

Grease Lightning – An Arts Production **Two Schools Different Schools, One Common Link**

Kaikorai Valley College

Kaikorai Valley College is a large co-educational secondary school in Dunedin, New Zealand. Initially starting as Kaikorai Valley High School in 1958, and built to cater for the large suburbs opening up close to the school, the school combined with Kenmure Intermediate School in 1996 to become Kaikorai Valley College. This was the result of falling rolls in both schools and the local community's response to what was best for the ongoing education of the local young people. The school now caters for 950 students from Year 7 (10 or 11 year olds) to Year 13, approximately 50 of whom are international students. (It has a sister school relationship with Sakuragaoka High School in Japan.)

Facilities include a new Special Needs Learning Centre, and the college has its own theatre and dance studio. A new gymnasium complex has recently been completed. Night classes are run at the school for adult education.

The Learning Centre, the Brathwaite Centre, is named for the previous head of the Centre, which began as the Special Needs Unit for the Deaf, at Kenmure Intermediate. It became the Unit for Intellectually Disabled students once all the deaf students moved on, and in its final years at Kenmure Intermediate School became a satellite class of Sara Cohen School. When the schools amalgamated in 1996 the Learning Centre moved and remained a satellite class of Sara Cohen. With the introduction of Special Education 2000, secondary schools were required to take ownership of Units or Learning Centres or have them shut down. The Board of Trustees, and staff at KVC embraced the Learning Centre as its own and from then it has continued to develop and grow. It currently caters as the umbrella for approximately 20 students who receive Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Funding (ORRS) from the Ministry of Education. This funding is available to 1% of the NZ school population. The majority of these students are mainstreamed for some of the time, and many students are on the Autistic Spectrum. The Centre is funded through the school's Operational Grant, the Specialist Teacher funding component and from the Ministry of Education's Support Staff Funding pool.

Sara Cohen School

Sara Cohen School is a small Special School, designated Primary, which was established in 1926 by Mark Cohen, and named after his late wife Sara. Mark Cohen was a local businessman, City Councillor, and Editor of the Evening Star Newspaper. He and a number of his business friends would take wagers to see who could raise the most money in a few days. On this occasion Mark Cohen won and decided to build an Open Air School for disadvantaged children.

Initially the property was developed into the Prince Edward Convalescent Home but further land was developed to become the Richard Hudson Kindergarten, which remains next door. Subsequently alongside this was developed the 'Fresh-air' or 'Open-air School'. The school, which opened in 1926, operated in conjunction with the Convalescent Home, the convalescent children taking lessons at the

school, and the school-children taking a midday meal at the home. Sara Cohen, Mark's wife, had died in 1923 and the school was named the Sara Cohen Memorial School.

Sara Cohen School has developed over time to respond to the needs of schools and families in finding solutions to the challenges of educating young people with disabilities.

The 1989 Education act recognized in law the rights of all young people to an education. Since then children and young people with disabilities have been able to enrol as of right in their neighbourhood school, or in the local Special School if this is seen as the most appropriate setting.

Since the advent Special Education 2000 Sara Cohen School has provided itinerant specialist resource teacher support to students enrolled in primary and secondary schools around Dunedin. A resource bank has been developed over a number of years and provides students in inclusive schools with resources that extend their programs. The itinerant teachers work with members of the host school staff to support students in inclusive classrooms.

Students attending a Special Day School must have a Section 9 Agreement, which is signed between the parents and the Secretary for Education, Special Education. The majority are ORRS funded and have intellectual, or severe physical disability, or both. ORRS Funding allows a student to remain at school until the end of the year in which they turn 21.

Currently there are 33 students enrolled at Sara Cohen School, 3 in a Primary Satellite class at a local Primary School and 3 in an Intermediate Satellite Class (Year 7-8). The remaining 27 students are aged 14 – 21 with 20 of these aged 18 and over. Our focus for these students is Life Skills and Transition to life beyond school.

As our buildings have not changed much in the 82 years of the school's existence, we have asked now for the Ministry of Education to consider rebuilding the school.

History of the Arts

Kaikorai Valley College

Kaikorai Valley High School/ College has always been active in promoting the Arts with the school, producing a major Production most years and offering Music, Drama, and Visual Art to NCEA Level 3. The school is also involved in the Stage Challenge competition which showcases Dance as well. There had never been a production by the students from the Learning Centre, although one or two had been involved in the school productions.

As the new Director of the Learning Centre, I (Barbie) , needed to get to know the students and have them relate to each other in a closer way. To this end I wrote a play based on the talents and current activities of the 16 students in the Centre. 'Sleeping Beauty Won't Wake Up' was born.

Not all Support Staff were supportive, many thinking I was crazy for trying to do this as they perceived it as too difficult for many of the students. I produced the play on my own, discovering in the mean time how wonderful and talented the students actually were. The improvement in turn taking and working as a team was amazing and a highlight! The production was performed for parents and supporters with rave reviews! To see the School Principal take part, as well as the Psychologist from the Ministry of Education, Group Special Education, gave the students credibility, and

Barbie the reassurance that I was on the right track.

Since that performance other performances have included – The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe, Romeo and Juliet and Grease Lightning. These have been whole staff efforts with the other teachers and the Support Staff finally seeing the benefits for the students.

In 2006 an Art Exhibition was staged, with students' work on sale. The local Ministry of Education purchased pieces for their new Offices recognising the great work being done.

This year the students are involved in the Wearable Arts Awards, as models of costumes they have made.

The students also participate each year in the School Talent Quest and Wearable Arts Awards.

Sara Cohen School

It has always been recognised that the students learn best from 'hands on' practical experiences.

The school has employed, for a number of years, a local Artist, Janet de Wagt, to work with the students. Her approach is through a hands-on, therapeutic art type experience and students use a variety of media over a term. Much of the work for the students in wheelchairs is hand-over-hand with a supporter encouraging the interactions.

Two Visual Art Exhibitions have been held since 2005. Much of the Art work is displayed around the school and takes the form of paintings, ceramics, clay, paper sculpture and model making. Students' work was for sale at both exhibitions.

In 2004 a Fashion Show was held. Students were each given \$10 to spend at a local Op Shop and then the students had to model the clothing they purchased, after having modified and decorated it into an outfit that best suited them. The fashion show performed for parents lifted the morale and confidence of the students and gave them exposure to performing in public, something very new for most of them.

In 2007 and 2008 a Drama Specialist from the local College of Education has worked with staff and students on Process Drama. Staff have been involved in Professional Development to build their skills in Drama Teaching and are bringing this skill into their classroom programmes as they grow in confidence. Students, too, have developed their skills and are keenly suggesting story lines to use for Process Drama within their classrooms.

In 2006 and 2007 senior dance students from the University School of Physical Education worked alongside the staff and students. These sessions provided the students with opportunities to work in a dance theatre with students majoring in dance studies.

Alongside our regular music classes the school is also fortunate to employ the services of a Music Therapist and many of the students enjoy a weekly session of Music Therapy.

The Connection

When Sleeping Beauty did awaken it was because of a very loud belch from a delightful young man attending Kaikorai College. This young man was using belching inappropriately, often to gain attention and comment from staff and other students at school, and his brothers and parents at home. When challenged the belching increased, rather than decreased – until Sleeping Beauty expressed her

displeasure at the sound! After the production his belching at school and at home decreased considerably!

This young man became the link because, not only did he attend KVC, but his mum is the Principal at Sara Cohen and is on the Board of Trustees at Kaikorai College.

When looking at doing another Production it seemed obvious, that as this fellow was hooked on Grease, which was being played incessantly at home, it would be the logical answer.

Why Combine?

To give a creditable public performance it is better to have a larger group of students which gives more depth to the performance. If the group is larger it is easier to write the songs and actions that the group can perform and it is easier to include all students.

Kaikorai Valley College did not have sufficient girls to take on lead roles to enable them to perform 'Grease', but did have some talented musicians and dancers, as well as a teacher willing and able to take on the music part of the production.

Sara Cohen School could provide the female lead roles as well as other talented students who could take on major roles.

The students from both schools met on other social and school occasions – Wednesday Sports, Special Olympics, holiday programmes, and other such events. They had already developed some friendships and we could see the benefits of encouraging and expanding upon those links. Many of the students move from Kaikorai Valley College to Sara Cohen for their final three years of schooling, at 18 plus, so joining together made that Transition an easy one.

Combined practices led to shared lunches, shared venue and fun, which in turn led to increased social skills, communication skills and the skills involved in dance, drama, music and visual art.

The Difficulties

Some difficulties were real but others were perceived. Since Kaikorai College took responsibility for the Learning Centre which had been a satellite class of Sara Cohen School there had been a perception that the schools were in competition for students. This was not the case as far as we were concerned as the schools' roles were different, with KVC having the majority of their students included in mainstream classrooms for much of the time, while the students at Sara Cohen attended because there because their schooling in mainstream secondary had not been successful, or because parents had made the choice to send their child to Sara Cohen and not into a mainstream setting.

The size of the group had its negative, as well as positive side. An increase in noise levels certainly had a negative affect on many students, especially those on the Autism Spectrum. We had to make provision, through adequate staffing, for students to be withdrawn when it got too much for them. Trying to keep the group calm with so many unpredictable and enthusiastic participants was also often a challenge. Our Support Staff were a very valued part of this exercise.

Fitting everyone into a part, while taking into consideration the access to the stage and the space available, was also challenging. We were lucky to have staff willing to be part of the action on stage, so that they could support students in wheelchairs to perform. While it was obvious right from the

start who the lead characters would be, it was important to us to have all students valued for their part in the Production. Along with this difficulty was the difficulty of getting everyone together for practices – a number of students in wheelchairs had to be transported between schools so the school vans were used as a shuttle service. Practices at Sara Cohen were limited by the small hall in which we practised. There were also some challenges around the dynamics of the staffing. While teachers remained in charge, there were some very strong assertive characters amongst the Support Staff, who wanted to take over at times. Keeping the lid on was overcome in the end by their wanting to do the very best for the students – once they got into the swing of things they were carried away by the students' enthusiasm!

Open, honest communication between the two schools was vital. There could be no hidden agendas or power plays. If there was an issue arising it was important to have discussions before it became a problem. All staff became really great at discussing how things could be made better and what they could do to solve an issues that arose. It was great supportive team building for staff from two different schools.

Advantages of combining

The great advantages were the friendship developed between the students and the exciting pool of talent from which we could draw.

Being able to share resources and costs made the production realistic for us both. Both schools were able to help with the making of costumes, sets and props, which ,in turn, uncovered hidden talents amongst the staff and students.

Being able to work together, which took away the perception of being in competition, was a highlight for us. We continue to work on this still as we need to reinforce this in the greater Dunedin community where there are misconceptions regarding the role of a Special School.

The confidence and pride shared by the students for themselves and each other was huge! Students gained a great feeling of belonging from being with a group of like-minded young people who celebrated everyone's individual successes! The socialisation was fantastic – laughter, fun, excitement, nervousness and all the other aspects of a major performance were evident as our students learnt their parts and practised their roles! And all this in a non-judgemental, non-threatening learning environment. The final huge advantage came from the reaction of the parents. To see parents in tears of pride and happiness, seeing their child performing in front of a live audience for the very first time, made everything we achieved worthwhile. For some it was an achievement they thought they would never see, for all, it was the fact that their child was recognised for the skills and talents they have, and the things they can do, rather than their limitations and that which they can't do. To us, this made it the success it was.

Where To From There

In 2007 Kaikorai Valley College produced its own drama based on Romeo and Juliet. They took their show on the road and performed it in Wanaka while the students were on camp, as well as performing it to a public audience at school.

Sara Cohen staged an Arts Exhibition with visual art on display and for sale, as well as students doing

small performances in music, dance and drama.

This year, the two schools once again will combine in Term 3 – 4 to produce the encore to Grease – High School Reunion, The Concert. We decided to bring back the main characters – Sandy, Danny and the Fonz as these three students remain at school, and two are in their final year. Some of the original cast are now at Sara Cohen School having moved there after five years at KVC.

The story will centre around these three being invited back to school to talk to the students about their lives after leaving school. In their honour the school will put on a concert- new songs, dances and action while being able to relate to what they did before and the success they had.

After that- who knows?!

Raewyn Alexander
Principal
Sara Cohen School

Barbie Guest
Director, Brathwaite Centre
Kaikorai Valley College.

Explanations of terminology:

Board of Trustees: All New Zealand Schools are governed by an independent Board of Trustees comprising elected parent representatives, staff member, student member (in Secondary Schools) and the Principal. Prior to the Tomorrow's Schools initiative in the 1980's schools were governed solely by the Ministry of Education under the local Education Board, with an elected school Board.

Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Scheme: The Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS) provide resources for a very small group of school students throughout New Zealand who have the highest need for special education. Most of these students have this level of need throughout their school years.

The ORRS are additional to staffing allocations and operational grants paid to schools for every student in New Zealand. The Schemes' resources are primarily to provide specialist assistance to meet students' special education needs.

Section 9 Agreements: This agreement is signed between the parents/ carers and the Secretary for Education, Special Education (on behalf of the Ministry). All students attending a Special Day School must have a S9 before enrolling. All ORRS Funded students with intellectual disabilities are eligible for Special School attendance but parents must make their decision based on informed choice, including all options available.