Lesmes, Christina Staros and Ben Stevick.

“These six gala chairs are shining examples of how far children with disabilities can go when given appropriate education and the confidence to believe in themselves,” said Francesca Pellegrino, founder and president of the Catholic Coalition for Special Education. “The Catholic schools they attended instilled in them the confidence to believe in themselves. And they shattered all expectations when people looked beyond their disability and recognized their gifts and abilities and gave them the opportunities to learn, grow and reach their potential. That was something that just a decade or so earlier was considered simply impossible. Their wonderful teachers believed they would be successful and watched with joy as they flourished.

“Today, they are in post-secondary education or gainfully employed. They continue their involvement with their parish communities, and one or two of them are even considering independent living options. It is your generous support of and belief in CCSE which made this possible,” said Pellegrino.

The 2018 Spring Benefit gala was CCSE’s second highest grossing raising over \$230,000 and featuring many new sponsors and friends. The Holy Father’s Representative to the United States, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, offered words of praise saying, “I give thanks to God for the work of CCSE and so those who build a culture of inclusion.”

As our gala chairs wrote in their thank you note to supporters and friends, “Thank you all for believing in us, for believing in our future and for supporting the future of our younger friends who are in school now or will be school-age in a year or two. We are all one body and we all have a part to play – and Catholic schools give us the start we need and deserve.”

Through CCSE’s *Believe in Me! Program*, Catholic schools located in Washington, D.C. or Maryland may receive seed grants to expand or create sustainable programs enrolling two or more students with cognitive disabilities. Funding may be used to hire and train special educators, purchase equipment and materials, or provide appropriate accommodations and modifications to the curriculum.

CCSE also provides scholarships to Catholic school teachers pursuing advanced degrees in special education and offers workshops and other training /coaching support to Catholic schools to help them meet the needs of students with disabilities at the classroom and administrative levels.

The mission of the [Catholic Coalition for Special Education](#) is to ensure that children with special needs are able to attend and receive an appropriate education in their local Catholic elementary schools and high schools. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI “no child should be denied his or her right to an education in faith, which in turn nurtures the soul of a nation.” CCSE provides grants and technical assistance and training to help Catholic schools in Washington, D.C. and Maryland achieve this goal.

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