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A Gift to Prepare Students for Work Success: Robert B. Catell Donates \$500,000 to Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School

DONOR OF THE DAY | BY MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

As a new academic year begins at Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School, Robert B. Catell is making a donation to help ensure the long-term success of the school, which offers students a unique combination of classroom learning and professional work experience.

Mr. Catell, 76 years old, recently gave \$500,000 to Cristo Rey Brooklyn. The gift will go toward a \$5 million campaign to create a fund for the school, he said. He serves as the chairman of the school's board of directors.

Cristo Rey Brooklyn, located in East Flatbush, is among the newest in a national network of Cristo Rey schools. The Catholic schools are situated in urban neighborhoods and serve lower-income students.



Robert B. Catell

Every student participates in a work-study program. Students at Brooklyn's Cristo Rey work at financial services, law, accounting, media and real-estate firms in New York. The work ranges from mailroom duty and filing to data entry.

Income from work-study jobs covers about half of each student's annual tuition, while the school raises the other half.

Before beginning a job, students attend a three-week office-skills summer camp, which teaches the importance of timeliness, professional dress and a good handshake.

“It is a great experience that the students get,” said Mr. Catell. “Employees and companies see young people, the company feels a corporate responsibility and it also lifts morale in many departments.”

The most recent Cristo Rey Brooklyn graduates—the school's third graduating class—were all accepted to a four-year postsecondary school. The 40 seniors received some 400 acceptances to more than 100 colleges, according to the school. Most students were awarded financial-aid packages that will cover their full need.

Mr. Catell said he became involved in Cristo Rey a few years ago because he believes students from low-income families should have the same opportunity for success he had.

He grew up in Brooklyn and attended public schools, including City College, then tuition-free. He earned degrees in mechanical engineering.

After taking a meter-repair job at Brooklyn Union Gas Co. in 1958, he rose to become chief executive and president of the company, and later chairman. He led the firm through a merger that formed KeySpan Corp.; that company became part of National Grid.

Mr. Catell officially retired as chairman of National Grid, U.S., in August 2009, but he has developed a “second career,” he joked, leading a number of nonprofit boards in and around New York. “Most of the jobs I have today I don't get paid for.”