

NEWS

## 'The journey is the reward': How one family's loss led to the acquisition of Pope Francis' watch

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GREEN BAY - Even after 15-year-old Brian LaViolette lost his life in a swimming accident in the summer of 1992, the watches he collected over the years kept track of the time.

Twenty-nine years later, a Swatch wristwatch would arrive to Green Bay from Vatican City — Pope Francis its former owner — all in Brian's name.

"On the day of Brian's funeral, a promise was made that great things would be accomplished in his name and memory," wrote Green Bay Bishop David Ricken in a letter to Pope Francis.

The journey from Green Bay to Vatican City relied on a series of connections that pulled these disparate worlds closer together.



Pope Francis' wristwatch, a Swatch, is displayed at Nicolet National Bank in downtown Green Bay. The watch will be auctioned off in February, with proceeds benefiting the Brian LaViolette Foundation. *Natalie Eilbert/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin*



Brian LaViolette, who attended De Pere High School, lost his life while swimming in the Bay of Green Bay. The story was featured as the cover story in Green Bay Press-Gazette's paper on Monday, Aug. 10, 1992. *Courtesy Of Kim LaViolette Mosteller*

The story took up most of the hourlong announcement on Tuesday at Nicolet National Bank in downtown Green Bay, where member organizers and friends associated with the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation announced the "Once Upon a Time Collection," the upcoming online auction and how to donate watches to the cause.

Pope Francis' wristwatch will be front and center in the online auction on Feb. 22, alongside timepieces worn over the last few decades by the likes of Priscilla Presley and Jerry Lewis.

All proceeds will go toward the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation, the non-profit founded in 1992, which offers 56 scholarships a year to college-bound students ranging from \$500 to \$10,000.

Doug LaViolette, Brian's father and president of the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation, cherishes Timex watches. When his grandson, Walker, was born, he wanted to give the child a wristwatch, a legacy item he and his wife, Renee, might impart on their only grandson.

When he had this gift idea, his memory flashed to his late son's own fascination with watches, which began when Doug gifted him his first one — a Green Bay Packers watch.

Doug remembered the dresser drawer in Brian's bedroom where he kept his watch collection. He hadn't looked at that drawer of watches in 28 years. But there they were, literally frozen in time. It was nothing a battery couldn't fix.

"I've worn one of Brian's watches every day since February 2020," Doug said.

At Tuesday's event at Nicolet National Bank, one of Brian's watches could be seen on Doug's right wrist as he unveiled the watch once worn by Pope Francis.

## How Green Bay received Pope Francis' watch

Doug's consideration of family legacy was not only integral to his baby grandson, but the longevity of the Brian LaViolette Foundation.

The gift of a watch, Doug reasoned, could only grow the foundation's efforts as he considered just how many people, including luminaries at home and abroad, kept watches ticking away in drawers across the world.

He immediately thought of Pope Francis.

"Pope Francis is known not only for his spiritual work, but he also wears an inexpensive watch that lends itself to his



Doug LaViolette, Brian's father, shares stories of faith, Brian's life and the friendships forged in his untimely death. *Natalie Eilbert/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin*

character," Doug told the Green Bay Press-Gazette ahead of the event. "From Day One of the watch project, I always felt that if we could get to Pope Francis and ask him for his wristwatch, that would literally be the Holy Grail."

After he pitched the watch idea to his daughter, Kim LaViolette Mosteller, the Brian LaViolette Foundation's executive director, they arranged a Zoom call with Brian's childhood best friend Austin Rios.

Rios is now an Episcopal priest living in Rome, Italy.

He was the last person to see Brian alive and, after losing his best friend, became one of the first recipients of the foundation's scholarship awards.



Doug LaViolette, left, and Mike Calawerts, right, unveil Pope Francis' Swatch watch and the letter from Rev. Fabio Salerno, Pope Francis' personal secretary. Doug is wearing one of Brian's watches, an everyday commitment he's upheld since February 2020. Natalie Eilbert/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

Over Zoom, Doug and Kim pitched the idea to Rios, who had his camera off during the conversation. Silence followed as they stared at a blank icon. Doug would later recall this pause with laughter: "I thought, 'Oh my god, we offended the priest.'"

Rios, after a moment, said he was in.

"When I got the call from Doug and Kim originally, my initial reaction was like *really?*" Rios said over Zoom at Tuesday's event. "But I'm a faithful person and someone who believes that if you don't ask, you won't receive. I was very much interested in the idea."

Rios had been living in Rome for a decade, and had met Pope Francis a number of times. He also had connections with religious priests and bishops in Rome and the Vatican.

"I remember when Austin was this young boy who used to knock around with Brian," Doug said. "And here he's this priest in Rome and he's talking about bishops at the Vatican. These relationships are so deep. It's all about starting a conversation."

One conversation led to another. The group at the Vatican researched the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation and held a special hearing about it, according to Rios. They came back to Rios to relay the message that such an ask, indeed, was increasingly plausible.

"They validated the purity of what the foundation means," Doug said. "We just had to follow the proper channels. The proper guidelines required the recommendation of a local bishop in Green Bay."

During Tuesday's event, Mike Calawerts, a friend of the LaViolette family, said when he called Bishop David Ricken, of the Diocese of Green Bay, Ricken offered what was becoming a familiar pause of astonishment. After a pause, Ricken told Calawerts, "I don't think this has ever been done before."

He would think it over and pray.

On May 28, Ricken addressed a letter to the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City. After explaining the foundation's background, Ricken delivered the ask that had inspired dead silence for each uninitiated listener.

"Your Holiness, on behalf of the family, I humbly ask if you might consider offering an inexpensive watch you have worn prior, that you may feel inclined to part with for this specific cause," wrote Ricken in the letter. "Your watch could be a most significant addition to the timepiece collection for auction."

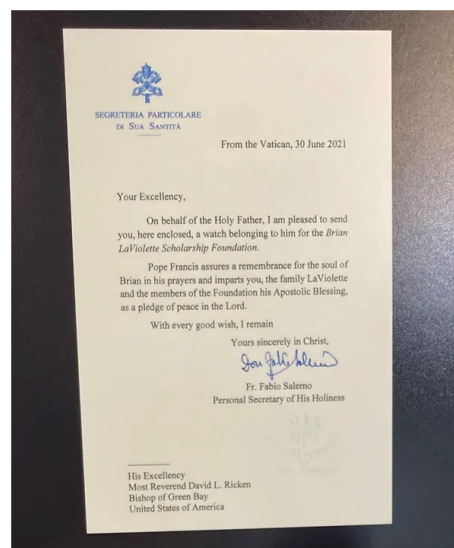
When Rev. Fabio Salerno, Pope Francis's personal secretary, wrote back to Ricken on June 30, he enclosed a watch worn by Pope Francis with a brief but powerful message:

"Pope Francis assures a remembrance for the soul of Brian in his prayers and imparts you, the family LaViolette and the members of the Foundation his Apostolic Blessing, as a pledge of peace in the Lord."

When Bishop Ricken relayed the news, all Doug could do was cry.

"I think our world is starving for meaningful relationships right now. And that is what ultimately led to success in this project," Rios said.

Pope Francis' watch will remain in Central European Time —the time zone in Vatican City — until the day of the auction.



Rev. Fabio Salerno, Pope Francis' personal secretary, attaches a letter on behalf of Pope Francis, along with one of Pope Francis' watches, to Bishop David Ricken at the Diocese of Green Bay. *Natalie Eilbert/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin*