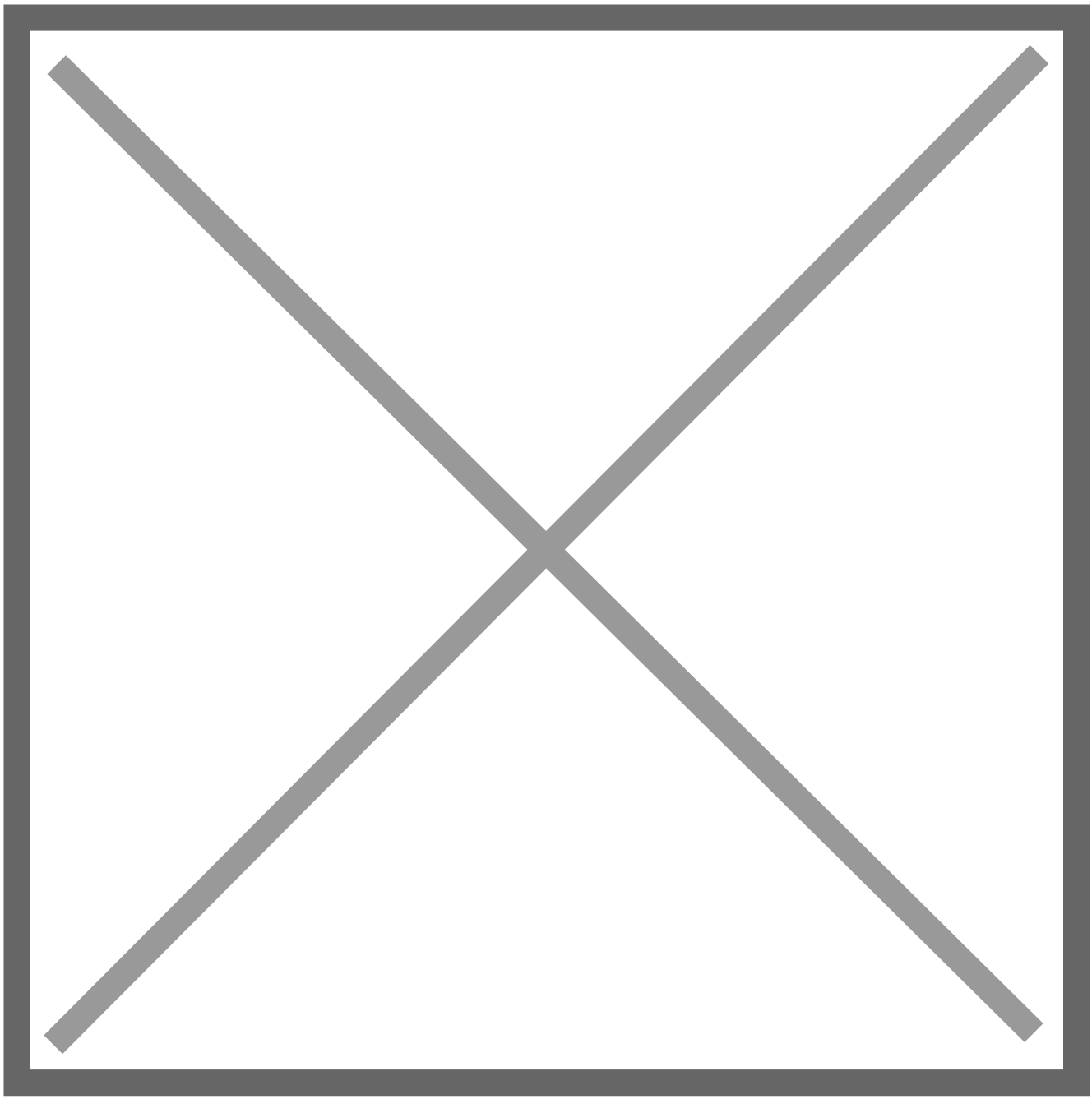
News



Timothy Shriver, chairman of the Special Olympics, delivers the commencement address at Jesuit-run Fairfield University in Connecticut May 18, 2025. Shriver is the recipient of the 2026 Laetare medal, a prestigious honor given by the University of Notre Dame to American Catholics. (OSV News/Fairfield University)

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The University of Notre Dame is awarding the prestigious Laetare medal, an honor reserved exclusively for American Catholics, to Timothy Shriver, chairman of Special Olympics.

The university announced March 15 that Shriver will receive the award at Notre Dame's commencement ceremony on May 17.

The Laetare medal is announced every year on Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent in the Catholic Church's Roman liturgical calendar. The first word in the entrance antiphon of the Mass that Sunday is "Laetare," the Latin word for "rejoice," anticipating the celebration of Easter.

The medal has an inscription reading "Magna est veritas et praevalebit" — Latin for "Truth is mighty, and it shall prevail.” The award, conceived in 1883 as an American counterpart to the papal Golden Rose honor, is bestowed annually by the school to a Catholic "whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church and enriched the heritage of humanity."

Shriver has served as chairman of the Special Olympics International board of directors for 30 years, and in that time the organization has grown from 1 million athletes to 6 million athletes in more than 200 countries and territories around the world.

"Drawing on his deep faith, Tim has devoted his life to being a force for good. Whether through his leadership of Special Olympics, his work in education or his commitment to fostering civil discourse, he is a tireless advocate for human dignity," Notre Dame president, Fr. Robert Dowd, said in a statement announcing the award. "In awarding him the Laetare Medal, we honor his inspiring witness and his dedication to building bridges in service of a more just and compassionate world."

In his statement thanking the university for the award, Shriver honored his parents, Eunice Kennedy Shriver and Robert Sargent Shriver and their vision for the organization. His mother founded Special Olympics in 1968, and his father served as president and board chair in the 1980s and 1990s.

"My parents never retired. They loved their work. They loved the Special Olympics movement. So my mom and dad were not looking to hand off the torch; they just wanted someone to help carry it," Shriver said. "Most of all, I think they wanted confidence that whoever was going to lead the movement into the future understood it. And we have tried to maintain that same vision — to see the dignity of every human being and to stay focused on what matters most, which is that every child who comes into this movement deserves to be treated with dignity and hope and justice and joy. Give them a chance, every one, no exceptions."

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"I look at the work of the last half century of the Special Olympics movement as largely shifting the lens from, 'What's wrong with them?' to 'How much can we accomplish if it's us, not us versus them? If we're all seen as equally gifted, as opposed to some being better than others?'" he said. "These were all lessons that were taught to me very early in life, and I'm grateful for them."

Shriver earned a bachelor's degree from Yale University, a master's degree from The Catholic University of America in Washington and a doctoral degree in education from the University of Connecticut. He spent 15 years in public education — some in special education — as a teacher and helped pioneer social and emotional learning (SEL) through the New Haven Social Development program. He also co-founded the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at Yale in 1994 and chairs its board of directors.

Shriver also founded UNITE in 2018, a movement to try to bridge political divides in the United States. In 2022, UNITE launched the Dignity Index "an eight-point scale for measuring how we talk to each other when we disagree" to assess whether the language people use reflects contempt or respect for those with other views.

"I know I don't belong in the company of many of the people who have received this medal," Shriver said. "I think it's being given to me as a placeholder for the people who are doing the work every day. It's being given to me so that the athlete who's in a refugee camp in Tanzania running 50 meters this afternoon will somehow know that the world is paying attention, and so that his mom at the finish line will know that her son matters. I'm a good channel for people who deserve it, and I'm grateful to be able to be that channel."

The university noted in its announcement that "Shriver is the only Laetare Medalist in Notre Dame history whose parents were both recipients as well." His mother received the Laetare medal in 1988 for her work with Special Olympics, and his father, Robert Sargent Shriver, was the 1968 Laetare Medalist in recognition of his work in founding the Peace Corps. Timothy Shriver's uncle, President John F. Kennedy, received the medal in 1961.