

Carmen Micic – To sing ‘The story’

All stories are worth telling and Oakhill’s is no exception. In 1992, 21 years ago our school, started with 54 pupils and 5 teachers on the first floor of Woodmill lane. Oakhill was born into, what was still apartheid South Africa. It was a violent time, a time of uncertainty and determination for both the country and our founders.

It had only been two years prior, to the birth of Oakhill on the 11th of February 1990 that Nelson Mandela was released from Victor Verster prison in Paarl.

1991 was even more significant for Oakhill. It was then that Trish Griffin, Cecilia Ruthven and Pam Muir met on the banks of the Knysna river to discuss the founding of an Independent school in Knysna while the Edwards and the van Niekerk’s had similar conversations.

On the 14th of February that year Pam gave birth to Robert Muir. Another Oakhill student in the making and our SRC president in 2009, Rob was my first SRC president and his wisdom and calm demeanour were keys to a successful year. Rob was also a fantastic ambassador of Oakhill hockey and our latest results are built on the back of his commitment and dedication!

On the 24th of January 1992 FW de Klerk opened parliament with the suggestion of a referendum in which the vote of each race group would be counted separately. Tina and Anthony Robinson were so excited by this prospect that Tina gave birth to Wesley three days later. Wesley was to become a great hockey and cricket player and an integral part of the Oakhill SRC and ethos. His commitment to the school is legendary.

On the 13th of August 1992, two days before the South African Cricket test side played their first test after apartheid, Jannah Ruthven was born, another Oakhillian who would mesmerise us with her sultry singing voice at Music in the Blue years later.

1992 was the first year of the schools existence and Chloe Bunnett and Diana Manson, nee Graham, daughter of our founder headmaster registered with us.

This was the same year that Guy Jacobs joined Oakhill as the first registered student and in 2013 we celebrate for the first time an Old boy sending their kids to Oakhill. Guy and Holly’s son Tre has now started in Grade 1 and I have no doubt that Lyla will follow soon.

Founder teachers, Kim Storey, who is with us tonight, Taught Grade 4, 5 and 6 and Barbara-Anne Hayward, who is still teaching at Oakhill after 21 years taught all the Grade 1, 2 and 3’s – she will be teaching Tre Jacobs in Grade 2 next year and so a whole new era will begin at Oakhill.

In 1993 Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace prize and Danielle Pieters registered at Oakhill. Les Pieters her dad is a former Board Chair and served here from 1996 to 2001. Jonty Pieters was a great cricketer and Joshua Pieters Matriculated in 2012. He was the first Oakhill cricketer along-side Chris Marrow, a current Grade 11 pupil, to be selected for the Khaya Majola Coca-Cola provincial cricket week.

All stories of the path of democracy in this country start with Nelson Mandela and in 1994 he was elected as the first democratic President of our country. There is no coincidence that in 1994 Oakhill wrote the matric examinations for the first time and Wayne Craig was one of the 18 members of that that class.

As Nelson Mandela took the oath of office, Oakhill's first politician matriculated and followed in the steps of the great man by wanting to make a difference. He has recently been elected to the Plett council.

Dotti Rakau started at Oakhill in 1994, Reneira Graham, Alan and Dal's daughter, Rhian Berning and Mark Taylor were also part of the class of '94 and it's wonderful to have Rhian and Mark at this dinner as well. These were our first children of the democratic South Africa!

In 1995 South Africa won the rugby world cup and Tim Leibbrandt, Matthew Muir and Erastus Ruthven started at Oakhill. The mood was positive and the school had grown to 240.

Niklas Martin, a current pupil, top academic, published writer and South African body-boarder, was the first of our SRC members to be born this year. In the same month Miss Dix-Peek (now Caroline Payton) started Little Oaks with 17 children. Steven Cameron came into the world a month later, he is a great hockey player and SRC member, Lulu Read who has been the SRC president for two years running followed him on the 15th of November and Finn Stevenson sneaked in right at the end of the year on the 11th of December 1995.

This same year Mr Chris Storey organised the annual sports day at Knysna High. Chris is now the Headmaster of Somerset House Preparatory and it is wonderful to have you and your wife Kim with us this evening!

1996 was a leap year and Alan Graham our Founder Headmaster, said the following: *The pioneering phase, characterised by vision, determination to survive, spur of the moment decision making and high risk, is now over, but I hope that the pioneering spirit that has got us this far will never be lost.*

I'm not sure the spur of the moment decision making and the high risk is over – Elna Brown is still employed here and each morning I have to run the gauntlet past her desk down to my office, but one thing is true sir: the pioneering spirit which you started is certainly not lost – it is alive and well. This young school has never marked time! This young school and its founders were pioneers in 1992 and now in 2013 we are still pioneering a 21st century education which is making a difference in the lives of all who come into contact with it.

Teachers always take pride in seeing their students excel and Chris Storey is immensely proud of Michelle Eray and Chloe Bunnnett who travelled to Japan for the world canoeing championship in 1996 and both received their national colours. Once again it is no coincidence that current Grade 11 student Michaela Beers trains with Michelle. I would not be surprised if she follows in her footsteps.

Current SRC members: Adam Oosthuizen, Fern Wolf, and Leon Martin were also born in 1996 and in that year Chris Storey caused a storm in a tea cup by going against protocol and announcing 3 boys and 2 girls as prefects in the Prep School. Chris continues to cause trouble! I hope you listened to Mike Maughan Brown's speech last night Chris!

It was the same year that Lauren Paremoer came 20th in the English Olympiad. Maya-Rose Torrao followed in her footsteps in 2012 when she came 11th. It's wonderful to have Lauren's parents with us tonight!

In 2013 we are pioneering again, and as I speak the bulldozers and graders have broken ground on 17 hectares of land which the school has just purchased to build sport facilities. It starts a new era of possibility and excitement for pupils and parents alike. If all goes according to plan we will have our last 21st celebration on that land as the year draws to a close.

In a letter from Andre van Niekerk, our first Board chair, he says, and I quote: *In August 1991 a group of people were brought together by some inexplicable cosmic force. Call it divine intervention, fate, what you will, but the fact is I believe it happened for a reason.*

This group of people: the Muirs, the Ruthven's, the Griffin's, the Edward's and the van Niekerk's from Knysna, joined forces with others from Plett, The Rogers and the Holding families and against all odds started the ball rolling which has ultimately culminated in this celebration tonight.

In my time this process has been led by Peter Wallington, who has tirelessly and against the tide, fought to retain the unique DNA which exists here. Before him was Mike Maughan Brown and before him, Marisa Murphy, Steven Reitzer, Leslie Pieters, Franco de Grandis and Andre van Niekerk. I have seen the stress that this position carries with it, first-hand. Everyone knows better and to harness a young, vibrant, energetic stallion has not and will not be easy in the future. You need composure, wisdom, self-control, generosity, compassion, vision and strength beyond your bounds and there is no doubt that all these men and women had these virtues in abundance.

We celebrate tonight, not because our story is an easy one. We celebrate tonight because we had the strength, bravery and perseverance to overcome even the worst of our critics and detractors. Our young school has withstood many an onslaught. Our young school has withstood many a hijacker who wanted to revert to the so called, easy safe harbour of Industrial Era thinking and most importantly at every onslaught we have prevailed and there is no doubt that we are stronger for it.

Our school had a traumatic infancy, experienced the turbulent teens and as a result all who have gone before: parents, pupils, Board members and teachers, I am confident that we are now experiencing a modicum of maturity in young adulthood. This is a proud institution and you should be proud of it too!

It speaks for itself that out of seven Board chairs over the last 21 years we have five represented here tonight. Andre van Niekerk would love to be here but as you know lives in Australia. Franco de Grandis, Leslie Pieters Marisa Murphy, Mike Maughan-Brown and Peter Wallington have joined us tonight. **(Toast to past and present Board Chairs)**

It is also a privilege to have Allan Graham with us for the weekend. It has been wonderful to wander down memory lane with him, to understand even more the heartbeat of this great institution. To be counselled by his wisdom, to hear him rattle off the names of all whom he taught in those first years and to see him wander through the campus provoking dormant memories. Being a Headmaster is one thing but having the courage to be a Founder Headmaster is quite another. Allan was promised three month's salary to move to Knysna from Johannesburg – it was a huge risk for him and his family. Not only did he have to face this risk but he had to face the turbulent times of the political and educational landscape. Allan, along with the founders shaped and moulded a school which had no resources or promise of any, into a vibrant and exciting learning environment, which I sincerely hope you are proud of today. When Allan was asked what inspired him about Oakhill (in the early years) his reply was: *the inspiration that we have given each other*. Allan was and still is driven by the desire to make it possible for young people of all backgrounds to enjoy learning in a school environment that places the learner, rather than the schools interests, at the centre of life. Hence our motto: the joy of learning. This is Allan's life mantra – he lived it here and he certainly inculcated the joy of learning into our DNA from the early days. Allan, you have inspired great things from humble beginnings. Your vision, dedication, wisdom and love for this school have been an inspiration to many. Beverly Conklin once said: *A teacher is a very special person who uses his or her creativity and loving inquiring mind to develop the rare talent of encouraging others to think, to dream, to learn, to try, to do*. You have certainly done this for Oakhill and we salute you! (Toast)

Ladies and gentlemen we, who are currently involved at Oakhill stand on the shoulders of so many who have gone before us. We have built on the legacy of those who committed themselves to the beautiful purpose of dedicating their efforts to create this institution from scratch. When I feel weighed down by the troubles of the modern world, I have no greater motivation than knowing that you persevered and conquered and as a result I am stronger. Hopefully future generations will be saying the same about us. I can think of no greater tribute than to ask Luyolo Mvimbi, a Grade 5 boy, to sing 'You lift me up' in honour of all those who have gone before us and ultimately allowed us to celebrate this 21st Birthday.

Oakhill is a school which is happy yet rigorous

Oakhill is a school which is modern yet grounded

Oakhill is a school which is real yet compassionate

Oakhill is a school which lives in the present yet prepares for the future

Oakhill is a school which values individuality yet understands the importance of team

Oakhill is a school where freedom of speech thrives yet we place more value in listening

Oakhill is a school where respect and tolerance lives

Oakhill is a school where shirts hang out – Mike, we are still a little scruffy

Oakhill is a school where thinking is encouraged

Oakhill is a school where pupils' opinions count

Oakhill is a school where dreams are fulfilled

I do so wish we could be there to share the excitement with you all and see all the wonderful people that we worked with to get Oakhill started.

Cathy and I and Lara and Andrea send greetings to all of you from Australia.

I have one indelible memory that I want to share and that I hope is never forgotten as a piece of Oakhill's history.

When the school was just a few months old we ran out of money and the finance committee approached the teachers to tell them that we could not carry on.

They went into a huddle and came back to say that they would take a voluntary pay cut for as long as was needed.

That, to my mind, is the spirit of Oakhill.

Allan Graham and the teachers who took the leap of faith set in motion an irresistible force that will continue as long as that kind of commitment exists.

I salute all of you.

Viva Oakhill, viva.

So to end off in the words of Andre which are pertinent now: - we feel proud and privileged to have you on the team. The magic is going to continue. I won't let us down. There will be happy times, sad times, achievements and disappointments but one thing is certain, every child who is touched by the magic of Oakhill will be changed forever.

Enjoy the party! Lulu to toast the school.