

Dear Orinda Aquatics,

I can only imagine where I would be today, right now, if I had never joined Orinda Aquatics back in seventh grade. I see myself spending this Saturday night in my parentless house with a dozen members of my high school's top partiers, already a few drinks deep in my parent's liquor, behaving like a sloppy mess. I see myself dancing with boys I don't even like, breaking my mom's glass top coffee table, and getting into a car with a girl who swears she's safe to drive but clearly isn't. And I wouldn't even care. It would just be another typical Saturday night. Instead, I'm here sitting on my couch writing a letter to the team that changed the entire course of my life, the team that I owe everything to.

In middle school, I found myself, like so many others do, at a crossroads of sorts. The girls I considered my best friends were making choices that made me uncomfortable on all kinds of levels, but I could still feel myself slipping down with them. Looking back, I can see just how far I was about to fall. After joining Orinda in seventh grade, I made the choice to stop hanging out with those girls. Over time, I began to categorize my friends, as so many other swimmers do, as "school friends" and "swim friends." It wasn't long before "swim friends" was shortened simply to "friends". My life went from slipping downwards, and slipping fast, to something entirely different and positive.

I have so much gratitude towards Orinda Aquatics for everything that the team has done for me over the past seven years. To the coaches, I owe not only my career in the pool, but also the relationships that I consider some of the most important in my life. I know that there are very few people in the world who would do for me what Donnie and Ronnie would in a heartbeat, and I cannot express how thankful I am to have these two people in my life. And to my teammates, well, I love you. We've been through a lot together and I know that in the end we're here for each other. To the girls in my class, you have been amazing friends over the years, and I could not be more grateful. OA has given me so many lifelong relationships, and for that, there is nothing I can say but thank you.

After seven years of obediently following the mantra set on repeat in my head, only recently did I begin to consider what it really means to live character first. "Character First" was the basis for my entire high school belief system, but I never thought to look into its actual denotation. Like I said, this team, along with its character attitude, has changed my life for the better in countless ways, so there must be something right about it. Character is who you are, whether or not someone's watching you, whether or not anyone notices, and whether or not there are consequences. Character is an accumulation of actions, words, thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that can define a person for their entire life.

In the end, I think it's important to consider what it really means before taking it on as a life motto. How can you live for something if you don't know what it is? I now know and I am so grateful to Orinda Aquatics for not only shaping me into the person I am today, but also for making me realize who that person is. Because of Orinda Aquatics, I know my values, and I'm standing by them. I truly hope that the same has happened for my peers, and will happen for those to follow. EE