



Anne van Zyl, Head of OWLAG



Academy prepares our leading ladies

Inspired by her own “humble beginnings” and disadvantaged background, Oprah Winfrey transformed her admiration for Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first democratically elected black leader, and her emotional attachment to the country into a positive contribution to the nation’s future through the founding of the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls (OWLAG), a positive contribution to redressing the racially-based educational inequalities existing within the nation.

Believing that “education is the path to the future” and that “education is freedom”, Winfrey dreamt of building the school after a visit with Mandela in 2000 provided the inspiration for educational and leadership opportunities for academically gifted girls from impoverished backgrounds who exhibited leadership qualities.

The dream became a reality in January 2007, when the Academy opened its doors for girls in the seventh and eighth grades. The school has grown steadily, adding grades each year. The growth phase is expected to be completed in 2011, when more than 300 girls will attend grades 7 to 12.

Educational and recreation facilities are spread across a 28-building campus, covering over 52 acres at Henley-On-Klip, about 64 km from Johannesburg. The safe and nurturing educational and residential environment offers the girls state-of-the-art classrooms, computer and science laboratories, a library, a theatre, a gymnasium, sports fields, a wellness centre, modern dormitory facilities and a dining hall.

Far from being an ordinary school, the Academy aspires to be one of the world’s premier schools for developing girls into leaders for South Africa and the African continent as a whole. The Academy supports the development of a new generation of women leaders who, by virtue of their education and leadership, will

lead the charge to transform positively themselves, their communities and the larger world around them. To accomplish this goal, the Academy provides a thorough and supportive educational environment for academically talented girls.

Accordingly, the Academy has implemented a dynamic and innovative curriculum designed to develop critical, questioning minds and to prepare learners for university studies in an inspired, open and tolerant learning environment.

The curriculum includes mathematics, natural science and technology, arts and culture, social economic and management sciences, life orientation and leadership, and languages.

Citizenship is stressed by the Academy encouraging pupils to give back to the community. Each year OWLAG pupils spend considerable time working and giving back to the community. Their activities include; painting of schools, reading to disadvantaged children and visiting old age homes. This initiative encourages pupils to be sensitive to the needs of those around them and develop an active social consciousness.

Interview with OWLAG Principal, Anne van Zyl

What is your background in education?

“I was educated at Rustenburg, St Cyprians, the Universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town. I registered for a teaching diploma through Unisa, I did my teaching practical at Pretoria High School for Girls and later joined the staff as a member of the English Department. Ten years later, having been an HOD, and Deputy Principal, I was appointed Principal.

“I left Pretoria High School for Girls at the end of 1994 having spear-headed the drive to make the school the first ‘Model B’ or multiracial school in the Northern Transvaal, as it was known then. I then became Founder



Cultural activities



The science lab

Head of St Stithians Girls Collegiate, now known as St Stithians Girls College.

“From 2003 to 2009 I was Head of Bridge House School, a co-ed day/boarding school for pupils from Grade 00 to Grade 12 in Franschoek. I was due to retire at the end of 2009 when the opportunity of leading the Oprah Leadership Academy for Girls arose, a challenge I could not resist.”

What were the challenges you encountered on your arrival?

“There had been several changes in top management in the school during its first three years of existence. I was the first Head of the Academy with hands on experience of a South African girls’ boarding school. With over 20 years’ experience as a Principal, I understood the importance of our first group of Grade 12 girls not only succeeding but excelling in the first National Senior Certificate exam due to be written at the end of 2011.”

What do you think are the key challenges facing our national education system?

“The greatest challenge is putting qualified, motivated teachers in every South African school. Many feel threatened as they are not appropriately qualified and each day they face undisciplined learners while the amount of administration required of them grows each year. Teachers need time to teach! SADTU, the teacher union, has shown strong resistance to teacher appraisal or extended hours in the classroom and other methods that would improve the quality of teaching and learning.”

How does technology enhance teaching and learning at OWLAG?

“All classrooms have smart boards and the girls have access to computers through the library, computer centre and a number of classrooms that are equipped with computers. The senior girls are being provided with notebooks/laptops so that they can access the internet from the residences.”

“Teachers are constantly finding ways of improving teaching and learning through innovative use of technology. The girls have to realise the responsibility and accountability that is involved when one has access to all the information in the world.”

What student leadership model do you use at OWLAG?

“Leadership is based on the idea of ‘Servant Leadership’ and not on privilege. The girls can serve the school from within like in the residences, leading co-curricular activities such as the Computer Club, Peace Group, the library, and community service groups.”

“The highest elected body is the Learner Representative Council with a President and Deputy President leading an executive committee.”

“In addition there are House Captains responsible for sporting and cultural activities.”

Honourable accolades

Nelson Mandela has high praise for Oprah (2007): “This school will provide opportunities to some of our young people they could never imagine, had it not been for Oprah. The key to any country’s future is educating its youth. Oprah is therefore not only investing in a few young individuals but in the future of our country. We are indebted to her for her selfless efforts. This is a lady that has, despite her own disadvantaged background, become one of the benefactors of the disadvantaged throughout the world and we should congratulate her for that.”

The Academy was honoured by Bill Clinton when he featured it in his book Giving: How Each of Us Can Change the World (2007) as an example of how to give back to the world. Clinton predicted that the school would change the lives of many young women and interviewed Winfrey to find out why she decided to build the school. Winfrey explained that caring teachers made education an open door for her and that she wanted to help girls who grew up like her, economically disadvantaged, but not poor in mind or spirit. ●