

# Pope Francis' Swatch Watch Coming To Auction With All Proceeds Going To Charity

SEPTEMBER 9, 2022



*By Charlie Dunne*

A few months back, I spoke with Eric Wind about a special watch: a Swatch donated by Pope Francis to a non-profit foundation located in his home state of Wisconsin. Based in Green Bay, the [Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation](#) began in 1992 after the tragic passing of Brian LaViolette at the age of 15 years in a swimming accident. The LaViolette family would go on to pay tribute to Brian's life by offering over 1,000 scholarships to deserving college-bound students in Northeastern Wisconsin, the United States, and other parts of the world.

"The importance of time is not lost on our family and we feel what we do with this time on earth is important by giving back and honoring others." Kim LaViolette Mosteller, Executive Director of the Brian LaViolette Foundation, would share in correspondence. "The concept of the "Once Upon a Time Watch Project" revolved around Brian LaViolette's passion for watches and an opportunity to raise funds for the Scholarship Foundation that bears his name for future generations to come. When dreaming up the idea of the Watch Project we thought of who the 'Holy Grail' of watch donors could be. We felt it should be someone who was admired for the goodness in their heart and their good deeds to others."

The LaViolette family would soon decide upon a very ambitious, yet ultimately fitting hypothetical donor. "We kept coming back to one individual, His Holiness Pope Francis. Yet, we realized Pope Francis would be a difficult leader to reach."

It would turn out that Brian's childhood best friend, Austin Rios, had become an Episcopal priest and over the past decade had been serving in Rome, Italy. During Rios' time in Rome, he had met Pope Francis on several occasions and had developed connections with religious leaders in the Vatican.



SEGRETERIA PARTICOLARE  
DI SUA SANTITÀ

From the Vatican, 30 June 2021

Your Excellency,

On behalf of the Holy Father, I am pleased to send you, here enclosed, a watch belonging to him for the *Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation*.

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.

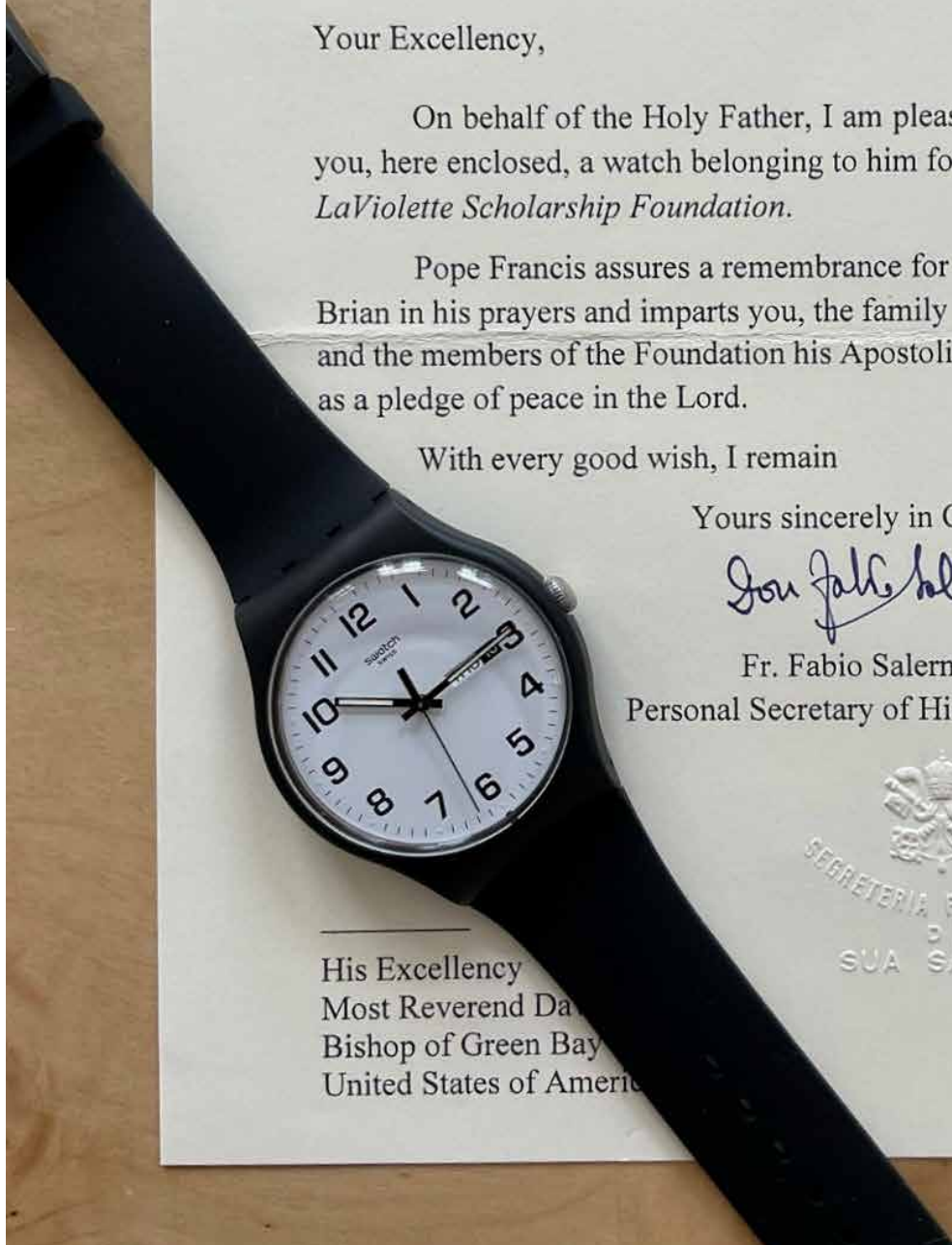
With every good wish, I remain

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Fr. Fabio Salerno  
Personal Secretary of His Holiness



His Excellency  
Most Reverend Da  
Bishop of Green Bay  
United States of America



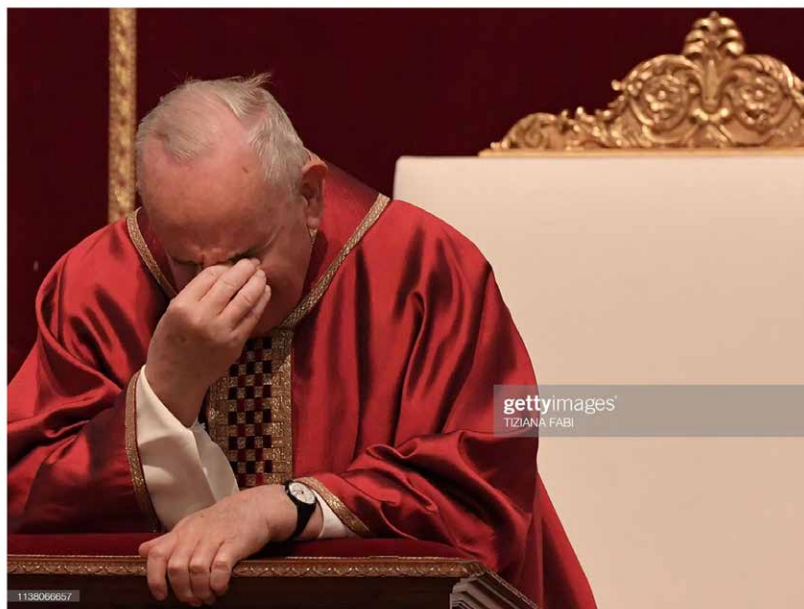
This particular example is distinguished by the fact it is available for the public to bid on in Rago / Wright Auction's forthcoming November watch auction.

“Austin literally “opened the gates of the Vatican“ and got things started with a simple conversation, that lead to another, and another” Brian’s father Doug would describe. “After the Vatican validated the purity of the Foundation’s mission, they recommended that Green Bay’s Bishop make the request to Pope Francis. This ultimately led us to our friend Mike Calawerts, who connected us with Bishop David Ricken, the Bishop of the Green Bay, Wisconsin. A few months later, Doug would describe the arrival of a simple Swatch Watch once owned by His Holiness arriving in Green Bay, Wisconsin bringing the family to tears.



## BRIAN LAVIOLETTE SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION

“Our logo is special to us. Brian is represented by the white figure and the spirit he left behind. The other three figures symbolize Doug, Renee and Kim LaViolette who established the foundation in Brian's name and memory in 1992. The wave below represents the Bay of Green Bay where Brian drowned. Three steps in the wave are the steps filled with hope by the LaViolette family and the journey to higher education for our scholarship recipients.”



Pope Francis prays during the Celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday at St Peter's Basilica, on April 19, 2019 in the Vatican. Photo by Tiziana FABI / AFP) (Photo by TIZIANA FABI/AFP via Getty Images).

In addition to the donation of Pope Francis' Swatch watch, [several timepieces have been donated to the charitable auction](#) including examples previously owned by Terry Bradshaw, Randall Park, Fred Savage Bart Starr, Mike Krzyzewski, Tony Shalhoub, Condoleezza Rice, Jerry Lewis, Priscilla Presley, Admiral McRaven, Eric Wind, Dick Vitale, Ronny Chieng, Aly and AJ Michalka, Mason Crosby, Jan Stenerud, and many others.



Like many young teenagers, Brian's enthusiasm for watches was just developing. His last timepiece, a Swatch from the early 90s, can be seen on his father's wrist frequently.

"There is nothing quite like wearing it!" LaViolette would reply when asked about his son's Swatch watch on his wrist. "Brian saved his hard-earned money to buy this Swatch watch and he loved wearing it. It brings me closer to him every time I wear it."

The vintage Swatch would return to use nearly three decades after Brian's passing. "After Brian's watch collection sat dormant in his bedroom dresser drawer for 28 years, it's hard to describe the feeling I had when I saw that his entire watch collection running for the very first time in almost three decades." LaViolette would describe his son's timepieces as a reminder of Brian. "Every time I wear one of his watches it brings such joy into my life. As I see it ticking on my wrist, it's like a part of Brian is still alive and spending the day with me, it's such an amazing feeling."



*“Every time I wear one of Brian’s watches it brings such joy into my life. As I see it ticking on my wrist, it’s like a part of Brian is still alive and spending the day with me, it’s such an amazing feeling.”*



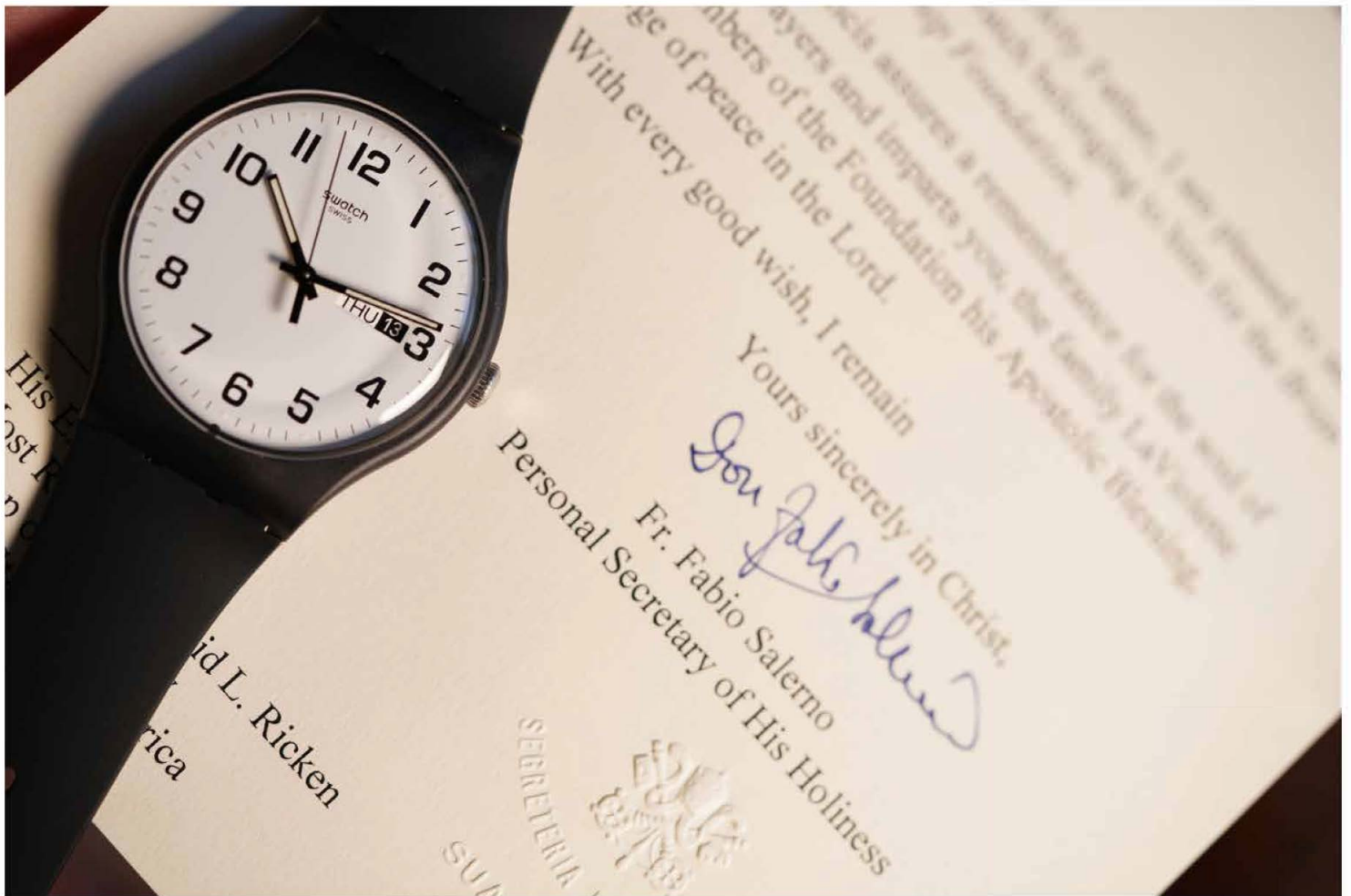
*Left to Right – Richard Wright, Doug LaViolette, Emilie Sims, Eric Wind, Josh Hendzadeh and Mike Calawerts taken at the Rago Wright Auction House in Chicago.*

"There were so many people involved and we can't thank them enough for the time and energy they put into making this life-changing donation possible. We wish we could personally thank Pope Francis for providing such validation for what Brian's Foundation has accomplished the last 30 years...the donation of his watch has provided not only encouragement, but has propelled the Watch Project forward to help us continue our mission to honor hard work and community service." - Kim LaViolette Mosteller,

To learn more about the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation, visit their website: <https://www.briansjourney.com/>.

To learn about The Watch Project and donors, visit: <https://www.briansjourney.com/watch-project>.

To register to bid in the "Once Upon a Time Watch Project" visit: <https://www.ragoarts.com>.



NEWS

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

**Natalie Eilbert** Green Bay Press-Gazette

Published 6:02 a.m. CT Nov. 24, 2021 | Updated 8:03 a.m. CT Nov. 24, 2021

View Comments



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."

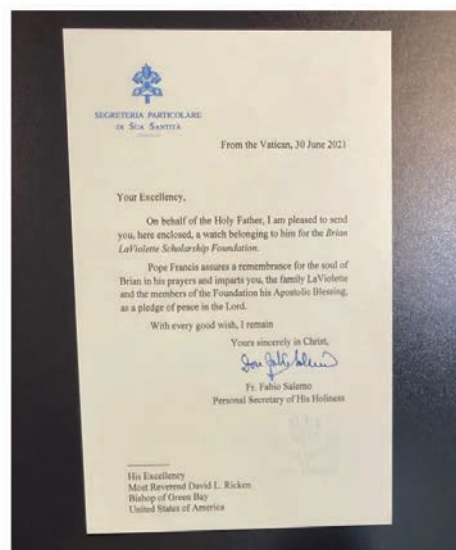
When Rev. Fabio Salerno, Pope Francis's personal secretary, wrote back to Ricken on June 30, he enclosed a watch worn by Pope Francis with a brief but powerful message:

"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*

**YUM YUM:**  
He bakes  
caramel rolls  
for charity.  
P2



## Pope donates watch to local foundation

With Bishop Ricken's aid, watch will help raise funds for scholarship foundation

BY NANCY BARTHEL | FOR THE COMPASS

**GREEN BAY** — A dream that Doug LaViolette had for well over a year — something he said a few friends told him was “crazy” — has indeed come true.

At a press conference on Nov. 23 at Nicolet Bank in downtown Green Bay, LaViolette announced that the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation has received a watch from Pope Francis for its “Once Upon a Time Collection,” a watch collection which will be auctioned off online in 2022 in time with the foundation’s 30th anniversary.

All the watches “will have been owned and worn by an individual who has made a difference in the world,” according to the foundation. Further details on the auction will be released on Feb. 22, 2022 — or as the foundation states, on “2.22.22.”

The foundation was established to honor the life of Brian LaViolette, a De Pere High School student who, on Aug. 8, 1992, at age 15, died in a drowning accident off Chambers Island in Door County. His family promised the day of his funeral that “great things” would be accomplished in his name and memory.

Since then, over 1,000 local, national and international scholarships have been awarded. In an interview



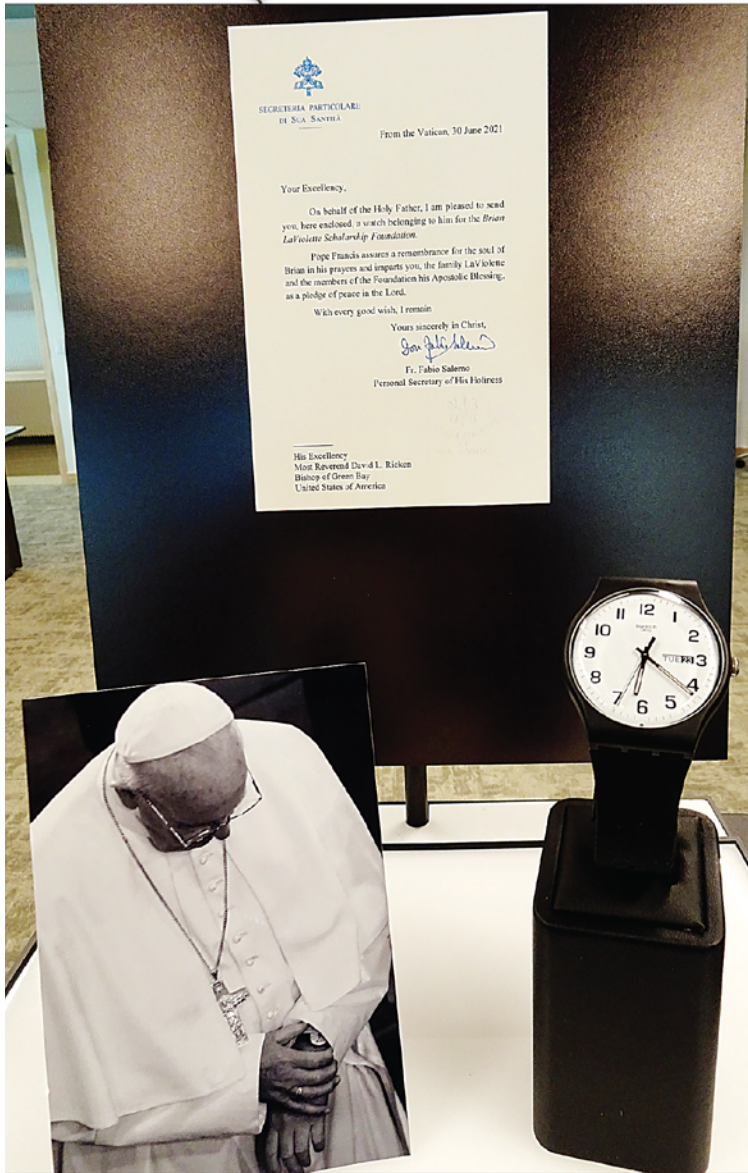
NANCY BARTHEL | FOR THE COMPASS

**Brian LaViolette is pictured at about age 14, according to his mother, Renee LaViolette. He drowned on Aug. 8, 1992, at age 15.**

with The Compass prior to the press conference, LaViolette, who is foundation president, noted, “Seventy-five percent of all Brian’s scholarships honor someone else.”

The foundation is also renowned for its support of the military and the reason why is easily explained, he said: the day Brian died a letter had arrived in the mail inviting him to visit the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

The pope’s watch donation — which was set seven hours ahead to Rome time for the press conference — also



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Pope Francis is seen wearing the Swatch watch, which he has donated to the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation’s “Once Upon a Time Collection” capital campaign fundraiser. A letter, signed by Fr. Fabio Salerno, the pope’s personal secretary, is also pictured.

# Watch donated by pope will fund scholarships

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came with a photo of Pope Francis wearing the Swatch watch and a letter signed by Fr. Fabio Salerno, the pope's personal secretary.

It reads: "On behalf of the Holy Father, I am pleased to send you, here enclosed, a watch belonging to him for the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation.

"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 Blessings, as a pledge of peace in the Lord."

The casual Swatch watch was first introduced in Switzerland in the 1980s. The brand's name is a contraction of "second watch."

"We talk about the importance of time. But he's so simplistic," said LaViolette of Pope Francis. "Many material things are not important to him, from what we can tell, and his wrist watch reflects that. It's a very simple design and I think that, in itself, is so telling of him as an individual. He's just such an extraordinary human being that has such simple taste." LaViolette and his wife, Renee, are members of First United Methodist Church in Green Bay.

Michael and Rocky Calawerts, members of St. John the Evangelist and St. Agnes parishes, Green Bay, are co-chairs of the \$1.5 million capital campaign which is designed to secure the foundation for generations to come. Michael Calawerts is a board member for the Catholic Foundation for the Diocese of Green Bay Inc. and also owner of Pella Windows & Doors in Green Bay.

"It was a year ago that I called the bishop (Bishop David Ricken) about his watch request, and I know, because it was Thanksgiving," said Calawerts in an interview with The Compass following the press conference.

Calawerts said he and his wife were drawn to co-chair the capital campaign because it was on Aug. 8, 1992, when they learned the "incredible news" they would adopt their first child, Lucas, on the same day the LaViolettes lost their son. "We have a connection," he said.

Bishop Ricken would ultimately make the formal request of Pope Francis for the watch donation. "He views himself as being the shepherd of everyone in this community," no matter their faith, said Calawerts of



NANCY BARTHEL | FOR THE COMPASS

**Michael Calawerts, right, a board member for the Catholic Foundation for the Diocese of Green Bay, is co-chair, along with his wife, Rocky, of the \$1.5 million capital campaign for the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation. He is pictured with Pope Francis' donated Swatch watch and Doug LaViolette, father of the late Brian LaViolette, namesake of the foundation.**

Bishop Ricken. "It's community and it's everybody helping each other. When you leave Green Bay and come back to Green Bay, it's a pretty special place. It's a small town and people still talk to each other and care for each other."

The process leading to the formal request from Pope Francis actually began with an Episcopal priest in Rome.

That priest, Rev. Austin Rios, rector of St. Paul's Within the Walls Church in Rome, was the best friend of Brian and was with him and two other friends the day Brian died.

The two first met when Rev. Rios moved as a boy with his family from Texas to De Pere.

"We basically did everything together," he said, speaking remotely from Rome during the press conference. "I always resonated with Brian, because he was never afraid of the deeper questions, and I (wasn't), too. We connected on that level."

On Aug. 8, 1992, "I got to share a really meaningful conversation with him, not knowing it would be his last one on earth. ... Our conversation was all about what we wanted to be when we grew up," he said.

Rev. Rios — who was the third recipient of a scholarship from the foundation and has lived in Rome for 10 years — was "so significant

in opening the gates to the Vatican originally," said LaViolette during the press conference.

Rev. Rios said he has met Pope Francis several times. "This is a project that resonates with anyone who has a heart," and Pope Francis does, he said. "I praise God for that."

"The Holy Father receives lots of requests," he continued, but he knew the story was compelling. Doors at the Vatican started to open for the watch request, but, "The best way to have this be a successful task was through (Bishop Ricken). ... That was really a wonderful offering on his part and a gift to see that come about."

In a letter dated May 28, 2021, from Bishop Ricken to Pope Francis, the bishop wrote, in part: "I write today to share a very special request with you on behalf of the family of Brian LaViolette, who reside in the Diocese of Green Bay. ... 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."

In a statement provided for the press conference, Bishop Ricken said the following about the watch donation by Pope Francis:

"Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, is a man of great generosity. I sus-

pect when he heard the story of this unique watch collection being assembled to continue the legacy of providing yearly scholarships, it truly touched his heart. Knowing that the foundation was established by the LaViolette family following the tragic loss of their beloved son Brian, only made the request more compelling. I am blessed to have played a small role in the facilitation of this donation and pray for a successful outcome to the auction."

Why was the "Once Upon a Time Collection" selected for the foundation's capital campaign?

Brian was fascinated by time, said LaViolette, who wears one of his son's watches each day. At age 4, he received his first watch and, by age 15, he owned seven, most of which he purchased with his savings, his father said.

In addition to the pope's watch, the foundation has already acquired watches that were worn by Green Bay Packers and pro football Hall of Fame kicker Jan Stenerud, Medal of Honor recipient Sal Giunta, comedian and philanthropist Jerry Lewis, actor and Korean War Silver Star recipient James McEachin, actress Priscilla Presley, Gen. George Patton's grandson George Patton Waters, and Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient Sgt. Donald Jakeway who parachuted into Normandy, France, on D-Day June 6, 1944.

"Nothing will ever bring Brian back," he said, "but every single year during award ceremonies around the world, a little piece of him goes with these scholarship recipients, and the important thing is it's not just Brian, but it's all these individuals. We honor their memory and, in a lot of cases, their heroic memory," LaViolette told The Compass.

"We've awarded scholarships to every imaginable faith and everybody worldwide," he continued, from a young woman in South Africa to someone entering the Air Force Academy, "and everything in between."

LaViolette is thankful for Pope Francis' donation, noting, "Well, obviously, he's the leader of the Catholic Church, but, more importantly, he's just a profound leader of mankind. ... I think it starts with kindness and understanding. He gets it. You know, he's so compassionate with everyone he talks to."

"They both care about mankind," said LaViolette of Pope Francis and Bishop Ricken. "I think that's such a beautiful thing."