

Stars shine bright at special John Carroll Prom

BEL AIR - Decked out in a full tuxedo, Patrick Mullen jumped onto the stage at The John Carroll School for an energetic impersonation of Journey frontman Steve Perry as the DJ blared the legendary '80s band's smash hit, "Don't Stop Believin'."

Mullen's over-the-top performance was a clear indication that "A Night for Our Stars," a prom for students and adults with special needs, made March 26 a night to remember.

Thanks to John Carroll senior Caroline Cooney, who made "A Night for Our Stars" her senior project, attendance increased from 20 for last year's inaugural event to 175.

Invitations were extended to various organizations serving people with special needs, including The Arc Northern Chesapeake Region, Penn-Marr Human Services, Catholic Charities of Baltimore's Gallagher Services and Harford County public high schools.

As word spread, families began contacting Cooney directly, swelling the guest list.

On the big night, John Carroll's gym became a banquet hall, complete with a balloon arch and, thanks to the drama department, a photo booth for capturing memories.

The baseball team arrived at 10 a.m. for set -up, and students, parents and alumni provided hair and makeup services.

Faculty put together a buffet dinner, sponsored by local businesses.

John Carroll art students created a commemorative painting for all to autograph over the course of the evening.

Participants danced the night away, at one point joining a conga line as classmates Jesseca Dunnett and Max Movey played current hits and favorites from the past.

New friends were made and old friends were reacquainted. And while a few brought dates, John Carroll students filled in for those who didn't.

"I never imagined it this big," Cooney said, commenting on the growth of the event.

"I am not one put myself out there," she added, though the success of her project indicates otherwise.

Parker Day, who launched the prom as her senior project in 2016 and is now a freshman at Jacksonville (Fla.) University said that Cooney had "done an amazing job and outdone herself."

Day had traveled from Florida to support her friend on the big night.

Senior graduation projects - in which students commit to 30-hours of field work in pursuit of a career interest, a personal passion or community service - were instituted nine years ago, according to Louise Geczy, senior project coordinator at John Carroll.

"Sometimes students take on projects that are larger than life," Geczy said. The "A Night for Our Stars" prom for students and adults with special needs is one of those projects.

Geczy said she hopes the prom will continue long into the future; Cooney said she has made it her goal to recruit a current junior to put together a 2018 prom.

"Life is so precious," Cooney said. "It's amazing to give them the same opportunity, and reach out to out to others who might not have the same advantages as you do."

Shirley Miles, mother of 21-year-old Victoria Van Beek, a senior at Bel Air High School, appreciated the opportunity for her daughter.

"This doesn't happen enough," Miles said. "It's all she's talked about for the last three weeks since we signed up."

The best part of the evening for Van Beek?

"I met a boy," she said.

E-mail Kevin Parks at kparks@CatholicReview.org.