

OPRAH WINFREY LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR GIRLS

SOUTH AFRICA

PRESS CONFERENCE

November 5, 2007

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Before we can kick off today's proceedings, I'd like to introduce our speakers.

On my right I have Superintendent Andre Neethling who is the Provincial Coordinator, Family Violence, Sexual Offenses & Child Protection Unit.

Then we have Superintendent Lungelo Dlamini who is the spokesperson for the Gauteng Provincial Commissioner.

And then we have Mr. John Samuel on my left, Chief Executive Officer of the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy.

Via satellite we're joined from Chicago by Miss Oprah Winfrey. And before we start, I'd just like to establish a few ground rules. Please think of your fellow colleagues. You are allowed one question per person. We have microphones on

the sides that will be roving to help you to ask your questions. And also please introduce yourself and the organization you're representing when you ask your question.

Just one technical consideration to please keep in mind, Ladies and Gentlemen, there's a six second delay on the satellite and now I'll hand over to Superintendent Andre Neethling.

SUPT. ANDRE NEETHLING: 702's mike just fell.

Okay. Good afternoon, everybody. I just want to take you through what had happened in the last three weeks. Just to highlight you in terms of the process that was followed. On the 15th of October, I was contacted by the Oprah Winfrey Academy in Henley-on-Klip and I spoke to Mr. Robert Farley who with two social workers, all three of them from Chicago was conducting an internal investigation into certain inappropriate behavior by personnel at the college.

Mr. Farley informed me that some of the issues that was unraveled during the interviews with children could result in criminal behavior or criminal accountability by certain individuals.

The same afternoon I met with this team

from Chicago and they then briefed me with regards to the interviews they had with some of the children. It was obvious that some of this could account to criminal actions and we then proceeded with a police investigation.

The school made available a room for us as well as two interview rooms so that we could interview children in isolation and in privacy and I called in a team from our Vereeniging Family Violence Child Protection & Sexual Offenses team. Constable Maraletsi and his commander, Captain Pillay. They sit at the back here.

Various children were interviewed during the process and the -- we conducted the interviews as well as provided the children with some emotional assistance or psychological assistance. The Teddy Bear Clinic was called in to assist and we also called in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions and Mr. Justice Mnisi came to assist us in the investigation.

We decided to handle the investigation and conduct the investigation at the school as we believed this is where the children would feel comfortable and we -- this investigation then led

to the arrest of Mrs. Tiny Makopo who is a 27-year-old lady who has been working as a dorm parent at the school. She appeared in court this morning. I believe many of you have been there. But for the benefit of those who do not have the information, we investigated the whole weekend her -- the possibility that she could flee or any information on which we could base our bail opposition application and she does, however, in terms of the South African law qualify for bail. She was released on 3,000 rand bail and the conditions that she need to meet includes that she must report every Monday between 7:00 and 8:00? Is that correct? To the Sebokeng Police Station. She's not allowed to leave the Vaal Triangle Area where she lives. She's not allowed to -- to apply for a passport. And she's not allowed to make any contact with anybody associated to the school or the investigation.

The court also issued an order in terms of Section 154 of the Criminal Procedure Act in South Africa which states that under no circumstances may the identities of the children be published in -- within the media.

The case has been remanded to the 13th of December for a provisional date. The prosecutor will thoroughly peruse the case docket and ensure that everything they need for a trial is included.

Thank you.

MR. JOHN SAMUEL: Good afternoon. I'm John Samuel, Chief Executive Officer of the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa.

Thank you all for joining us here this afternoon. This has been a difficult time for the academy. But thanks to the efforts of the South African police services, our teachers, our counseling team, and the girls' parents, we are beginning to heal.

The girls who have been affected have received and continue to receive the best counseling and support. And all of our learners are getting support from the academy, their peers, and their families.

On campus, there is a sense of relief that the investigation is concluded and we are returning to a normal way of life. The spirit of

the girls remains strong and they are determined to move forward and we are committed to making the changes necessary at the academy to empower them to do that.

And now I would like to introduce Miss Oprah Winfrey.

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Good afternoon again, everybody.

I, too, am grateful for this opportunity to finally have a chance to speak to you all. I have wanted to speak since my first visit to South Africa, but Superintendent Andre Neethling and his diligent team sat in a room with me and they asked me to please not speak to the press until an arrest was made or risk jeopardizing this investigation. And of course I didn't want to do that. So now that the accused has been arrested and has been charged, I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to you, Superintendent Neethling, for your guidance and your efforts throughout this difficult ordeal for all of us. And also thanks to you, too, Mr. Justice Mnisi, and the entire team of investigators who really have been nothing but

responsive and sensitive to all of our students.

So, let me begin with how this all --  
how I came to know about these happenings.

On October 6, a Saturday, I spoke to John Samuel who is our CEO at the academy who you just heard from and Mr. Samuel informed me that 15 girls had come to his office to see him with a list of grievances including suspected sexual abuse of one of their classmates by a dorm matron. They didn't use the word sexual abuse. They implied that something inappropriate was going on. Hearing that, John Samuel, immediately after hearing that allegation, removed the accused, Tiny Makopo, from the campus.

I was, needless to say, devastated and really shaken to my core when I first heard this news and immediately within the first hour of receiving this information I contacted here in the United States Dr. Bruce Perry who is founder of the Child Trauma Academy in Houston, Texas, and Dr. Perry informed me that the law in the United States requires that one must report even if you suspect child abuse, it must be reported to the child protective services. And so he said if

I were you, I would confirm if that is also the law in South Africa, which I did, and first thing Monday morning I contacted Superintendent Neethling and told him that I wasn't sure what had happened but there was a suspicion on the part of the girls of some type of sexual abuse. I told Andre Neethling that I wanted to conduct an independent investigation to determine what exactly had happened and that I would appreciate his advice and his guidance in this matter.

And he told me that his department would work in cooperation with our independent investigation.

Now the reason why I did that is I wanted to hire an independent team because my experience with child predators is that no one ever, ever abuses just one child. Although the girls only had spoken of one classmate, my first priority was to determine how many girls had actually been affected and to what extent.

So I hired a team of three headed by Robert Farley, who is a former detective and Commander of the Child Exploitation Unit of the Cook County Sheriff's Office here in Chicago.

Detective Farley and his team immediately flew over from the United States and they spent a week interviewing girls and staff. I arrived before the team. I was accompanied by Dr. Bruce Perry and I spoke to all the girls personally and I encouraged all of them, any of them who had actually been harmed, to please come forward and to trust the team and speak to the team and the police.

And I told them that although they had apparently been living in an atmosphere that repressed their voices, that this was a chance for them to break the silence and to take their voices back.

As a result of that conversation with the girls, by the next day, five other brave girls had come forward. But all the girls were afraid of repercussions from the remaining dorm matrons. So we immediately removed all remaining dorm matrons and put teachers in rotation in the dorms.

That weekend, which was Sunday, October 14, we had enough information by that time about the specific nature of the girls' complaints that we then started calling all of their parents

to inform them of the situation and to ask for a meeting the following weekend.

Then the following weekend of October 20th I returned again to South Africa and I met with the parents and their daughters. I apologized for the unfortunate circumstances that we are enduring and I promised to institute immediate changes to create a new model of excellence in social, emotional, and academic life for girls at the school.

This has been one of the most devastating if not the most devastating experience of my life. But like all such experiences, there's always much to be gained and I think there's a lot to be learned. And as Mr. Samuel said, we are moving forward to create a safe, an open, and a receptive environment for the girls and I'm also very grateful to their parents and to their guardians and their caretakers for their continued trust and their support in me and also in the school.

What I know is, is that no one, not the accused, nor any persons can destroy the dream that I have held and the dream that each girl

continues to hold for herself at this school. And I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to make sure that the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls becomes the safe, the nurturing, and enriched setting that I had envisioned. A place capable of fostering the full measure of these girls' productivity, of their creativity, and of their humanity. It will become a model for the world. With each girl who graduates, we will show that the resilience of the human spirit is actually stronger than poverty, it's stronger than hatred, it's stronger than violence, it's stronger than trauma and loss, and it's also stronger than any abuse. No matter what adversity these girls have endured in their short lives, and let me assure you, they have endured a lot, their lights will not be diminished by this experience.

So I would like to at this time recognize the courage and the leadership already demonstrated by those 15 students who came forward and reported the abusive dorm matron to the CEO of our academy. These 15 girls banded together and they acted because they felt that previously their voices had not been heard by other adults on

campus. And now, thanks to what I now call the OWLAG 15, we are all here where a horrible situation has been uncovered and rooted out. They represent those 15 girls, the new generation of youth in South Africa, who fearlessly take back their voices to speak up about their concern for their fellow classmates. This is really what we're trying to teach. This is what leadership is all about. To use your voice, no matter what the personal consequences, so that abuse will end and good will prevail.

I continue to be proud of them and of every girl in our school. And I welcome your questions.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Okay. Ladies and Gentlemen, please just limit yourselves to one question.

Robin Keller?

ROBIN KELLER (CNN): Robin Keller from CNN.

Is it correct that you've given each of the girls cell phones and that you've given them your personal number and have told them they can contact you any time that they need to?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: It is not correct that I

have given them. It is correct that I have promised them to them. We are in the process of purchasing all the cell phones now in South Africa.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Iman?

IMAN RAPPETTI (ETV News): It's Iman Rappetti from E News.

Ms. Winfrey, the screening process has been called into question. The girl that -- well, the woman that was charged and -- well, that appeared in court today had no previous training, from what we can see, in terms of mothering children or being a dorm parent.

How close a look have you taken at the screening process and how is it going to be changed in the future?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: I think that knowing what I know now, the screening process was inadequate. Although I do know that for every person that is hired at the school, there is both a criminal and a civil background check. But I was not directly responsible or in charge, although the buck always stops with me, of hiring the dorm parents. But we are going to redefine what that position should

mean and what the qualifications for that position should be for the future.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Yes?

CELINE JACOBSEN (Associated Press): Hi.

Celine Jacobsen, Associated Press.

Perhaps you can just fill us in on what the status is of the headmistress who is being -- who is on suspension and whether there has been any contact with the girl who has left the school and returned to her old school.

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: The first question regarding the headmistress, the headmistress was -- when I first heard of this, the headmistress was visiting the United States. She and I were to be looking at the incoming candidates for this year's selection of seventh graders and I informed her that she would be put on a leave of absence pending this investigation. And since that time, we have informed her that we will not be renewing her contract. Her contract was up this December 31st.

Regarding the girl who most recently left the campus, I recently spoke with that girl's mother. I had been told when the child left that

the child was being taken out of the school by her mother because her mother wished to spend more time with her and wanted to go shopping. That's what I had been told. And it wasn't until I read the article in the paper and came to know that that article was true that I -- I had reason to suspect that the child left for other reasons.

I might add that this whole circumstance came about because of that newspaper article. The girls have weekly sessions with various adults on campus, student leaders -- leaders of the children. I think it's called the Isivivane Group. And during one of those groups, there was a discussion about that newspaper article and the girls in that group were saying that that particular newspaper article was true. That the most recent student who had left had left because of complaints or difficulties with one of the dorm parents. The children realized that previous articles criticizing the school had not been true but felt that this particular article was true and that started the whole discussion about why the article was true and that there was a complaint not just by this one child who had been taken out

of the school but that other girls also had their complaints.

NADIA NEOPHYTOU (702 Eyewitness News): Hi, this is Nadia Neophytou from 702 Eyewitness News.

Ms. Winfrey, do you feel that your academy has been targeted because it is so high profile?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Well, in this particular case I don't think that it was targeted. I think wherever there is abuse and wherever there are children there is always the possibility of something like this happening. Obviously you all know with-- the child abuse rate being what it is, the statistics being what they are in South Africa, I think 21,538 reported rapes, and out of that, 41 percent last year were children, the statistics for child abuse are off the charts. And this is not unusual to have a case where there is suspected child abuse.

I think that because of the high profile of the school, obviously it would get a lot of attention. I'm happy for it to get the attention because it is one of my goals in life to put child abusers, whether they be in my home, whether they

be in my workplace, or in this case, in the academy, to put them where they belong. And that is behind bars. So, no, I don't think that the attention regarding this is unjustified.

BRAM VERMEULEN (Radio Netherlands): Hi, Miss Winfrey, Bram Vermeulen, Radio Netherlands.

How personal do you take all of this? Do you feel that the whole issue has damaged your reputation at all?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Damaged my personal reputation? Are you asking my personal reputation?

BRAM VERMEULEN (Radio Netherlands): That's the question, yeah. How personal do you take this?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Okay. Well, I take it very personally. As I said to the girls -- I said to the girls this summer before I knew of anything like this going on on the campus because they -- they say that they were always told that when I appeared on campus to put on happy faces and -- and to never complain to me. I take it very personal. I said to them, I am a mama bear when it comes to protecting my children. These girls

are like my children. I -- that's not just rhetoric for me. It's not just a part-time pet occupation for me. I take their futures and the possibility for what their futures hold very seriously and so in that way I take it personally.

I don't feel that it has harmed my personal reputation because I have done nothing wrong. From the beginning, I have only done -- done what I thought was best to protect the children. Unfortunately, I think I and other people at the academy spend a lot of time putting up walls to keep people out, which we felt were necessary, considering the statistics for rape of young women in that country. We spend a lot of time putting up technical systems that would keep people out and protect the girls. And as often is the case, child abuse, sexual abuse, happens right within the family. Right within the confines of people you know. Most children are abused by people who they know and trust. And so this was also the alleged case here.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Gavin?

GAVIN PRINCE (Rapport Newspaper): Gavin Prince from Rapport Newspaper.

Oprah, you said that early on you were devastated and also mentioned that the girls are receiving counseling. All right?

How are you dealing with the events that happened over the past few weeks emotionally?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Thank you, Gavin, for that question.

Well, I have -- as I said earlier, it has shaken me to my core. But at the core of me is a spiritual foundation and a belief that all things happen for a reason and that no matter the devastation, this, too, shall pass. And so it is my -- my spiritual belief -- beliefs and support. I've had friends who have held me in their heart and had my back and understanding that the most important priority for me here was to figure out how I could best help the girls. I -- you know, when I first heard about it, I spent about a half hour crying, moving from room to room in my house. I was so stunned, I couldn't even wrap my brain around it. But as I said earlier, within the hour, I pulled myself together and started making calls in preparing for what to do next and how to best look after the girls.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: We'll allow for three more questions, starting with the lady here.

MELODY BRANDON (The Times): Hi, I'm Melody Brandon from The Times.

In terms of the exams and the girls' academics, how has this whole situation affected them academically?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Well, I think they're all pretty nervous about the exams coming up. As John mentioned, a number of the girls are receiving counseling who were directly affected by the alleged accuser and they're very concerned. They're very concerned. They would normally be concerned. They were concerned at mid-term exams because one of the -- the difficulties in transitioning for this school prior to all of these events, one of the difficulties has been is that all of these girls had come from places where they were number one or number two in their classes and one of the difficulties in transitioning has been for them to realize that they're no longer number one or number two. One of the girls said to me, I used to be number one and now I'm number 12. So they have a lot of

anxiety when it comes to testing and being -- being successful on those tests. And I would have to say this hasn't helped the situation.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Next question, please?

THUTO NGOBENI (Channel Africa): Miss Oprah, Thuto Ngobeni from Channel Africa.

Do you feel that as a school you failed the girls? Because, I mean, if you go to school, you expect to be safe there. So do you think as a school you failed the girls?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: No, I don't think that as a school we failed the girls because there's still many people at the school who are caring and dedicated and want the best for all the girls. I think that there are systems within the school that fail the girls. I feel that the girls were placed in an atmosphere where they were taught to be fearful and they were taught to literally be silenced. And so when you remove the systems and put in a different kind of leadership, all of that will change.

I have nothing but real strong hope for the possibilities of what this school can be. No

one is ever happy to have this kind of a scandal or a crisis. I certainly am not. But I am glad that it happened now and not two years from now because this gives us an opportunity to completely course correct, removing all the dorm parents. And as I've said to the girls, cleaning house from top to bottom.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Next question?

Yes?

JILL GIFFORD (Star Newspaper): Miss Winfrey, Jill Gifford from the Star Newspaper.

I've spoken with the father of the girl that has left the school and he said that he was hoping that the school would eventually make contact with the family and once she's done with exams and everything that there would be a possibility for her to go back.

Is there a possibility for that to happen for her?

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Do you know, as a matter of fact when I first heard that this child actually had left the school for reasons other than I had been previously told, after speaking to the girls for the first time on the weekend of

October 13, and as soon as I finished my conversation with the girls and told the girls this is about taking your voices back and things are gonna be different and I explained to the girls that all the dorm parents had been removed and they cheered and wept at that announcement. They cheered and wept they were so -- so happy, as they say. So happy. And several of the girls came up to me afterwards and said, would it be okay for this child who had gone to come back? And I said, I welcome her. I welcome the opportunity for her to come back to the school.

As a matter of fact, I have not spoken to -- as I said earlier, I have not spoken to her father, but I have spoken to her mother extensively who told me that she had on three occasions been to the school and had a conversation with the head of school complaining about the dorm parents.

I said to her, as I say to you, that was never relayed to me. I was told something completely different. I was told that she was a mother who missed her child and wanted to go shopping which didn't make any sense to me because

it was -- it was so close to the end of the school year and I was questioning, why would a mother want to take her child out of school when it's so close to the school year?

But anyway, yes, I welcome the opportunity to have the child come back to the school.

REPT. OF MAGNA CARTA AGENCY: Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you so much. You've been a very cooperative press corps.

Miss Winfrey, thank you so much.

Many thanks to Superintendent Neethling, Superintendent Dlamini, and Mr. Samuel.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this marks the official end of this press conference. Thank you.

MS. OPRAH WINFREY: Thanks, everybody. Thank you.

(End of press conference.)