EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S MESSAGE

Mr. Reeves, at the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Dear Friends:

If all goes as planned, you will be reading this edition of Towers just as I am returning from an adventure of a lifetime, a climb up magnificent Mount Kilimanjaro.

As I’ve shared with our students, Mt. Kilimanjaro is one of the Seven Summits, comprised of the highest peak on each continent. It’s pretty common knowledge that Kilimanjaro is the most manageable of the seven, though it’s by no means a “walk in the park”.

When I was a high school student in Oregon, I was impacted by reading Henry David Thoreau, who trekked through the woods with enthusiasm: “If one advances confidently in the direction of [his or her] dreams, and endeavors to live the life which [she or he] has imagined, [he or she] will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

Some of the highlights from my trek are within this issue, but if you are interested in seeing photos and reading more about my experience on Kilimanjaro, please visit our website at www.obs.org/our-stories/director’s-message.cfm.

Each of us has mountains in front of us that are worth climbing even if success is not guaranteed. I hope as you read through this issue of Towers, you’ll recognize the mountains our students overcome on a daily basis that make the Roof of Africa seem low in comparison and inspire the rest of us. Our Overbrook community is ever stronger because of people who read this publication and choose to act in support of our students. Because of that, in large measure, our students continue to achieve success unexpected in common hours.

Kind regards,

Todd Reeves

Executive Director and CEO
By the end of the season, Louis was swimming up to 200 yards (eight lengths) of the pool at a time. At the Sports Banquet, Louis earned the “Star On the Rise Award” and on Achievement Day, he was recognized with the “Aquatic Program Award” for demonstrating the most individual progress during the swim team season.

In the end, Louis was one of only two swim team members who attempted to learn how to dive off of the starting blocks.

“It’s a work in progress,” he says.
With a steady beat, Shamirah Brown tapped her white cane on the crowded sidewalk as she approached the crosswalk at 15th and Market Streets in Philadelphia, undoubtedly one of the busiest intersections in the city. It was October 15th, White Cane Safety Day, and with the seemingly incessant blare of car horns and screeching of SEPTA buses all around her, Shamirah stopped and carefully assessed the situation.

"I hate it when people run red lights," said Shamirah. "It’s so frustrating because I’m trying to analyze it, trying to get it right to cross the street. When people run the red light on a right turn, I have to then wait until the next street sign cycle so that it’s safe for me to cross."

It’s a tough task on a daily basis, but Shamirah was excited to help Overbrook School for the Blind staffers get the word out that morning about White Cane Safety Day, an opportunity to educate and raise awareness of the blind and visually impaired.

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With proper training, people using a white cane can enjoy greater mobility, safety, and freedom to travel independently to their schools or workplaces," said Jackie Brennan, Superintendent. "We were in Center City to demonstrate to the general public and local media how a white cane is an important mobility tool for people with visual impairment. We want to encourage people, especially motorists, to take extra care when they see someone with a white cane."

With reporters and photographers from several local television stations lined up to film Shamirah’s demonstration, OSB Orientation and Mobility Specialist Amanda Bear explained the process.

"She lines her cane up with the curb on a diagonal," said Bear. "We want motorists to see the white cane and recognize that she has a visual impairment so they don’t wave her on to cross. They need to know that she may need a little bit of extra time to cross the intersection. She will analyze it, familiarize herself with that crosswalk, and determine when and where to cross."

“For me, my cane makes me independent,” said Shamirah. “It helps me find steps and curbs, locate and step over cracks or uneven sidewalks. I can find doorways with it, and get into cars and on the subway.”
To draw attention to Shamirah’s trek, OSB enlisted the help of several advocates, including the District 4 Councilman, Curtis Jones, Jr. and the Phillie Phanatic, the beloved mascot of the Philadelphia Phillies, both long-time supporters of Overbrook School for the Blind and its students. The Phillie Phanatic followed Shamirah’s lead—and after a few dance moves and waves to cars stopped at the streetlight—he walked behind Shamirah, through the busy intersection, and congratulated her with a big high-five and hug for a successful and safe cross onto Dilworth Park at City Hall.

“I’ve always wanted to meet the Phanatic,” said Shamirah. “It was so much fun to have him there with me. I felt like I taught him something.”
On the other side of the world on White Cane Day, Executive Director and CEO Todd Reeves was starting his climb of Mount Kilimanjaro after traveling to Ethiopia to take part in the 7th Africa Forum on Visual Impairment. In a pre-hike Q&A with Towers, Reeves described what it will take to reach the summit, mentally and physically, and how so many OSB students experience a similar rigorous ‘climb’ every day.

“As difficult as this climb might be for me, I’ll have the support of a guide and porters,” said Reeves. “They’re doing the hard work, and they’ll be there to support me. Faith and willingness to fully access that support is important. Like most worthwhile accomplishments I’ve been a part of, it’ll happen because of the company and work of others.”

“Secondly, I think maintaining mental composure and resiliency will be important. If I’m one hour into an eight-hour trek, and I feel my pulse rate climb faster than I am, it might be easy to panic. It’ll be important to make simple adjustments in the moment without mentally extrapolating my likelihood of success in the midst of fatigue.”

Mr. Reeves stuck an OSB magnet on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro when he reached the summit.

“Third, I think intentionally appreciating each and every moment, knowing I’ll likely never be there again, will be pivotal. It’s easier to push down the effects of fatigue when you’re appreciating the scenic beauty that surrounds you.”

“Overall, I can remind myself that the vast majority of the students we serve overcome more challenges by the time they push themselves away from the breakfast table and board the bus to come to school than I can fathom. Kilimanjaro doesn’t seem so high when I walk down OSB’s halls and chat with our students.”

“Whereas our Orientation and Mobility Instructors teach our students to navigate their own neighborhoods, mass transit, and the streets of Philadelphia, all I’m doing is walking a fairly established pathway to a defined endpoint. I’ll have a guide and porters on Kilimanjaro, whereas Overbrook students work each day with a goal to cross a busy thoroughfare in Center City with confidence and independence. Which is the easier path—climb Kilimanjaro or cross a street in Center City blind-folded with a white cane? To me, the answer is obvious: I don’t have the courage for the latter. When it comes to courage in daily living, our students “occupy the field”.”
AFRICA FORUM
Mr. Reeves and International Program Coordinator Wenru Niu traveled with members of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for the 7th Africa Forum on Visual Impairment, to learn a bit of what’s happening throughout Africa in terms of services in education and employment for people with visual challenges.

Ambassador Kwesi Quartey, the Deputy Chairperson of the secretariat arm of the African Union—a 55-member state organization working to create an integrated, prosperous, democratic and peaceful Africa—was the distinguished guest speaker at the forum. Ambassador Quartey most recently served as secretary to former Ghanaian President John Mahama.

OSB is an international partner in ICEVI, and Mr. Reeves is a member of ICEVI’s Executive Committee.

MYANMAR
In Myanmar, OSB’s partnership with the Nippon Foundation and the Overbrook-Nippon Network on Educational Technology (ON-NET) has provided support to a number of projects including the development of an Android version of Burmese Text To Speech. The work was completed by teams from Vietnam led by Mr. Phuc Hoai Dang and in Myanmar by Mr. Benedict La Khun. Recently released to the public, several students reported that they use it to do office work, help with studies, contact friends via social media apps, and write in Burmese.

This is Hlala Khing, a 3rd-year university student, who started using the Burmese TTS for the past month and likes it because she can write to friends in Burmese, and it helps her keep a diary. Ms. Khing wants to become a poet someday.
Students in Ms. Worsley’s class gather for a planning meeting to discuss the next issue of *The Red and White*.

The student newspaper has long been a cherished tradition at many of the nation’s top high schools, and Overbrook School for the Blind’s *The Red and White* newspaper is no different. For over a hundred years, *The Red and White* has been continually published, allowing OSB students to hone their writing skills while absorbing lessons in academics, technology, ethics, and responsibility.

Today, under the direction of high school teacher Eva Worsley, students in her class carry on the OSB newspaper tradition. This small group of six students produce *The Red and White* four times a year in a Microsoft Word and PDF file for accessibility and also post the newspaper on AdobeSpark which allows for YouTube videos and photos.

“At the start of the marking period, we meet as a group and reflect on the last paper published to identify things that went well and areas that can be improved,” says Ms. Worsley. “We also set any group and individual goals here. We establish a publication date and think about what topics or ideas may be current or interesting to write about for our next issue. Each student typically hands in two–three ideas of what they’d like to write about, and then as a group, we decide what everyone should write. We’ve been doing this long enough to know that we should try to stay away from generic topics such as holidays and find a more creative spin on them—like a special holiday recipe, a way to get involved in holiday preparation at home, or gift ideas for teens.”

For students like 18-year-old Ethan Ruddell, who is working on a literacy goal to improve his writing skills, writing for *The Red and White* has greatly increased his ability to complete the writing process from start to finish independently. Today, he uses JAWS, Microsoft Word, and spell check, to edit his documents on his own.

“The thing I enjoy most about working on the newspaper is coming up with new ideas,” says Ethan. “I look forward to writing about my life at OSB and how I’ve grown from being a little kid to an independent student.”

A lover of non-fiction, Ethan frequently writes articles on topics that teach new skills to others, such as *Guide Dogs: Is One Right For You?* and *How Elections Work*. 
Another contributor to the newspaper is 18-year-old Jessica Bobo who says, “I’m looking forward to writing about the Earth and how our planet is changing. But I also like to write about interesting things going on during the school year or something that has to do with things teenagers like.” Jessica’s story in the next issue of *The Red and White* is about food allergies and OSB’s peanut-free campus. Previously, she wrote about Bryce Harper joining the Phillies.

For many, a school newspaper is an essential part of any high school experience. “It gives our students a voice and a creative outlet,” says Ms. Worsley. “It also ties nicely into academic skills we’re already working on so it makes learning more fun for my class. The process of writing the newspaper teaches a lot of skills: brainstorming and creating a writing outline, proofreading, editing, and editing again, consideration of our audience and altering content to meet their interests, working as a team, understanding and meeting hard deadlines, research skills and evaluating the reliability of sources, and being an active part of our school community and understanding what’s going on at our school. Lastly, it’s a great chance to have their hard work seen by other people in the school. They all light up when they are praised in person or by email for a great article.”

If you would like to read the latest edition and past issues of *The Red and White* newspaper, please visit www.obs.org/our-stories/red-&-white-hs-newsletter.cfm

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**DID YOU KNOW?**

- The first issue of *The Red and White* school newspaper was published by OSB students in 1915.

- At the time of the first printing, Dr. Olin H. Burritt was the Principal of OSB and 230 students were enrolled in OSB.

- Major features included in current issues of the newspaper are the same as in 1915, such as poetry submissions, fiction writing, and stories covering special events at OSB.

- Of course, there have been several changes in the layout and design of *The Red and White* over the years.
EMBRACING CHANGE: RETIRING ONE GUIDE DOG BUT WELCOMING ANOTHER


MEET MARVIN

“There’s an art to the matching process,” says Rebecca Ilniski, Spanish Teacher and Braille Transcriptionist. “When it comes to matching a guide dog with an owner, trainers look at many things to make a good guide team like pace and pull of the dog and walking speed of the person. They look at the environment the owner lives in and works in and consider the personality of the owner and dog, too.”

But after 10 months of serving as her hardworking guide dog, Kabob, a yellow Labrador Retriever, showed signs of nervousness and fear and seemed especially stressed when on a new adventure in the city with Rebecca.

“His confidence didn’t go up over time,” says Rebecca. “When we tried to go to new places, he was afraid of the noises and didn’t want to take initiative to do what a guide dog needs to do. It showed in his pace when he walked with me. He would cower and drool. He just seemed so stressed.”

Rebecca contacted Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael, California, where Kabob was trained. The trainers flew out to do a follow-up evaluation of Kabob and saw his difficulties. They agreed that Kabob just wasn’t a city dog, that he should go back to California with them, and they would reevaluate his skills to see if he could go out with another owner in a less stressful environment.

“It was hard emotionally to let him go, and it’s still hard,” says Rebecca. “I wondered if there was something else I could have done. It’s just that Kabob was only comfortable doing what he knew. I think he helped me because of the bond he and I had. He loved me enough that even though he didn’t really like the job, he did what he could for me. I still miss him.”

A few weeks after Kabob returned to California with his trainers, Rebecca received a call from them. They believed they had made a mistake with Kabob, thinking his confidence would grow. He was retiring to become a full-time pet to a loving family. But, they had another guide dog for her, and could she come out for a two-week class to begin working with this new dog right away?

Rebecca headed to San Rafael, California for the class and met Marvin, a friendly 18-month-old black labrador retriever.

“Marvin knows his job,” says Rebecca. “He’s courageous, takes the initiative to get me where I need to go. If things are in my way, he takes me around them and doesn’t just stop. He finds the safest way through.”

It seems like Marvin likes to learn, too.

“When I first brought him to OSB, he learned my classroom and office in 20 minutes,” says Rebecca. “He was immediately comfortable with students and staff.”

After receiving a treat for guiding Rebecca to the railing outside on the front steps of the Rotunda building on the first day, Marvin now heads there each morning.

“He helps me find the light pole button to push to cross Malvern Avenue, too,” says Rebecca. “He thinks he’s going to get another treat so he goes there immediately to help me out.”

After working a full day, Marvin and Rebecca play for a while when they get home, and Marvin crashes on the floor next to her bed.

“Normally, it takes about 12 months for a working guide dog team to really bond together,” says Rebecca. “We’ve only been together three months and we’re further along as we work together. I’m comfortable with his pace, and he really seems like he wants to get me where I need to go.”

“I think he’s going to be around for a while.”
We are delighted to welcome new individuals to our Board of Trustees who will provide their expertise to further our collective work at Overbrook School for the Blind. Please join me in welcoming our newly-elected Board members.

MEREDITH LEIGH CARTER: As the President and CEO of Context Business Lending, LLC, a family office backed specialty finance company providing $1M-$25M in working capital to the lower-middle market, Meredith leads the strategic direction of the company as well as oversees the business development, credit, and operations processes of the business. She has a J.D. from Villanova University School of Law and a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Delaware.

MARK A. RIOBOLI, CFP®, CFS: The proud uncle of Lauren Rioboli, who has been a student at OSB since 2005, Mark is Shareholder and Director of Wealth Management at Independence Advisors, LLC, where he is the Senior Advisor for high net worth individual and institutional clients. He has a B.S. in Financial Management from St. Joseph’s University.

MEDEA Z. MCGLYNN: (not pictured) With her experience as President of PERC, the home and school association for OSB, Medea is a natural for the role of Parent Representative on the OSB Board of Trustees. She is a Senior Consultant for Cannon Group Enterprises where she manages multiple clients to determine savings for their IT and Telecommunications services. Medea is also the proud parent of John Joseph, or JJ, who has been a student at OSB since 2015.

DIANE MCCARTHY: As the chief financial officer for the Lincoln Investment Companies, Diane brings more than 25 years of broad financial, strategic, and management experience to her role. Before joining Lincoln in 2018, Diane spent time as the senior vice and CFO of Insurance Solutions at Voya where she led the finance function for the Individual Life and Employee Benefits business lines. Diane also worked at Lincoln Financial as the Retirement Solutions head of Strategy and Profitability management. She was also the CFO and chief administrative officer for Lincoln Financial Distributors where she directed all financial reporting and planning functions, incentive compensation programs, and distribution technology development. Diane is a graduate of LaSalle University with a B.S. in Accounting. She holds a FINRA Series 27 (Financial and Operations Principal) registration.

I am also happy to announce the following changes to our Board’s Executive Committee: Marjorie G. Stein (President); Anne Marble, Elizabeth Passanante-Rodriguez, and Sidney Rosenblatt (Vice Presidents); Joseph T. Doyle, Jr. (Treasurer); and, Jackie Keenan (Secretary).

Congratulations to each of these board and committee members on their new roles.

By Todd Reeves, Executive Director & CEO
More than 150 guests dined under a starry sky during the sixth annual Overbrook Experience, OSB’s signature gala, which celebrates OSB’s ability to inspire achievement, defy expectations, and reach new heights in education.

With a nod to the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon Landing, the theme of the 2019 Overbrook Experience Dinner, ‘Achieving the Impossible’, connected guests with the challenges that OSB students face each day, and how teachers and staff members lift insurmountable barriers in order to give our students the opportunity for growth and learning.

“Not yet, but someday,” said Executive Director and CEO Todd Reeves, in reference to each student working towards his or her goals for the future. “We believe that Langston Hughes was right, that dreams don’t die. If you believe the same thing, and you believe the arch of history is long but it bends towards justice, then you are among friends. It’s what we’ve been doing at Overbrook since 1832, believing that each student’s dreams should always be positively addressed.”

During remarks, Marjorie G. Stein, President of the Board of Trustees, and Vice President, Anne Marble, introduced two sets of Overbrook School for the Blind parents. Monica Picinich, mother of four-year-old Andrew, shared her experience working with the Early Childhood program and how it motivated her to return to school to become a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairment (TVI). Nate and Suzanne Lentz shared the path their 16-year-old son, Nicky, has taken from starting at OSB in the Early Childhood program, then attending schools in his local school district, and ultimately returning to the OSB High School program last year.

After remarks, Mr. Reeves invited guests to take part in a matching gift designed to support OSB’s students and programs.

“No matter the size of the gift, your contribution for the benefit of our students, staff, and families is an investment that yields one of the greatest possible returns: an education that lasts a lifetime.”
Parents Nate and Suzanne Lentz spoke about their son's experience at OSB.

Parent Monica Picinich returned to school to become a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairment.

Executive Director and CEO Todd Reeves offered remarks during the dinner.

Guests mingled in the Rotunda Building Lobby during cocktails and had dinner under the tent on the West Lawn.

“No matter the size of the gift, your contribution for the benefit of our students, staff, and families is an investment that yields one of the greatest possible returns: an education that lasts a lifetime.”

**SPECIAL THANKS TO THE SPONSORS OF THE 2019 OVERBROOK EXPERIENCE DINNER:**

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OSB HAS ENTERED INTO A PARTNERSHIP WITH VARIETY—THE CHILDREN’S CHARITY by launching a daily after school program on the OSB campus to support students and families.

The mission of Variety is to enrich the lives of children and young adults with disabilities through social, educational and vocational programs that nurture independence and self-confidence, and prepare them for life.

"What started out as an idea for a Variety-run week-long summer camp housed on the OSB campus grew into an every day after school program, supporting students and families within Philadelphia," says Victoria Romano, Coordinator of the OSB Elementary program. "We are excited to provide a wide range of educational and recreational activities in a safe, stable and supportive environment for students and their families."

The program provides participants with the opportunity to engage in purposeful recreation and leisure activities, arts and humanities, exercise, choice-making, and access STEM curriculum-based activities.

The hours of operation are 3:30 to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, for children ages 5 to 21. For more information, visit www.obs.org.

THE OVERBROOK OUTPOST opened for business this month at nearby Springfield Mall. Students in the School to Work program are making and selling products like t-shirts, plates, mugs, tote bags, student artwork, bracelets, soaps, body scrubs, and seasonal items, at a kiosk in the upper-level center court main entrance by Ruby Tuesday.

"It’s challenging to find jobs in the community for our students," says Andrea Dasch, Lead Teacher in the Middle School and School to Work programs. "This opportunity in the mall will give our students a chance to be seen working in the community and hopefully show other businesses the strengths of our students. It’s a great opportunity for OSB students to build work, money, and social skills, and it shows the local community the work ethic of our students."

Stop by to browse and buy. The Overbrook Outpost is open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

THANKS TO THE SUPPORT OF THE ROSENBLATT FAMILY CHARITABLE FUND, a new ceramic kiln was installed in the art room this summer, much to the delight of art teacher Susan DiFabio.

"Clay is such an important medium for sensory development, motor skills, self-expression, and problem-solving," says DiFabio. "The sensory experiences students encounter are numerous. They are able to feel the clay, comment on what they are feeling, poke it, pinch it, twist and roll it. This helps the students develop both fine and major motor skills."

The new kiln was put immediately to use by students who made pinch pot pumpkins to be used as centerpieces on tables at the Overbrook Experience Dinner. Plants from the M. Christine Murphy Horticulture and Education Center were put in the pots, and several students made clay fruits and vegetables that were included in the centerpieces.

"In the past, we were only able to use air-dry clay," says DiFabio. "Now students are able to glaze their work and create something that is very tactile. The possibilities are endless."

Art Teacher Susan DiFabio holds up a note of thanks for OSB Board Vice President, Sid Rosenblatt of the Rosenblatt Family Charitable Fund, and OSB’s new kiln (right).
There’s no question that students get hands-on experiences at Overbrook School for the Blind. Student growth and business development are the foundational elements of the newest student-run enterprise at OSB, a commercial-grade 3D print shop. Thanks to the support of the Fox Family Foundation and the Scholler Foundation, students will begin using a new 3D printer to produce the standard ADA compliant braille signage seen typically on office doors, elevators, and restrooms in businesses and community organizations. The new printer can also produce plaques and awards with three-dimensional photographs and tactile graphics to improve the appearance of braille signs.

Muneer Tawam, the project’s first Braille Signage Specialist, has been hired to manage the entire process, from receiving orders for signage to design development, production, and fulfillment of orders. The first project is to produce braille signs for high visibility corridors and key offices throughout OSB, including the Executive Director’s Office, the Rotunda Conference Room, and the OSB Museum. Our second goal is to produce 25 braille signs for the offices and classrooms in Biddle House.

While our students enthusiastically delve into the world of free enterprise, they will be building decision-making, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. Our new partnerships with regional businesses such as Inter Sign National and Color Direct will allow students to gain valuable mentors who help them apply what they learn in the real world.

Explain to us your role as OSB’s Business Manager and Chief Financial Officer. How do you see your position at OSB?

As the CFO I’m responsible for all the School’s financial matters including banking, investments, insurance, budgets, financial audits, and regulatory reporting to name a few. I see my position as keeping the school’s business matters running smoothly.

What attracted you to OSB?

The School’s mission was a strong attraction for me. It is personally fulfilling to be part of that mission.

What are your short term and long-term goals at OSB?

Short term I need to learn the job. That will take some time. A longer-term objective is to find ways to make it easier for our staff to do the incredibly important work they all do.

What are you most excited about in your new role?

I really enjoy learning new things every day. And I especially enjoy working with so many talented and caring people.

Fill in the blank: If you really knew me, you’d know...

My husband and I have been married for over 30 years. We raised three sons now all through college and graduate schools. While the three boys live far away (California, Tennessee and Maine) we all get together to camp in Maine during the summer and ski in the winter.

Sheena Lawrence can be reached at Sheena.Lawrence@obs.org.
CROSSING THE FINISH LINE!

The inaugural Overbrook School for the Blind 5K RUN, WALK ‘N’ ROLL was held on October 6th in Fairmount Park. Participants of all ages and abilities came out to support our students and families. In all, Run, Walk ‘n’ Roll raised more than $6,000, which will support initiatives such as assistive technology in classrooms, improvements to accessibility options on campus, opportunities for student engagement in vocational activities, and programs that engage students in athletics and the arts. What an amazing day with friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers!