

CRISTO REY – THE SCHOOL THAT WORKS – CELEBRATES YEAR ONE

BY MEG WATERS

WHEN CRISTO REY HIGH SCHOOL opened in Santa Ana last fall, it became the latest entry in a community of Orange County Catholic college preparatory high schools. For over a century, Catholic high schools have set the gold standard for academic excellence, sports and faith formation for many of our most celebrated business, political, science, athletic and nonprofit leaders locally and across the country. And yet, from day one, Cristo Rey is doing all this and more, creating a new model that levels the playing field for low-income, and working-class students, enabling them to succeed in college and careers. Given the chance, these students demonstrate that they can compete and achieve head-to-head with the best and the brightest.

Founding principal Karelyn Roberts remembers many students who came into the school on the first day shy, scared and unsure.

“At our recent gala, it was incredible to see these same students, a few months later, standing tall, confident and shaking hands with benefactors because they have been successful. Success breeds success.”

Cristo Rey is no ordinary high school. The school is part of a nationwide network of 39 Catholic schools that offers students with limited economic resources a top-quality education and professional work experience. Each student works five days a month in a professional entry-level position through a partnership of educators, businesses, and universities.

According to Roberts, “Less than 25% of the students came to Cristo Rey with a 3.0 GPA or higher in the fall. Based on research from the University of Chicago, we know that students who finish freshman year with a 3.0 GPA or better are more likely to ultimately graduate college. We anticipate that by the end of the year, 90% of our students will have at least a 2.5 GPA or higher.”

Stephen Holte, president of Cristo Rey, believes the key to the student’s success is in “Our emphasis on meeting the student where they are, whether they need extra help with math, language — a variety of things. Every student has unique strengths, and it is our role to discover and build on them.”

The students entering Cristo Rey receive testing to pinpoint their academic needs and design a rigor-



CRISTO REY’S PRESIDENT STEPHEN HOLTE (FAR LEFT) AND FOUNDING PRINCIPAL KARELYN ROBERTS POSE WITH STUDENTS AND TIM AND ALANNA PSOMAS, FOUNDING BUSINESS PARTNERS AND BENEFACTORS OF THE SCHOOL, DURING THE “VIVA” GALA HELD ON MAY 10 IN NEWPORT BEACH. PHOTO BY JOHN WATKINS

ous curriculum to help them fill in any educational gaps and achieve their highest potential. Roberts recalls one student who told her, “Every other school I’ve gone to was designed for me to fail. This school was designed for me to succeed.” She had a 4.0 GPA at the end of her freshman year.

The corporate and nonprofit employers are impressed with the contributions of the students.

Holte said the students are part of a work team with tasks equivalent to an entry-level position.

“The feedback I get from our partners is that our kids bring a breath of fresh air into the workplace,” he added. “The staff love them and are excited to mentor the students. A finance company offered the students a summer position because they are an important part of a work team.”

Thirty companies participated in the first year, including law, finance, accounting, banks, hospitals and retail management.

In the fall, the school will welcome a new freshman class. The academic year



PRINCIPAL KARELYN ROBERTS GREETS A STUDENT ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL, AUG. 14, 2023. PHOTO BY RENNE ENRIQUEZ/DIOCESE OF ORANGE

begins in July with the summer success program, a two-week session at the University of California Irvine (UCI) to take placement tests and learn the soft skills associated with presenting themselves professionally in the workplace. This means that the appropriate help and resources will be available to each student from the day they start the new

school year in August.

Another first was the recent “Viva” Gala, a sold-out event that drew more than 380 philanthropists, corporate leaders and community members to the VEA Hotel in Newport Beach. The event honored Tim and Alanna Psomas, founding business partners and benefactors of Cristo Rey Orange County. The Psomas’ chaired the initial feasibility study committee for Cristo Rey, and Tim is the school’s founding board Chair. The event raised more than \$2 million towards the school’s total operating expense of \$4 million annually.

In addition to the many donors who stepped forward and generously supported Cristo Rey’s mission, many students also participated in the event. The guests saw first-hand how their investment in these students was reflected in their air of confidence born of their success in school.

Cristo Rey is located in the former elementary school at Immaculate Heart of Mary parish in Santa Ana.

“We still have many challenges ahead,” said Holte, “We need to move to a new campus in two years, so next year we will focus on identifying and retrofitting an existing building. It will likely be a commercial property with at least 6-acres.”

Cristo Rey’s motto is “The School that Works!” With the community support, dedicated teachers and staff and blossoming students, one year into the program, it is working quite well. ❖