

Joseph Caruso '86

Entrepreneur and Philanthropist

When students enter Benchmark School, they typically have challenges in learning related to how they process language and/or a mismatch of their learning styles and the instruction they have received. For Joe Caruso—who entered Benchmark in 1979—having been born with congenital cataracts and being legally blind took his challenges to another level. “I couldn’t read and I couldn’t see,” Joe remembered.

Although he struggled to maintain his vision through numerous surgeries, he distinctly remembers the day that his teacher, Sally (Ross) Laird—now Benchmark’s Assistant Head of School and Head of the Lower School—had an “aha moment” and figured out that Joe was actually able to read, but he just could not see the small letters. Sally gave him large print books and his reading improved immediately. For that he is “forever grateful” to Benchmark School.

“The learning skills you acquire here [at Benchmark] are incredible,” Joe said. In particular, he believes that Benchmark helped him with confidence and in teaching him how to learn. “Benchmark hones in on what a student’s strengths are and focuses on them to build self-confidence,” he said.

“For me, it was building my confidence in gym class, and that confidence eventually bled into my academics.”

After leaving Benchmark, Joe went on to attend Sanford School, Springfield High School, and Drexel University. After college, he joined the wholesale wine business—working for others at first, and then starting his own wholesale and import wine business with his father, based in Cape May, New Jersey, in 2007.

While Joe’s successes were abundant, he had the unfortunate experience of re-living his vision and learning challenges after his two daughters—Parker and Shea—were born with congenital cataracts similar to Joe’s. The numerous surgeries and long hours in the waiting room of Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia began to wear on Joe, and he sought out the high-intensity training for triathlons as an outlet to deal with the emotions of the situation. It was during this tough time that his family decided that they were going to give back as much as they could to support the efforts of the hospitals that had helped his daughters and many other children with vision-threatening medical issues.

Since Joe had been enjoying the challenge of triathlons (he has



Joe Caruso '86 with daughters Shea and Parker.

completed nearly 40 of them!), the idea of completing an IRONMAN crossed his mind after hearing about a Cape May friend who had qualified multiple times for the IRONMAN world championships. However, Joe remembers that he immediately said that there was no way he could ever do that. “After I said it, the words made me sick, and I signed up the next morning for the race,” he said. “Benchmark taught me that *I can’t* is not an option, and I did not want to be an example like that for my daughters.”

Using his first full IRONMAN race in 2012 as the inspiration, Joe raised and donated nearly \$50,000 to Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. Soon after, he began the FOCUS

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Wine Foundation. After completing his second full IRONMAN in 2014, Joe decided to further expand his foundation by adding his own private label brand—FOCUS Wines.


Launched in June 2015, FOCUS Wines gives a portion of its proceeds to Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and other premier children’s eye institutions. In this way, Joe has hopes to give children from around the world their chance to experience life the way all kids should: with health, joy, and hope. Continuing to use his daughters as inspiration, the first wines under the FOCUS Wines brand were fittingly named “Parker” Pinot Noir and “Shea” Chardonnay.

In his business life, Joe still utilizes many of the strategies he learned at Benchmark. “I plan things out, create outlines, and set short-term and long-term goals,” he said. “Benchmark taught me goal setting and that small accomplishments can lead to big accomplishments, and that’s how I navigate business.”



Joe’s children Parker Caruso (left) and Shea Caruso (right).

Joe has set big future goals for himself and FOCUS—to sell one million cases of wine and donate \$1 million to worthy medical institutions. With the “tenacity

and persistence” his Benchmark experience taught him, he will not accept “can’t” and there is no doubt he will meet these goals as well. 

Joseph Caruso '86 Named Benchmark's 2016 Outstanding Alumnus

During the Middle School Celebration of Accomplishments and Graduation on June 15, Benchmark Alumnus Joe Caruso '86 was honored as the school's 2016 Outstanding Alumnus. In addition to receiving the honor, Joe had the opportunity to impart an inspirational message to the students and their families who were in attendance.

In his address, he said that he and his family are “forever grateful to all involved at Benchmark School” for helping him to achieve his potential. “Take advantage of what’s here [at Benchmark] and appreciate it,” Joe said. “Have faith; Benchmark knows what it’s doing—that’s for sure. Find your path and what you’re good at, and use it to build your confidence. Also be resilient, stay focused, trust your instincts with the people you are going to surround yourself with, and never, ever give up.”

“Joe was chosen as the 2016 Outstanding Alumnus because of the tremendous success he has experienced in many areas of his life: successfully competing in IRONMAN competitions, starting a thriving business, and giving back to the hospital that helped him and his daughters overcome their vision difficulties,” said Head of Middle School Eleanor Gensemer. “We are very proud of all that Joe has accomplished.”



Head of School Robb Gaskins with Benchmark's 2016 Outstanding Alumnus Joe Caruso '86.