



# Years of Transformation





## “I love you, Momma.”

Those are the words Claudia longed to hear from her son Mattieu.

Her son was diagnosed with autism early in life and struggled to express himself in any way, whether verbally or nonverbally. He threw intense fits, screamed for hours at a time, rejected clothing as if it hurt his skin, and refused food, appearing terrified of anything his mom tried to feed him. Claudia recalls that Mattieu seemed to be in his own world and out of her reach.

Life was hard, and his working parents were barely holding on.

A therapist recommended Connections, and after touring, they knew it was the right school for him. But there was a waitlist. A very long waitlist.

When a space opened for Mattieu, they were overjoyed. Mattieu’s journey has been challenging, but with patience and persistence, the team at Connections has connected with him and helped him achieve goals that once seemed impossible.

Today, Mattieu is a happy, expressive 8th grader who communicates clearly, eats well, dresses himself and navigates life with more appropriate behaviors. He’s an A student who loves everyone at the school — a remarkable transformation from where he started.

And he ends each day by telling his mom those words that escaped him for so long: “I love you, Momma.”

“I don’t know what we would have done without Connections. They’ve been a miracle in Mattieu’s life.”

— Claudia, Mattieu’s Mom



*That’s the power of Connections, a nonprofit school for individuals with autism in Palm Beach County. Here, lives are transformed by highly skilled, compassionate teachers, therapists and team members who are dedicated to empowering students and adult clients to reach their full potential.*

*We invite you to learn more about our 10 Years of Transformation and see how you can help make a meaningful difference in the lives of local students and adults with autism.*



## A Welcome From Our Leaders

On behalf of Connections, we are pleased to present our 2024 Annual Report—Celebrating 10 years of Transformation. In this report you will find information about the people we serve at Connections, our key partnerships and programs, and our 2024 highlights and challenges.

Not that long ago, Pam, Jason and Debi sat around a kitchen table brainstorming about the school they wanted to build. We wanted this new school not just to offer research-based educational and therapeutic interventions, but we wanted it to be warm and inclusive while meeting the needs of the families. We were so fortunate to have an angel who agreed to support our dream, and we started building our vision with 22 children.

Here we are now, 10 years later (WOW!) and look where we are. We serve over 140 individuals on the autism spectrum in our three programs: elementary charter school, private high school and an adult program. The establishment of the high school and adult program were driven by parent desire and need to know that their young adults were in a safe place that valued their individual uniqueness. We are filled with immense pride and gratitude for all we have accomplished together. It is through your unwavering support and dedication that we continue to grow and provide life-changing education and services for children with autism and their families.

Over the past year, we have seen tremendous progress in our students and our organization. Our students and adult clients continue to inspire us with their growth, achievements and determination. As an organization, we have expanded our programs to reach more students, implemented new curricula, and invested in cutting-edge technology to support our learners and improve school safety.

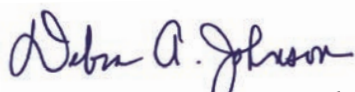
We are especially proud of our many local community partners who share our vision for a more inclusive and supportive society. Together, we have created opportunities for our students and adult clients to engage in real-world learning experiences that prepare them for a healthy and meaningful future. These milestones are not just a reflection of the hard work of our dedicated staff and teachers, but also a testament to the power of a community that believes in the potential of every child.

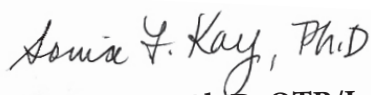
OUR WORK IS FAR FROM OVER! With your generous help and support, we are confident that we can make even greater strides in fostering a nurturing, empowering environment for all our students. As we look ahead to the coming year, we are committed to and advocating for the needs of individuals with autism at every stage of life, providing innovative and state-of-the-art programs and further meeting the needs of more families.


To our incredible staff, volunteers, donors, board members and community members—thank you! Your contributions, whether in time, talent or treasure, are the backbone of our success. You are changing lives every day, and we could not do this without you.

We look forward to another year of collaboration and progress as we continue to build a brighter future for our students and their families.

With deepest gratitude,

  
**Debra A. Johnson, M.Ed**  
Principal/Executive Director

  
**Sonia F. Kay, Ph.D. OTR/L**  
President, Board of Directors  
Connections Education Center

  
**Marc Edzon**  
President, Board of Directors  
Connections High School &  
Vocational Center

# 10 Years of Connections



**Opened Connections Education Center for Pre-K–8th grade**  
**Began animal-assisted therapy with Island Dolphin Care**

**Started Health & Wellness Program with adaptive swim classes**  
**Opened the Connections High School & Vocational Center**

**Celebrated our first graduating high school class, with 8 graduates**  
**Held our first prom for older students and adult clients**  
**Launched our after-school program with art, cooking and bowling activities**

**2015**

**2016**

**2017**

**2018**

**2019**

**Tripled our space by moving to a building with 16,000 square feet**  
**Partnered with Palm Beach Fire Rescue for winter holidays**  
**Partnered with First Tee to start our golf program**

**Began Creative Arts Program**  
**Partnered with Vinceremos for therapeutic horse care and riding**  
**Partnered with Palm Beach State College to teach students about dental care**





Achieved the only commendable rating from the Florida Department of Education for a charter school for autism

Added vocational partnerships with community businesses



Expanded our Health & Wellness Program by adding a culinary program

Won top honors in *Palm Beach Illustrated's* Education Award

2020

Expanded our space to 26,000 square feet to accommodate growth

Launched our Parent Resource Program

Started employing adults with special needs

2021

Opened our independent-living instruction space

Updated our sensory room

Purchased our first NEW bus

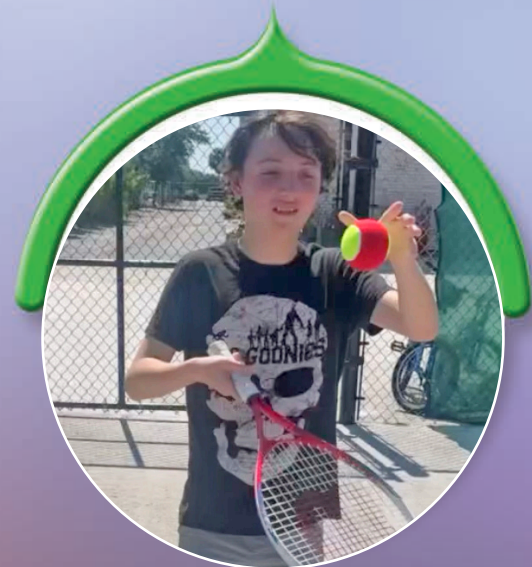
2022

2023

Added tennis to our after-school activities

*And so much more to come!*

2024





## Our Mission

To empower students with autism and related disabilities to learn academic, social, vocational and independent-living skills using evidence-based strategies and a family-centered approach.

## Our Vision

Connections envisions a world where everyone is given the opportunity to achieve their full potential and where students with autism can access the specialized, caring instruction and therapies they need to become productive members of their families and community.

## Who We Serve

- ◆ Students and adult clients with autism or related disorders who need moderate-to-high support
- ◆ 85% of our students live below the poverty line
- ◆ 94% come from minority families
- ◆ 50% live in single-parent families or with grandparents

## Connections: A Nonprofit Created to Transform Lives

Today, 1 in 36 children in America is diagnosed with autism. This unprecedented prevalence creates a greater need than ever before for quality education and therapeutic services for students and adults with autism. Research clearly shows that the sooner autism intervention begins, the more effective it can be.

But there's a problem with the options available to most families. The public school system is not a good fit for many children with autism due to larger class sizes, a lack of specialization in autism, a disconnect between school and home, and other challenges. And private services are out of reach for many families who cannot afford them.

That's why we exist.

We serve some of the most marginalized children in our community — students and adult clients who otherwise would not have access to the quality services they need and who otherwise might not be given the chance they deserve.

We know that lives can be transformed with the specialized help, and we're dedicated to helping our students and adult clients with autism achieve their full potential.



## Connections: By the Numbers

140

students and adult clients,  
opened with 22

102

full-time staff members  
including certified teachers, board  
certified therapists, bilingual team  
members, a school nurse and other  
caring team members

94%

staff retention rate  
creating a more consistent environment  
for children with autism who often  
struggle with change

3:1

or better  
student-to-staff ratio

## Delivering Services Through 3 Entities

Our highly qualified, experienced and caring team delivers top-quality education and therapies through three nonprofit entities:



**Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches** — A Title I charter school for students in preschool-8th grade



**Connections High School & Vocational Center** — Our private high school that serves students ages 14-22



**Connections Adult Program (CAP)** — A day program for adults with autism who have aged out of the school system and still need support

## Transforming Futures Through Education

Students with autism learn differently than their neurotypical peers. Our caring team members leverage extensive experience and training to meet students where they are and help them achieve their full potential.

An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is developed for each student by our certified educators in collaboration with each student's family. The team meets regularly to evaluate the student's progress toward the IEP goals and adjust strategies as needed.

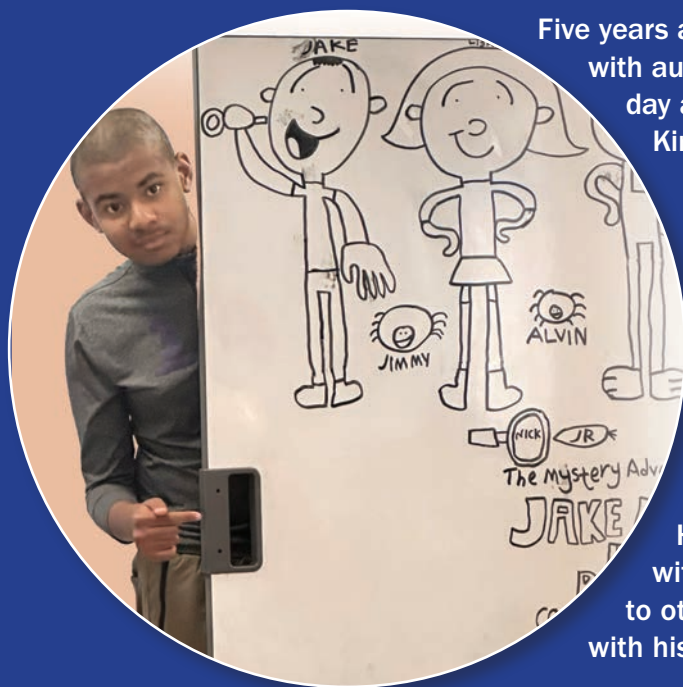
### Connections Education Center

Through our nonprofit, Title I charter school for students in preschool-8th grade, we deliver high-quality academic instruction with integrated social skills training. Our targeted therapies include evidence-based teaching strategies supplemented with cutting-edge technologies. Students learn math, language arts, social studies and science, and we extend learning with extracurricular rotations for art, nutrition, fitness and aquatics. Field trips are an important part of our community-based instruction and inclusion program.



### Connections High School & Vocational Center

Our private, nonprofit high school weaves together functional academics, targeted therapies and vocational training to help older students with autism transition into adulthood. In addition to traditional academic classes and extracurricular rotations, high school students learn independent-living skills in our apartment-style classroom. Our high schoolers enjoy regular field trips to promote generalization of classroom learning and promote inclusion in the community.



Five years ago, Tristan was a 5th grader at a specialty school for kids with autism. His mom unpacked his backpack after his school day and sat down to help Tristan with his homework — a Kindergarten worksheet.

“I just cried,” his mom says. “I knew he was capable of doing more and making progress, but this was the best the school could get from him? What kind of future would my son have?”

Fast forward to 2024, and Tristan is a high school junior at Connections. His homework looks a lot different now. It looks like high school math skills, reading comprehension and on a great day, art — Tristan's favorite.

He has learned to speak, recognize and manage anxiety with appropriate strategies (like drawing!), show kindness to others, make friends, and help around the home he shares with his single mom and sister.





“This school is a God-send,” says Tania, whose daughter Maya attends Connections. Early in Maya’s life, she attended public school and then a specialty school. But neither school was able to meet Maya’s needs, and Tania became accustomed to hearing educators say that Maya had to leave.

When Maya came to Connections, everything changed. “Here was a school that was willing to work with me to help my daughter,” Tania says.

Maya has responded well to the personal education plan developed by the Connections team and her family. One element — ABA therapy — has proven particularly effective for Maya.

Maya is now a talkative, sociable girl whose vibrant personality shines every day. While Maya’s progress in speech, behavior, academics and life skills delights her mom, the best part is the peace of mind it brings. Tania says, “Knowing that I can drop her off at school and know she will be safe and understood is the biggest thing for me. This alleviates so much stress for me and has improved our family life tremendously.”

## Transforming Abilities Through Essential Therapies

Our students receive high-quality therapies proven to benefit children with autism. Each student’s IEP guides a personalized therapy plan, with interventions delivered throughout the school day in individual and group settings. Therapeutic strategies are integrated into all classes and shared with families for maximum impact.



### Speech Therapy

Empowers students to express themselves, promoting social connections, enhancing learning and reducing behavior issues driven by frustration.



### Occupational Therapy

Helps students develop motor skills needed for learning and addresses the sensory challenges that impact daily functioning, while also building the physical abilities needed for personal care.



### Behavioral Therapy

Using Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), therapists use individualized behavioral plans to enhance behavioral, social, communication and learning skills.

# Transforming Lives Through Holistic Training

Our holistic program extends learning beyond traditional academics to address the unique challenges faced by students with autism.

- **Health** — Many students with autism only eat a limited number of foods. Our nutrition classes introduce a wide variety of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods, helping students expand their diets.
- **Wellness** — Each student receives a personalized fitness plan from a certified trainer who understand the motor challenges and resistance to structured exercise common among students with autism.
- **Aquatics** — Drowning is the No. 1 cause of death for children with autism, making it essential for our students to learn to swim, especially in Florida where water sources are abundant. Our adaptive swim lessons have proven highly effective for children with autism.
- **Independent Living** — We teach students important skills for taking care of themselves and contributing to their families, such as laundry, cleaning, job readiness, money management and more.
- **Culinary** — Students love learning to cook. We emphasize kitchen and food safety and then teach students how to use recipes, prepare ingredients and cook meals.



## Transforming Individuals Into Adulthood

### Connections Adult Program (CAP)

What happens when a student with autism ages out of the school system yet still requires support? This year, that question will have to be answered for some 70,000 young adults in America. Every day, we field calls from families in our area in urgent need of support for a son or daughter with autism who has reached adulthood.

In 2020, we launched CAP in response to the needs of families of our students who had completed high school and still required support. CAP is an engaging program where adults with autism spend their days in a safe, structured, supportive environment. Here, they continue developing social skills, communication abilities, safety awareness, independent-living skills, vocational abilities and leisure skills that promote healthy lifestyles and social connection. Our adult clients participate in volunteer projects and have the opportunity to contribute to the community.

Like our schools, our adult program is at capacity with a long waitlist.



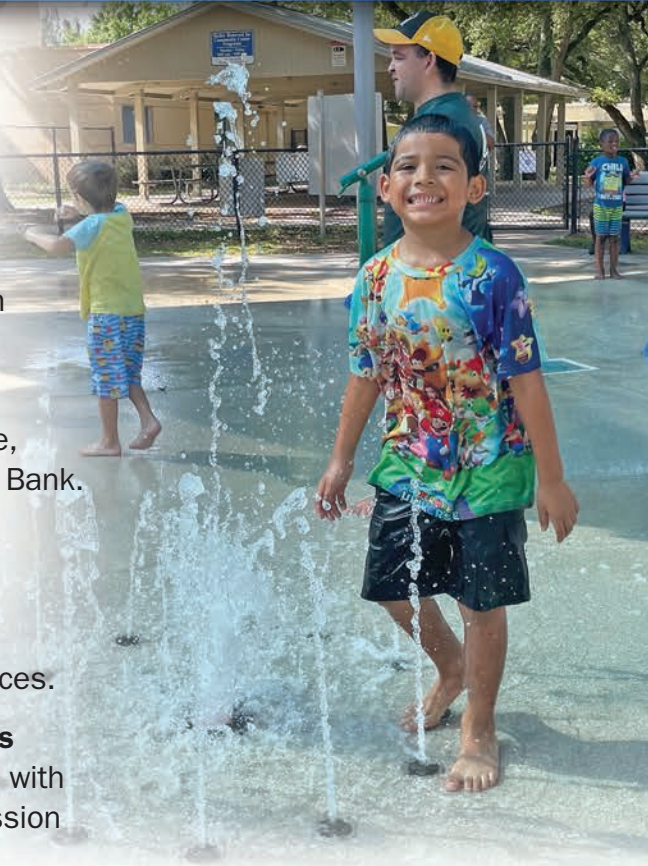
# Transforming Families

From our inception, we have prioritized families and worked closely with caregivers to develop effective student plans while creating consistency between school and home. Most of our students live below the poverty line and live with a single, working parent or grandparents. Many face food insecurity and lack basic resources that can put them on more stable ground for learning and growing.

That's why we developed our Connections Cares Program, through which we assist families with basic needs and connect them with vital resources. This program currently includes:

- **Food Pantry** — Helps families have food for the dinner table, thanks to our partnership with the Palm Beach County Food Bank.
- **Backpack Program** — Gives food to students to take home for weekend meals.
- **Family Resource & Assistance Program** — Guides families through bureaucratic red tape to desperately needed resources.

We also help families by offering **Winter Break and Summer Camps** for our students. This provides a safe, structured place for children with autism to spend school breaks while parents work, reducing regression and giving students new experiences through fun field trips.



## Transforming Communities with Strong Partnerships

We're proud to partner with the following amazing organizations across our area and the nation to give our students and adult clients the opportunity to reach their full potential.

### We Value All of Our Community Partners:

- All4Arts Florida
- All-Tag Security
- American Heart Association
- Big Brothers Big Sisters
- Canine Assisted Therapy
- Drive Shack
- Drowning Prevention Coalition of Palm Beach County
- Early Learning Coalition of Palm Beach County
- Extraordinary Charities
- FAU CARD
- First Tee
- Florida Panthers Foundation
- Lynn University Conservatory of Music
- Mike Menor - Growing Together Farm
- Mint Eco Car Wash
- Palm Beach Atlantic University
- Palm Beach County Food Bank
- Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation
- Palm Beach County Youth Services Department
- Palm Beach Kennel Club
- Palm Beach State College (Dental Hygiene Program)
- Pediatric Partners
- Peggy's Pantry of Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League
- PGA Community Outreach Committee
- School District of Palm Beach County
- Special Olympics of Florida
- Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center
- Wawa

# Key Achievements 2023-24

This is an exciting time of growth and achievement at Connections. Here are highlights from the last school year.



## Expanded the Connections Cares Program

To better serve our population of students who largely come from disadvantaged communities, we launched a new program to connect families with basic resources, such as food, while helping guide them through complex public programs to unlock essential resources for families of special needs children.

## Opened New Sensory Room

This well-equipped therapeutic space gives our students with autism a safe space to meet their sensory needs so they can be better prepared for learning and interacting with others. It's an ideal setting for occupational therapy (OT) sessions as well as supervised, independent exploration.



## Celebrated New Milestones in Teacher & Staff Retention

Retention rates are especially important when working with children with autism who often struggle with change and take time to build a rapport with new people. We're delighted to report that we maintained our 94 percent staff retention rate and celebrated the fact that 50 team members have been with us for three years or longer.

# Key Achievements 2023-24

## Building Improvements

To accommodate growth, our CAP and high school spaces have been remodeled, increasing program capacity by 25% and easing transitions between learning modules. The culinary classroom now features restaurant-grade tables, allowing staff to focus more on teaching and less on setup.

## Convened Our Task Force on the Future

To meet the needs of our growing school and adult program, a group of board members and community members evaluated a variety of paths forward. They've made initial recommendations and continue to guide our efforts to better serve the local autism community.



2024 CONNECTIONS GALA

# Hearts & Hands



### Hearts & Hands Gala

Thank you to everyone who supported our Hearts & Hands Gala held Feb. 17, 2024. Attendees joined us to *Play it Forward* to support life-changing programs for students and adult clients at Connections. The sold-out event raised a record \$530,500 to fund essential programs at Connections.

*Special thanks to event co-chairs  
Laura Pope and Carol Kaufman!*





**Fire Truck Pull**

The 2023 Fire Truck Pull brought together teams of first responders, business professionals, home builders, parents, educators and more from around Palm Beach County! Teams competed to see who could pull a real fire truck fastest and competed to see which could raise the most money to support students and adults with autism. This first-annual event held Sept. 1, 2023, raised \$23,000 for Connections!

*Special thanks to event chairperson Marc Edenzon!*



**Draw the Line on Drowning**

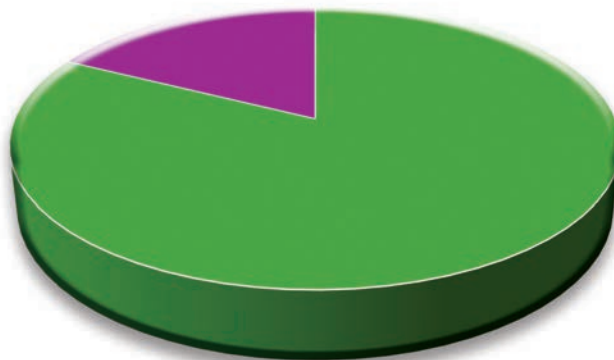
Thanks to generous supporters, our Draw the Line on Drowning campaign raised \$14,313 to help fund adaptive swim lessons at Connections. An amazing, generous donor matched this amount bringing the program funding up to \$28,626!



# Strong Financial Discipline 2023-24 Fiscal Year Financials

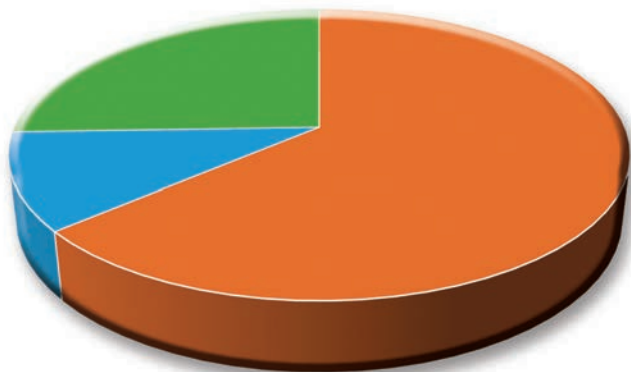
## Operating Expenses

- ▲ Charter School .....\$5,651,032
- ▲ High School & Adult.....\$1,207,456



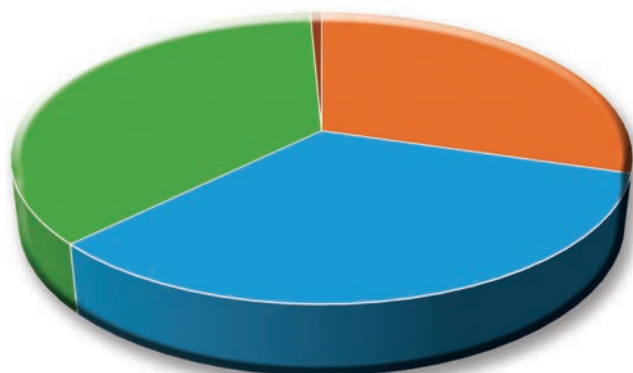
## Operating Revenue

- ▲ Charter School ..... \$4,553,063
- ▲ High School & Adult..... \$767,284
- ▲ Gap (Met Through Fundraising Efforts) ..... \$1,822,726



## Fundraising Sources to Cover the 30%+ Gap

Public funding for our students falls short of the cost to provide the specialized instruction and therapies they need. We depend on and appreciate our generous donors who bridge the funding gap.



- ▲ Grants .....\$668,011
- ▲ Individual Gifts .....\$539,739
- ▲ Events .....\$602,162
- ▲ PTO .....\$12,814



# What's Next

## Build a Sensory-Friendly Playground

Thanks to the generosity of two individual donors, we will soon have our own sensory-friendly playground. We are nearing completion of the zoning requirements, and we look forward to enjoying this incredible space this school year.



## Increase Community Outings

Understanding the importance of community-based instruction and integration, we plan to increase the number of field trips and supervised outings during the day. To support this initiative, we aim to purchase a new vehicle and ensure that more staff members obtain the necessary Commercial Driver's License.

## Implement Recommendations from Our Task Force on the Future

We'll soon kick off a capital campaign to help fund the facility expansion and improvements recommended by our Task Force on the Future. We're eager to share the exciting details this year.



# Thank You Supporters

David Abarzua  
Lawrence and Patricia Abramson  
Martha Ackerman  
Gregory T. Adams  
Mary Adler  
Beverly G. Agee  
Austin Anderson  
Mary Anderson  
Antonio Apicella  
Giovanny Apicella  
Haley Apicella  
Italo Apicella  
Mateo and Colleen Apicella  
Ted Arnstein  
Donna Avolio  
Carolyn Ayers  
Dolores G. Backe  
Michael Bailey  
Philip and Laura Balas  
David and Arlyn Bamberger  
Thaddeus Baptiste  
Rebecca Barkman  
Enma Baron  
Mirella Barwick  
Martin Bechtel  
Michelle Beckwith  
Colette Beland  
Kristen Belford-Kanjo  
Kathy Berkowitz  
Robin Bernstein  
Sheree Biafore  
Elvira Bibbo  
Samuel and Nancy Billard  
Brian Bischoff  
Joy Blamar  
Ronald Bloom and Dolores King  
Carol Bodenstein  
Judy Borinstein  
Patricia Borsch  
Erik Bowe  
Annette Bowerman  
Marsha Boyes  
Benjamin and Joanna Boynton  
Judy Brandt  
Vincent and Brandy Brenner  
Gloria Brickenden  
Lisbeth Brod

Debra Brown  
Ilene Brown  
Marlene Bryda  
Keith Bryer  
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Jeffrey Butler  
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Pasquale and Regina Carbone  
Melissa Carman  
Michael Carman  
Elijah Carrier  
Delaney Cauley  
Rene Cazanans Jr and Lilette Cazanans  
Brett Chambless  
Carol Chimento  
Debra Johnson and William Churchill  
Meghan Clancy  
Patricia Clavin  
Joseph Clayman  
Maria Elena Coffield  
Howard and Susan Cohen  
Stuart Cohen  
Craig and Elizabeth Cohen  
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Milly Corbo  
Dom Costa  
Spiros and Ada Cotakis  
Mary Craven  
Mr. Roberto Cruz and Dr. Paola Herrera  
Richard and Natalee Cuccioli  
Kara Cugno  
Dorothy Currie  
Everrett and Dorothy D'Anjou  
James Dahl  
Jerry and Susan Davenport  
Julio De La Vega

Natalia De Lara  
Brian Dean  
Fred and Meg DeCaro  
Marie Bloom Deckert  
Daniel Deev  
Eugene and Amanda Deev  
Nathaniel Deift  
Jerrold and Eileen Delaney  
Allison Delpesche  
Jackie Derle  
Peter and Ruth Derow  
Gino and RobinSue Desimone  
Nancy Dinkin  
Shirley Diuro  
Brenda Diuro  
Alice Donahue  
Donnelley Family  
Dawn Donohue  
Kim Donohue  
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Tina Hatcher  
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Kyle and Wendy Henderson  
Catherine Henshaw  
Edwin and Chelsea Hernandez  
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Joann Hofmann  
Robert and Darby Hold  
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Christofer Howell  
Marilyn Huebner  
Mark Huebner  
Jay and Robin Huebner

Pat Hughs-Gelardi  
Lisa Huguenin  
Marlena Husted  
James Ippolito  
Faena Izgelove  
Jason James  
Charles Janes  
Daniel Japha  
John and Jessica Jennings  
Glen and Joann Johnson  
Katy Johnson  
Kyle Johnson  
Kyle Johnson Jr.  
Mariah Johnson  
William and Debra Johnson  
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Marc Joseffer  
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Merle Jurnovoy  
Theodore and Carolyn Kaplan  
Lewis and Cynthia Karas  
Hanite Karuby  
Jane Katzen  
Dana Kaufman  
Mark and Carol Kaufman  
James Kay and Dr. Sonia Kay  
Peter and Elizabeth Keith  
Peggy Kennelly  
Ardith D. Kenny  
Howard and Ruth Kesslin  
John Kianka  
Karen King-Watt  
Jacquelyn Kingston  
Gail Kinney  
Susan Metzler Kirkman  
Cynthia Kizer  
Emma Klipstein  
Dave Kodner  
Stanley and Melissa Koppelman  
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Denise Maran  
Ginger Marchetti  
Lynne Marino  
Stacy Maron  
Zoraida Marrero  
Lisha Marrow  
Gina Marsala  
Wade Martin  
Christina Martinez  
Charlene Marx  
DeeAnn Mays  
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Cori McKnight  
Margarita Medina  
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Dr. Medwin Mintzis  
Luz Molina  
Patricia Monti  
Joe and Charleen Morales  
Diana Morse  
Greg and Zulema Mortman  
Dylan Mortman

Jeff Mortman  
Justin Mortman  
Richard Mortman  
Zachary Mortman  
Stephen Moss  
Daniel and Natasha Mueller  
Nadia Nagy  
Joanne Naylor  
TJ and Monique Nelligan  
Christine Neptune  
Patrick Nickler  
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