

Ten Minute T(ea) with Ms. Lloris Adams

*Interview conducted by Kaela Dunne
April 13, 2017*

Q) How do you think boarding schools have improved racial diversity and acceptance on campus? If you think they have.

A) I think that boarding schools have a unique opportunity to be a bridge for racial diversity because you're bringing together students from very different backgrounds who actually live together. So, whereas some schools can talk about it and experiment—I've been at a day school so I'm not anti-day school—but the reality of living together on campus and sharing the core of who you are, your cultural identity, your practices, what's important to you, the pains, having to see someone everyday like family, it's hard to hide behind the facades that we carry in life. It's hard to hide behind the mask. So the benefit of living together in boarding school is that there is an evolution of personhood where the mask comes off, whether you want it to or not, and you can see a person, even a group of persons, in a more complex manner than you do in, I guess, relationships that are shorter term.

Q) How do you think St. Mark's handles racial issues in comparison to previous schools you've worked at?

A) Well I'm still learning the community. I'm doing a lot of watching and learning this year. I appreciate the conversations that we have. I do think that we can delve deeper than we have been. I have been apprised of some history, some very tough conversations and town halls, and struggles the school has had. When people talk to me about it, it's usually like "I can't believe we did that! It was so hard and so horrible." But I don't think they see that the time that felt so rough helped St. Mark's move forward, whereas, in a school that would shut it down, you just have it fester. If you don't let it come up, you have assumptions about people and assumptions about groups. What I've appreciated this year, we've had a couple of conversations in the Fall when kids were talking about protests, National Anthem, whatever—I appreciate the fact that St. Mark's is willing to stop and have the conversation. We can gather and I can say that, "we're going to be in the Center tonight," and people show up. They show up to have the conversations, to wrestle through. I have heard from other teachers about work they are doing in their classes that I had no idea. I had no idea that Mrs. Berndt was unpacking genetic evidence, or lack thereof, of race in her biology class. That's not something that happens, as far as I understand, in every independent school. So, I know I've talked to students who feel like we need to be doing more but it's a long term vision. I know it's hard to see in the moment, when you're inside our bubble, but talking to my peers at other schools, we're having more conversations and doing more than a lot of schools, which I think is pretty cool.

Q) Do you have any goals for improving racial attitudes or diversity as Director of Community and Equity?

A) I've got goals for days! Coming into the school this year, the conversations I've had with teachers and students helped me identify a few goals: more support for international students and how they connect with the community overall, continued support for SHADES, programming that helps the conversations and activities and empathy building, there's been some conversation between myself and some faculty members about having a space to really talk about what it means to be white—the feedback I've gotten from some students and adults is that, “we talk about this race or this race or this race, but where's an opportunity for us to unpack as a white person without feeling like I'm guilty or shamed because I'm white?” So that's a big goal for next year, we have some adults on board for that. Also, the return of the Black Student Union and more emphasis on Pathways Pizza so when we have these groups, that I think are fantastic, we also have the opportunity to have cross discussion so we don't just pull into our groups to talk about challenges and not have discussions with the other students and faculty members.

Q) What do you think is the biggest challenge that faces the St. Mark's and boarding school community in terms of race?

A) That's a good one. The biggest challenge? The biggest challenge that I've encountered since coming to St. Mark's is really time. In boarding schools, we do a lot. From athletics to, of course, academics to arts, there's a lot of things pulling us in different directions. I think one of the challenges is how we integrate it and see the work we're doing around race, around community and equity, as integral to what we do. So, we have push-ins in our classes, for example, and not just what feels like an add-on. A co-curricular here or C&E day there, that it becomes increasingly more natural in our day, in our flow, in our conversations. My dream would be for this office not to exist—for it to be so organically ingrained in the culture of our school. In a lot of ways it is, but there's oversight. There wouldn't necessarily be a person that oversees the work, the banner would be carried by the student body and the faculty.