

# HEAD'S LETTER TO PARENTS: First Letter of the New Year 10 January 2012

Dear Parents,

It has been an incredibly busy and positive start to the New Year. The 121 New Boys who have joined us this year have settled well and the new members of staff have settled even better.

## The Challenge before us – taking boys to men

"Heard melodies are sweet," observed Keats in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "but those unheard are sweeter" – a dubious proposition for the music lover, but a potent image for the person who strives to live his/her life in a creative manner.

One of my favourite Bob Dylan songs is one he recorded in 1983 in the Infidel sessions, with Mark Knopler of Dire Straits as producer. He hadn't recorded a top class set of songs in several years (probably *Blood on the Tracks* in 1974) and *Blind Willie McTell* was a return to form. When the recording team listened to it in the studio that night, everyone agreed that Bob had recorded a gem. However, when the general consensus went one way, Bob went the other, and *Blind Willie* was left off the album released that year. When it finally saw the light of day in a bootleg release in 1991, it was evident that one of Dylan's best recordings of the 1980's had been hidden by its creator. (If you ever travel with me in my car, it is a track that you might hear every day of the year!)

For every song that is released to the public, there is a load of aborted riffs (not all as brilliant as Dylan's). For every book that reaches publication day and gives its author his two minutes of fame and glory, there's a nasty pile of debris, stillborn metaphors and banished chapters. There's a multitude of titles abandoned halfway through, or consigned to the bottom drawer (sometimes to be rescued or reheated half a lifetime later).

Some books or songs never get written or composed at all, but stay, wraith-like, in their owner's head. A book unwritten or a song uncomposed (or not recorded or performed) is more than a void. It accompanies the work one has done like an active shadow, both ironic and sorrowful. It is one of the lives we could have lived, one of the journeys we did not take. "Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better," concluded Samuel Beckett in *Worstward Ho*.

That is the process in which we are engaged again this year. I write this letter from Windy Brow Game Reserve near Cullinan, the farm on which we are holding our New Boys' Camp again this year. There are 121 new boys (109 Form 1's) and six new staff out here for three days. Each one of these new faces has 'melodies that will be heard' during their time here, just as each individual will have melodies that will go unheard. It is our earnest hope that we hear more melodies than not.

Bringing those melodies to light will require courage, safety, trust and patience. While we may be able to measure the 'heard melodies', it is a far more challenging task to measure those that go unheard. And the reasons for those unheard melodies can be incredibly complex and nefarious. But we must strive to include such a consideration in our measurements of our success as a school this year.

For sure, the year will not be perfect and things will go wrong. We will fail sometimes. We will try again. If we fail again, we will fail better. What matters is not how often we get it right, but rather how large our cumulative errors are.

We had an excellent staff conference on Friday and it is evident that we are seeking significant improvement in several aspects of our systems and processes this year. However, while we may be striving for perfection this year, we are unlikely to get there.

Indeed, we don't want to get there, for as Paulo Coelho wrote: "When God wants to make someone mad, he satisfies all their desires!"

## Matric Results 2012

A separate document on the results achieved by our Matric Class of 2011 was published this week. We are delighted that so many of the boys did so well. **Adriaan Booyen** and **Francois Strydom**, with nine distinctions each, were the top two achievers in the IEB Examinations in the city and were placed in the top 120 of the achievers in the country (from a total of 8 281 candidates from 173 schools nationwide).

They were closely followed by **Kian Barrett** (seven distinctions) and **Matthew Botha** and **Reghardt Pretorius** (with six distinctions each). **Jacques Basson** achieved five distinctions, which means that he and Matthew Botha have qualified for Scholarship Honours, joining the five earlier recipients of this prestigious award from last year. While comparing year groups is a sometimes unfair and misleading exercise, the depth of talent in our Class of 2011 bore no comparison to their immediate predecessors which had a total of 17 Scholarship Honours recipients. In that context, it would be a fair assessment to state that our Class of 2011 generally realised their individual potential. There are a whole lot of magic melodies that were played out among this group - and several miraculous melodies, too.

That said, there were certainly a number of 'unheard melodies' among this group. In my personal assessment, there will be at least four - and possibly up to ten - members of that class who will feel a little disappointed. Twenty nine distinctions were missed by the narrowest of margins, two missed Bachelor's Degree Passes (old University Entrance) by excruciatingly narrow margins and there were a couple of candidates who fell far short of expectations (ours and their own). We will certainly benefit by seeking to understand why such outcomes transpired.

## Academic Staff Conference and Academic Planning

On Friday 6<sup>th</sup> January, our Academic Staff had a day long conference particularly focused on preparations for the year ahead, which we hope will give us strong momentum right from the outset. Tim Jarvis, Counsellor at Michaelhouse, was our keynote speaker on the topic of 'Ideals of Masculinity among Teenage Boys' and he challenged us as much as he informed us.

The focus this year is on optimising our academic effectiveness. St Alban's College is a remarkably busy school and it can be easy for focus to be lost with competing interests calling for the boys' attention and energies. The appraisal cycle at the end of last year brought several problematic issues to light and we have responded in our plans and structures for the 2012 Academic Year:

- Our Academic Leadership Team, including our Director and Deputy Director of Academics plus Heads of Department, will be 'called into' active leadership in addition to the day-to-day management roles that they already play. This will include a more thorough approach to programme design and structure, skills and knowledge diagnostics, remediation, teacher development, analysis and moderation of academic results and standards. We are seeking a level of programme coherence and professionalism that has been uneven in the past. This will be coordinated by Patti Bossenger and Dave Kroeger.
- Our academic timetable for this year includes a much greater emphasis on professional development and collaboration among academic staff as well as developing a series of internal action research themes. Our goal is to 'prepare young men for life' and that will require a nimble and relevant curriculum which is able to motivate and engage our boys on a daily basis. This will be led by Ross Barrett, Dave Kroeger and Greg Hingle.
- The role of technologies in education has been a hot topic for generations, but with tablets (iPads and the like)

becoming more ubiquitous, there is no doubt that the preferred modes of learning and personal organisation, levels of attention and concentration, and output generation are changing fast. It is not unreasonable to expect textbooks to be available in digital format within the next couple of years and with that in mind, we have launched an iPad pilot programme this year. It will run alongside the long-existing laptop programme at Form 2 level and will be led by Bruce Collins and Daniel MacLachlan. This makes our school the first in the city to become an 'Apple School' and our programme is being developed in conjunction with Think Ahead which is a global educational consultancy on Apple products in education. Bruce Collins has also been accepted into an IBSC (International Boys' School Coalition) action research team on "the role of digital technologies in facilitating creativity, and boys' learning, engagement and motivation."

- The role of house tutors in continual monitoring of the individual programmes of our boys has been long-understood. However, our effectiveness in this respect has been somewhat uneven and we are aiming to have a more methodical and consistent approach to tutoring this year. Our school comprises six houses and it is at house level that learning management can be best individualised.
- The final aspect that will gain attention is planning for a new Learning Support Centre which will incorporate our existing media centre and provide collaborative and supplementary support to our academic teaching team and boys. We envisage this Learning Support Centre being developed in our existing Todd IT Centre. It will require the recruitment of additional professional staff onto our team and may be a signature development project in our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year in 2013.

### **New Boys and School Roll**

The new intake this year is very strong and augurs well for the year ahead. The welcome and introduction functions all went off superbly. The orientation period is going well and the boys are certainly making a thoroughly positive start to their careers here.

With 561 boys on our school roll - 263 boarders and 298 day scholars - our school is larger this year than ever before. The pressure to accommodate more boarders is unrelenting and over the next six months we will be discussing the possibility of opening a fourth boarder house in 2013/4.

We understand that economic conditions are challenging for many of our families and greatly respect and appreciate the sacrifices that parents make to have their sons educated here. To have such a buoyant school roll in these circumstances is a cause for comfort. Nineteen of our new boys this year are younger siblings of current or recent Albanians (although one has a brother who matriculated in 1998!). The Oloo Family have their fourth son, Chester, in Form I this year, joining the Van Vollenhoven Family whose fourth son, Stefan, joined us last year: that kind of loyalty is precious indeed!

### **Staffing**

Our over-arching philosophy on recruitment is that we only seek to appoint staff with the potential to be great teachers. As the general quality of our staff increases, it is an increasing challenge to replace those leaving with equal or better. We also recognise our broader responsibility towards the greater good by way of identifying and developing top class teachers through a strong internship programme. If independent schools simply recruit from among the best teachers in the public sector, then our national educational system will cannibalise itself and we will all lose.

Our new staff this year have all made favourable first impressions and appear to be the calibre of people who will strengthen our team:

- **Yaw Fosu-Amoah** has joined us from the Blue Bulls as a biokineticist and conditioning expert. He will be striving to have an impact on the health and wellbeing of each and every boy and member of staff.
- **William Koopman** holds degrees from Stellenbosch University and the University of Pretoria and will take up the second teaching position in our History Department, working alongside Barry Detert. Barry has resigned from the position of Director of Sport in order to focus on the teaching of History and his replacement as Director of Sport will be announced by the end of the current month.
- **Elisabeth May** joins us from Westerford HS in Cape Town as a Life Science teacher. She and Head of Subject, Claire Weerepas, will be collaborating in growing our reputation in Life Science.
- **Magalan Pather** returns to our Mathematics Department after four years accompanying his wife on diplomatic service in Finland. He previously taught here between 2003 and 2007, the last four years as our Head of Mathematics.
- **Tshepo Phiri**, who joined us as our webmaster in 2011, will become our Senior IT teacher this year.
- **Bragi Thor Valsson**, previously Choirmaster at the Drakensberg Boys' Choir School, will become our Choirmaster and Music Teacher.
- **Carin van Graan**, a part-time Accompanist here for the past four, has been appointed as our fulltime Music Teacher.

An area in which we have been lax in recent years is the regular updating of our community on current events and achievements. **Mrs Pam Gebhard**, previously Head of IT, will move into a role of communications, publications, and database management. She will be publishing weekly updates on school life and bringing a more pictorial and human interest perspective on our busy lives here. In addition, she will manage our database, which is an essential and important aspect of our communication, especially going into our Anniversary Year in 2013.

### **Physical Development**

Although we intentionally had a quiet holiday and chose not to host conferences or festivals for the first time in several years, a good deal of maintenance and upgrade work was completed amounting to a total cost of R1m:

- Three classrooms in the Struben Block were brought up to the new specifications and will be used by our Languages Department. The teachers in this department have also had a new office and collaboration space made available to them.
- The whole of the classroom infrastructure in the Wilson Block will also be redone to create a new Life Science complex (two classrooms, a laboratory, stores and an office) as well as two new EMS Classrooms.
- Paving around and access to Knapp-Fisher House was completed. The first stages of the house committee improvement project in that house were also completed with the rest to be done later in the year.
- Our own repairs and maintenance team completed a full overhaul of our three boarder houses. They are in fine condition for the return of the boys on Tuesday.

We look forward to a good and peaceful 2012!

**Tom Hamilton**