

## **GOLDEN APPLE WRITING COMPETITION**

### **2014 COMPOSITION RESULTS**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Place “Stars” by Margaret Saltau, VIC**

Stars are very important to human beings. The English language is full of allusions to them. We are star-struck, we consult our star signs, we abnegate responsibility by claiming the fault is in our stars, and here at Sirius, we reach for the stars.

Sirius is the brightest star in the earth’s night sky, so it is easy to discover the symbolism in Sirius College’s name, which announces that second-best is not good enough, and that our students can achieve at the highest of levels. One of my joys in teaching at the College is derived from the excitement of watching the development of some of our brilliant, accomplished students, and from reading complex, sophisticated pieces of writing that would make any scholar proud. They are stars. But I feel equal joy and pride when students who find my subject difficult simply do their best, all the time; they hand in every piece of work - on time; they contribute to every class activity; they always bring their set text, they always do that little bit extra; they are interested in learning; they do not become discouraged. And they improve, slowly and steadily. They are stars.

The star, Sirius, is more than twenty times brighter than the sun and is twice as big. Traditionally, it is seen as a source of spiritual life, complementing the physical life emanating from the sun. Spirituality can take many forms, but I think that without that recognition of something beyond worldly success, Sirius College would be a lesser place. Material success – the top study score in the State, the first prize in the Maths competition, – is not to be sneezed at, and such success is what we all aspire to for our students. However, the light that shines from Sirius brings with it humility, the generosity that has a girl spending the hour before her mid-year exam explaining a problem to another girl, and the ability to find value in a subject for its intrinsic value, not only as a means to worldly success. The light that shines from Sirius has a Year 12 English student discover, and become obsessed by, the music of Leonard Cohen after studying some of his lyrics in her English Context, and at the same time attain the highest study score in her class. The light that shines from Sirius has girls refusing to leave an after-school class before perfecting the wording of the opening of a practice essay, even though it’s late and they’ve had a full day of classes and SACs. The light that shines from Sirius has, every year, potential Literature students demanding to be given the text list for the following year so that they can start work – in July! The light that shines from Sirius has a student look up a type of shark mentioned in a short story, and show how important it is as a metaphor, teaching me something I didn’t know. The light that shines from Sirius produces the wheelers and dealers of Year 12 English, bargaining to make sure they have exactly the same time for their SAC, to the minute, that ‘the other class’ has. Whenever I see them smiling sweetly, and saying, ‘Mrs. Saltau, we were wondering...’ I know I’m going to have to be strong.

Sirius girls aren’t perfect; let’s not be too starry-eyed! They can be demanding, late, disorganised and noisy. They can be funny, moody, pessimistic and exasperating. When it comes to the crunch, though, they’ll seize their opportunities, and when we see them reaching for the brightest star we can all share the light.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place “ “Just Write”, I Said” by Aliyyah Cornish-Ward, WA**

The flying ants herald Spring in Perth and the buzzing of the bees appears to lull the students into a stupor. After lunch it is nigh on impossible to get them to work after they have been running around after a soccer ball and feasting on sucuk sandwiches. I have to teach them prepositions and participles on a languorous afternoon.

One of them, a boy, sits staring out the window. I call him back into the room intermittently, interrupting his reverie with a question which I know he is not going to answer. The physical education students are having way more fun than he is. Next to him is a sheet of paper, white and proud. It has defeated him.

“Just write”, I say, sliding it toward him like a last meal. “We will work on your English, but we need to start with something so that we can improve upon it”. I might as well be asking him to build a rocket and fly to the moon. By the end of the lesson he has written one sentence. Teaching him is like squeezing the last piece of toothpaste from a tube.

Later, my mentor scribbles notes across my timetable. The boy’s name is there and I am charged with teaching him remedial English. I feel like the hangman chosen for an execution. I take him to the library for one period per week. I watch as he contorts himself around a language that he learned when he was five and never speaks at home. “Just write”, I say. When he writes I scythe through it in red. I open his words up mercilessly. I am kind to him but cruel to his language.

Week two he asks me why we need English. “Will we ever need it again Miss?” he enquires, eyes large. I tell him what the future will be like and how he knows more languages than most people. I paint him a picture of the life he could have if he has a sharper intellect, a rapier command of both Arabic and English. In week four he tells me he wants to be a doctor. In week five he tells me how he was expelled from his last school. “I was hanging around the wrong people Miss”.

In week nine he looks up from his work and smiles at me. “Maths used to be my favourite subject Miss, but now it’s English”.

I look away. My heart is bursting. “Just write”, I say.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Place “The World of Teaching” by Khalid Said, VIC**

I am a teacher because I want success, to change the world, to make it better. I soon learned there were many worlds to change.

I spent the formative years of my career developing teaching strategies that focused on equipping my students with effective learning philosophies. It was clearly evident that students would identify short term goals, largely centred on the school’s assessment framework, and apply themselves to achieve their individual aims. As the educator, I saw it as my role to facilitate both the goal-setting and learning that will be required to achieve a perceived degree of success. I was all too aware that throughout the teaching journey, some students will face challenges. These may inhibit learning or act as a demotivating force that would only serve to generate momentum away from student learning. My understanding of being an effective teacher in this context was to support students so that they may overcome their challenges. And if required, realign their goals, so that success was achieved notwithstanding any impediments that would inevitably arise when dealing with a group made up of many individuals.

‘Who dares to teach must never cease to learn’ (anon.) was a philosophy I had adopted whilst training to be a teacher. It was incumbent upon me as the prescribed guide, who was only so because I chose to be, to define success and achieve it. I realised that my approach, setting goals with students and working to achieve them had fundamental limitations. Goal setting, ostensibly as the driver and measure of success, was in fact limiting our definition of achievement. Those students who were achieving good grades felt a sense of absolute achievement, mission accomplished perhaps, and those that failed to clear their hurdles could only be, by definition, failures. Teaching could not be so narrow. The next phase of my teaching journey needed to be more about life-long learning and less about abstract, assessment focused teaching.

My teaching practice from this point on focused on equipping students with learnings that will not only benefit them in assessment tasks, but rather equip them for their journey beyond my classroom walls. It was essential that students were transformed to adopt a more far-sighted approach to their learning and clearly accept that investing in skills and experiences would deliver a more tangible return.

Among my first impressions of our school when I arrived was the dedication staff paid towards students’ personal development. Pastoral care programs incorporated activities that really delineated the lines between students, their families, and the school. I saw an opportunity to extend upon this platform. I believed that students at our school and particularly in my classroom were quiet disparate from issues that affected the wider community. In particular, Australian political and social issues did not form a great part of the prevailing school conversation. This presented a unique opportunity to me as a teacher. Here was my chance to change some worlds. Here was my responsibility to change the world.

I was in no doubt as to what I believed was a significant barrier to lifelong learning at our school. Our school taught our students some fundamental values. It taught those values very well. Students would be challenged to define their own sense of self. Values would be defined and validated based on core principles the school community held dear. These teachings manifested into the development of altruistically minded individuals. Our focus on values strengthened the fundamentals of our students. This would in turn strengthen our families. This would in turn strengthen our community.

As a social studies teacher throughout my five years at Sirius College, I became frustrated at the lack of connection between my students and their world. I would often draw on my experience of living in the same communities my students live in. I would share stories of my developmental years and find I could not establish any meaningful context with my students. I would relate issues with current prominence in the

media and find little engagement. I would teach history, politics, law and civics, yet find that my students had almost no prior knowledge. Suddenly the challenges I wanted to teach my students to overcome were presented to me. I was disillusioned and found myself constantly searching for morsels of motivation within me.

The status quo could not be accepted. I refused to continue teaching so that my students would merely remember. I needed to teach so that my students would understand. To dissolve my frustration I was conscious to not lay blame on my students. In fact blame needed not be laid at all. It was only a question of what I must do to change the world, if I dared.

Drawing on our students' strong sense of identity, it was time for them to belong. As the head of Humanities I have organised for our year 9 students to visit Canberra. Drawing on the success from previous years' tours by senior students, it is my hope that students will be immersed in ideas that have shaped their society. Our humanities program across all secondary years has adopted an authentic curriculum mantra. Visits to prisons, courts and ports as well inviting people from embassies, political institutions and the wider social community have worked to build a sense of purpose to our students' learning. I cannot stop here. My next phase of real world teaching will further grow our sense of community. I will work to bring an awareness of many issues like mental health and disadvantage to the minds of our students.

Each of our teachers shared meaningful moments in our lives. Those who taught us to learn have remained with us. I want to be a teacher that helps my students understand their world. How they change that world can only be determined by them. Just as the contribution of our own teachers wasn't realised until many years later, so too our measure of success will only be discovered as the many worlds change.