

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE
HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS



NEWS RELEASE

Illinois High School Student Selected as National Recipient of NFHS National High School Heart of the Arts Award

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: John Gillis

INDIANAPOLIS, IN (March 6, 2015) — Ethan Gray, a senior at Chicago (Illinois) St. Rita of Cascia High School, has been selected the 2015 national recipient of the “National High School Heart of the Arts Award” by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).

The National High School Heart of the Arts Award was created by the NFHS to recognize those individuals who exemplify the ideals of the positive heart of the arts that represent the core mission of education-based activities. This is the second year that the National High School Heart of the Arts Award has been offered.

With its tradition-rich roots on Chicago’s south side, St. Rita has built a legacy of athletic excellence that intertwines directly with its membership in the heralded Chicago Catholic League Conference. There is little doubt that at some juncture since the school opened its doors in 1905 that a coach or player from the all-boys school has referenced the need for “toughness” or “playing through pain” in the athletic arena.

Gray is not a part of Mustangs basketball team that is currently ranked among the best in the nation, or its perennial state title-contending baseball team, nor will he be its next alumnus to play in the NFL, as Darius Fleming did for the Patriots in the Super Bowl this year.

The kid who might very well be the toughest walking those hallowed halls is making his mark in the arts - namely music and theater - although he isn’t one to let on about what he has been through.

“Once in a while you get a kid who inspires you and Ethan is that type of kid,” said St. Rita music faculty member Cindy Gradek. “He has a quiet presence about him, and his classmates love him.

However, I think the school is going to be blown away when they hear his story. Most kids outside of band don't know what he goes through."

What Gray goes through - and will for the rest of his life - is a monthly blood transfusion. The transfusion is performed through the port catheter that was surgically implanted in his chest, and is a necessity to combat his Sickle Cell Thalassemia.

The genetically inherited disease led Gray to be hospitalized at a young age for maladies such as pneumonia, acute chest syndrome and other life-threatening diseases. In addition, he experiences debilitating episodes known as "pain crisis" that can occur at any time when parts of his body are deprived of blood and oxygen due the sickling of his blood cells.

After being home-schooled in grade school in order to help limit his exposure to germs, Gray enrolled at St. Rita. The clubs he joined ranged from paintball to video games to Spanish, but none came more naturally than that of the music programs. Musically inclined from a young age, St. Rita opened up several new avenues for him, including playing in the school marching and jazz bands.

Although Gray had never played in a band before, the smaller numbers in the St. Rita band required him to learn and play new instruments. Saxophone, clarinet and guitar remain his most oft-played instruments, but he reports he can now play 11 different instruments - self-taught on each.

Gray has also expanded into the high school theater program, working on the stage and lighting crew as a sophomore before embracing a more active role. He has now been a part of the cast in three school plays, including Hamlet, and was picked as the funniest performer at one of the school improv shows in which he participated.

Minus a month-long hospital stay during his freshman year, Gray remained relatively healthy for the first 2½ years of his high school career. He had to take some precautions, such as needing to go inside to get warm to avoid a pain crisis when playing with the band at cold-weather football games, but overall things had gone well. That changed in April 2014, when he suffered a stroke in the school theatre.

The stroke resulted in the monthly transfusions becoming a lifelong reality for Gray, but he has recovered and persevered.

Despite all he has endured and his involvement at St. Rita, Gray somehow still finds time to give back to his community. He plays music at two churches, has built homes for the underprivileged as a part of his youth group, played guitar for sick children at his hospital, and volunteers at Garden Center

Services and 115 Bourbon Street, which help the handicapped and veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, respectively.

Music will always be a part of Gray's life, but his long-term goal is to establish a career with his other artistic abilities. He plans to pursue collegiate studies in game design illustration and animation, with the ultimate goal of one day drawing comic books for Marvel or D.C.

About the Award

In addition to the selection of Ethan Gray as the national award recipient, the NFHS National High School Heart of the Arts Award Selection Committee chose eight individuals for section awards.

Following are the 2015 National High School Heart of the Arts section winners:

Section 1 – Molly Parker, student, Hinesburg (Vermont) Champlain Valley Union High School

Section 2 – Rachel Johnson, student, Roanoke (Virginia) Patrick Henry High School

Section 3 – Brian Evans, student, Hattiesburg (Mississippi) Oak Grove High School

Section 4 – Ethan Gray, student, Chicago (Illinois) St. Rita of Cascia High School

Section 5 – Danielle Medrano, student, Wichita (Kansas) The Independent High School

Section 6 – Elizabeth-Helen Martin, student, Ponca City (Oklahoma) High School

Section 7 – Kevin Berlat, English teacher and speech/debate coach, Phoenix (Arizona) Central High School

Section 8 – Cory Bergh, student, Deming (Washington) Mount Baker High School

Nominations for this award were generated through NFHS member state associations and reviewed by the NFHS National High School Heart of the Arts Award Selection Committee composed of state association staff members. While the national winner will be recognized June 29 at the NFHS Summer Meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, the section winners will be recognized within their respective states and will receive awards before the end of the current school year.

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[About the National Federation of State High School Associations \(NFHS\)](#)

The NFHS, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, is the national leadership organization for high school sports and fine arts activities. Since 1920, the NFHS has led the development of education-based interscholastic sports and fine arts activities that help students succeed in their lives. The NFHS sets direction for the future by building awareness and support, improving the

participation experience, establishing consistent standards and rules for competition, and helping those who oversee high school sports and activities. The NFHS writes playing rules for 16 sports for boys and girls at the high school level. Through its 50 member state associations and the District of Columbia, the NFHS reaches more than 19,000 high schools and 11 million participants in high school activity programs, including more than 7.7 million in high school sports. As the recognized national authority on interscholastic activity programs, the NFHS conducts national meetings; sanctions interstate events; produces publications for high school coaches, officials and athletic directors; sponsors professional organizations for high school coaches, officials, spirit coaches, speech and debate coaches and music adjudicators; serves as the national source for interscholastic coach training; and serves as a national information resource of interscholastic athletics and activities. For more information, visit the NFHS Web site at www.nfhs.org.

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