

## **Chaminade College Preparatory Breaks Down Walls**

*Ten years after the Columbine tragedy, students at Chaminade look to encourage unity among all students*

(West Hills, CA) November 25, 2008 – School violence is a common headline these days in the paper. Next year, April 20, 2009, marks the ten year anniversary of one of the most tragic school shootings at Columbine High School. While this day is vividly etched in many of our minds, it is especially important to Chaminade College Preparatory’s Director of Student Activities, Julie La Belle, who counseled many of the teens at Columbine High School in the aftermath of the shooting. In an effort to promote unity on campus and make sure no child feels left behind, La Belle and the students at Chaminade are working together to encourage communication through **Breaking Down the Walls**.

Breaking Down the Walls is a series of activities aimed to tear down the boundaries that exist among students and teachers within a school and bring unity to campus. The program aims to allow all students, regardless of their peer group or cliques, permission to safely and comfortably reach out and communicate with each other. “Breaking Down the Walls helps students reach out to one another before a tragedy forces them to do so,” says La Belle. “I believe that by bringing this program to Chaminade, we as a school have chosen to take a stand against violence, bullying or disrespect and in doing so hope to bring about change on our campus and in the larger community.”

Nearly 400 students at Chaminade participated in special workshop led by the student diversity team leaders and Scott Twardoski of Learning for Living, Inc. Chaminade students from all walks of life gathered in the gym and got to know each other better by sharing their personal stories and by playing different games to help break the ice and change the way they view their campus, their fellow classmates, and most importantly themselves.

“The workshop experience was really uplifting. I think a lot of high school students are naïve about what goes on outside of their own lives and I was naïve before this experience, but I found out a lot of things I didn’t know about my classmates,” says Chaminade freshman Jake Speyer. “It was comforting to see people are just like me and that they have their problems too.”

During one of the activities, where students had to jump through a rope in groups of two, four, and then six, it was clear how much the workshops had impacted students. Says Chaminade teacher Yvette Williamson, ““The moment I am most proud of was at the end during the jump rope activity. The kids were

given a choice to either hold hands or link arms as jumped through and over 90% of them decided to hold hands. It is just such an intimate gesture... we had boys holding hands with other boys, popular kids holding hands with less popular kids, and they were all cheering each other on and working for a common goal. It was really great.”

After the two days of workshops, Chaminade added its own unique touch to the program, inviting all 1,200+ students to participate during lunch. Every student was given a colored bracelet and then asked to sit at tables with the kids who shared the same color bracelets, giving students an opportunity to socialize outside of their familiar circles. Although not everyone participated, the majority of students enjoyed the social experiment greatly. “I have never met the kids I am eating lunch with today. I’d seen them around, but I had never had the chance to talk to them until, today,” says freshman Stephan Cha. And the experience wasn’t only meaningful for freshmen. Junior Auberi Zwickel also met some new students. “I saw people from other classes that I had never even seen before, and I met people from my own class that I had always seen but never spoken to.”

For Julie La Belle, the experience was particularly moving. “I saw kids who always eat their lunch every single day, sitting with other kids smiling and laughing.” She continues, “During the workshop jump rope activity I saw smaller and quiet freshmen giving chest bumps and high fives to football players. It was just so meaningful to watch the kids react like that.”

The week’s activities concluded with a prayer service celebrating diversity and the Marianist characteristic of Family Spirit.

Although the formal activities are now over, Breaking Down the Walls workshop participants are asked to live what they learned last week every day in class. Chaminade hopes that these dynamic kids will influence others and keep the spirit of the week alive all year long.