

10th Annual *The Power of Grace*: A Grateful Farewell to Matthew Fitzsimons

Over 300 supporters and friends of Grace Academy gathered at the Delamar West Hartford on the beautiful evening of Thursday, May 5 to celebrate the 10th annual *The Power of Grace* benefit and to honor the legacy of departing Head of School and co-founder, Matt Fitzsimons. Grace Academy students greeted guests as they entered the hotel and inside, four Grace Academy alumnae mingled with guests and shared their stories and future plans as they prepare for college. Our school's Step Team, Stepping With Grace, wowed the crowd with a brief performance and Kenny Mayne, former ESPN *SportsCenter* anchor, led a hugely successful paddle auction, delivered with his signature humor and wit.

The Power of Grace was originally created to coincide with the graduation of our first class of graduates in 2013, with the intent to raise awareness of our school and mission. Grace Academy has now graduated ten classes of eighth graders who have matriculated to some of the finest high schools stretching from New Hampshire to Virginia. In his remarks that evening, Matt Fitzsimons reflected on the past twelve years noting how the quality of instruction has improved over time, and how the school's culture is making a lasting impact on the students' lives. "Quality academic instruction is one reason for Grace's success. The caliber of our teachers is unparalleled for an intentionally small middle school. But academic accomplishments by themselves do not transform lives. The culture created by our community is transforming lives. The metrics by which we measure progress are at the service of culture and community, not the other way around. The culture of our school is about holiness and wholeness." (continued on page 6)



Celebrating Our 10th Graduation Ceremony

On Tuesday, June 14, in the sanctuary of Central Baptist Church in Hartford, Grace Academy graduated fourteen eighth graders, proud members of the *Anna Julia Cooper* class. Among the graduates, some had overcome the obstacles of being newly relocated refugees and others are preparing to leave home for boarding school. Vida Ntem-Mensah will matriculate to Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, NH, Chanya Johnson will be attending Millbrook School in Millbrook, NY, Gabriella Duncan will attend Miss Porter's School in Farmington, CT, and Anna Min will become a member of the freshman class at Westminster School in Simsbury, CT.

"Our terrific high school placement reveals the strength of our academic program!" commented a beaming Head of School, Matthew Fitzsimons. "We are enormously proud of each one of our graduates and what they have accomplished."

The Invocation was offered by Central Baptist Church Pastor, John Endler. One of the original founders of Grace Academy and current Board member, Marge Morrissey, then bestowed the Marjorie Murphy Morrissey Award, given in honor of her mother, to Aubrey Buxton who will be attending Windsor High School. Graduate Gabriella Duncan gave the Keynote Address which was followed by remarks by Mr. Fitzsimons that called to mind the humble origins of the school and the strides it has achieved over the last decade.

From the time of the school's founding in 2010, Fitzsimons noted, "One of the defining goals of Grace Academy remains today: to provide a place where young women like you can be nourished in a safe and secure environment. A school that is inclusive to all...a true *sisterhood* that prepares students to meet the challenges in our world. Grace is a school like no other...a place where you are valued for who you are, where you can discover the gifts that lie within you, leading you to be the person you will become."

Over the years, these 14 students have enlivened our halls and classrooms with their laughter, resilience, and creativity—and now they have earned their Grace Academy diploma. Our school is a better place because of this group of students and we look forward to following them through the next chapter of their lives.



The Future Plans of '22 and '18

The Anna Julia Cooper Class of 2022 will be attending:



Aaliyah Austin-Christopher
 Aubrey Buxton
 Almar Chaung
 Gabriella Duncan
 LaTe'jah Gardner
 Arleth Hernandez
 Chanya Johnson
 Anna Min
 Ja Seng Ra Nkhum
 Vida Ntem-Mensah
 Catherine Paw
 Rosemary Paw
 Htee Hsa Paw
 Chantelle Rodriguez

Glastonbury AgriScience
 Windsor HS/ACSE
 Mercy High School
 Miss Porter's School
 East Catholic High School
 Northwest Catholic High School
 Millbrook School
 Westminster School
 Watkinson School
 Phillips Exeter Academy
 Mercy High School
 Classical Magnet
 Bulkeley High School
 Cheney Technical High School



This spring, Grace Academy's Anne Frank Class of 2018 recently graduated from high school, and have turned their focus to the future. They will pursue the following next steps:



Samantha Allen
 De'Geal Davis
 Leanne Edwards
 Abigail Islam
 Sande Min
 Julissa Mota
 Destiny Navarro
 Amanda Ogando
 Adriana Ordaya
 Clairise Owens
 Ku Paw
 Paw Shee
 Grace Valdez

Undecided
 Springfield College
 Colby-Sawyer College
 University of Hartford
 Wesleyan University
 Wesleyan University
 Undecided
 UConn Hartford
 Vassar College
 UConn Hartford
 Mount Holyoke College
 Barry College
 Culinary School



Follow the Girl: Watkinson School's Grace Scholars

In 2018, long-time donors and supporters of both Grace Academy and Watkinson School, David and Jan Klein, create the Grace Scholars fund at Watkinson School. Motivated by their belief in the power of education, David and Jan designated funds from this program to enable 8th grade graduates of Grace Academy to enroll at Watkinson for high school.

Watkinson has a long-standing relationship with and commitment to Grace Academy, and over the past six years, Watkinson has funded five Grace Academy graduates and since 2015 has provided more than \$400,000 in financial aid to Grace students.

The students that benefit from Grace Scholars at Watkinson demonstrate the qualities and characteristics most closely associated with Grace Academy and Watkinson School: determination, an exemplary work ethic, grace under pressure, and a clear sighted vision of the possibilities that await a young woman when they aspire to succeed.

Teri Schrader, Head of School at Watkinson, commented on the importance of the fund: "Watkinson School is committed to providing access to deserving students in the Hartford region whose only barrier to attending Watkinson is financial. Scholarship opportunities like Grace Scholars at Watkinson is one example. We are so grateful to our dear friends Jan and David Klein, who believe passionately in it a young woman of substance when they aspire to Watkinson's mission and understand that we are a perfect next academic community for graduates from Grace Academy. We are so proud of [our students from Grace Academy] and we are thankful for all the ways they have enriched our school community."

The Grace Scholars fund at Watkinson not only provides a Grace student with a four-year scholarship each year, it also enables Grace Academy to reallocate valuable "last dollar" funds to other students' tuition gaps. As part of the twelve-year commitment that Grace Academy makes to each of our students, "last dollar" tuition assistance is provided to those students awarded partial scholarships or who have a gap in funding that would prevent them from enrolling in private school.

To learn more about the Grace Scholars Fund at Watkinson, visit: watkinson.org/grace-scholars



Thalia Ortiz '15 speaking at the Watkinson School Commencement in 2019.



Maricele Reimann, assistant admissions director at Watkinson School and a graduate support officer at Grace Academy, and Nary Oo '17 celebrate commencement in 2021.

Princess Hyatt Named New Head of School



Princess with alumnae San De Min '18 and Ku Paw '18 at The Power of Grace.

(continued from back cover) Princess is a Hartford native. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Pine Manor College, a Master of Science degree in non-profit management and philanthropy from Bay Path University, as well as a Professional Fundraising Certificate from Boston University. She has been a classroom mentor at Jumoke Academy through the Starbase CT program, is a current and active member of the Urban League of Greater Hartford and The African American Development Officers (AADO) Network, and a 2020 Quest Alum of Leadership Greater Hartford. "I am honored and humbled to be selected as Grace Academy's next Head of School, a role that aligns with my passion for and experience helping young girls from underserved communities get the support they need to achieve their full potential and purpose," said Hyatt. "I look forward to engaging with the Grace community over the months ahead as we work together to break the cycle of poverty through education."



The year's mandatory **Summer Extension** program included Humanities and Math classes in the mornings and enrichment activities in the afternoons. This summer's theme was "Sustaining a Capacity of Resilience: Building a more promising future." Led by director Shantel Hanniford, students worked collaboratively to design specific sustainable development goals for a mock United Nations council.

Students got crafty painting flower pots, making stained glass, and creating pillows in afternoon Art classes. Macy McPhee, a Conard High School senior, raised over \$1,400 to fund the art program, and led the classes for rising 6th through 8th graders. "I've always loved painting and crafts, and try to make art part of my routine. Studio Art gives the girls an opportunity to slow down and be creative, and is a nice balance to the morning academics," says Macy.

The girls also enjoyed a number of science projects, including making bubbles and frog dissections!



The Power of Grace: A Grateful Farewell to Matthew Fitzsimons



Julissa Mota, a member of Grace Academy's Malala Yousafzai Class of 2018 and graduating senior at The Taft School gave an impassioned keynote speech describing the impact Grace Academy and Mr. Fitzsimons have had on her life. "In middle school, I didn't know what a private boarding school was, and I certainly didn't think it was something available to me – a first generation American whose family came here from Mexico. Grace gave me this opportunity and I ran with it. Now as a senior looking back at my four years of high school and my time at Grace Academy, I realize that both experiences went hand in hand in helping me become a very successful student... I was able to rise to the demands of the academics at Taft, as I had learned the importance of time management and organization at Grace... But I am just one of so many Grace girls whose stories are just like mine and who are achieving great things in high school and college... Mr. Fitzsimons, please know that as I continue my journey through life, I will always credit you and Grace Academy for giving me and so many other young women in Hartford the gift of a wonderful education that has launched me into a life of possibility."



Lindsey McPhee also reflected upon the impact Matt has made on the school, "Matt is always in service to others". She said, "He has worked tirelessly to build and sustain this school- to educate and advocate for each girl so that she gets the opportunity she deserves and the support she needs. And with optimism and humor, faith and love, he has poured his life into this school."

Grace Academy owes a debt of gratitude to *The Power of Grace* Committee for their generous hard work, and to the many supporters and friends from near and far who were in attendance to celebrate the profound impact that Grace Academy, and Matt Fitzsimons, have made in the lives of so many the past twelve years. Matt's classmates, members of the Fordham Prep Class of 1976 (bottom right), made the trip from across New York. The group recently raised funds to dedicate a classroom in the school. Thanks to the overwhelming support of so many individuals and businesses, this year's benefit was the most successful yet!



Grace Graduates in the World



Kierrah Harris '14 graduated from Loyola University Maryland and has been accepted to the David A. Clarke School of Law at the University of the District of Columbia.

Rhaili-em Lowe '19 was recently featured on FOX61 where she discussed her project for The Girl Scout Gold Award, the highest and most prestigious award in Girl Scouting. A Girl Scout for the past eight years, her project, Project Diverse Books, is designed to make a difference for Hartford students. She plans to collect 150 books for students ages 6 to 12 for the Hartford Public Library branches that are written by authors of color or focus on DEIJ topics.



Sabrina Williams '14 completed her college course work at Springfield College in December. She received her diploma this spring and will be training for a position with Veritas, a charter school company in MA. Sabrina served on Springfield College's Board of Trustees as the student representative in her senior year.

Ximena Franco-Bao '13 graduated with a Master's in Education from Providence College and will be teaching at Horizons at Ethel Walker School this summer. She has also been hired to teach 5th grade at West Woods Upper Elementary School in Farmington beginning this fall.



Spring and Summer Student Highlights

HIMCO rejoined us to lead an Investment Club after a two-year hiatus. The eighth graders learned about interest rates, mortgages, and aspects of the bond and equity markets. Each student chose a stock that was of interest to her and played a game where they monitored the stock during the Club's fourth quarter activity. The club concluded with a field trip to the trading floor at HIMCO, a pizza party, and prizes for the winners of the stock market game.



A Dream

Our dream of a future with these beautiful necessities
Of equality where you can be you
Of happiness where you can laugh and smile
Of righteousness where the truth is served every time
Of awareness where you learn and teach
Of honesty where you don't resent the cold truth
Of education where you can expect greatness every time
Of non bias where you don't look at someone
and play a guessing game with their life
Of freedom where we can walk with our heads held high

Vida Ntem-Mensah '22

was recently recognized by NPR for her poetry. After composing *A Dream*, an interpretation of Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech, in an out of school program at Charter Oak Cultural Center, Vida was invited by her teacher to recite the poem on the NPR radio station!



Rowing also returned this year. Students learned to row on the Connecticut River at Riverfront Recapture and the season ended with a regatta with the boys from Covenant Prep.

Moving-Up Ceremony. Prior to the end of each school year, Grace Academy celebrates the "passing of the torch" from the graduating 8th graders to the rising 8th grade class who will serve as the new leaders of the school in 2022-23. Each 7th grader prepares a farewell to an 8th grader and then the 8th graders read an encouraging statement to a 7th grader and passes an electric candle—a light—to the 7th grader.



Grace Alumna Starts Peer Mentorship Program at Ethel Walker

Ethel Walker School and Grace Academy have maintained a longstanding partnership since Grace's founding in 2010. This year, San De Min, Grace Academy Class of 2018 and a senior at Ethel Walker, initiated the Peer Mentorship Program. San De recruited fellow high school students to serve as mentors to our 7th and 8th grade students. It was San De's way of giving back to her alma mater.

The Peer Mentorship Program consisted of three Saturday sessions over the course of four months. The first session, held virtually, allowed students to meet, play games and learn about one another. The second session, held at Ethel Walker, included a tour of the campus, followed by a panel discussion workshop addressing questions such as: what is life like at boarding school, and what is life like for a student of color at a predominantly white institution? How can you advocate for yourself in high school? Students and mentors then spent time together and concluded the session with fun games and activities. The Ethel Walker students made the trip to Grace Academy for the final session. Grace Academy students took their mentors on a tour of the school by having them engage in a scavenger hunt. They then went outside to play games of kickball at Bushnell Park and returned to make friendship bracelets for each other.

The first year of the program met its goals and was deemed a huge success. Grace Academy students gained insight on what life will be like in high school, how to advocate for themselves and build relationships with older students who can give them tips on navigating the high school experience. Friendships were developed and some students continued to stay through the end of the school year. Thanks to the efforts made by San De Min, Grace Academy is looking forward to continuing and expanding this partnership in years to come.



New Board Member is Quick to Action

In February, 2022, Grace Academy's Board of Directors welcomed its newest board member, Rachel Tressy, CPA, CIA, CRMA, Voya Financial's chief audit executive. Rachel is responsible for providing internal audits and advisory services in the evaluation of Voya's internal control environment. Prior to joining Voya, Rachel spent 15 years at Cigna in both audit and business roles. She started her career at Ernst & Young in audit and advisory services.

Rachel is also a member of Wheeler Clinic's Board of Trustees, serving as the co-Chair of the Finance Committee and Treasurer for the Board. Rachel and her husband Rich live in Weatogue with their three dogs.

Rachel is excited to bring her multitude of ambitions and talents to the board and said, "I am honored and excited to be part of such a tremendous organization, working to break the cycle of poverty through education."

She wasted no time in giving back to the school. On May 12, Grace Academy welcomed back employees from Voya Financial for a day of service. Volunteers planted flowers along Main Street and in the recess yard, added mulch around the grounds, organized the school's large supply room, and worked with the students to make a tapestry.

Prior to the start of the pandemic, Voya employees would volunteer for a day of service to help with various needs while also spending time with our students on interactive projects. Grace Academy values these corporate relationships which allow students to gain insight into the business world through their interactions with employees who serve in various capacities at companies such as Voya Financial, The Hartford and PwC.



Rachel, and her husband, Rich, at The Power of Grace on May 5th.



Respect • Leadership • Courage • Hospitality • Joy • Grace

Princess Hyatt Named Next Head of School and Executive Director



The Board of Directors has named Princess Hyatt as its next executive director and head of school, effective August 18. Hyatt succeeds Matt Fitzsimons who is leaving Grace Academy to establish a tuition-free middle school for underserved students in Bridgeport.

"Princess's experience and track record of achievement working with underserved students positions her well to lead Grace Academy," said Michael Bergin, chair of the Grace Academy Board of Directors. "When we embarked on this search, we described our ideal candidate as someone passionate about Grace's mission, a relationship builder with a proven track-record of successful fund development, experience working with young people from underserved communities and in an academic or nonprofit setting; we found all of these things and more in Princess."

Hyatt currently serves as the Executive Director of Horizons at The Ethel Walker School, where she is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the Horizons' Pre-K through Eighth Grade program -- an award-winning academic and enrichment program dedicated to reducing the learning gap often experienced by students in vulnerable communities. *Continued on Page 4.*