

# Bringing Honor to Life

## Writing Our School Honor Code

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Tara Performing Arts High School, Class of 2012

A student at my high school, when asked what he would change about the school, responded after much thought, "Well ... they could get a hot tub." This is the story of a different answer to that same important question, an answer that led my class to write the Tara Performing Arts High School Honor Code.

The process began with the graduating class of 2011. When reflecting on their high school experience, they came up with the idea of placing the school's substance policy in a larger context for future students. Tara's substance policy is an agreement that every Tara student makes to be alcohol- and drug-free year-round. Our commitment to this policy allows us to fully experience each moment of these defining years of intellectual and personal development. By placing the substance abuse contract, which is signed by all students when they enroll, within the context of the principles of the Tara community, our commitment to it would be supported by an articulation of those ideals.



Although I didn't know it at the time, this idea was why I found myself at the beginning of my senior year, sitting beneath a pine tree in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado, trying to write a paragraph about honor. (Try it sometime; it's not easy!) My eleven classmates and I were gathered for our senior retreat with the directors of our school to prepare for the year ahead and, unbeknownst to us at the time, to discuss such lofty concepts as honor, community, trust, respect, and accountability. We addressed each of these topics in discussion and in writing – but this was more than just a philosophical exercise; this was the first step of what would become the Honor Code.

We were joined in our discussions by a faculty member, the woman who would become our patient and loving mentor in the process of taking the Honor Code from idea to reality. Four of us volunteered to work with her as the official writers. I'm not sure any of us fully realized at the time the enormity of the task we were taking on, or the sense of fulfillment that would come with the document's eventual completion. For months, we squeezed meetings into our already bursting-at-the-seams schedule of college applications, classes, and play and choir rehearsals, and took breaks from writing essays, solving equations, and memorizing lines in order to write or assemble or edit another paragraph of the Honor Code. I cannot, however, claim all the credit just for us. The words and ideas that went into the final draft were an amalgamation of the voices of everyone in the class. Some of the sentences in the Honor Code came directly from a classmate's writing from the senior retreat at the beginning of the year. Despite being authored by twelve distinct voices, the final product flows with the fluency of a single pen. Our goal was to encapsulate the ideals that already existed within the Tara community, so credit must be extended to the founders and directors of the school, and the generations of students who came before us and kept those ideals alive for us to step into.

Writing the Honor Code required patience and persistence. During certain meetings, an entire hour was spent on a single word! We were constantly checking to be sure the writing didn't sound too "preachy" and that we weren't making assumptions or inaccurate generalizations. The goal of the document was not to be a set of rules and regulations, but a source from which to draw an understanding of the community's

ideals and the inspiration to instill them in one's own life. Despite the inevitable challenge of composing such a document, it came with its own joys. This work gave us the opportunity not only to discuss our ideals in principle but to talk about them in relation to real, personal situations. Our own experiences informed our writing and, in turn, what we wrote and learned through writing enriched our lives.



After about four months of writing, rewriting, editing, rewriting, and refining (and did I mention rewriting?), we presented the Honor Code to the rest of the senior class. Having worked so closely with the writing for so long, it was good to have some fresh input and much-needed perspective. With the comments from our peers in mind, we took the Honor Code back to the table for some final adjustments, and then at last came the long-awaited moment: the presentation of the Honor Code to the school directors. We had the document printed on parchment paper and tied with a ribbon to add some pomp and circumstance to a moment that made me feel a bit like a founding father, and we presented it before the whole school at our morning circle.

After the initial presentation, we met with each grade to read the Honor Code with them. We told them what the Honor Code meant to us and about our hope for it: that it strengthen the commitment to the substance policy, and that the principles expressed in it inform the actions, interactions and discussions within the Tara community. It is theirs now as much as ours, and when each class reaches its senior year, they will have the chance to review it. It is our hope that the Honor Code will continue to evolve as the school evolves and that each senior class will add its own wisdom to our words.

*The following commentary is by Allison Paranka, speaking as a representative of the class of 2013.*

As the first senior class to receive the Tara Performing Arts High School Honor Code since its creation last year, we are handed the responsibility for both the content and the continued expression of this unique document on our school campus. Not only are the ideals of the Honor Code lofty and inspiring, but we find the wording to be accessible, realistic, and most importantly, not confining. The simplicity and eloquence is reminiscent of a piece of poetry, and although we appreciate the ownership that comes with the power to edit, we feel no desire to do so this fall. Our connection to the seniors who wrote it is still strong; we hear their voices in the document, which for us creates a feeling of understanding that we don't want to lose. More than anything, we realize that this document is merely a description of the qualities that are apparent the moment one steps onto our campus. We all felt it as freshmen, and we appreciate having it in written form because it is at the heart of the Tara experience. And because we can now have a tangible way of presenting it to the community, we, the class of 2013, have decided to incorporate the reading of the Honor Code into the school's annual Michaelmas Festival, something that we feel will be inspiring and uplifting for the student body and the wider community of teachers, alumni, family and friends.



*Note: It is the wish of the writers that the Tara Performing Arts High School Honor Code be preserved in its original intention and sincerity and therefore not be electronically stored or transmitted. However, if you would like to learn more about the Tara Honor Code, please contact the school at (303) 440-4510.*