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ST BENEDICT'S TAKES A STAND AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE LAUNCHING MANIFESTO ON MASCULINITY

October 2019

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."
Edmund Burke

As a country, South Africa is scarred by a history of violence particularly against women. The country's 2016 Demographic and Health Survey reports that one in five women older than 18 has experienced physical violence. This increases to one in three in poorer communities. In response to this scourge – a stain on the fabric of society – the boys and male staff at St Benedict's School have developed a unique *Manifesto on Masculinity*. Ratified at a special assembly today [Thursday, 24 October 2019], the manifesto is a proactive tangible declaration against femicide – denouncing excuses and promoting behavioural change – ultimately holding the greater Bennies community to a higher standard.

According to the school's Executive Headmaster, Andre Oosthuysen, as a boys' school, St Benedict's watches with concern, as on a daily basis, more cases of abuse are flashed on the front pages of newspapers.

"We are deeply distressed by the rise in gender-based violence and as a community we feel it's important to take a stand that will live on beyond marches and calendar events like 16 Days of Activism. We may not be able to influence legislation but we can mould and shape the thinking of our students. We take our role in developing honourable men seriously and want to ensure we teach our boys - while they are still young - to work against these societal norms which degrade women."

It was in September when violence against women was brought to the fore by the deaths of UCT student Uyinene Mrwetyana, UWC student Jesse Hess, boxing champion Leighandre Jegels, 14-year-old Janika Mallo, Lynette Volschenk, and Meghan Cremer that the school strengthened its resolve to proactively participate in measures to help curb violence against women (VAW).

Outrage on social media made it evident that women felt unsafe in their own communities and those who had not been personally violated, certainly knew of someone who was a victim of abuse.

"A common thread in discussion groups was men's reluctance to accept accountability for their actions. Furthermore, although men knew of acquaintances, friends and family members who conducted themselves in such reprehensible ways, many appeared to do nothing to call out this inexcusable behaviour. That silence fuels and perpetuates this ill of society," says Oosthuysen. "Knowing that it's fellow men who perpetrate such violence, we believe it's important to teach our boys to take a stand for their sisters, mothers, aunts and girlfriends and one day, their life partners."

To develop young men who will protect and respect women – St Benedict's advocates that change must start from within the school and so the process began. Discussions were held with boys at



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assemblies from Junior Preparatory to College level to explain in an age-appropriate manner what acceptable and unacceptable behaviour towards women is.

Oosthuysen challenged Grade 10 and 11 boys and male staff across the school to craft a Manifesto on Masculinity which would highlight how they would choose to behave towards women. Some of the 20 intuitive commitments made include to:

- Always call out other men on their inappropriate behaviour towards women. This includes for example when derogatory comments relating to women are made on WhatsApp groups.
- Report and put a stop to any form of abuse against women.
- Never assume anything about a woman because of what she is wearing.
- Never make a woman uncomfortable because of my presence.
- Never justify any unacceptable behaviour by saying “boys will be boys”.

“Today’s signing of our manifesto was a momentous occasion where all the boys and men of St Benedict’s formally adopted their collaboratively written code. A declaration to the Bennies community, and to outsiders – it formalises our commitment to making the world a better place for all women and girls. After today, it will be permanently displayed in Cafe ‘58, the school restaurant, as a constant reminder to all,” says Oosthuysen.

Speaking out about the importance of the manifesto, Ayrton Griffin-Ellis – a grade 11 pupil – believes that while St Benedict’s is an educational institution, teaching should extend beyond academic tuition and include morals and ethics, life lessons and the values of equality and respect for all.

“At a time where femicide, rapes and general gender-based violence and discrimination are considered hourly occurrences within South Africa, the poignancy and importance of a Manifesto where men agree to come to the protection and support of women cannot be underestimated. St Benedict’s College is a supporter of equality and an ally of women,” says Griffin-Ellis adding, “I see our Manifesto of Masculinity as an important step towards a future where women are consistently valued for what and who they are: fellow human beings. It’s an admission and acknowledgment of the threat women face day to day due to the actions of men. It’s an agreement taken by the men associated with St Benedict’s, both past and present, reminding us all to be cognisant of our behaviour - encouraging us to stand up and take action in support of women.”

In his closing Oosthuysen says, “At St Benedict’s we focus on developing boys holistically so they will go on to be well-equipped adults who have empathy and compassion for all human beings, irrespective of gender. We see the willingness of our boys and staff to develop this Manifesto as a significant step in our mission to groom the loving sons, boyfriends and husbands of the future.”



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For more information or to download the full manifesto - go to www.stbenedicts.co.za or Facebook: [@stbenedictscollegebedfordview](https://www.facebook.com/stbenedictscollegebedfordview).

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Word Count: 911

Additional Sound Bites – Teacher Perspectives:

Dr. D.O. Oerson - Campus Headmaster for Community Wellness and Advancement:

“Raising boys to become responsible men is the duty of all the adults in their lives. This manifesto is a deliberate step that calls us all to action. It serves as a pledge for the men we shape and the actions we take to protect women and girls. At St Benedict’s, we cultivate a psycho-social environment that recognises the contribution of all members of our school community who strive towards creating a fair and just society for all who walk our campus and the broader community.”

Christo Botha - Snr Maths Teacher

“Do you want to have an idea of how you are going to treat your wife one day? It will be exactly the same as how you are treating your mom currently. Do you need to change?”

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