

# ENVOY

A PUBLICATION OF THE TOWNSEND HARRIS ALUMNI  
ASSOCIATION



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# THHS UPDATES

- The Girls Varsity Basketball team finished the regular season undefeated. They join the Boys Varsity Basketball Team and the Girls Table Tennis team in making it to the playoffs this Winter.
- The SU held the first Winter Carnival since the pandemic this past January.
- The Class of 2023 had their senior trip at Villa Roma in January. This is the first time the senior class has been able to have their trip in January since 2020. Numerous teachers and staff chaperoned the overnight trip.
- The Black Excellence Club hosted its first ever Black Culture Festival in honor of Black History Month on February 15.
- Students, parents, and guardians shared notes of appreciation with their THHS guidance counselor in honor of National Guidance Counselor Appreciation Week, which began on 2/6

# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: TANYA ODOM

## Tell me a little about yourself.

I'm a member of the class of '88, so I was a member of the first graduating class. And I'm actually surprised that you all reached out to me because I feel like I've been featured in so many things! But, my job for the last 25 years has been working in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion and civil rights globally. And I have been fortunate enough to have worked cross sector. So I work in the private sector, [I've] worked in the not-for-profit sector, I worked with several UN entities and just been truly fortunate and blessed in my career.... And [a few] years ago, I actually accepted a role full time at the Walton Family Foundation.

And that's a story I tell publicly, because why would someone who was an entrepreneur for 20 something years go internal? And there are a couple of things. One is I have never worked as hard as I did after George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020, when people globally [reacted.] You know I use the language of "racial reckoning" lightly, because I don't think a reckoning truly happened. I think there was the beginning of a reckoning and a beginning of awareness and understanding and I saw some really good work that was being done, and I also saw some work that was really deep enough, not strategic enough. Not looking at things from a systems perspective, an interconnected systems perspective enough. Not historical enough.

And I've known the executive director here who works at the Walton Family Foundation for years, and she said a couple of things that were more intriguing to me; diversity, equity, and inclusion was already in their strategy, so they had this before me. It was already a shared goal in their strategy which is something you look for. That it's not a program or a training session, that it's not a tick the box, but you're actually prioritizing something.



Tanya Odom  
THHS Class of '88

To me, philanthropy has always been an area that I've had an interest in. I've had philanthropy clients for several years and the ability to impact the amount of giving that this foundation does is not something that I took lightly, and I think that the reason I bring up George Floyd's murder and how many of us worked at that time [is] we were also holding our own feelings of pain and disgust and disappointment and anger and sadness. Real, real sadness. And I felt like I didn't want to do something that was piecemeal, particularly after that intense period, an intense period, personally, of just absorbing George Floyd's murder and the horrific-ness of that. And then the ripples after that. And of course, it wasn't just George Floyd. I mean, we know this right, like, it was sort of a line and it's not like we haven't felt this way before.

I mean, I have a vivid, you know, [on the anniversary of] Trayvon Martin's murder, I had a vivid memory at some point of like sitting on my couch in my old apartment, hearing the Zimmerman verdict and sobbing, just sobbing. And so this is, this work is more than work. And I think that that's the reason I bring it up—I think I saw this as an opportunity to dig deeper to work on systems change. Doctor King has a wonderful quote: "Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary."

So that's why I'm in this role and you know, I think that this is one adventure that I didn't expect. I never thought I would be internal at this point, but I'm open and I don't know what my next adventure is. I was interviewed by someone for a radio show last year, or maybe in 2020 and one of the things that was interesting is as I went through my career, it's never been things that I expected to happen. And I don't want to sound like a grandma, but I must for a moment: I wasn't thinking that I was going to be in corporate America, particularly working mostly on Wall Street; that wasn't what was in my mind. But someone said, "Hey, let me introduce you to someone" and then it just happened. There have been several instances where I've allowed myself to "go with that flow," or allowed myself to be open to this path that was never planned in my mind. And that's worked out for me in a way that I think for some very, very focused overachieving Townsend Harris students may be hard to hear. But it's not like I just sat back and said "OK, universe come to me," right? Like I work hard, I'm committed to my profession—it's really important to me—and these career opportunities that I look back on have come through interesting channels. I love that I don't know that I would have accepted this role five years ago. I mean, I don't think I would have actually, in terms of where I was in my life. And so you know, my

generation of Townsend Harris alums are in our 50s at this point. So there's also like, what does it mean to live through a pandemic and be middle-aged and think about the world that you want to see for real, right?

And then to also be like very practical like I'm reminded of how much of a New Yorker I am when I'm here. Not just that I'm wearing all black and that my rings are big and I'm blingy and typical New York Tanya, but around these issues of race in America and globally, actually, I think I knew that we needed to do something different and so that's what drew me to this sort of role.

#### **How did you end up at THHS?**

My mom I grew up in Laurelton, Queens. My sister and I had been at that point been going out of district since middle school and the high school that our middle school was zoned for was a huge, huge school. And I think my mom read a blurb in Newsday and had me literally bring it to the principal. And it's very my mother because she's like a quiet giant spirit of motivation and like the foundation for me, in a lot of ways. But she went and said bring this to your principal. I did and I applied, I got in and the principal was not really happy about it. And I'll never forget she basically said "Do you want her to be a guinea pig?" Because [Townsend Harris] was new back then. There was no school. There was no Townsend Harris, it was just like this concept. We were in a very small building; we knew every one of us because we were the only ones there. But me ending up there was totally because of my mother completely.

#### **What is the greatest lesson you learned during your time at Townsend Harris?**

I mean, I feel grateful to have gone to a school that was so small. (Editor's note: It was only a freshman class of about 200 students.) And I had such connection to the administration: Dr Largmann, you know, Mr. Rossman, and to teachers. And I think that there was a lot of stuff we were taught to be so highly self-motivated, I mean it was written all over the brochures, but like, that's what you're taught. So you're hearing that you're highly self-motivated, you're hearing that you want to leave your city greater than you found it. And you're hearing that there is this legacy of men who did incredible things, I mean, the polio vaccine! And so, you know, that there's a very high bar. The other thing is, and I think you know people have different takes on this, but I think, when we went, it was a very traditional school in the sense that Dr Largmann, who I adore, was a very traditional educator, right? Traditional in terms of wanting to know what we learned that day. We had to make sure our textbooks were covered! Things that now [students] would probably be like, what? And so I think we

had this very high bar for academic achievement. I know people feel different ways about that in terms of the legacy of that and how now I think even more so the students are so focused on grades and such. But also I was involved in student government, right? So my voice mattered. We went up to Albany to rally for a building; there was this sense of agency that we had. We started these groups. One of my dearest friends today, started this group where she and her mother made these hand puppets and we went into schools to talk about saying no to drugs and we did Students Against Drunk Driving. There was this sense of getting involved in things and being engaged in things, and that there was a world bigger than yourself, right? About what doing service was. And we didn't have that social or political context as much internally as everybody has now, like, there weren't these discussions [happening], but we had a Literature of the 60's enrichment course where I was reading James Baldwin and where I was reading things that even now some students of color don't get to read. And we're seeing what's happening now, right with people saying they don't want people to read [these works]. So when James Baldwin died and we had taken the Literature of the 60's course, my mom said, "You should go to his funeral." And it was almost like, yeah, you should go to the moon. And I went to talk to Doctor Largmann and long story short, we ended up going to James Baldwin's funeral, a group of us went up to Saint John the Divine in Harlem and that was because of Townsend Harris and because of Mrs. Horowitz teaching that course and talking about it. And when I think about it now and what's happening in the education systems across the United States, and I look at the book banning and I look at all these things, I think about how lucky I was to sort of be in a place that would be experimental! Which was weird at times, of course. Yes, we had a cafeteria and auditorium that were the same thing. Like, it's odd, but I still appreciated some of that experimental, innovative startup culture--well they would call it startup now in an organization.

**Is there any teacher that greatly influenced you during your time at Townsend Harris?**

I mean, there are so many. So many. I think Mrs. Horowitz was always really important. Mr Sweetin was one; we worked on the yearbook with him, but he was like a college professor when we were in high school, like asking us to read Shakespeare or whatever he was doing. Mr. Moskowitz was our COSA, so he was the one we were going to Albany with. And then there was Mrs. Walsh. I'm very fortunate to be able to speak Spanish, not because I grew up with it, not because I have a bilingual family, and yes I have a good ear, but those seeds of understanding and speaking Spanish were planted at Townsend Harris. And I told her that

when I would go back to the school I would be like, "I just went to Argentina and the reason I was able to go is because of you." I credit her for that. There are so many different stories I could tell. When I think about some of the English classes...I really believe that you know my English classes with Ms Blechman, who I [often] talk about, and I talk about her never giving me above an 88, or Ms Ruben and just the way they would have us really dig into literature, set the course for me a really long time ago. You know, I've written for magazines, I've written for CNN.com, I've written for a bunch of stuff, and I credit this love of language--multiple languages and just understanding the power of words--[to them]. [For example], I had to give a speech at one of the early Founder's Days or something and [Dr Largmann] made me rehearse the Epehebic Oath and enunciate the words and I wasn't thinking to enunciate the words we all knew, but that level of detail...now as a person who speaks in front of thousands of people, of course I have to enunciate words, especially when I'm not in the US. And those are things that seem simple, but I can go back to being a 15-year-old, having someone tell me that was important.

And, of course, there were students who were going through things in life as we all do at that age and there were teachers that were just incredible human beings to people when they needed it. And not that that wouldn't happen at a large school, but it was easier when you had a group of people that was as small as we were.

### **What do you miss most about Townsend Harris?**

I miss having a group like we did at Townsend Harris. My friend and I--she's a Townsend Harris grad--we call ourselves Misfits. Like there was just this quirky group of nerdy, but interesting, people. Some of my Townsend Harris friends are just my people. Like they're the ones that I can talk to about Beyonce's latest tour, but we're also going to be talking about Tyree Nichols' video, right? So these are the people...I'm going to get emotional now which is interesting, but we couldn't see each other for two years [because of the pandemic] and one of my closest friends from Townsend Harris, she and I finally met up again like several months ago in California, and we literally stood in the middle of the hotel lobby crying, hugging each other. I don't know, you don't have those types of bonds with everybody, you just don't. We can talk about anything from our aging parents to race in America and allyship.

And there are few people in my world that understand the impact of the work that I do on me personally, but [these friends] are definitely those people. And they're also the ones--I guess because we knew each other when we were so young--that are so direct. We've

known each other for thirty years so there's a closeness and people know us that I think we know each other. And I miss that. I miss this quirky group of people who are kind of odd but smart. But I do miss it in an amazing way.

**What advice would you give to current THHS students?**

Those of us who are working in places and spaces, like where I work, need your brilliance. We need, definitely your intelligence, but, also, your emotional intelligence. We need your ability to work in diverse groups. The world really feels upside down a lot, so we need you. I would also say that, and I say this to every group of students I speak to at Townsend Harris, but you have to balance work and life. It sounds so silly, but my mom just turned 80 and I'm so mindful of my time with her. And like when I was 15, 16, I wasn't thinking, oh, I need to spend time with my mother, whereas now I'm like, which day on the weekend can I go see her? I know life is short.

The other thing I would also tell them is that, you know, [when I was young] I would have wished for a little more confidence, a lot more confidence, and believing in myself. We have a lot to offer and I didn't think that when I was [younger]. There's that piece, and then the other thing for me is that grades aren't everything. And it's hard [to tell people that] because they don't hear it because of where I went to school, like [I say], "You don't have to go to Harvard" and [they're like], "But Tanya, you went to Harvard!" Right. But I think that's part of the picture; it's not Vassar and Harvard that brought me to where I am. They're part of my story, but it's my mother, it's my experience, it's my passion and commitment to equity and justice. Like it's not all about the grades or the name of the school where you went. Also, like just like don't forget how privileged you are. Like all of us have some aspect or element of privilege and based upon my work in the not-for-profit sector and just globally traveling, we have so much.

**How have you implemented the sentiment of the Ephebic Oath into your life since graduation?**

I think I've committed my life to trying to make the world better in whatever way I can, I talked about that a lot earlier. And I don't have the Ephebic Oath in my head all the time--sorry Dr. Largmann!--but I do have a sense that I've been given a



tremendous amount and Townsend Harris is part of that. I've had so many gifts and blessings and there's work that I need to do too, and that's what I'm saying. I ran the dropout prevention program. I've worked with young people who didn't have half as much as we had in our school, even in the beginning. I don't take what I've been given for granted, I just really don't, and I think some of that definitely comes from Townsend Harris too, right? Like just knowing that we were really fortunate to be there.

**What is a recent accomplishment that you're proud of?**

I don't ever do well with that question. No matter how old I get, I don't know...So January 4th was my two-year anniversary here. And I think being internal, after being a solopreneur, is an adjustment. But I think I can definitely see some of the seeds I've planted, and at this point in my career, I'm seen as a resource and so that comes at a cost. It's good and bad. [When something happens in the world], I automatically start to get calls and pings and what do you think I should do's. And so I've established myself as someone who not only believes about this just in general, but as someone who's also in service to helping others address this. And it's not an accomplishment in the sense that I realized I'm in that place, but I'm recognized and have earned the place to help people and work on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion.

**How can other alumni and current THHS students connect with you? Do you have a LinkedIn or website you are willing to share?**

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/tanyamodom>

Facebook: <http://tinyurl.com/TMODOM>

Twitter: [Twitter:@TMODOM](https://twitter.com/TMODOM)

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