

# Sharing Differences in Dialogue

ON A PATH TO A PLURALIST SCHOOL

By Monica Cheng



“Pluralism requires action.” These words from Meredith Preston McGhie, Secretary General of the Global Centre for Pluralism, at TEDxCalgary 2024, echo the very heart of York House School’s mission.

Pluralism is not simply an abstract ideal; it is an actionable lesson. Pluralism is recognizing and accepting diversity in society as a source of strength. In a pluralist community, we thrive through meaningful dialogue, flourish in understanding, and grow stronger as different viewpoints converge. While disagreement is natural for people with different values and identities, belonging is essential.

At York House, our community is our strength. We believe diversity and discourse are the cornerstones of impactful learning. Our community is a vibrant tapestry where every voice matters, every perspective enriches, and every individual belongs. Here, different perspectives don’t divide us; they are woven together to deepen empathy and fuel innovation.

This feature brings together various threads and voices of the York House community to honour diversity, community, and belonging—a first genuine snapshot into our commitment to building a pluralist school.



**AÑULI AND CHIMARAOKE UZOZIE**  
Parents of Chioma '29

“*Not for Ourselves Alone* ... a nudge to look inward and to remind oneself, ‘not for myself alone.’”

**AÑULI AND CHIMARAOKE:** We are a Nigerian family of six, born in different parts of the world including England, Switzerland, and Canada. Our ancestral community is Igbo. Our family’s migration corresponded to Anuli’s academic career in post-graduate studies. Nigeria is a diverse country with over 500 spoken languages and a rich culture in storytelling. Canada has been our home since 2017. We experience diversity at a different level here, with people coming from different parts of the world representing different cultures.

Of the YHS values, we view Community as the starting point; all other values will follow if work is done on promoting collective wellbeing and support. When reflecting on the school motto *Not for Ourselves Alone*, it’s a nudge to look inward and to remind oneself, “not for myself alone.”

Community and Diversity can co-exist and may not need to be combined if they are fully understood and embraced. Through the lens of Biology [Anuli’s field], “Community” is defined as “an interactant group of various species in a common location.” “Various” means diverse, different, and unique, whereas “common” means being together. Much in the same way, a community can consist of different individuals representing a mix of ages, abilities, backgrounds etc., where all can belong with no prejudice or discrimination.



**DRISTY RAHMA**  
*Enrollment Management & Student Records Officer*

“Our curiosity about each other’s cultures drives us to educate ourselves and apply this understanding...”

**DRISTY:** I was born and raised in Bangladesh, a country deeply rooted in its history and culture. A significant part of my life is shaped by Islamic beliefs. I grew up observing the five daily prayers (Salah) and fasting during Ramadan, which are core to my faith. The values of kindness, respect for elders, and the importance of family have always been central to my upbringing. My family placed a high value on education because growing up in a society where women had limited opportunities, education has been a gateway to empowerment and independence for me.

I deeply cherish the strong sense of community at YHS, which mirrors my own culture; its vibrant festivals, delicious food, and warm hospitality. Gathering with colleagues reminds me of the shared values that unite us, helping us grow in love and support.

Through open dialogue, cultural events, religious accommodations, and professional development on inclusive topics, YHS fosters a sense of belonging as a lived experience for all. Our curiosity about each other’s cultures drives us to educate ourselves and apply this understanding through differentiated, culturally responsive teaching. These approaches help create an environment where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued, moving beyond uniformity.

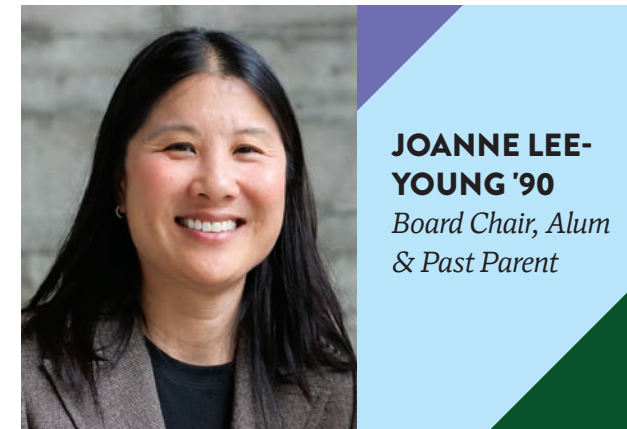


**ALEXANDRA SIMSILEVICH**  
*Junior School French Teacher*

**ALEXANDRA:** I grew up in Southern Alberta as the daughter of European immigrants, my mom, a Swiss-German, and my dad, a Jewish Hungarian Holocaust survivor who arrived in Canada as a refugee in 1956. I grew up with both Christian and Jewish traditions. In my late twenties, I decided to convert to Judaism, and a couple of years later met and married a South American, also of a mixed religious (Jewish/Catholic) and ethnic background (Eastern European/Hispanic/Indigenous). We raise our children and strive to live according to Liberal Jewish religion and values. Judaism’s emphasis on building a meaningful, purposeful life, and *tikun olam* (repairing the world), is a source of inspiration, strength, and hope.

“When we feel safe, welcomed, and valued... we can do our best to collaborate, support one another...”

The YHS value of Community is the most important to me, and the one on which I believe the other ones can grow out of. When we feel safe, welcomed, and valued for who we are, no matter who we are, we—students, staff, families—can do our best to collaborate, support one another, and do our best to further the other values we hold dear, such as Sustainability, Impact, and Excellence. In my experience here over the last three and a half years, I’ve personally felt a strong sense of community at YHS. We have areas where we can improve, but I think we’re on a good path.



**JOANNE LEE-YOUNG '90**  
*Board Chair, Alum & Past Parent*

“There is a long-standing tradition at YHS of a community that sees itself as respecting, celebrating, and holding different perspectives together.”

**JOANNE:** My parents moved to Vancouver a few years after I was born near Lethbridge, Alberta. I grew up in a household that spoke Cantonese and another Chinese dialect, Hakka. My paternal grandfather moved from near Hong Kong to Jamaica in the 1930s, and my Dad and his siblings were born there. There are many layers of migrating to new places, building a life, and then returning, only to set off once more. Through all of this, each generation added to a blend of Chinese, Jamaican, and British ways of doing things and seeing the world that was my Canadian upbringing.

There is a long-standing tradition at YHS of a community that sees itself as respecting, celebrating, and holding different perspectives together. The school can see this pluralism and ensure it is supported in our curriculum and practices. We can also look to staff, faculty, students, and families being personally and intellectually curious about each other’s history, experiences, and convictions as they build relationships during their shared time at the school and beyond. This is the heart of creating community and belonging.



**CHLOE ZHANG '29**  
*Grade 8 Student*

**CHLOE:** My name is Chloe Zhang. I’m in eighth grade, and I go by she/her. I’m Chinese and was born in Shanghai, while my parents are from Nanyang and Chongqing, China. Every year, my family and I celebrate a special holiday called Chinese New Year. On this day, we often eat freshly made dumplings and sweet dumplings with rice wine. There’s a tradition that says you must eat an even number of sweet dumplings—if you don’t, it’s believed to bring bad luck over the next year!

“All the people in this building are my family, and will always be.”

Out of the six YHS values, Community is most important to me. For me, community means friendship, love, and connecting with not only peers and teachers, but also the planet. Without the loving, tight-knit community here at YHS, I definitely wouldn’t feel at home. All the people in this building are my family, and will always be.

Whether it’s sharing lunch with friends in The Caf or learning together in class, this school makes sure everyone feels like they belong. There’s always a place for everyone, and as a Yorkie, I’m proud to say that no one is ever left out.



**ZOYA  
REEBYE '26**  
Grade 11 Student

“Building a diverse community starts with creating a safe space for open discussions without fear of judgment or defensiveness. This allows students to be themselves and prepares them for a world where ‘agreeing to disagree’ is a valuable skill...”

**ZOYA:** I’m a Grade 11 student with a deep passion for feminism, racial justice, and the empowerment of women through representation. I believe that when women uplift each other, true change happens. In my free time, I enjoy Peloton workouts, dystopian TV shows, creating social media content, and listening to alternative rap music. My ethnic background is a key aspect of my identity. My mother was born in Trinidad and Tobago, a country rich in flavourful cuisine, vibrant music, and stunning beaches. I’m especially drawn to the culture’s energy and love the accent! I also have Mauritian heritage, from a small island off the east coast of Africa. Mauritian culture is a fusion of French, Creole, Indian, and Chinese influences, offering a diverse mix of food and customs. A key value in my life is seeing myself as a lifelong learner. I embrace self-love and self-care in all aspects of my life, recognizing that every experience is either a lesson or a blessing. This mindset of appreciation and openness to growth keeps me grounded as I navigate both adversities and opportunities.

Each of YHS’s values is powerful, but Diversity stands out to me. We often surround ourselves with those who share our opinions, backgrounds, and identities, creating a bubble that limits our perspectives. Diversity breaks these barriers, fostering connection and understanding across communities. Embracing differences as strengths, rather than divisions, allows us to learn, grow, and navigate conflicts with greater empathy and insight!

Building a diverse community starts with creating a safe space for open discussions without fear of judgment or defensiveness. This allows students to be themselves and prepares them for a world where “agreeing to disagree” is a valuable skill. Our world is increasingly more separated and close minded so being able to respectfully disagree is important. York House is actively fostering this environment, especially in its classrooms. In Social Justice 12, we discuss topics like bodily autonomy and white privilege with respect and openness. Similarly, in English, our Harkness discussion on gender-based violence and *The Handmaid’s Tale* felt de-stigmatized and thoughtful. York House is making great strides in creating a space where everyone feels confident expressing their authentic opinions, and I’m excited to see what new initiatives will continue this progress!



**MONA  
KATO '31**  
Grade 6 Student

**MONA:** I am an only child. My dad is Japanese and my mom is Chinese, and I am Canadian, so we have a mix of cultures. I speak Mandarin to my mom, and Japanese to my dad, and they communicate with each other in English. I speak French and English at school. I celebrate Japanese and Chinese New Year. In Japan, we eat mochi, seafood, and noodles, and an array of food in a bento box on the first day of the new year. For Chinese New Year, I celebrated with my mom and her friends, eating hotpot. I really like physical activities like track and field and running. I also do competitive freestyle skiing. I have been skiing since I was two.

“... it’s OK to go beyond expectations. Even if you think it’s good, there may be room for improvement.”

There are actually two YHS values that are most important to me now. Excellence—it’s okay to go beyond expectations. Even if you think it’s good, there may be room for improvement. Just try your best in everything. Diversity—York House is a diverse school with many different cultures.

It’s important to build a community with diversity. It will show that you are welcoming and including other people. And it will be cool to bond and learn about different cultures.



**MYRA  
BHUSHAN '34**  
Grade 3 Student

“I just find people to talk to, especially if they are alone, to get to know them.”

**MYRA:**

- We are a family of four with my older brother, and my mom and dad. We like camping.
- I mainly talk in English, but I am also learning to speak Hindi from my parents. My brother and I also speak French for fun.
- I love dancing and I know different types of dances: ballet, jazz, modern, bollywood, and Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance.
- I like Math, PHE, and Music. My favourite is Math.
- My friends are similar because they also like PHE and Music, but they don’t like Math like I do.
- On being friends with different Yorkies: I just find people to talk to, especially if they are alone, to get to know them.



**CELESTE  
TO-MILES '37**  
Senior  
Kindergarten  
Student

“Special thing about me?  
I don’t know, I am just Celeste!”

**CELESTE:**

- I have five people in my family. An older brother, a younger brother, mom, and dad.
- We like to take walks, go to the playground, and ride our scooters. We talk in English at home.
- Special thing about me? I don’t know, I am just Celeste!
- I like having fun and doing play centres at school: kinetic sand, colouring, magnetic tiles, dollhouse, and dress up with friends.
- My friends have different skin and hair styles. And we like different activities and do different things on the weekend.



**DOTTIE  
ULMER '37**  
Senior  
Kindergarten  
Student

“I like to talk ‘care language.’”

**DOTTIE:**

- I like to go to the fitness studio on the weekends to hang out with my mom.
- I can speak English, Spanish, French, and Mandarin.
- One special thing about me is I like to talk “care language.” It means being nice, confident, and helping my friends when they’re sad.
- I play with lots of friends. They are different. Some have curly hair, some straight. I love the monkey bars, like all of my friends.



**ALISA  
BRESSLER '20**  
Alum

**ALISA:** I’m Jewish with both Ashkenazi and Sephardic heritage, meaning my ancestors come from Poland, Russia, Iraq, and Israel. My Jewish identity is central to who I am, shaping my values of community, resilience, and lifelong learning. My heritage has instilled in me a deep appreciation for storytelling, a commitment to justice, and a strong sense of belonging. These values guide me in both my personal and professional life, shaping how I connect with others and navigate the world.

“My time at YHS taught me not only the importance of advocacy but also how to engage with differing perspectives while staying true to my beliefs.”

Community is my anchor, especially as I navigate my Master’s in Journalism at Boston University and my move from Vancouver to Boston. I’m deeply grateful for the strong communities I’ve built back home, including at YHS. Their support has given me the strength, courage, and confidence to pursue my goals and make a meaningful impact.

YHS fosters a diverse community by embracing different backgrounds while uniting us through our shared values. It encourages dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect. My time at YHS taught me not only the importance of advocacy but also how to engage with differing perspectives while staying true to my beliefs.



**Did you know York House now has a Pluralism and Discourse Lead in the Senior School?**

**MATHEW CHYZYK** will implement the strategic vision and champion the importance of a diverse and inclusive school community and environment.

