

# FEATURE: Retracing The Steps Of THINK Digital College As Leading Virtual School Changes Name, Ventures Into The U.S

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PRETORIA – Awarding winning South African virtual school, Think Digital College, which recently made headlines after winning an international award, has been renamed to Think Digital Academy.

Chief executive of Think Digital Academy, Janessa Leita said that the rebranding of the institution of learning has been necessitated by the recent expansion into the United States of America.



THINK Digital Academy chief executive Janessa Leita. Image SUPPLIED

“As Think Digital College continues to grow in South Africa, and online education gaining further popularity under the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw it prudent to spread our wings to the USA – a goal we have been working on for some time now,” said Leita.

“That expansion to the United States of America has become a reality as we have now registered our first institution in the state of Florida. Our international expansion has however, meant that we have

had to change our name in the process as the word “college” refers to a tertiary institution in the USA. As a result, our exciting new name Think Digital Academy was birthed.”

Leita said the Think Digital Academy, anchored on the pillars of Think Digital College which recently scooped the international 2020/21 Corporate Livewire Prestige Award – will continue to provide the “cutting edge” online education it has become famed for.

“We take this opportunity to thank all the stakeholders for continued support in this journey. The future looks exciting,” she said.

Leita, who has decades of experience in education, also spoke to PretoriaLIVE about her long journey in the sector, which was sparked by a maternal instinct to protect her child.

She recounted how her youngest of three sons, Alessandro was diagnosed with Tourette’s syndrome, while in grade four at a private school, and that condition changed the young boy’s life and interaction with other learners.

Tourette’s syndrome is a neurological disorder characterised by recurrent involuntary tics involving body movements, such as eye blinks or grimaces, and vocalisations such as grunts or utterance of inappropriate words.

“Fortunately Alessandro does not have any vocalisations. Alessandro went from a happy, social child to an anxious, depressed, antisocial little boy. At that age, children are not very understanding and his classmates would nudge one another and wait for the next tic to tease him mercilessly,” said Leita.

“Many children have various conditions such as asthma, diabetes, allergies and fortunately, although uncomfortable and undesirable, are invisible. However, with Tourette’s, the symptoms are painfully obvious to others. There is currently no cure for Tourette’s so we worked extremely hard at supporting Alessandro emotionally to cope with the stares, comments and teasing.”

After persisting for over a year, Leita said each school day became increasingly more traumatic to the point where the young Alessandro would vomit as he entered the school gates.

“His psychologist explained that if I took him home, it would be extremely difficult to get him back to school the following day. So we kept a change of clothing in the car and took one day at a time,” said the mother of three.

“But one morning, while changing Alessandro in the parking lot, I suddenly stopped and told him to climb back into the car and we headed back home. We had no plan. No alternatives. No solution. We spent a week just talking and spending quality time together while I started researching schooling alternatives.”

The concerned mother visited countless schools but couldn’t find one suitable for Alessandro.

“There was no problem with his academic ability and I didn’t want to put him in a special school where he would feel that there was something wrong with him. The safest option seemed home-schooling. I found the most amazing qualified teacher and our exciting journey began,” Leita explained.

“Technology became Alessandro’s biggest friend. Because he didn’t have much social interaction, his cell phone became his constant companion – keeping him connected with his world. He used his phone to play, communicate, create – so why not to learn? I began searching for online educational

content, realising that his concentration span was so much longer if he was learning on his tablet or cell phone.”

Although there were some useful apps and programmes that covered elements of the curriculum, Leita was searching for “a comprehensive solution that covered the entire CAPS curriculum”, and later the British International curriculum.

Having had a background in higher education and owning an FET College for 17 years, the mother decided to bring in her experts and create a worldclass learner management system and content.

“I didn’t want a PDF online but rather interactive and engaging content consisting of animations, videos, text and all narrated by highly qualified teachers. We worked closely with educational psychologists to ensure our system catered for gifted children as well as children with learning difficulties. The content is from Gr R to 12/AS Levels.

I realised that this was the answer – not only for Alessandro – but for so many children who were unhappy in a traditional school environment,” said Leita.

And so THINK Digital College was launched.

“THINK Digital College is the first virtual school in South Africa. We provide a state

of the art learning environment by incorporating pedagogy (the art and science of learning) with technology. We provide the CAPS and British International curriculum in an integrated, engaging and effective way. Our aim is to produce young adults who are innovative, creative and independent in their thinking, who have courage, perseverance and resilience and who believe in themselves and their potential.”

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