



(L-R) Brett Adams '10, Michael Grosso '10, Mary Katherine Ortale '08, Rebecca Ruff '01, Ed McNichol '05 and Stephen Chase '06 shared their Benchmark stories and answered questions from 8th graders and their parents at the "30 Days Out" Breakfast on May 16.

LIFE-LONG CONNECTIONS

Alumni Find Meaningful Ways to Stay Connected to the Benchmark Community

By Jessica Siso

As an adult, it's not uncommon to proudly visit your college alma mater for Homecoming or even head back to your high school for a football game under the stadium lights. But to fondly remember—and visit—your middle or elementary school? The idea is almost unheard of; that is, until you come to Benchmark.

"Being a Benchmark alum is so special because it is such a unique school," said Mary Katherine Ortale '08. "There are thousands of alums from Penn Charter, Germantown Academy and Radnor High School, for example, but only select individuals are Benchmark alums. I feel like I get to wear a special badge of honor because of the extra steps my family and I took to focus on my educational needs and make a commitment to my future successes."

Though She Be Little, She is Fierce

Benchmark, which is excitedly approaching its 50th anniversary, has always been on the smaller side by design. With a current student population of just under 200 students, the school community has always focused less on being the biggest and more on being the best. For its students, the small classes mean more connections with peers and teachers, and ultimately, a community that is very tight-knit. Add in the fact that these bright students are connected on an even deeper level since many are going through the same ups and downs as they learn to work through their learning differences, and it's a recipe for a life-long—and often strongly emotional—connection.

"I continue to stay connected to Benchmark because it's the place where I found myself and regained confidence in who I am," said Dan Santoleri '13, a sophomore at Temple University. "It's where I gained the perseverance and the knowledge of how to tackle anything thrown at me. It revamped my will to learn. It was the spark that lit the flame that has now become a torch."

For Stephen Chase '06, staying connected is simply about the people at Benchmark. "I've attended five different schools in my life and while each is important in its own

way, there is something about Benchmark that draws me back," he said. "Perhaps it's because it is the place I gained confidence in myself, or perhaps it is because I enjoyed learning in this supportive environment and being challenged in ways that I later learned from. But what has always stood out to me as exemplary about this place is the people—the staff, teachers, board members, and so many more—who make this place unique and special."

And for Mary Katherine, staying connected to Benchmark is her opportunity to thank the school for all it has given her. "Without Benchmark, I would not be where I am today," she said. "I will always be thankful and grateful for the opportunities Benchmark provided to me, and I stay connected because I want to give back to the school."

Tell Your Story with Your Whole Heart

In addition to a large number of alumni coming back to the school to visit with mentors, teachers, and former classmates, many alumni also come back to speak about their Benchmark experience.

Several times a year alumni voluntarily come back to speak about their experience at admission open houses. In addition, alumni have also returned in recent years to tell their stories and answer questions at a "Life After Benchmark" Career Day and at the "30 Days Out" event for soon-to-be-graduates and their families.

"Being an alumnus in the Benchmark community is such an important and influential role," Dan said. "When I come back as an alumni speaker at an open house, I love talking to parents and showing them the impact Benchmark has had on me, and how I have taken what I learned here, run with it, and used it to accomplish great things. It's my way of talking to potential parents and showing them that this is the right place to send your kids."

"I have to almost pinch myself each time I return [to serve as an alumni speaker] because I remember the alumni who would return to campus when I was a student and share with me what college was like and what careers they held. Back then, I never thought that would be me one day," Stephen said.

Connect, Inspire, Support

In addition to sharing messages of hope and inspiration to current students and prospective families, many alumni return to Benchmark in some facet simply to stay connected to the school and faculty.

Ethan Mazer '12, the CEO and founder of Empower Event Group, has returned to Benchmark in recent years to serve as a DJ and keep the energy level high for a number of Benchmark events, including middle school parties, the Benchmark Parents Association Spring Social and Auction, and the student-led Mini-THON.

Similarly, professional actor Colin McAdoo '98 has graciously returned to Benchmark for the past 15 years to serve as director and choreographer of the annual middle school musical. "I have the privilege of calling myself a proud alumnus and the director or choreographer of the musicals," Colin said. "However, most importantly I get to call myself a member of this community. I truly believe the teachers of this school are, without a doubt, the finest I have ever had the opportunity to meet/work with throughout the world...and I consider many to be dear, dear friends."

Many other alumni have returned to Benchmark to student teach during the school year, or work as a teaching assistant or recreation counselor at Benchmark Camp, or to complete their internship requirements as high school seniors. Paul Shump '96, said that his role as a Benchmark Camp counselor was "one of the best jobs I've ever had"—so much so that he did it for 10 years.

For Anna Lodge '13, her desire to stay connected with Benchmark even led to a change in her perspective. "Benchmark has always been such an influential part of my life and like a second home, but working as a teaching assistant this summer has given me a different perspective on learning and thinking, as well as a new-found love and appreciation for this school."

Surround Yourself With People Who Get It

Regardless of how they retain a connection to Benchmark, the fact that these alums have all had the common experience of being a Benchmark student seems to be the most important consideration for our alums.

Over the past several years, Benchmark has been making the effort to provide more opportunities for our alumni to connect with each other informally on campus. Events presented by the Benchmark School Center for Empowered Learning have attracted many alumni who want to stay abreast of the latest research on helping those who may learn differently. The annual alumni gathering prior to the Friday night production of the middle school musical has been a recent favorite among alums of all ages. Currently there are plans in works for more reunions and other gatherings specifically for alumni to re-connect.

"I think it's important to stay connected because only we know what it means to have attended Benchmark, what our specific needs are, and how we can support each other in the future," Mary Katherine said. "Benchmark is home and will always be home, because it's where I finally learned to read and embrace who I am as a learner. Even 10 years later, my heart aches when I pull out of the parking lot." 🌿

Are you interested in coming back to Benchmark School to share your educational, career, or life experiences?

Contact Louisa Hanshew at LouisaHanshew@BenchmarkSchool.org.



1. (From top left): Mary Katherine Ortale '08, Maria Ortale '12, Jimmy Spencer '13, Anna Lodge '13, Michael Grosso '10, Tara Higgins '11, Jessica Katz '08, and Trey Milby '12 worked as counselors or teaching assistants at Benchmark Camp 2018.

2. (From left): Dominique Scirrotto '17 and Tierney Pegg '17 returned to Benchmark this spring to speak about their Benchmark experience at an Admission Open House.

3. (From left) Joseph Gallo '13 reminisced about his Benchmark days with Dr. Adam Lemisch, Head of Child & Family Support Services, at the school's Alumni Networking Reception on June 1.

4. (From left): Stephen Chase '06, Kate Netter Bailey '00, Dan Otto '00, Kane Kalas '04, Ross Mattis '91, and Paul Shump '96 spoke at Alumni Career Day: "Life After Benchmark" on March 24, 2017.