

Ten Minute T(ea) with Mrs. Vuyelwa Maqubela

*Interview conducted by Julien Alam
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Q) Do you have any interesting stories of students getting in trouble?

A) I have lots of stories. This kid was on probation, when I was in the dorm. She was a senior. I had had this long conversation with my students saying “I may be your house counselor, I may be your dorm head, but it doesn’t feel too long ago that I was your age. So, before you break any rules, know that I’m going to know about it and I’m going to be all over you. I’ve been there, done that.” I was very close with these students because I was twenty-five and they were around eighteen or seventeen. So, this kid liked to live on the edge and I was really worried about her. I would have her come to the house to study so that she would stay out of potential trouble. Later on in the year, at check-in time, she wasn’t there. And I was thinking that she’s on probation and she can’t afford to break a rule. Everyone was trying to find her, but they also knew it was going to be my first major bust. She arrived, pushing her bike, and I swear she was drunk. She found her way to the stairs to put her bike away and I couldn’t believe it. We went into my house and I closed the door of my study. I said, “What’s going on?” She said, “what do you mean?” I asked her if she was drinking and she said “No, I wasn’t drinking.” I wasn’t born yesterday, so I knew. I was annoyed that she wasn’t coming clean with me. So, I had to get another adult to give me a second opinion. So, I called the dean. He says, even before the breathalyzer, “Okay, stand on one leg.” She can’t even get herself to lift up a leg, let alone stand on one. Needless to say, she was out of there. That was my very first DC situation.

Another really good one, was when it was a long weekend. Our bedroom used to be right above an entrance/exit to the dorm, which locked automatically. It had just been check-in and I had heard the door open. I knew that either someone had left or there was an extra someone in the dorm. So, I went room to room just to say hi. I knocked on one door and it was locked. It was silent. I had brought my master key and was about to open the door. Next thing I heard was “Oh, I’m coming” (in a very “tired” voice). She was making it sound like she was fast asleep and I was disturbing her. She finally opened the door and let me in. I looked around and the person who was hiding underneath the bed had forgotten to tuck his legs in! I said, “who do we have here? Come on, sir, come on up.” It got quiet. Then I thought maybe he wasn’t in a condition to come out in my presence. So, I waited outside until he was decent. The two were busted, but it was the funniest thing. That was a long time ago. The girl comes back for reunions and we laugh about it.

Q) Why do you think students feel the need to break the rules?

A) I don’t think it’s a student thing. It’s a human thing. Humans break rules. Rules are manmade and even adults break rules by going above the speed limit, for example. I think it’s a human

condition. Rules are made to be broken. It's about taking chances and living on the edge. Whoever it is, they don't think they're going to get caught. So, they're not thinking about the consequences. Students are not immune to this condition. And young people in general want to push the envelope and test the limits. I understand, but they need to understand that I have to do my job as an adult to enforce the rules.

Q) In general, do you find that Disciplinary Committees (DCs) are fair?

A) Absolutely. This is because I am very much aware of each particular case and the details around it. I say this because I mean it. I tend to speak up when I find a situation to be unfair. I don't sit back and quietly take it. At a previous school, there were definitely certain practices that I did not approve of. I made it known. It didn't make me popular with the Dean's office, but I made it known anyways. Fortunately, here, I am in a position where I know what is going on and I know that Mr. Maqubela is of the same mind as I am that there should be fairness. He takes each case on its own and looks at the different aspects of it. He tries to be consistent, but the case is always different. So, I do think it's fair. I understand that kids don't always think so, but it's okay because it's about doing what is right.

Q) Do you think that teachers look at students differently after they have gotten in trouble?

A) Absolutely not because all the teachers were children too at some point. We teachers were your age once too and we've gotten in trouble in varying degrees. And we get in trouble now in different ways. We get in trouble for not paying a bill on time or with police when we're caught speeding. We're not perfect human beings. We really do understand that kids are kids. I told my dorm kids once who had broken the rules that I wasn't mad at them. I was mad at their decision to do this. It's not you I'm upset with right now. I want to help you grow. But, now look at what you have to go through. I still don't look at the kid differently. We honestly don't. I just want to make sure that this child is fine, emotionally and otherwise.

Mrs. Vuyelwa Maqubela is a beloved English teacher and wife of Groton's headmaster, Mr. Maqubela.