

Townsend Harris Alumni Association, Inc.
Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors (as approved on June 17, 2020)
April 28, 2020
Location: Teleconference

The following directors were present and constituted a quorum: Jesse Ash, Principal Brian Condon, Shari Gruber, Mrs. Irina Kimyagar, Principal Emeritus Malcolm G. Largmann, Peter Lee, Dr. Selina Lee, Kimberly Lo, Gary Mellow, Debra Michlewitz, Craig L. Slutzkin, Lara Traum, Aquib Yacoob, David Zarowin.

The following guest was present: PTA resident Bill Rettig

- I. Co-President Craig Slutzkin called the meeting to order at 6:05 PM and welcomed the directors to our first virtual board meeting. A brief four item agenda was introduced.

- II. **School Relations Reports.**
 - A. **School Report.** Principal Brian Condon reported.
 1. Townsend Harris High School has been ranked #5 in the nation and #1 in NYS by the *US News and World Report* listing of the nation's best high schools, news that Gary Mellow pre-empted by offering kudos as the floor was yielded to Principal Condon.
 2. The principal recapped his guiding principles, including that schools are places for teaching and learning and all decisions are in the service of the children. He credited 35 years of hard work, preceding principals, elected officials, the re-established school's first graduating class, and parents. He foreshadowed a related issue that this accolade seems to have prompted.
 3. Townsend Harris High School has also been designated a *Recognition School* by New York State for the second year in a row. This notes the academic excellence and achievement of the school. It supplants the Rewards School designation in previous years which the school had received. The school received congratulations from the Superintendent and the Executive Superintendent, a welcome acknowledgement which has been absent in past years.
 4. Unfortunately, the recognition of THHS by *US News and World Report* has prompted an Instagram campaign (#notmytownsend) which raises questions about the school's culture, commitment to tolerance, and treatment of students of color. Postings reference incidents that are relatively recent and many that date from years ago. The Instagram account issues a clarion call for any alum to share experiences related to any kind of harassment.
 - a. The leader of this campaign is a class of 2018 alumna. The former student cited the *US News and World Report* ranking as one impetus for the online discussion.
 - b. The principal outlined the mandated procedure and Department of Education (DOE) protocols for addressing this kind of complaint. It must go to ORRS, a DOE reporting system for initial review where it can be remanded to the principal for investigation or relayed to an outside

agency. It may be sent to OSI (the Office of School Investigations); the Special Committee of Investigations Office for serious and even criminal complaints; or OEO (Office of Equal Opportunity) when it is a case of discrimination. All postings and allegations are catalogued to determine the appropriate disposition of the complaint; “as uncomfortable as it may get,” it is an obligation applicable to current and former employees.

- c. The principal briefly discussed some of the more recent efforts by the school to address the issues of racism and bigotry in the school, particularly over the past two years, including an increased outreach to students of color, although there is clearly more work to be done. He further noted that this is a top priority of the school’s administration.
 - d. Craig Slutzkin stated that the Association is anxious to help the school going forward with special expertise which Tanya Odom and Aquib Yacoob can provide. Principal Condon said that the school will be asking for support and encourages the alumni board to reach out if they feel that they can help.
5. Principal Condon reported on the progress of Remote Learning.
- a. He commented that the school was prepared fortunately with capacity and willingness. Willingness applies to students who continue to strive to their best and teachers who seek to do a good job, a better job, a best job. Capacity describes the use of digital classroom features by almost the entire staff prior to this crisis. The successful innovations stem from collaboration between the administration and the UFT.
 - b. Evaluation tools have been modified. June and August Regents exams have been cancelled and students will receive Regents credit based on their final grade in the course. Students will receive grades of Pass or Incomplete. AP Exams will go forward in scaled down forms such as exclusively online multiple-choice tests and completion of independent study projects. Tested material will be limited to subject matter covered in class through mid-March and/or early April.
 - c. Certain colleges are not requiring SAT or ACT exams.
6. Principal Condon discussed budget concerns. The state’s \$6 billion deficit is now \$12 billion. There will be significant impact on school budgets. We are in a “keep the lights on and doors open” mode according to the Chancellor.
- a. This will affect THHS’s *College Access for All* allocations which funded projects like the Zen Den, College Visits, and SAT/ACT prep.
 - b. Funding of the Bridge Year is always in jeopardy and these circumstances make those funds particularly precarious. It requires an expenditure of \$800,000-\$900,000. We need to recruit support from elected officials. Assembly Member Nily Rozic told us that she had spoken to the Chancellor about the issue in March. She added that we need to get the larger school community involved to advocate. We can count on CUNY support.
7. The principal opened a discussion about planning alternative traditional celebrations and events that punctuate the THHS school year, especially for the seniors, and invited suggestions from the Board.

- B. **PTA Report.** PTA Liaison Irina Kimyager and PTA Bill Rettig reported.
1. Irina Kimyager assured us that all the questions would be shared with the PTA. She shared that the PTA is working with Ms. Lowe on a plan to provide internships for students for this summer.
 2. Bill Rettig told us about initial measures to adjust to our current circumstances. The PTA has reserved \$2,000 for “special” awards to enable juniors to burnish their college applications. The PTA Newsletter will be revived. A virtual workshop, provided by Mr. Rettig who has done recruitment for the University of Michigan for 20 years, will substitute for the cancelled interview workshop.
 3. Various responses are noteworthy. Lara Traum suggested organizing a panel, including PTA reps, Guidance Office staff, and alumni, in addition to all other constituents, to bring together the entire THHS community. Irina Kimyager suggested a THHS employment opportunity exchange. This dovetails with a longer discussion that took place led by Jesse Ash.

III. **THAA Response to the COVID Emergency.** The discussion was led by Jesse Ash. He framed the discussion with this question: What can THAA do to support the school and the alumni during these difficult times?

- A. He suggested that the email exchange pointed to five criteria for consideration: communication, support, dues, virtual events, employment / financial support. He emphasized that the enumerated needs require a short-term plan, of one to three months, and require an “amazing” commemoration of both graduation and baccalaureate ceremonies.
- B. A brainstorming session ensued.
1. Several directors touched on and developed communication in terms like “an email blast,” “a call to community,” “get us in a room to discuss...,” “offering a list of what we can provide,” creating a “list of what (each of us) can offer,” “ a Zoom link to self-organize a virtual reunion,” but “not just cocktail hours” but confronting the social isolation with virtual food demos, discussion groups, and workshops, tutoring, assistance with coping with “teen-agers at home,” a webinar showing how to do a Zoom interview, providing business information, creating GoFundMe pages for first responders, and using our in-house expertise to provide needed instruction and advice.
 2. A discussion about the Association providing direct financial help such as loans or grants concluded with such a plan likely being impractical due to the number of people that would likely request such loans or grants and difficulty substantiating need.
 3. Aquib Yacoob suggested and provided an online document which people can add to in order to organize responses to many of these needs.
 4. Final remarks made before the meeting adjourned asserted the Association should be careful before overpromising and/or underdelivering.
 5. The Board will continue to speak and connect informally and directly.

IV. **Dues.** Shari Gruber opened a discussion with Treasurer Craig Slutzkin and the board.

- A. Mr. Slutzkin reminded us that we are moving to a new financial calendar which coincides with the academic year.
- B. Board members must pay dues by the first meeting of the academic year.

There will be an announcement of our next meeting which will be moved to the end of May.

Meeting adjourned at 8:00 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Debra Michlewitz
Secretary