



Mercy means knowing that we all belong

By DENNIS HORTON

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Starting at a new school can be a daunting prospect at the best of times, but in the middle of a pandemic it is especially difficult. At St Mary’s College Ponsonby this year, a special effort is being made to ensure that everyone feels welcomed and at home. The Mercy value chosen to provide a focus for 2022 is whakamanuhiri – hospitality. Principal Sarah Dwan explains that throughout a student’s time at St Mary’s a series of seven core values are highlighted, and that this year hospitality is very appropriate as Covid-19 impacts on school life.

‘Wednesday 3 February was the first day the whole school was together at one time since August last year. Many of our new students had not actually been on site, since Alert Level 4 had led to the cancellation of both an open day and an orientation morning in the latter part of 2021.’

There are currently just on 1000 students at St Mary’s College. Most of the newcomers are in Year 7, with a small intake at Year 9 and a sprinkling at most other levels. A number are returning from overseas or new arrivals in New Zealand. ‘We have

been unable to come together as a community, which is really hard,’ the principal says. ‘We can still do this in an on-line sense, but we have been unable to gather physically to welcome new students and staff. It is very different to not have a school Mass to start the year; usually the whole school walks down to St Patrick’s Cathedral. But we continue to adapt and do what we can in our current circumstances.’

St Mary’s staff spent time unpacking the value of hospitality at their staff-only day this year; student leaders have also been thinking about how they can integrate whakamanuhiri with how they create a sense of sisterhood and involvement. ‘This is something that we will constantly revisit throughout the course of the year,’ says Sarah Dwan.

She explains that religious education staff are working to explore the value of hospitality by creating an impressive piece of art to which all students will be able to contribute. But finding ways to involve families is a challenge. ‘We were unable to welcome parents on site with their daughters on the first day. Instead, we tried to extend some hospitality by sending all our new students home with a tea bag, to make someone at home a “comfortable cup of tea” and to tell them about their first day. The tea bag came with information about Catherine McAuley and our Mercy value for the year.

‘Many of our younger students had only just been able to receive their first vaccination. For this reason, we have our

Year 7 pupils being taught in their form class in a set classroom, with teachers coming to them. This is unusual, as normally they would be moving around the school like everyone else.

‘Since we are unable to have parents on site, our new students have had to be dropped off at the gate. We had plans in place to help students feel as welcomed as possible, and to try to make the process as smooth as we could for them. We had the Year Level deans at the

assembly point, Form teachers meeting and greeting students in these spaces, and the Senior Leadership Team and office staff meeting students and parents at the gate.

‘But probably the stand-out for me was seeing the Year 13 prefects and peer support leaders welcoming new students and walking them down the driveway to their meeting points,’ Sarah Dwan recalls. ‘We use the analogy of walking in and out of the New Street gates a lot, and it was lovely to have our senior students who will walk out the gates for the last time at the end of the year accompany our newest students at the start of their journey. This was a real Mercy moment, showing that here everyone belongs.’



Senior students welcome new students on their first day at St Mary’s College in Ponsonby. Inset: Principal Sarah Dwan

