Inclusion, Diversity, and Community

In addition to our rigorous academic program and in keeping with our Catholic traditions, Saint David’s is known for its sense of family, compassion, and kindness. Our community includes boys and faculty who reflect the cultural, ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and religious diversity of New York City. At Saint David’s, we believe that being curious without prejudice and without bias is essential to a well-informed, educated young man. Our boys develop cultural competency as they are taught to respect and embrace difference in all its myriad manifestations. Boys broaden their perspectives as they learn from other traditions, creeds, and ways of life – fundamental in fulfilling the aspiration of the Founders “that they be good men.”

Saint David’s Magazine met with Jessica Pagan and Pedro Morales, the school’s Co-Directors of Inclusion, Diversity, and Community, to discuss Saint David’s commitment to building an ever stronger and inclusive school community among the boys, faculty, and staff. Jessica and Pedro work in conjunction with Allison Vella and the Committee on Community and Inclusion (COCI), which primarily involves the greater parent community. In addition, Coach Nick Imbelli, in his role as new student liaison, helps to welcome and ease the transition for boys who are new to the school in non-traditional entry grades. Efforts in this area address a broad definition of difference, are mission-guided and include focus on character, socio-emotional health and wellbeing in the Sophrosyne program, and the cultural competency initiative with Dr. Derrick Gay.

SDM: What are some of the major events/activities planned this year to build community?

Pedro and Jessica: COCI activities include an annual breakfast with Dr. O’Halloran for new Upper School boys and their buddies, which was a first this year, and a great personal way for the Headmaster to welcome boys during the first week of school. We also hosted a bowling party—which was attended by about 60 people this year, a huge turnout.

Another hugely popular event is the Father/Son Basketball Shoot Around for dads and their sons in Grades Two, Four, and Six. During this activity, we put the dads through the same basketball skills class that their sons go through during sports. The dads loved it and the feedback was great! We are also looking to host movie nights, a book club get-together to discuss Masterminds and Wingmen, a Prep-for-Prep Panel Discussion, an ice-cream social for new boys, a family picnic in Central Park, and a parent session with Dr. Derrick Gay, who has been consulting for Saint David’s for four years about building cultural competency and a strong, inclusive community.

SDM: In November, Saint David’s sent the largest contingency of boys (22) to the Young Men of Color/(Re)defining Power Conference. What is the purpose of this conference?

Pedro and Jessica: The Young Men of Color Symposium is a leadership conference for self-identified men of color.
in Grades Six through Twelve in the New York City area and beyond. The day featured opportunities for our boys to explore their multiple identities and learn skills geared towards self-advocacy and community building. The goal of this event is to empower students to effect positive change in their lives and their communities, using newly acquired language and knowledge.

(Re)defining Power Conference is a space for young self-identified white men in Grades Six through Twelve. The goal of the conference is to provide them with language and understanding to work with their communities toward racial justice and gender equity.

The keynote speaker, Darnell Moore, author of the acclaimed book *No Ashes in the Fire*, set the tone for the day, highlighting how we can interrupt stereotypical narratives of masculinity, reimagine the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others, and be in solidarity with all people in the struggle toward liberation. He provided a very powerful lesson to our boys about being proud of who they are.

SDM: That sounds like a very valuable experience, with actionable takeaways. What was the boys’ feedback?

Pedro and Jessica: The boys were so impressed with the speaker; they found him inspiring and motivational. In a post-conference discussion, they also indicated that much of what they learned, they had also experienced in our Sophrosyne classes geared toward equity and inclusion, and that they were encouraged to take what they learned in the conference to their peers.

SDM: Are there other similar conferences planned for this year?

Pedro and Jessica: Four Saint David’s faculty and staff attended the annual People of Color Conference. We will also be attending the Dalton Diversity Conference again with a cohort of alumni, parents, faculty and trustees. We will be sending faculty to a workshop in January at Marymount entitled Racial Literacy: How Home and School Can Work Together. Last, and a bit new is that we are working with the current Student Council and other Upper School boys to foster student-led initiatives.

SDM: Where do you see the greatest opportunities to continue to build an even stronger community at Saint David’s?

Pedro and Jessica: One great opportunity now is that having the official backing of the school takes this work to another level. Roles are more clearly defined about what we, COCI, and Sophrosyne do.
Another opportunity is having students lead the charge along with faculty and staff. One boy who was very interested in this work took it upon himself to draft a comprehensive proposal, which he presented with different ideas he had for student-led initiatives, two of which we will be implementing this year. One is to include during Advisory Group meetings something as simple as a discussion around the sentence, “I am this, but not that,” in order to debunk stereotypes. When this work comes directly from the boys, it’s more powerful and effective. Our hope and goal is that the boys be the messengers.

SDM: What are the challenges?
Pedro and Jessica: We are ensuring that we always stay true to what Saint David’s is, to our mission throughout this initiative. We keep the traditional classical balance, while encouraging the boys to see that the world is different and to make them better global citizens. Change can be a challenge in itself. Having discussions about differences can also be awkward. It’s important to realize that this is an ongoing and continuous process; it’s not about attending one conference or having just one conversation, or celebrating a culture for a day or month. Rather, difference becomes embraced on a continuing basis.

SDM: Where has there been the greatest growth thus far in this area?
Pedro and Jessica: Our collaboration with Dr. Gay, now in its fourth year, and our work in Sophrosyne. We’ve also expanded our student and parent body both socioeconomically and racially, with 30 percent of our families self-identifying as non-white. Our faculty and staff have diversified in significant ways. We have a female head coach and, while one might not normally think about gender when it comes to diversity, this is great for the boys to see. When we speak about diversity, we aren’t referencing just one or two races, but rather the whole spectrum, beyond race to include all types of difference.

SDM: What tips can our community members bear in mind to be more inclusive?
Pedro and Jessica: Make it a day-to-day process that is constantly reinforced—to recognize how vital it is to respect difference. Also, don’t be afraid to address a difficult situation when encountered. From the school’s end we want to ensure we are providing the direction, instruction, and skillset to handle what can be difficult conversations. From our perspective, the tips are to keep your eyes and ears open, and to always address a situation. We are also always available if community members have questions or are uncertain.

SDM: What led you to this work?
Pedro: Both of my girls, who attended prep school, went to the People of Color Conference while in high school, and I remember my older daughter coming back saying, “Now I know that there are people who look just like me.” That was extremely powerful, and I think what got me interested in this work: there is a lot that people go through that isn’t always realized.

Jessica: I attended a People of Color Conference and was in a group with high school Latinas, and it was interesting to hear them say how important it was to see people like us working in the schools. I learned how important it is for them to have a safe space, a person or location; somewhere they can feel comfortable having a difficult conversation or question addressed.

Pedro: It’s also not just boys of color. Our definition of difference is broad and inclusive. There’s always something we can do to help a boy when he’s having a difficult time. Because I am involved in sports, I get to talk to the boys a lot. If I can use that avenue to get out bigger messages that have nothing to do with sports, but more with life, I think that’s important. All of this has always been percolating within me, and I also feel like at this point in my life, I’m ready to do more for the school.

SDM: Anything you’d like to add?
Pedro and Jessica: We’re just really excited to be doing this work in this important area at a great school like Saint David’s.