



THE JOY OF LEARNING

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Dear Oakhill Parents and Friends

Simon Sinek, who is an internationally recognised authority on building healthy organisational cultures, emphasises the importance of 'knowing your *why*'. Over the past few weeks, a number of initiatives at Oakhill truly inspired me because I observed our students' authentic participation, which shifted their thinking and helped them frame the *why* in their engagement with the rich diversity of people around them.

### **67 Minutes**

The first was the 67 Minutes for Madiba initiative that was approached very differently this year. Instead of asking our students to make donations or contribute to a project initiated by the school, we wanted to encourage intrinsic motivation for volunteering to make a difference in the broader community. We invited five local NGOs to a student assembly where they were given the opportunity to explain how volunteers could get involved in their community projects. We then encouraged our students to follow up with any of these organizations by pledging their time and service before the end of this term. The response was overwhelming! Our students stepped up to the plate in a manner that we did not anticipate. They have collectively pledged hundreds of hours of volunteering and many of them got stuck in immediately. At the end of term we will create an opportunity for feedback from those who participated.

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Our planned Diversity and Inclusion day of dialogue took place on 26 July. The day commenced with an address by Ms Nene Molefi who helped us frame the essence of true inclusion and how this is stifled by our unconscious biases when we exclude and stereotype others without meaning to do so. The rest of the day followed specially designed programmes for the respective phases of the school.

The Prep focussed on experiential activities to help younger students grasp the abstract concepts of difference, diversity, prejudice, exclusion, bias, inclusion, belonging etc. It was enlightening to observe how the insight came to some children while others surprised us with their wisdom.

The College programme took the form of forum discussions on four topics. Each forum was facilitated by a panel of five to six students, one staff member and one external adult expert who all came prepared to share and lead. Students then rotated in year groups (Grade 8-11), in four consecutive time slots, visiting each of the panels. The topics of the four respected forums were gender-, racial-, learning-, and social diversity within the context of our school community. These were intended to be introspective and interactive sessions of reflection on our unconscious biases. Panel members prompted dialogue by sharing their personal stories of inclusion, exclusion, acceptance, rejection, belonging and bias. We were attempting to create safe spaces where students would be willing to risk showing vulnerability and share openly and honestly. This is exactly what happened! Some students shared, others listened, some questioned, others replied, some acknowledged their fears, others their biases, some shared their pain and others consoled them. These were not comfortable spaces but they were deeply meaningful and shifted minds in a powerful way.



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## **LO Day**

On our Term 3 Life Orientation Day our Grade 8-12 students were challenged to shift their thinking around differently-abled people. One of the highlights was a visit by Mr Andre Manders, a man with a contagiously energetic personality who holds national colours in three sporting disciplines. His other superpower is that he is blind! Mr Manders addressed College students in an informal conversational setting during which he had them in stitches of laughter. He turned an initially uncomfortable moment into a safe space where students could confront their unconscious biases and ask tough questions around the topic of people who are differently-abled. I was inspired by the way in which he helped our students grasp the difference between sympathy and empathy. He showed that the former is not helpful while the latter can be a powerful enabler. Another learning moment was the fascinating story of Ms Susan Agrella who decided not to allow the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis to confine her to a wheelchair. She took up fencing and, with remarkable courage, patience and grit, progressed from being unable to walk to selection for the SA national fencing team.

## **Interact**

Our Interact Club has been very active this year and managed to provide many opportunities to College students for making a difference in the community. Their latest project involved College students and their parents in a team effort to beautify and secure the Hlalani Creche in the Hlalani township. With this project Interact is aiming at the construction of a strong and colourful wooden fence around the facility, followed by new garden spaces later in the year. The interactors and their parents had loads of fun during the Friday afternoon and Saturday morning work parties. The Knysna Rotary Club presented Oakhill with the gift of a young yellowwood tree in acknowledgment of the consistent impact of our Interact Club in the broader Knysna community.

## **Community Choir Festival**

On 7 August Oakhill hosted the long-awaited Choir Festival that took place at The Vineyard Church in order to accommodate the large audience. What a delight it was to experience the power of song uniting the entire spectrum of the Knysna community. We had the pleasure of listening to nine choirs and vocal ensembles from six schools, including Concordia Primary, Knysna Primary, Greenwood Bay College, Percy Mdala High and Bishops Diocesan College. Oakhill was represented by four groups: the Foundation Phase Choir, the Intermediate Phase Choir, the College Choir and our boys' vocal ensemble, A Few Oaks. The event drew an audience of around 700 people. This is what hope looks and sounds like!

## **Afterthought**

In front of our school is a signpost with ten core values that we hold dear at Oakhill. I often wonder which of these is the most important one. Today, I think maybe it is empathy...

Kind regards

*Jannie*