

Dear Donnie,

I wanted to write you a note to thank you for writing a letter of recommendation for me— but it dawned on me that I have so much more to thank you for. I've been slowly but surely trying to find the words to articulate exactly how you and Orinda Aquatics have impacted my younger years and how to express my gratitude. I grew up reading the Orinda Aquatics senior letters, and I was always excited to write my own; to share the wisdom, knowledge, and lessons I had learned along my journey. And though I may not actively swim for Orinda Aquatics anymore, I still feel that part of my identity is forever tied to the team and its values. I hold the “big picture” very close to my heart, so I present to you: my long-winded, *big-picture* way of saying: thank you.

I still have all of my meeting printouts; I've never thrown one away, even though my last OA meeting was nearly 4 years ago on Zoom. My family even has “The 17 Signs of Immaturity” taped up in our kitchen. We periodically forget it's there until a guest comes over and points it out. I occasionally stumble upon the stack of printouts in a box in the closet when looking for something, and when I do, I take an hour to sit down and reread them. To this day, I still find myself thinking about Robert Frost's “two roads diverged”. It was this very poem that sparked my love for poetry and prose (so thank you for that!!). I'm sure that many look back on their time at OA and define their memories by the popped times, the big meets, and the moments of pride. I've found my own memories to be frankly the opposite; the small things that humbled me have defined my memory of the team, weekly meetings being one of them. The messages communicated within those meetings continue to inspire me and form my decisions today. Orinda Aquatics has brought out the parts of me that are strong, grounded, and authentic. And truly, none of it would've happened without those meetings and without you taking the time to care about each one of your swimmers. Thank you.

You have a true gift to see things within other people before they see it within themselves. It's something I admire about you, and I hope that one day, I will be able to understand people in the way that you do. You saw the leader in me before I did. You insisted on putting me in leadership roles like running dryland until I started to embrace that part of myself. I can't thank you enough for seeing *me* at that age. Knowing that someone outside of my immediate family believed in me so strongly meant, and still means, the entire world to me. The platform I was given on OA to be a leader empowered me to lead with character first in other parts of my life, as I now represent my entire high school as ASB President and volunteer as a STEM mentor for girls at underserved elementary schools. It wouldn't be until years later, looking back, when I would begin to understand what you'd say about leadership being a path of most resistance. Being a leader means being brave in the face of things that challenge us. A lot of times, taking a look in the mirror and seeing yourself is the bravest thing you can do.

As a senior, I've spent a lot of time looking into that mirror that you held up for me and thinking about who I am now. I think that I'm doing right by my 13-year-old self; if 13-year-old Elsa had current Elsa as her senior buddy, I think she would be blown away (and a bit starstruck). For a while, I struggled to define myself outside of the activities I did. I felt that all of my friends had their 'thing', and I didn't. I never fit into a single box, even after an extensive search for the perfect one. But the only boxes that exist are the ones we put ourselves in. Some time ago, I decided I'd much rather be defined by who I am, not *what*. To be remembered as a person who was kinder than necessary, as a person who followed their gut, as a person who lived with true integrity and purpose. Not by the classes I took, the sport I played, or the clothes I wore.

Life has come at me pretty fast since I left swimming. I've navigated a post-Covid world, handled waves of health issues, dealt with loss, and made a lot of hard decisions. The resilience I learned from swimming has no doubt made these challenges more scalable, and I am grateful for that. I still get emotional when I think about my time on OA. I can't help it; the support, friendship, and camaraderie between the team and the coaches is something that I am still chasing down. I find that my swimming connections are still strong to this day— I've run into my swim friends grocery shopping, at music festivals, high school graduations, and sports games. I've reached out to older graduated swimmers throughout my college process, and it warms my heart knowing that those connections won't go away, even as time passes. Part of my heart will forever and always belong to the people on OA.

I started my senior year with a simple goal in mind: the goal of inspiring someone. I've seen firsthand just how powerful inspiration can be, as you have been an inspiring figure in my life. If we're lucky, every so often someone comes along with enough passion to leave a lasting impression on our lives. You have left the most positive mark on mine. I've learned so much from your humility, selflessness, compassion, servant leadership, and courage. Your dedication to the team, its success, and culture is nothing short of remarkable.

What Orinda Aquatics stands for is so important. You're shifting culture in a world of conformity and trends, and valuing the development of the person, not just the athlete. In a world where we all just want to be seen, you saw me before I did, gave me a chance to grow, and have supported me through every decision and change.

A million times over, thank you. For everything.

Character first, always.

All my love, Elsa Hartley