

Published September 15th, 2010

## Miramonte Principal Reflects and Looks Forward

By Lou Fancher



Miramonte Principal Adam Clark with students Robert Fluegge and Jason Lammert Photo provided

If Adam Clark's first year as principal at Orinda's Miramonte High School was all about getting to know the students, faculty and parents, his second is about standing out.

"I'm out there," he says, naming his primary approach to directing the school's future. "If it's lunch time, I'm out there. In the morning, at all sports events and performances, after school-I'm out there. If you ask the students, they'll say, 'He's everywhere.' "

That physical presence means Clark knows his teachers struggle with the perennial lack of time and ever-changing student population. He sees the kids who slide to the edge of academic and social acceptability. He hears the community complaints of favoritism to athletes. He speaks with passion to parents, Rotary clubs, city administrators and the media about Miramonte's student body.

Clark's first year has not been a cliched bed of roses. Or, if it has, alcohol abuse, a tragic death and ongoing efforts to curtail risky behavior are the thorns in his side.

"The first issue, a huge issue here," Clark says, "was dealing with alcohol violations at weekend parties." After the death of one student last year, the Miramonte Healthy Choices Committee arranged an alcohol awareness forum, attended by Orinda Police Chief Bill French, Clark, and a panel of legal and medical experts, to better inform parents and the community about the issue.

"Obviously, in high school, you're going to have risky behavior," Clark says. In response to subsequent accusations that athletes were allowed a separate, more-lenient code of conduct after the tragic incident, Clark stepped up his intervention. "I started working with athletes: mentoring them, holding meetings, speaking with them on their turf about how alcohol abuse can derail what we are trying to accomplish here."

Clark says school policy for first offenders is serious: suspension, which can be reduced only by attendance at 5-6 meetings with school crisis counselors and the student's parents. Last year, Clark reports that less than ten violations occurred. Of those, approximately fifty percent of the students did not repeat, meaning, to him, the intervention is successful. For repeat offenders, Clark says the police are called, the student is suspended, and the sessions with crisis counselors, while still required, do not reduce the student's suspension.

"But even if we have a kid who's fallen off the deep end, they're not just cast away," Clark promises. "My administration and I find those kids. We talk about those kids. We keep an eye out."

Asked about an alleged on-campus assault of a female student by a male student this summer, Clark says his understanding is that, since the male student is no longer enrolled at Miramonte, the school is not charged with addressing the specific incident. He calls the subject-sexual or physical violations-"serious," and states his belief that "invoking a student body that really cares about this place," is the solution.

Miramonte is not all about drama and drugs. Most of the time, Clark says, it's about academic excellence and achievement. Last year, he learned "how engaging the students are-they're not only concerned about their own needs, but generally interested in me." He's moved by the fact that, when advising them about college, they ask him, 'Where'd you go to school?' His proactive approach, developed as a middle school principal, has had immediate results. "My first couple of weeks on the job, I could tell. You know, kids are intuitive, often more than adults are, and they really know if you're genuine," he says. "Their reaction to me was the opposite of push back. It was push in."

Orinda, unquestionably an affluent community, isn't an excuse for Clark to settle into complacency. "Listen," he says, leaning forward intently, "we have kids going to Ivy League schools and kids to trade schools. All are equally important and my concern is that no students cut themselves short."

In an increasingly competitive academic environment, Clark will rely on two primary devices to distinguish the school. The first is future-thinking: technology. "We're on the cutting edge," he says. "We need to embrace how our kids learn and go with that."

Staff training is essential to the successful integration of technology into the classroom. Clark says the school is supporting the teachers' acquisition of knowledge and all departments have their own websites. And for students without cell phones or laptops of their own, the library is open extended hours and technology devices can be checked out on loan.

At the end of the day, and likely at the start, Clark relies on a second tool for leading Miramonte: personal history. "Since the third grade, I've always worked. I've done a bunch of jobs, and while doing them, it hit me: I need to learn. I need credentials or certificates to do the kind of work I want to do." Forming a link between school success and his future, he developed concepts that lead him to go outside, amidst the students, at every opportunity. "My grandfather," he says, "he was a brilliant engineer. He always told me, 'Don't close any doors. Once they're closed, you're going to have a hard time opening them up again.' So that's what I tell these kids. Don't close any doors."

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