

# CENTER SPOTLIGHT | SPECIAL EDITION

Dear Friends and Community Members,

We did it! It is with pride and deep gratitude that we are writing to share a huge milestone for the Carole Robertson Center for Learning made possible by your generosity and partnership: **We have officially completed our *Invest Today, Empower Tomorrow* campaign.**



Because of you, what began as a vision is now a reality. Over three years ago, when we launched our first-ever major fundraising campaign, it was because we believed that together we could create lasting change and hope for Chicago's children and families. We aimed to build spaces that inspire, programs that transform lives, and an operating reserve that would empower us to write the Center's next chapter, hand in hand with our youngest learners and their families. Together, we've sent a clear message of belonging and worth to our children, families, and communities.

We not only raised a transformative \$20 million, but we surpassed our goal and did it **a full year ahead of schedule**. We are beyond grateful to the generous donors who helped make this possible—you can find our community of supporters [here](#).

We are already starting to bring our bold plans to life. The campaign is supporting capital improvements at our flagship sites: We have finished renovations on our Little Village flagship site, which is now beautifully updated and equipped to provide the enriching environments that our children and families deserve, and we're looking forward to breaking ground at our North Lawndale flagship site in September 2026. In addition, the campaign has fortified our sustainability by strengthening our operational reserve.

This monumental achievement happened because of our community: our families, whose input and trust made this campaign possible; our staff members, whose steadfast determination, flexibility, and willingness enabled the process; and our supporters, whose continued confidence and belief in our vision and mission helped us realize that a small group of people can, in fact, bring about transformational change.

As we close out this campaign, we look ahead with excitement, strengthened by the foundation you helped build. In the coming months, we look forward to welcoming you to see the impact of your support firsthand.

Thank you for standing with us, believing in our vision, and helping us turn possibility into promise.

With sincere gratitude,

**Cornelia Grumman**

**Bela Moté**

# 2026 E3 GALA RECAP

With a cocktail reception, dinner, paddle raise and drop, and time to mix and mingle over dessert, this year's E3 Gala opened doors to connection, celebration, and impact—marking a milestone moment in our 50th anniversary year.

Scroll further down for awards and program videos.



## Emcee

City Cast Chicago host Jacoby Cochran graced our E3 Gala as emcee for the fourth time. He brought warmth and energy to the evening, ending the program with a sentiment that filled the room with hope and inspiration:

“  
“The next 50 years is full of promise, opportunity, growth, and transformation.”  
”

## Awards

### Shaping Futures Award

One of the evening's most memorable moments featured youth participant **Jasteline A.**, a 5th grader enrolled in our program, who shared how the Center has shaped her growth. Jasteline, together with Julissa Cruz, VP for Community-Based Advocacy, presented our inaugural Shaping Futures Award to **Governor JB Pritzker**, in recognition of his unwavering commitment to early childhood—opening doors to opportunity, equity, and a stronger future for every child and family in Illinois. On his behalf, we welcomed **Dr. Teresa Ramos**, Secretary of the Illinois Department of Early Childhood, who spoke about the administration's commitment to children and families across the state.

Click the graphic below to view the message from Governor JB Pritzker:



## Curba Merrill Friend of the Center Award

**Cornelia Grumman**, Chair of the Campaign Cabinet and member of the Center's Board, presented the 2026 Curba Merrill Friend of the Center Award to the **Robert R. McCormick Foundation** in recognition of its extraordinary 25-year partnership with the Carole Robertson Center for Learning. Reflecting the values Curba Merrill brought to the Center's founding leadership—faith, imagination, and trust—the Foundation's lead gift demonstrated faith in the impact of early childhood education, imagination in envisioning what transformed spaces could mean for Chicago's communities, and trust in the Center's leadership and vision.

**Timothy P. Knight**, President and CEO, accepted the award on behalf of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.



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## Corporate Partner of the Year

**CME Group** received this year's Corporate Partner of the Year award in recognition of their long-standing commitment to opening doors for children, youth, and families in our community. Since 2008, they have gone beyond financial support—investing in early childhood education, engaging employee volunteers, and strengthening programs that help young learners thrive.

We were honored to recognize CME Group, and to welcome **Eva Giglio**, Executive Director, CME Group Foundation to the stage to accept the award on their behalf.



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## Carole Robertson Memorial Scholarship Award

**Eden Morales**, a youth development assistant at the Center and last year's scholarship awardee, took to the stage to present the 2026 Carole Robertson Memorial Scholarship to **Melanie Suggs**. Melanie's journey reflects the very heart of the Center's commitment to opening doors through care, connection, and opportunity.

From a young age, she found belonging at the Carole Robertson Center, where she grew, built friendships, and developed the confidence to thrive.

Today, Melanie is an honor roll student with a clear sense of purpose, and a goal to carry forward both her resilience and a commitment to helping others.



# THANK YOU TO THE 2026 E3 GALA SPONSORS

## PRESENTING SPONSOR

**ROBERT R.  
McCORMICK  
FOUNDATION**

## CHANGE AGENT

**SFF** Steans Family Foundation

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JOHN AND NICOLE SMITH

JOHN BLASI AND KATHY STOHR



MICRO-TECH U.S.A.



PNC

**WINTRUST**  
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## ALLIES

CONSTRUCTIVE PLAYTHINGS

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STEFANIE AND ANDREW CURLEY

BELA AND RAJIV MOTÉ

RUSH UNIVERSITY  
MEDICAL CENTER

JESSICA AND SCOTT GAITO

PERKINS EASTMAN

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS

ERIKSON INSTITUTE

METROPOLITAN FAMILY SERVICES



## Program Videos

### *The Legacy We've Built: 50 Years of Impact*

For 50 years, the Center's mission and values have remained steadfast. In this special anniversary video, hear from key leaders who helped shape the organization's journey from 1976 to 2026 as they reflect on our earliest years, the pivotal decisions that guided our growth, and the lessons that continue to inspire our work today.



And, you know, all of those things around where young people could congregate.

### *Invest Today, Empower Tomorrow*

In 2022, the Carole Robertson Center launched its first major fundraising campaign: Invest Today, Empower Tomorrow. Focused on capital improvements and a sustainability fund, the campaign marked a pivotal moment in the Center's journey. Hear from campaign leaders and supporters about the vision, commitment, and community investment that brought the campaign to a successful conclusion in 2026.

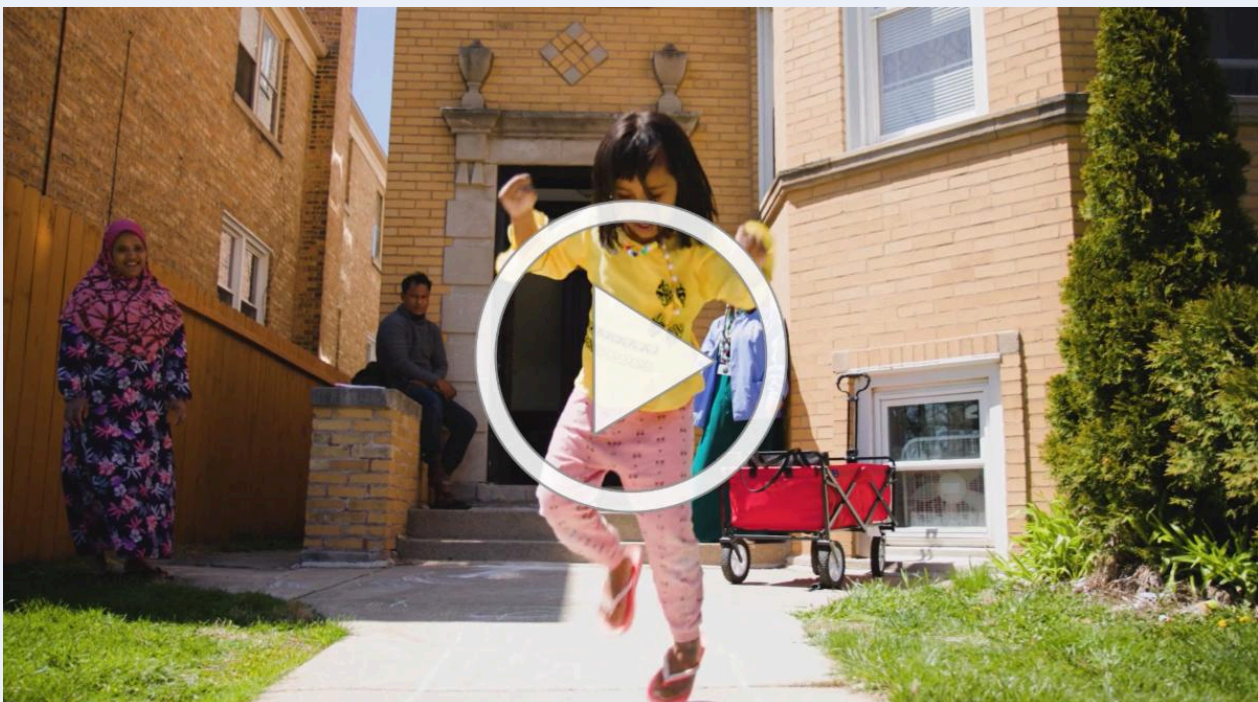
“

“I believe that our children and families have the highest potential. We just open some doors, make sure the bricks are laid so that they have the ability to walk on the roads that should be paved for them.” - Bela Moté



## ***Forward Together: Our Next 50 Years***

As the Carole Robertson Center for Learning celebrates 50 years of impact, this closing video from our 2026 E3 Gala looks ahead to the future. From our founding by families for families to the growth of our programs, communities, and partnerships, the Center’s journey has always been driven by a vision of opportunity and empowerment for every child and family we serve. This video offers a glimpse into what’s next and the bold vision guiding the next 50 years of the Center’s work.





## Questions? Contact:

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