



11 May 2015

Dear Parents,

Max du Preez in his latest article comes to the conclusion that *South Africa has become a nation of victims*. He says that *most of us are consumed by self-pity and compete in painting the darkest possible picture of our country*. He suggests that if you are unhappy and your life is not what you dreamed it was going to be, *we simply find someone to blame*. His most scary comment is his opinion that *hope and optimism are scarcer today than ever before*.

I had the wonderful privilege today of welcoming a group of College and Preparatory students to achievers' tea to celebrate a range of achievements over the last while and one of the questions I posed to them was: can you give me a couple of positives about the wonderful country we reside in? **The silence was audible and I am afraid reflective of the conversations you and I are having as parents around the dinner table.** We forget that our comments and actions as adults are being listened to and modelled on a daily basis and it is incumbent on us as parents to reflect what we would like to see in our children. If we want to blame, we should be blaming ourselves, as adults, for taking things for granted, for wallowing in self-pity and paradoxically for blaming others for our state of mind. Our children are some of the most privileged in the world. They live in a beautiful environment and they attend a world-class school which ultimately gives them an education and a passport to a bright and hopeful future.

Blaming others and blind pessimism, not only robs our children of joy but it saps our energy and our ability to tackle the challenges which will inevitably come our way. I am surrounded with natural optimism, and the joy of learning at school. All I have to do is step out of my office onto the playground to feel the energy, inquisitiveness and optimism that comes with childhood. I see children marvelling at a frog or centipede and I see children absorbed in a good book or telling their friends about the coolest experience they had. Susan Engel, in a wonderful piece she has recently written entitled, *Joy: A Subject Schools Lack*, indicated *the traditional view of kids being inquisitive and happy, is that this behaviour constitutes a charming but irrelevant by-product of youth – something to be pushed aside to make room for more important qualities like perseverance, obligation and practicality. Yet moments like this are just the kind of intense absorption and pleasure adults spend the rest of their lives seeking.*

Our children are in the most significant times of their lives. They are developing and growing and grappling with the joy of learning and I would encourage you not to push aside their ability (or yours) to feel joy. Why not learn from our children? Why not unlearn pessimism and relearn the joy of exploring ideas, solving problems and discovering new things? We should model joy, we should model being inquisitive and **we should model hope.** I'm not suggesting we all stick our heads in the sand and ignore the significant challenges we face as families, as a school and a nation but I am suggesting that we figure out a way to solve problems and face adversity with hope and optimism. If we model this, it is my belief that we will give our children a great and noble gift and as a consequence they will build their self-confidence and realise that all things are possible!

So in the words of Susan Engel: *before you brush this argument aside as sentimental fluff, or think of joy as an unaffordable luxury in a nation where there is dire poverty, low academic achievement and high drop-out rates, think again. The more dire the circumstances, the more important pleasure is to achieving any success!*

After a recent visit to Cape Town to launch the Old Oaks Association, I have been pondering how one would decide whether a particular school is a great school? Does one decide this by researching the school's sports results, like most South African families do? Or does one only scrutinise the academic results? What about teacher qualifications? Or Matric results? Why is it that we don't dig a little deeper and observe the critical aspect of teacher-student relationships. After all children 'learn' teachers not subjects!

I am often asked, as a teacher, what I would look for in a great school – it is an interesting and significant question and I would like to share five criteria which I believe makes a great school and why I have my children at Oakhill!



**Criteria 1:** I believe that one of the criteria by which schools should be judged is **how well their students do after they leave school** and the launch of the Old Oak Association reminded me what a wonderfully successful school Oakhill actually is. I had to travel to Cape Town for the inaugural Old Oaks event where the Past Pupils Association was formally launched and I was enthralled to listen to passionate Old Oaks talk about how the school prepared them to follow their dreams. I spoke to **Matthew Myers** who is completing an honours Degree at UCT in sustainable development and has recently been offered a full scholarship to Cambridge University (UK) to do his Masters next year (Matthew matriculated in 2010). I sat next to **Terri Rossouw** (matriculated 1995) who proudly told me that she struggled academically at school but that the skills and self-belief she was able to build at Oakhill has helped her build a multi-national company selling bath-salts. I also met **Brad Hall** who restores cars for a living and is loving how this has just taken off in Cape Town or I can tell you of **Stephen Campbell** (2010) who is narrating for National Geographic or **Nic Martin** who has just changed courses from Architecture to Engineering or **Simon Wallington** who has just started an architecture degree after studying English and Philosophy. **Rob Muir** our 2009 SRC president was also at the event. Rob is currently top of his honours class in Geology at UCT. There are so many stories of happy and fulfilled young men and women and intuitively we know that our school is doing well. Unfortunately it is difficult to see this bigger picture when our children have an issue in Grade 4 but it is important to remind ourselves that our children are on a journey not a competitive race and whilst we will need to partner when things go wrong, we should know that in the long-run children do well when they leave Oakhill!

**Criteria 2:** Great Schools **allow kids to make mistakes and celebrate success.** In fact they create opportunities where this is possible. Doing well does not mean that children at Oakhill do not make mistakes and just this last week I had to have a number of conversations with young men and women who have not behaved appropriately. Whilst we do not overreact to these instances of indiscretion, we are firm that our students need to learn and grow when they push the boundaries. Children learn from their indiscretions as well as their successes and we have been celebrating the courage of Devon Dodd this past week, who saved a young man from drowning at sea. Devon is a wonderfully modest, polite young man and we are immensely proud of his actions.

**Criteria 3:** Great schools **have a sense of joy, warmth and genuine relationships** and you cannot experience this when looking at a webpage filled with results and successes. Schools are ultimately about people and how those people make you feel. Teachers need to be respected but not feared and most of all they need to create an environment where creativity, experimentation and inquiry is central to all learning. Our children ultimately 'learn' teachers not subjects and when relationships are strong and resilient, students thrive! Oakhill has managed to attract and retain extraordinary teachers and we should celebrate this and support them in their endeavours with our children (in the good times and the bad)!

**Criteria 4:** Schools **should be a little messy and disordered at times.** There is no doubt they need to be safe but not necessarily orderly at all times - We don't want our kids to grow up in Pink Floyd's Another Brick in the Wall video. And disorderly gives a clear indication as to whether there is emphasis placed on the joy of learning or whether the school is more obsessed about window-dressing! Disorderly doesn't mean disorganised.

**Criteria 5:** Great schools **have high expectations.** They are relentlessly wanting to improve in all areas and they expect the best from their teachers who in turn expect the best from their students. Great schools believe that everyone has the capacity to learn and grow and they create and establish a learning, questioning and thinking environment which is challenging and rigorous. Our Bridge Building facilitation is one of these occasions where students have to research, experiment and create a model bridge (out of wood) which has to hold as much weight as possible. This year the winning bridge held 765 times its weight and only broke at 122kg's.

Schools should also encourage critical thinking and have high expectations for, and encourage debate. In his recent article in the Rand Daily Mail, Jonathan Jansen says: *places of learning are being reduced to episodic bursts of street theatre performance. Instead of rational debate, we have public spectacle.* Great schools should nurture debate and give children the platforms to express their opinions in a rational way. Ultimately great schools will produce students who solve problems and make a difference in the world.



When all is said and done schools need to help all their students find pleasure in learning and school needs to be seen as a source of joy if we are to succeed in our mission.

### Independent Co-Ed Hockey Festival

We have recently been able to host the Independent Schools Co-Ed Hockey Festival on our astroturf and this event continues to grow in stature as teams and schools from around the country participate in this festival of hockey. A huge thank you must go to our Grounds, Sport and Events departments who continue to ensure success in these areas. In particular I would like to thank Terri Pautz the Festival organiser for ensuring that all teams, coaches and parents enjoyed their experience with us. Both our Boys and Girls sides played amazing hockey and their results speak for themselves:

#### Boys

- Won 10 – 0 vs Elkanah House
- Won 4 – 0 vs Bridgehouse
- Drew 1 – 1 vs Dale College
- Won 3 – 0 vs St Peter's College
- Lost 0 – 1 vs Somerset College
- Drew 1 – 1 vs Chesterhouse

#### Girls

- Won 3 – 0 vs Heronbridge
- Won 2 – 0 vs Elkanah House
- Lost 0 – 1 vs Collegiate
- Drew 0 – 0 vs Bridgehouse
- Won 2 – 0 vs Chesterhouse
- Won 1 – 0 vs St Peter's College

Our Preparatory U13 boys' and girls' sides also participated in the Prep Co-Ed Festival hosted at the OSC:

#### U13A Boys

- Lost 0 – 1 vs Bridgehouse
- Won 4 – 1 vs Merrifield
- Won 3 – 1 vs Stirling
- Won 5 – 0 vs Dainfern
- Won 5 – 0 vs Chesterhouse
- Won 4 – 2 vs Van Rheede

#### U13A Girls

- Drew 1 – 1 vs Bridgehouse
- Won 10 – 0 vs Oakhill B
- Drew 0 – 0 vs Stirling
- Won 1 – 0 vs Dainfern
- Won 4 – 0 vs Chesterhouse
- Won 3 – 0 vs Van Rheede

#### U13B Boys

- Won 2 – 1 vs Bridgehouse
- Lost 0 – 5 vs Stirling
- Drew 0 – 0 vs Dainfern
- Lost 0 – 1 vs Chesterhouse
- Lost 0 – 1 vs Van Rheede
- Lost 0 – 2 vs Merrifield

#### U13B Girls

- Lost 0 – 6 vs Chesterhouse
- Lost 0 – 10 vs Oakhill A
- Lost 0 – 8 vs Stirling
- Lost 0 – 3 vs Van Rheede
- Lost 0 – 4 vs Bridgehouse
- Lost 0 – 2 vs Dainfern

Oakhill's depth in sport continues to grow and we are proud to be able to boast two sides in most age groups. All students at Oakhill are important to us and we will continue to ensure that we provide the best possible coaches and fixtures for all our students.

Oakhill also recently hosted the Vice Chancellor of the University of the Free State, Jonathan Jansen, and I am pleased to be able to announce that the **Vice-Chancellor of Wits, Adam Habib has also agreed to travel to Knysna to talk to Parents, students and community members** about the state of education and the opportunities on offer at Wits. It is not often that a school is able to persuade two Vice-Chancellors to speak and I would encourage as many as possible to attend this event on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2015.

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With regards to Universities and careers: you will be aware that Julia Warren, our Educational Psychologist has been appointed to help guide and develop systems which will empower our students to choose the correct subjects in Grade 9 and ultimately to choose the appropriate University course at the end of Matric. Should you want to chat to Julia about this please do not hesitate to contact her on [j.warren@oakhillschool.co.za](mailto:j.warren@oakhillschool.co.za). Julia is also involved in counselling and Life Orientation and her insights are helping us to develop systems in our school which will help us to support and encourage students, staff and parents to deal with issues once they arise. Julia will be communicating with all parents in the next while about the systems we have established to support both students and families.

We continue to endeavour to provide an excellent opportunity for children to grow and experience joy at Oakhill and we are truly fortunate to have a wonderful team of teachers whose sole purpose is to help children find their element. We appreciate your support of the school and look forward to partnering with you in the future to ensure your children continue to thrive.

Yours sincerely,

Shane Kidwell  
HEADMASTER