



March 28, 2017

Dear Parents and Friends

We have reached the end of a long and full term, which gives us an opportunity to reflect. During the term many people worked incredibly hard to meet the challenges, negotiate the curved balls, solve the problems and keep up with the demands that is part and parcel of running an exceptional school. This can only be achieved through a remarkable team effort involving quite literally a whole community of people. It takes a village to run a school! In this letter I would like to share with you some of the highlights that I treasure in my reflection on my first term at Oakhill.

My most significant observation as a new Head of School is the outstanding team of dedicated teachers. As a smaller school, we are faced with challenges that require staff to be flexible, innovative and resourceful. Thanks to a team effort by teachers who do not count the hours they put into achieving the standards they set, our school is punching in the top weight division as private schooling comes.

I have quite frankly fallen in love with Oakhill this term. The main reason for this has been the pupils. Their authentic openness and ease of engagement struck a chord with me. I prefer this disposition to a rehearsed display of courtesy. It is important to me that our pupils have good manners, are friendly and helpful and show respect to others. I want them to greet, say thank you and be mindful of the needs of visitors to our campus. The trick is to get them to buy into the value behind such behaviour, rather than threatening with rules about common courtesy. I have spoken to pupils about this as often as I could – individually, in assemblies and in smaller groups. In every instance I have found our pupils easy to interact with and their values spot-on. Of course they don't get it right all the time; of course they are naughty and full of beans, but I refuse to hold this against them!

The involvement of our parent community is a major factor in the school's success. My image of our parent body is one of an enthusiastic group of fans, cheering us on, offering support and appreciating our efforts. I am often asked how I handle 'the demanding parents' of a school like ours. My answer is, 'with respect for the sacrifices they make to offer their children this opportunity and with mindfulness of the high expectations they rightfully have, but also with appreciation for their overwhelming generosity, goodwill and loyalty towards the school.' We stand as a proud school today on the shoulders of giants who were the courageous founder parents, twenty-five years ago. Since then, this parental support base has grown with the school to assure our survival and growth in the future. Many of the former parents, as well as Old Oaks and other members of the Knysna community have remained friends of Oakhill. I have met so many friends of the school during the past term to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for their support, advice and kindness.

After two short months, I stand astounded at the number of highlights on which I am able to reflect. The days were just packed! Some of the highlights...

I enjoyed the warm welcome we offered our new pupils and their families at the start of term. The school has a unique tradition with the welcome table for new pupils, which takes the sting of anxiety out of that first day for new pupils and their parents.



The Chukka Festival was a world-class event and unique in South Africa. We received glowing reports from visiting schools, begging us to invite them to next year's event. It was encouraging to witness the Knysna community pulling together with the festival to make it a showcase for the town and region. With the generous support of Active Education, the Oakhill Chukka festival is currently featured on SuperSport. Repeat broadcasts can still be viewed until the end of March, on the following [schedule](#).

Our 25th Birthday Celebration was probably the flagship event of the term. The picnic at the OSC was a feast, involving founder families, Old Oaks, staff, parents, pupils and friends of Oakhill. I could hardly imagine a more fitting and stylish way to celebrate the occasion. The music, décor, catering, speeches and company we shared were from the top drawer and truly honoured the heritage of 25 beautiful years. Once again, there were a whole host of people who made it happen and deserve our gratitude.

I am proud of the learning opportunities that were on offer this term, over and above the core curriculum. These happened in big and small measures. Highlights to me included the Lit Quiz in which our Oakhill team finished fourth in SA, Careers Day (attended by a number of neighbouring schools) and guest speakers, such as Graeme Codrington and Dion Chang who provoked our thinking as educators, pupils and parents. This was a term during which all our grades had the privilege of experiencing outdoor education on various camps and excursions. The College offered a day of experiential learning which catered for a large variety of enriching activities on and off campus. Our Grade 6 class visited the Science Festival in Grahamstown – an experience from whence they returned enthused about science and technology. On campus, Little Oaks had 'adult day', among their many wonderful experiences, which I particularly enjoyed observing. The Prep School celebrated World Book Day in fine style and it was inspiring to witness the enthusiasm of pupils and staff.

I spent three days hiking with one of the Grade 10 groups on the Odyssey. I was blown away by the growth and insight I noticed in my interaction with the boys in the group. I returned encouraged by the humility, gratitude and honesty expressed by the boys, not to mention the perseverance, camaraderie and tolerance they demonstrated. The physical challenge presented by the Odyssey tends to be over emphasised by those who have never participated in it, at the cost of realising what a huge personal growth opportunity it offers. It is incredibly important that we offer rites of passage experiences, such as the Odyssey, to our pupils at various points in their school career.

It is well known that Oakhill has a proud tradition in the Arts and term one did not disappoint in this regard. It was a special moment on our 'birthday' when the whole school walked down to Millwood Lane to assemble on the same spot where it all started 25 years ago. What a pleasure it was to hear close to 500 voices unite in singing our special birthday song! I am hopeful that singing will become a stronger part of Oakhill tradition in future. Our Prep stage production, 'Free Ice Cream' demanded much dedication and hard work from the cast, backstage crew and staff during the term and their effort yielded a top quality production that drew a full house on both nights of the performance. Our senior Art class had the honour of meeting Benin, an internationally acclaimed Ugandan artist who visited our school to view the works by our College pupils. Benin is in Knysna on an international art residence programme, supported by SAFFCA. Still on the art front, I am aware that a number of artists in Knysna are currently working on pieces for our Miniature Art Exhibition taking place in May. I attended the annual Post Modern stage production

presented by our matric drama class this week. This production was not light entertainment by any stretch of the imagination but commented on major issues around violence, injustice and cruelty in society in a powerful manner.

The term produced a huge number of sporting highlights. Waterpolo is booming in both the Prep and College. Our players have achieved exceptional results in numerous festivals and competitions. The U13 girls team deserve special commendation on an unbeaten season. Cricket also brought home many outstanding results and we were particularly proud of the First XI for winning the T20 league this season. In other summer sports, such as athletics, tennis, mountain biking and swimming we were delighted with exceptional individual achievements. Although the achievements of our top athletes fill us with much pride there is another observation that made an impression on me. Facilitated by dedicated coaches, there is a remarkable culture of participation in sport among our pupils. Quite literally everyone who signed up for a sport, regardless of talent and experience, were offered an opportunity to represent either the school or their house this term. It highlights one of the misperceptions out there that opportunity is limited in smaller schools. On the contrary, our pupils are stretched because everybody counts and is seen as a valuable asset. It is therefore not unusual at Oakhill to find pupils balancing three sports, two musical instruments and play practice with their academics in any given week. No time for facebook! Hooray!

Apart from the highlights I pointed out above, there were countless everyday joys that are typical of schools which kept me returning to work with enthusiasm every day. I try and walk the campus as often as I can and, when I do so, I am never disappointed with what I find: sounds and sights that fill me with hope for the future, despite the huge challenges we are facing as South African and indeed world citizens.

I wish all pupils, parents, staff and friends of the school a well-deserved holiday. I hope you will be able to slow down, take time, linger, reflect and rejuvenate. The second term will bring a change of season in every sense of the word and will no doubt present a good measure of challenges and opportunities. I am looking forward to sharing the adventure with you!

Kind regards



Jannie de Villiers