



THE STUDENT, THE ARTIST, THE GIFTS

Darryl Ford had an extraordinary story to tell when he walked to the podium of the Earl and Pam Ball Theater on April 13, and he began by remembering a student, Antonios “Tony” S. Thomas.

Ford recalled crossing paths with Tony in the dining hall one morning years ago when they were both picking up breakfast. Ford was Middle School director then, Tony a Lower School

student. “I said hello, Tony said hello, and then with a big smile and great pride, he informed me: ‘I am Greek, you know.’”

“From that moment, I knew Tony Thomas was a special young man. His curly hair, remarkable smile, exuberant personality and sparkle were imprinted on me forever.”

When Tony became a middle schooler, Ford observed that he was that rare student beloved by everyone. “The smart kids loved him; the musicians loved him; the singers loved him; the athletes loved him; the popular kids loved him; and the less popular kids loved him. His teachers loved him, too. Tony was able to walk easily into and out of every social group in the school. He cared for everyone and was a friend to all. He was my friend.”

Tony Thomas was diagnosed with leukemia while he was in Middle School, and he died in January of his eighth grade year.

Speaking before the packed and hushed crowd, Ford explained Tony’s connection to the gleaming grand piano sitting at center stage and, just off stage, the musician waiting to play it.

Despina and Sotirios Thomas, Tony’s parents, gave the Steinway Concert B piano to the school this year in loving memory of their son. Tony was a pianist, and they had

The Philadelphia Inquirer wrote about the gift of the piano and the performance in a front page story on April 15. Access the story online through penncharter.com/news.

Tony Thomas on the Schuylkill River in 2004 for Penn Charter’s first Dragon Boat race.



Emanuel Ax played music by Chopin and Schumann, including selections from his concerts earlier this year at the Kimmel Center and Carnegie Hall.

promised to buy him a Steinway when they moved to a bigger house. “This new Concert B piano fulfills their promise to Tony,” Ford explained. “It is a gift to Penn Charter to honor their son, Antonios, so that his memory and spirit live on in this school that he loved so much.”

Ford told the audience that, last year, when Despina Thomas talked about the gift with Chief Development Officer Jack Rogers, she suggested that Emanuel Ax might play the piano in a concert here. Tony had visited the internationally acclaimed pianist backstage after a concert at the Kimmel Center when Tony was 10, she explained. “Don’t you think Emanuel Ax would want to play Tony’s piano?”

Rogers promised to do his best. He envisioned a grand finale for the school’s \$47 million Frameworks for the Future fund-raising campaign, a celebration to thank 1,362 donors to the campaign, 306 of whom gave gifts specifically to the Kurtz Center. Having Emanuel Ax in concert would certainly make for an unforgettable evening. Not to mention what it would mean to Tony’s parents.

Rogers contacted John Doelp OPC ’72, senior vice president with Columbia Records and Sony Music

Entertainment, for advice. Ax records with Sony, and Doelp helped Rogers contact Ax’s associates. Many months and many phone calls later, Rogers was elated by the musician’s response. Ax agreed to come to Penn Charter to play Tony’s piano. And he decided to donate his performance.

Ford thanked the audience for their gifts, and Emanuel Ax for his “remarkable gesture, and for your remarkable gifts.

“While I desperately miss him, I am thankful to Tony Thomas, my student and my friend, and I am thankful to God for the gift of Antonios, who upon my first meeting him, proudly proclaimed, ‘I am Greek, you know.’” PC

VIEW PHOTOS of the ribbon cutting, *Wizard of Oz*, Emanuel Ax concert and more in the Flickr gallery at penncharter.com/news.

