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## Hearts & Hands Gala Raises a Record-Breaking \$645,000 To Support Local Students and Adults with Autism

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla., Feb. 18, 2025 — The 2025 Hearts & Hands Gala set a new fundraising record, raising \$645,000 to support students and adults with autism at Connections, a nonprofit school in West Palm Beach. Held on Feb. 8, 2025, at the National Croquet Center, the event brought together community leaders, philanthropists and autism advocates for a night of impact and celebration.

This year's gala marked Connections' 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a milestone in the school's mission to provide specialized education, therapies and life-skills programs that empower individuals with autism. "This year's gala was more than a milestone. It was a celebration of 10 years of transformation for our school and the 140 individuals we serve," says Debra Johnson, executive director and principal of Connections. "The generosity of our supporters helps us create brighter futures for some of the most underserved members of our community."

Connections serves a population that often lacks access to key services, with 85 percent of students living below the poverty line and nearly 50 percent residing in single-parent or grandparent-led households. The organization depends on donor support to bridge the 30 percent funding gap between public funding and the actual cost of delivering essential services to individuals with autism.

At the event, special guests included Palm Beach Gardens Fire Rescue **Fire Chief Keith Bryer** and **Deputy Fire Chief James Ippolito**. WPTV anchor **Michael Williams** served as master of ceremonies, and special honorees were recognized for their significant contributions to the school's mission. The 2025 honorees included:

- **Jody and Howard Passov of Palm Beach Gardens** – Recognized for their unwavering dedication to Connections' students and families.
- **Dr. Sonia Kay of Palm Beach Gardens** – Honored for her pivotal role in advancing programs for individuals with autism.
- **BallenIsles Charities Foundation** – A longtime supporter funding technology and educational resources for Connections' students.
- **Extraordinary Charities** – Recognized for opening new opportunities in culinary training and independent-living skills for students.

"Our 2025 honorees have been instrumental in shaping Connections' first decade of success," says Johnson. "Their generosity and advocacy have directly transformed the lives of our students and adult clients, paving the way for even greater achievements in the years to come."

For more information about Connections or this event, please visit [connectedpb.com](https://connectedpb.com).

### About Connections

Connections is a nonprofit educational center that delivers specialized education, therapies, vocational training and life-skills development for students with autism in Palm Beach County. The organization serves students ages 3-22 and offers an innovative day program for adults with autism. Learn more at [connectedpb.com](https://connectedpb.com).

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