

A VALUABLE PUBLIC RELATIONS / COMMUNICATIONS TOOL: THIRD THURSDAY AT THE AMERICAN SCHOOL OF GUATEMALA

by Ettie Zilber, Director General Colegio Americano de Guatemala

As school leaders we know that we can never communicate enough and we can never be friendly, agreeable, interested, available or visible enough. In an attempt to improve (or disprove) all the above, I instituted a strategic public relations program known simply as "Third Thursday." (TT)

TT is a monthly forum whereby parents are invited for "coffee and conversation" with the Director. Each of the objectives of this forum is two-sided: a) for the Director to get to know more parents and for the parents to get to know and hear the Director; b) for the Director to listen to concerns and comments of parents and for parents to express them; c) for each to listen to the comments of others outside their circle of friends, family or active and vocal parents.

After a brief explanation (reiteration) of the objectives and *modus operandi*, the agenda and the floor are turned over to the parents. They are free to make any comments and ask any questions about the school and/or its programs. They are also reminded that this forum is not a substitute for the appropriate channels of communication, which are always open. I also explain that while we certainly wish to allow them to express their concerns, they are also encouraged to explain why they chose our school and, more importantly, why they keep their children enrolled in ASG.

Parents are repeatedly informed about the *modus* for the selection and invitation of this forum. They learn that at the beginning of each month, my Administrative Assistant selects 12 parent names from our data base of 850 families. These names are selected randomly through a computer application which selects random numbers. The corresponding parents are contacted, first by email and then with a telephone follow-up. The email message explains the objectives and the process of selection. The telephone calls are vital to ensure participation. Cancellations are quickly replaced to maintain a full complement of 12 participants. Any chosen parent who cannot attend may substitute their spouse. However, families which cannot attend are not given a second opportunity.

The forum formation is structured, yet simple and is a source of amazement for the participants. Parents are impressed that each has as equal a chance of being invited as any member of the more well-known families. It seems that this has touched on a deep-rooted

emotional issue and, ultimately is one of the reasons for the growing popularity of the program; I have found myself blushing when parents express their gratitude for this new and unique offer of open communication.

Some of the comments and concerns raised at TT are ubiquitous and familiar; while others are new: the cafeteria food, the PE uniforms, the sports program, bullying, third language program, homework, values education, teaching kids responsibility, and more. I have learned that the opportunity to express themselves is sometimes more important than the topic itself.

Each month, I write a summary of our TT conversations for our community newsletter; thus, allowing greater participation from the wider parent readership. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that by the 4th TT session some families have begun to prepare themselves by holding family-forums asking their children and spouses what comments they would like their representative to make. Many eagerly wait to see who will be selected.

While the moniker "Third Thursday" may not sound as edifying as FDR's "Fireside Chat", a recent AISHnet/Headnet subscriber forum offered more serious titles such as: "Share your pain with wine (whine?) and Wayne", Swill with Bill, Nosh with Neil, Snacks with Jack, Booze with Bob, Complain with Jane, Yarn with Am, Tea and Sympathy with Steve, Margaritas with Areta, Sherry with Sharon, Chips with Chip, Juice with Joyce, Beer with Bob, Higher with Meyer, Howl'n with Allen, Jamming with Joan, Drive-by with Carr, Chewing the Fat with Matt, Marshmallows with Mick, Gripe with Mike, Koke with Kev, among others. I thought for a moment of changing the title to "Latte with Ettie."

As Shakespeare so eloquently stated, "a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet," and Third Thursday, by any other name, would work just as well. Why not choose your own name and implement your own forum?

To read summaries of our Third Thursday fora, go to www.cag.edu.gt

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