



CHATHAM DAY SCHOOL

June 1, 2020

Good Afternoon CDS Families,

We are deeply saddened and angered by the displays of bias and brutality in our country. While we cannot 'walk in the shoes' of one of our students, community members, or friends of color to feel what they are feeling, we will attempt to connect some other personal experiences to the inherent emotions: sadness, anger, fear, and frustration. We will empathize, allow that to steer the message and our actions thereafter, and use our voices and our platform to have a positive influence on our young students who can enact change in their world now and into the future. We will stand as allies to those who are personally impacted. That is why we teach. It isn't always easy, but the most impactful lessons often aren't.

To our families of color, you are in our hearts and minds. We pledge to speak up on behalf of those who have been wronged, especially when it might be difficult. We will not speak over the top of, or in place of, but in amplification and support. We owe that to our students and are grateful to be a part of the CDS community where that pledge is not only allowed but encouraged.

We will not be silent on these issues of racism involving George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Christian Cooper. Today, Dr. Mott and Mrs. Kent addressed our students in age-appropriate ways about diversity, equity, and inclusion. In our planning for this, our feelings were complex: "What do we say? Will we say the wrong thing? Will we say enough? Is our message valid as members of the majority?" These are often the questions that stall the conversation, but we know that it is our duty as citizens and educators to engage in these discussions.

Last week—more precisely, last Friday morning at 3 a.m.—Mr. Buffum wrote the message below to all CDS faculty and staff.

CDS Faculty and Staff,

I can't sleep tonight.

There are a lot of reasons why one might have trouble sleeping these days. Fear of the virus. Fear for our families. Fear for our school. Ambiguity is everywhere, and it is exhausting to have to worry about the future, and all of the people in our orbit, at all times.

But I can't sleep tonight because I have been reading and thinking about George Floyd.

For those that do not know (though I suspect almost all of you already do), George Floyd is a Black American man who was suffocated to death by a police officer in Minneapolis earlier this week. One of the last words of this middle-aged man was "Mama," as he cried out for help.

I needn't get into the details here. And I should be clear, I am not in a "I dislike law enforcement" state. Quite the contrary, in fact, as I believe a massive percentage of law enforcement officials in our country do work that requires tremendous bravery, strength, and patience and they do it extremely well under incredible duress. They will always have my respect and my gratitude.

But it is very hard for me to view this situation as anything but murder. And it is very hard for me to imagine this tragedy as being disconnected from race. And, as I also have been watching a video of a woman in Central Park hysterically calling the police saying that an "African American" man is threatening her after he simply asked her to leash her dog (why use the qualifier?) and reading more about what has recently happened in Georgia, I am again and again reminded of a systemic problem in our country. Every situation has nuanced ripples, to be sure, and every situation is different. But to deny that racism has not been and is not at play here is, I believe, an abdication of leadership and of humanity. We—I—need to acknowledge that these acts are part of a pattern. While different, they are the same. The pattern is racial injustice, and it needs to be called out.

I received a message earlier today (Thursday) from an old friend, who is African-American and the mother of two grade-school boys. She was asking me in general terms what our school is doing to help stand up to such injustices and implored me not to be a bystander. While I tend to actively resist being swayed by others' anxieties (some of you who work with me closely are acutely aware of this), I immediately realized this was not about anxiety. It was about equity, it was about anger, and—most relevantly to my friend—it was about her worst nightmare. She is constantly reminded of what her boys will be up against in their lives. I have no doubt that she lives with the terrifying reality that it could have been—or could be—one of her boys saying 'Mama.'

I can't sleep tonight. And normally I would not expect you to care about that at all. In this case, I think it is relevant to all of us at CDS, because, whether I like it or not, I am the Head of School—and I want you to know that as the Head of this school I will continue to be open to conversations and ideas and practices that can help address inequities and injustices. Across the board. I think it is owed to those who experience this on a daily basis, and it is owed to all of our students to help them navigate through these issues while teaching them to be advocates and allies for peace and justice and equity and humanity. I want that for my son, and for all of our sons and daughters.

Anyway, I can't sleep tonight. But I am likely going to sleep better than my old friend. And I likely have for my entire life. I can't help but feel that the exhaustion I have felt during the uncertainty of this pandemic is a feeling she knows all too well—and one that is made all the more powerful as a parent. I know for darn sure that I don't have to carry the very real fears that she has to carry, and that I will never fully understand that burden, that exhaustion, that fear.

Naming it is important—and I thought it relevant for you to know where your Head of School stands on this.

Sincerely,

David

The summary here is that we are in this together. Our leadership is fully aligned with our school's values of inclusion, of equity, of seeing and meeting individuals where they are and for who they are, and of educating our students to be advocates for peace, justice and a better world for all.

Sincerely,

David Buffum, Head of School

Kellen Kent, Division Head, EC/LS

Dr. Jason Mott, Division Head, MS/US