ENDOWMENT

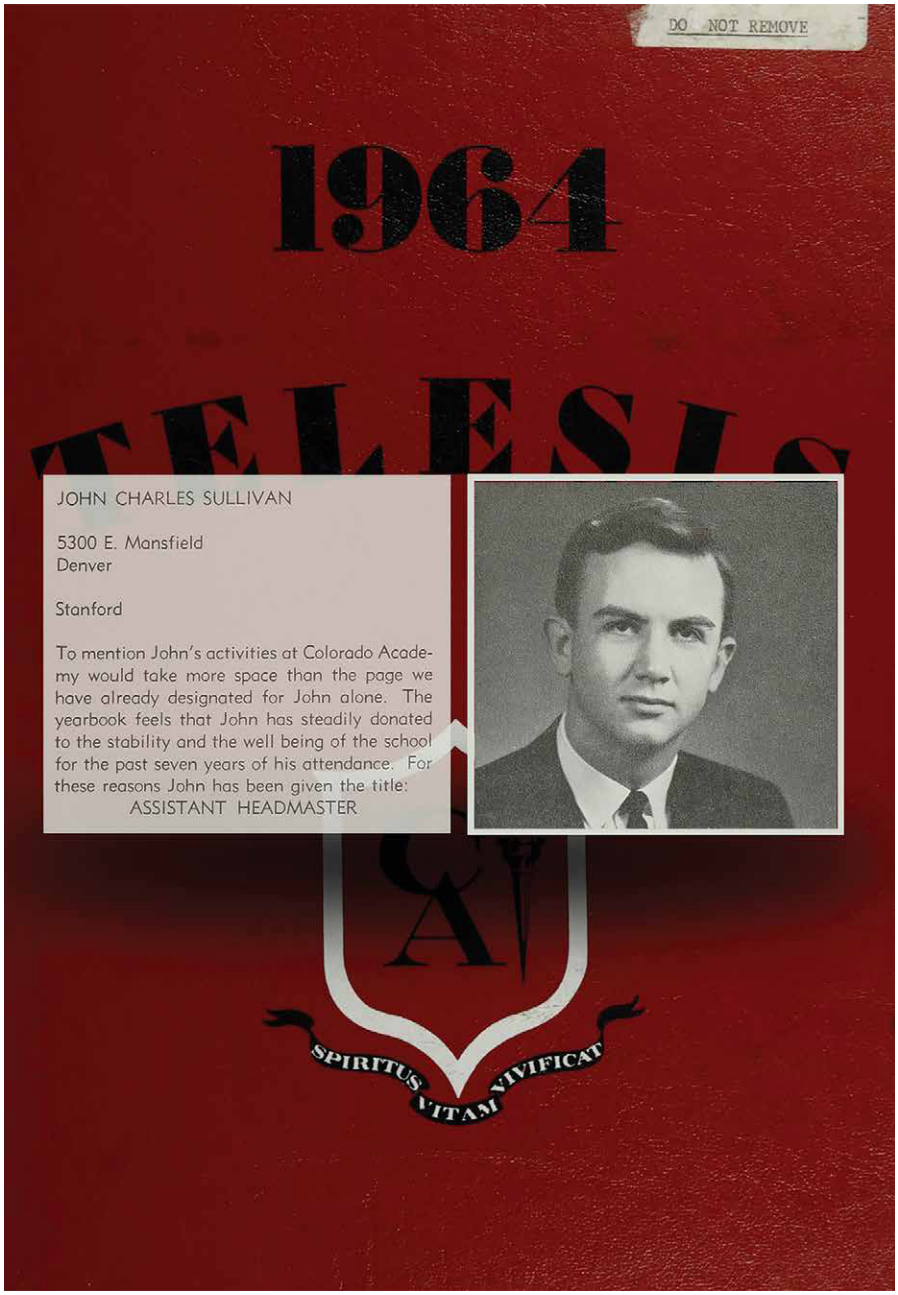
John Sullivan ’64 and the Sullivan Challenge

John Sullivan ’64 knows more about Colorado Academy than many—probably more than most, in fact. His arrival at CA in 1957 as a Sixth Grade transplant from Montana—“a little-town kid becoming a big-city guy and all that,” he recalls—coincided almost perfectly with that of the school’s legendary headmaster, F. Charles Froelicher, who through the 1950s and 1960s rescued CA from its faded military-school past and transformed it into a new kind of model for the West, blending the idea of the East Coast college preparatory school with his own vision for “learning by doing.”

Under Froelicher, says Sullivan, “Colorado Academy was busy reinventing itself before the word ‘reinvention’ became a buzzword in education.”

From an all-boys boarding and day school of fewer than 200 students when he first set foot on campus, Sullivan watched closely as CA grew to embody the “independent school” ideal. So involved in every area as a student that he earned the informal title of “Assistant Headmaster” and was given his own office and set of keys, Sullivan now argues, “It engendered independence in every one of its students, attending to each one’s strengths and weaknesses and encouraging independent growth.”

In his estimation, Froelicher’s unique vision, combining a rigorous liberal arts tradition with the fine arts, music, theater, and outdoor and experiential education, laid the foundation for what is today a thriving and dynamic institution that occupies a very special niche in his own life and in the lives of generations of fellow graduates.



John Sullivan ’64 earned his own page in the 1964 Telesis.

Says Sullivan, who has retired from family banking and ranching operations in Montana and formerly managed a group of local newspapers, "I thrived at CA, and ever since I have recognized that it was a very big part of whatever person I was able to become."

What the experience most deeply imprinted upon him, he continues, was the fine art of "plate-spinning": "I had all these different things going on, and I kept very busy, did a reasonably decent job with all of them, and that's how my life has gone, too."

But the school's future is now at stake, Sullivan believes.

Under the leadership of Head of School Dr. Mike Davis, who carries forward Froelicher's legacy among a student population that's grown five times larger, CA has indeed continued to offer a model of education available almost nowhere else, in which individual growth through experience and the challenge of open discussion complement a globally informed perspective built upon the traditional liberal arts.

Yet across the larger landscape of education, engaging young people in the kind of rigorous and dynamic learning that determined his own successful path now seems more difficult than ever, according to Sullivan.

"I think it's an amazing feat, what Colorado Academy has been able to accomplish under Dr. Davis," he explains. "The incredible new buildings, the financial access for so many more students—it's impressive that the school remains one of individuals, both students and faculty, who all shine in their own way."

But, he goes on, "I realize I may sound like an old coot, but there's a sort of blind spot for a lot of young people today. Culture is so complex, the pace of change is so rapid, and we're exposed to so much information, it's harder and harder to process. It's more and more difficult to get an informed picture of life and how things actually work. Students today need an appreciation and understanding of so many new and different facets of the world."

And as artificial intelligence adds yet another impossibly complex wrinkle to young people's ability to envision and shape their future, Sullivan argues, "Some of us old-timers are starting to say, 'Well, not my problem.' But it is; this generation of young people is something we should care deeply about."

Fortunately, CA is uniquely capable of preparing students for whatever unknowns they may encounter, he says—but doing so is costly and requires great adaptability.

Just as during the COVID-19 pandemic, when CA's ability to respond rapidly and creatively kept students on campus while many other institutions were shuttered, Sullivan believes that institutional agility and its enabler—Unrestricted Endowment—are essential in this moment.

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That's why in 2025 he issued a successful endowment "challenge" to CA supporters, and is following it up with a new call for endowment support among CA families and alumni.

"The ability to adapt, to find a workaround, is one of the most enduring things about CA," he recounts. "It was just the same in my time, when students and faculty all pitched in to build things together. But now, those who have been so generous to the school need to be thinking about providing more permanent support—not just getting one group of students to graduation, or funding the construction of one new building."

Vision and adaptability like CA's require long-term risk taking, and risk requires a safety net. As the independent school world has increasingly realized, tuition and annual donations are no longer enough.

"Since Froelicher's day, Colorado Academy has been on the leading edge of a lot of things in education," says Sullivan. "We've always been willing to roll up our sleeves and take on any challenge. But the challenges are 10 times greater today, and the school needs a heck of a lot more endowment support if it's going to keep doing so. It needs people willing to invest in a future that's going to be there and remain there for generations to come." □

The Sullivan Challenge

Give Today!

John Sullivan invites you to join him in investing in the future of CA by contributing to the Unrestricted Endowment. He will **match every gift, dollar-for-dollar, up to $500,000 between now and June 30, 2027**.

For questions, please reach out to:
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