

Mystery alumnus showers millions on South End's Cathedral High

By [Adrian Walker](#) Globe Columnist, Updated April 23, 2024, 5:38 p.m.



The large majority of students at Cathedral High School, seen here in 2004, are from the city. And every one of them is on some form of financial aid. GREENHOUSE, PAT GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE - THE BOSTON GL

Its many admirers insist that Cathedral High School — a South End landmark for just shy of a century — is not what it appears.

Where some potential students and their families might see a pricey school in an upscale neighborhood, its mission has always been educating students without regard to their ability to pay a hefty tuition.

That goal just got a huge assist. A donor from the class of 1954 who chooses to remain anonymous has given the school its largest gift ever — a \$30 million matching grant. School officials say this largesse will enable the school to stay affordable for years to come.

“This will allow us to continue our mission for another century,” said Dan Carmody, the school’s president.

To understand why this gift is so significant, you have to know who attends Cathedral. About 98 percent of its 340 students are Black or Latino. The large majority of them are from the city. And — because none of them can afford the school’s stated \$20,000 annual tuition — every one of them is on some form of financial aid. Most of them end up paying a small fraction of the list price.

The mystery donor is a retired financial-services executive who has been giving to Cathedral for years. He attended the school when the student body looked very different, of course, but Carmody said the donor believes the mission of providing opportunity to those who otherwise might not get it has never changed.

The donor gives anonymously, Carmody told me, because he doesn’t want the spotlight to be on him.

“I can honestly say he’s the most selfless individual I’ve ever met in my life,” Carmody said. “I’ve been blessed to be in education for almost 20 years and I’ve never seen this kind of generosity for all the right reasons. Nothing is more important to him than for Cathedral students for generations to come to have the opportunity for an education where they might not otherwise have it.”

Carmody said the money will go into the school’s endowment. Parts of the building might get needed upgrades, but the money will mostly go to fund day-to-day operations — especially financial aid. He said the school has now raised about \$22 million of the money the donor has pledged to match.

Carmody says about half the school’s students are Catholic, though he guesses fewer than that are practicing members of the faith. The school’s focus, he says, is much less about doctrine than about producing students who are ready to become leaders in the wider world. The school boasts a 100 percent college acceptance rate.

Carmody became the school's leader in February 2020, just before COVID turned the world upside down. He said he was drawn to Cathedral by the school's commitment to inclusion and the resilience of its students.

While other schools have battled learning loss in the wake of the pandemic, Carmody said Cathedral's students have actually been performing at a higher level on standardized tests.

Those students find their way to the school by reputation and word of mouth and family ties.

Patrick Elvariste, a graduating senior, credits his time at Cathedral with helping him adjust to America as an immigrant. He's headed to Boston College to study computer science.

"For me, it was like the American experience," he said. "I've grown as a person and transformed as a person. Cathedral has done more for me than I could ever do for Cathedral."

His classmate, Laura Agblekpe, will begin a five-year architecture program at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in the fall. She said Cathedral staff — Carmody in particular — had encouraged her interest in the field, including helping arrange an internship with a local architect.

"That gave me a glimpse into what the day-to-day life of an architect is like," she said. "So Cathedral means a lot to me because I've been introduced to so many amazing opportunities and people."

Carmody said the donor's fondest wish is to ensure the school's longevity. "It's about making sure we're here and serving students who need it most for a long, long time."