

Orinda Aquatics Senior Letters 2019



"Live a life of purpose. Do so by filling your mind with truth, your heart with love, and your days with genuine care and kindness." unknown

“Do all the other things, the ambitious things – travel, get famous, innovate, lead, fall in love, make and lose fortunes ... but as you do, to the extent that you can, err in the direction of kindness.” George Saunders



“Today’s children are the future leaders in business, politics, and sports. People in such positions of authority encounter ethical dilemmas on an even grander scale. It is imperative for teens to learn about ethics and wise decision-making today in order to equip themselves for tomorrow.”
Life in Perspective

I am forever grateful that some of my deepest roots have been planted through Orinda Aquatics. I have been with the team for the past 7 years, and I am incredibly thankful for everything the team has given me. As a young age-group swimmer, I joined the team to become a fast swimmer. I am leaving the team with a commitment to character and leadership. Here is my story.

I joined Orinda at the age of 11, eager to learn to swim faster. My meet experiences solely revolved around getting faster times and trying to reach certain time standards. The year-round practices proved to be helpful soon enough. But, as I had gotten faster, my work ethic decreased and my complacency was apparent. I was a selfish teammate and didn't care much for others. Then came a time when I stopped improving. I wouldn't get any faster, and my frustrations grew. I lost the eagerness I had. My ego only inflated, and I refused to admit to myself who I had become.

Soon high school rolled along, and my ambitions had changed. I had a burning desire to serve my country. Fortunately, this was the same time I met some of my biggest role models and influencers in my life. My sophomore year coach, Jill Jones, taught me what working hard meant again. Rishabh Roy taught me what it meant to be a leader on and off the pool deck. Ryan Teshima taught me what it meant to be a good friend and teammate. From the Clovis Safeway runs to the annual Christmas gift-exchange, Orinda Aquatics felt more like family.

All this time, I was continuing to seriously consider a career in the military. But that was when my junior year of high school hit me hard. It was late September when I was diagnosed with three disc injuries in my lower back. Walking was painful. Sleeping was just bearable. Studying felt impossible. Swimming was just out of the picture. And all the same, my hopes at a shot for a military career looked grim. I had hit a low point in life, and I wanted to find a way out. I think that this was when I leaned on my teammates the most. I received endless support from everyone on the team. I will never forget when a teammate once told me, "Your pain is our pain, Andy". I was able to gain enough strength to crawl out of a dark hole in life.

In the end, everything worked out just fine. My back completely recovered, and I now face a hopeful, yet unclear future in the military. But as I stare down this long uncertain road, it becomes even more obvious how important character is. It matters. Leadership matters. Looking back, I know that I may have not come this far if it wasn't for the endless support and lessons learned from this team. To all the younger swimmers on the team: forget your ego. Find your dreams and passions. Listen to your role models. Lean on your teammates. Stare down the impossible. They say that light only burns bright in darkness. Be that light in the world. Be humble and be excited for a bright future. Thank you. Andy

"Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness." Anne Frank

Alec Kong
Dartmouth
- club

OA Inspirational Award (as a Junior)
Campolindo Inspirational Award Recipient
National Merit Finalist
Sectional Qualifier/NCS Qualifier

I may be the only swimmer to have ever saved a DQ slip. It happened at my first senior group swim meet for a one-hand finish, that I am still in denial about. At the time I didn't think much about it, having been disqualified somewhat regularly as a junior group swimmer. Then Donnie approached, holding that dreaded yellow paper. Swimming in Senior 1, I had never before had the opportunity to talk to Donnie or Ronnie, and I was scared. I stood in stunned silence, scrambling to understand what was happening, as Donnie reproached me for my laziness and lack of focus.

Eventually, he began to highlight how my careless misstep could negatively affect the team culture, and our club's vision of character and discipline, instructing me to save the DQ slip as a reminder to find self-discipline. I was caught off guard. Never had I even considered that I – an unassuming freshman – could ever have enough significance to influence an entire organization. In that moment, being exposed for my DQ and lack of focus, I realized that Orinda Aquatics is where I belonged and would call home.

Donnie's words didn't make themselves clear to me. They were an enigmatic riddle whose contents I had to understand for myself. Placing my DQ slip above my desk as Donnie had asked, I always had the chance to ponder the meaning of our "Character First" mission. Now, after four wonderful years of triumphs, laughs, and joy, I can condense the message into one phrase – ***refuse complacency***.

Along with countless articles, speeches, videos, and meetings, this club has taught me to refuse complacency *in everything I do*. Whether it is pulling covers before morning practices, participating during meet takedown, or cheering for my teammates and friends, I have learned to never allow myself to be lulled into bad habits. Orinda Aquatics has also inspired me to live a more selfless life – one that actively tries to help others for their appreciation rather than their recognition. I used to get jealous of my friends' successes, but now, I am more proud about losing my voice cheering for my team than swimming best times. We should not be defined by our times or our achievements, but rather by the people whose lives we change for the better.

Along each step of my journey with this amazing club, I have been blessed with many compassionate coaches: Marc, Matt E., Kevin, Sophie, Jill, Matt A., Ronnie, and Donnie. All have developed me in more ways than I can count, encouraging me to interpret the meaning of character for myself. I owe them a debt of gratitude that I can only repay by continuing to spread their legacy of selflessness and integrity.

Besides coaches, I am honored to have been lucky enough to form lifelong friendships with my teammates. Together, we have pushed and supported each other, anchoring down our commitment and belief in one another. We rise and we fall, only to appreciate all that we have and all that we are willing to give. These are my brothers and sisters who, I have no doubt, will go on to do big things with an impeccable command of character.

Finally, all that I am, I attribute to my family – especially my mom. My mom has sacrificed more than I will ever know, and I can only hope that I have appreciated her enough for it. Every day she inspires me to work harder and to believe in my own abilities.

Having spent my transformative years with Orinda Aquatics, I will cherish these memories for a lifetime. I leave, confident that in such a profound organization, future swimmer will continue to refuse complacency and actively work to better their communities. With love, Alec

Kassy Gregory
Soka University
- *swimming*

- **Campolindo Coaches Award**
- **DAL Finalist**
- **California Scholarship Federation/National Society of High School Scholars**
- **President's Volunteer award**

I want to express my appreciation for the support and kindness I've received during my time with Orinda Aquatics. When I first joined OA, I was uncertain whether I would fit in. OA has a reputation for building incredibly talented Olympic and D1 level swimmers. And many of my teammates had been members of OA since middle school. At the ripe old age of 15, I believed that I joined the team too late in order to be successful. However, after only a few short weeks, the team felt like family, and I knew I belonged. Everyone on the team welcomed me with open arms and did their best to make me feel comfortable.

I clearly remember attending my first Clovis meet with the team. It was my first time swimming 1,000 free, which was the first event after the long bus ride from Moraga. It was raining non-stop, and there were very few swimmers on the pool deck. Yet when I finished my race, I was surprised to see the team standing in the pouring rain cheering us on. Looking around, I observed that only a few of my competitors had teammates supporting them. That's a typical example of what sets OA apart.

What first impressed me most about OA is its culture. Navigating high school can be challenging, and I've observed many of my classmates attempting to recreate themselves. They often try on new personas the way one would try on different t-shirts, and they didn't think twice about stretching the rules and social norms to appear cool or gain popularity. Being a member of OA has grounded me. I feel humbled to have found my focus within a team of like-minded individuals. We are student-athletes who strive to improve both academically and physically. OA provides an environment which focuses on healthy living, hard work, and building character. The coaches help us become better swimmers, but also to become the best people we can be.

The OA team culture is the barometer I used to evaluate prospective colleges, coaches, and teams. The OA coaching staff has established an environment which is honest, supportive, and respectful. I am proud to wear a team cap and OA gear with the motto "Character First". All of my previous athletic experiences focused on improving my technique and event times. As a member of OA, my focus in swimming has gone from a focus on myself and my performance, to focus on the team's attitude and conduct. My previous coaches emphasized positive attributes such as being a good sport, but there was very little focus on the good we should do for others. The education and training we receive as members of OA are not restricted simply to swimming. Each day brings an opportunity to focus on individual and team character-building.

No one will ever say that being a member of OA is easy. I'm grateful for the challenges that the rigorous practice and meet schedules have posed. I learned that balance and self-discipline is the key to managing my academics. That's something I have in common with my teammates. And it's that self-discipline, and making good choices which will enable my success in the future.

I've come to understand that making the best choices I can is ingrained in every aspect of swimming, from the moment a swimmer steps onto the blocks and first greets one's opponent, to the end of the swim meet. Every day I am surrounded by real-life examples of character. Each swimmer takes responsibility for setting up the pool and cleaning up the deck without being instructed to do so. While our passion for the sport propels us to put in our best effort, we understand how our actions relate to others.

Orinda Aquatics has become a huge part of my life, and I could not imagine who I would be today without having experienced it. The lessons I've learned on the team will continue to guide my way of life for many years. I've made many valuable friendships and connections that will last a lifetime.

I want to express my gratitude to Coaches Ronnie, Donnie, Matt, and Mark for your patience and the many lessons you've taught me. You've helped me grow as both a swimmer and an individual. I'd like to thank my parents and my sister Julia, for their support and the countless hours they've spent cheering for my teammates and I. I'd also like to thank all of the OA parents for their generosity, time and support in making OA what it is today. And I'd like to thank my teammates who've made each practice, activity, and swim meet both enjoyable and memorable! Kassy

Emily Gebhardt
San Diego State
- *swimming*

Junior National Qualifier
Swimming All American
OA Inspirational Award Winner
NCS/State Meet finalist
Scholar athlete

Orinda Aquatics not only has made me a better swimmer, but more importantly, a better person. I cannot even begin to express the amount of gratitude and love I have for this team. When joining Orinda Aquatics, I envisioned a team full of fast, strong and intimidating swimmers. Yes, they were strong and fast, but far from intimidating. The team welcomed me with open arms and I am eternally grateful for that. Little did I know 4 years later, I would have found the most amazing group of young, talented and driven teenagers. Although those 4 years were not all rainbows and butterflies, I have this team to thank for the amazing memories.

The beginning of my Orinda Aquatics career had an inauspicious and challenging start to say the least. I spent my freshman year working through shoulder pain that would lead to surgery. The first half of my sophomore year was dealing with rehab and physical therapy and I spent the Clovis meet at the coaches table taking splits. It would have been easy to see my competitive window narrowing and to return to rec swimming. Throughout that time, Ronnie stayed with me, going to appointments and giving me assurance that not only would I get through this, but offered a glimpse into what my true potential could be.

It is staggering to find that within two years I would be competing at a national level en route to a strong Division 1 program. Although it may be a cliché, I lived it; my greatest challenge offered an extraordinary lesson in resilience, patience, faith, and team. I hope my story offers hope to those dealing with challenges that; there are lessons to be learned, that you can come out much stronger, and that the coaches and team will be with you every step of the way.

To Ronnie - thank you for being the most influential coach I have ever had. You have had an impact in my life both in and out of the pool. In the pool you have taught me how to push myself, train and be the best swimmer I can be. However, the impact outside of the water is most important. You showed me how to be the best version of myself, no matter what life throws at you. You have taught me how to work hard, not use social media and the importance of putting character first. Thank you for coming to doctors appointments for my shoulder, pulling me out of practice to watch music videos, teaching me the importance of the bigger picture, and always being a supporter. Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself.

To Donnie - thank you for teaching me the importance of character, both as an Orinda Aquatics swimmer, and member of society. Your dedication to this team and the swimmers inspires me. I am so thankful for the opportunity to be a part of Orinda Aquatics and to have been coached by you these past 4 years.

To my parents and all of the team parents - thank you for your countless hours of driving, volunteering, preparing healthy and delicious food and for all of your love and support. This journey would not have been possible without your love and compassion. Although I may not seem very grateful post Saturday workouts or early in the morning, deep inside I think to myself everyday just how grateful I am to have you both in my life. Thank you for being my #1 fans now and forever. I love you.

To the team - I would have never thought a group of high schoolers could be so caring and welcoming. I have each and every one of you to thank for my personal success and the success of our team. We all push each other to be our best selves every day, and I am eternally grateful for that. Whether it's Clovis cheering in the pouring rain in February, or Clovis again in the scorching August heat - the cheering, positivity, and memories will never be forgotten. You are all more than capable of being leaders, role models and positively impacting not only your OA teammates but also your world.

To Senior 4, thank you for accepting me at my worst and supporting me at my best. Whether it be kindly bullying me during a kick set, laughing and crying all at the same time, or simply just being there for me. To the girls, swim fast, work hard, do some pull-ups and don't forget to Facetime me whenever you need me and even when you don't need me. Continue to be the beautiful, strong and determined young woman you all are. To the boys, thank you for finding a way to make me laugh at 5:15 AM, for trying to speak girl but failing, and always having my back.

To everyone else. I want to express to you that no matter who you are or what your story is, you have the opportunity to have a positive impact on another member of this team, or anyone else in this world. Being a part of the Orinda Aquatics team is an amazing privilege. But in reality, it is more than a team, it is a family. Enjoy the time you have left and continue to be amazing humans! Always remember to keep working hard and good things will happen. Emily

Matt Lanzara
Trinity College
- swimming

Junior National Qualifier
USA Swimming Scholastic All American
North Coast Finalist
Scholar Athlete

Five years ago, in eighth grade, I stepped on the Soda Center pool deck for my first Orinda Aquatics practice. From that moment on, I was surrounded by people I would call friends for the next five years and on. I remember getting introduced to Kevin Lai as well as Alec Baker and Richard Zhang. And thus, our legendary friendship began. They took me under their wings and to this day are the best friends I could ever ask for. As I started freshman year at College Park, I was in Donnie's Senior 3 group. Donnie reconstructed all of my strokes and I really started to enjoy swimming with memorable sets like no-breath 50s fly. My first few years with OA went by in a blur because of an incredible team environment and teammates.

In my sophomore year, I was moved up to Ronnie's Senior 4 group. Immediately the sets got harder and Ronnie worked with me on focusing solely on backstroke despite me wanting to train freestyle. My second year in high school was probably my hardest year of swimming mentally. I was insanely close to getting sectional times, but kept missing them even by hundredths of a second. I felt like whatever I did wouldn't make me better. This is where Ronnie had one of the biggest impacts on my high school swimming career. He taught me to stay strong, to never give up, and, most importantly, he taught me the importance of working hard every practice. With Ronnie's help both mentally and technically, I was able to break through and finally get Sectionals at NCS.

My junior and senior years are full of my fondest memories of being on OA. It includes me transferring to Campolindo and being immediately feeling comfortable. I want to thank Alec, Richard, Sean, Ryan, Isaac, Zach, and the honorary OA swimmer Giorgio for making my transition to a new school as easy as possible. Because of

you guys, it feels like I was there all four years of high school. Also, during my Junior year, I met Zach Le-Nguyen. Zach, you are the best training partner I could have ever asked for. Your work ethic is incredible and you have helped me get through some very hard sets. One of my most memorable moments on OA has to be during Junior National in Texas. It was after I had just finished my 200 back time trial, as soon as I touched the wall I hear Alec yell, "Yeah Matt", from the side of the pool, I look up at the board which shows my time being 1:49.8 - my first Junior National time. As I got out of the water, I was surrounded by my teammates who congratulated me. At that moment I felt like all of my hard work had paid off. All of those mornings of getting up early and going to practice, then school, and practice again had paid off. Looking back at swimming in high school, that moment will always stick out as a highlight. It will remind me what an especially close group we had.

As the year went on, all the seniors started announcing where we would be going for college next year. Slowly it dawned on everyone that the end of an incredible group would be coming. For me personally, I found out that I would be moving to Austin, Texas at the beginning of the summer. At my last practice on Orinda Aquatics, Ronnie held a meeting to say goodbye to me. He told us a quote from Dr. Seuss that will stick with me throughout my life, "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened". My moving to Texas has taught me arguably the most important lesson in life - *to hold on to and enjoy the memories that make our lives great.*

To the Senior 4 group, I would like to thank each and every one of you for being such great teammates and friends. This group has been there to support and push me every single day. I could not have asked for a better group of people to be surrounded by during my high school years.

To the boys - Alec, Richard, Zach, Isaac, Sean, Ryan, and Aidan, I want to thank you for being great role models and for pushing everyone in each set to their fullest effort. I will never forget all of the laughs we have shared in the water and in locker room. To Margaux, Maddie, Channing, Emily, Maggie, Paige, and Eloise, I want to thank you for always being positive, encouraging, and for being amazing lane partners. All of you made practices a lot more fun.

To Alec and Richard, I want to thank you two for being supportive and amazing friends from my first day on Orinda Aquatics. I couldn't have asked for better best friends in my life.

To Zach, I want to thank you for being an amazing training partner. You were the one who I could count on to always do the right thing, to always work hard, and to always grind out the backstroke sets with me. Your dedication has had a huge impact on my swimming career. Congratulations on getting Summer Juniors earlier this summer and I cannot wait to see what you accomplish in the next few years of high school and into college. Backstroke Gang forever!

To Ronnie and Donnie, I want to thank both of you for never giving up on my ability. Both of you have been there to support me and push me to achieve my goals. Not only are you both the best coaches I could ask for, but you are great role models of character. I will never forget the massive impact the two of you have had on my life.

Lastly, to my parents, I would like to thank them for their everlasting support in school, swimming, and life in general. My parents made huge time commitments to my swimming. They would spend entire weekends working shifts at my swim meets, they would drive me to practice when I didn't have my driver's license, and they would show up to almost every meet I would swim at whether it was a small CBA+ meet at Campo or a big championship meet out of town. Their hard work is the reason why I have had all these opportunities to fulfill my goals and inspire me to be the person I am today.

I would like to wish everyone the best of luck in their endeavors next year in college or in high school. I will never forget the memories and laughs I have shared with the people on this great team. Thank you for everything. Matt

Lizzy Follmer
Northwestern
- swimming

Academic All-American
Campolindo School Record (200 MR)
Scholastic All American
Swimming All American

After seven years on the team, it's finally my time to write a senior letter. Upon reflection of my early years on the team, I realize that I have a lot of "thank you's" to say before my "final goodbye". This team and its culture have not only shaped me as a swimmer but have helped me to develop as a person.

To begin I would like to thank Marc Cavallero. From LMYA to OA, Marc has been a constant source of positive energy and probably the first person who taught me to love swimming. He was also the first person to help me work through a set-back. I remember losing the county relay spot and being devastated. After voicing my frustration (probably in tears) he calmly said "Liz, it is going to be ok. This is one of the earlier meets of the season and if you work hard enough you'll be able to get that spot back". Marc always provided me with perspective. To this day, I often find myself taking a step back and using his advice to get me through the frustrations that come with the sport of swimming.

I also need to thank Matt Ehrenberger. Although I was never in his group, we've had more than a few good talks (mostly about my brother). Every time I talk to Matt, I get a good laugh. I think my favorite story he's told me is about Mac's first long course practice. I remember Matt walking up with his signature half smile, signaling he had some juicy gossip to share. He started laughing as he said, "You'll never guess what Mac did today". Hesitantly, I asked, "what?" and he proceeded to tell me that instead of diving into the pool Mac entered with a flip. He said Mac then popped up and yelled: "YES! Nailed it!" I will forever laugh at the Mac stories and will definitely miss them next year.

Another very influential person in my swimming career was Donnie. I've never met a swim coach who values high character as much as speed. He cares so much about the team and is the driving force behind the motto "Character First". Donnie has helped me to see that no matter how great you are there will always be room for improvement. He has helped me to keep raising my goals and has constantly pushed me to get better. Without Donnie, I would not have made as much progress because I would not have believed in myself.

Ronnie...where do I start? I need to express my gratitude to Ronnie for not "cutting the cord". I know we've had our share of ups and downs but he has stuck with me through all of them. He has done so much more than just helping me to get faster. He has taught me how to deal with embarrassment (mostly through embarrassing me), how to be strong when it gets tough, and countless other valuable life lessons. I find myself striving to impress him on a daily basis because I truly value his opinion. Honestly, Ronnie has been more of a life coach than a swim coach - he's like a third parent to me. I am grateful that I met him and think that everyone on the team benefits from his presence.

Finally, I would like to thank my teammates and my family. They have carried me through setbacks and encouraged me to be the best that I can be. I have faith that the underclassman will be able to continue to cultivate the same impressive culture. I will miss all of you! Lizzy

Sean Percin
Georgetown
- swimming

Junior National Qualifier
Inspirational Award Winner
Scholastic All American
Swimming All American

Dear Coaches, Teammates, and the Orinda Aquatics community,

When I first walked onto the pool deck to try out Orinda Aquatics, I was skeptical that it would live up to its hype. Four years ago, I left a toxic team culture in Truckee that I had been in since I was six and it sounded too good to be true that I would be surrounded by a group of self-motivated swimmers who actually wanted to be at practice. The fact that these kids were devoted to being truly good people as well as dedicated athletes was completely foreign. Looking back, I can honestly say that OA exceeded expectations due to the exceptional coaching and culture that fostered incredible team camaraderie.

During my freshman year, my attention was split between water polo and swimming. Despite my lack of commitment, Coach Kevin Lai kickstarted my career by telling me that I had the potential to become a national-level swimmer. At this point, I was struggling to get senior meet time standards and being a national-level swimmer never even crossed my mind. However, Kevin's vote of confidence planted a seed.

Coach Matt Armanini, further encouraged me during my sophomore year despite the fact that I had yet to focus on swimming and continued to play water polo. At Clovis that year, I swam the 1,000 our first night there. I really was not sure what to expect but Matt seemed to have more confidence in me than I did. Forty laps later, I touched the wall shocked to see that I had gotten my first sectional time. Matt ran over and gave me a hug and I thought, "Huh, maybe swimming is not so bad after all".

After Clovis, I began to get more and more excited about the sport. However, the beginning of my Junior year, I got a concussion in a water polo practice that took me out of school and contact sports for two months. Despite the fact that I had missed almost all of the summer and fall OA practices due to my water polo schedule, when I walked on the pool deck and asked if I could stretch out in one of the outside lanes, Ronnie, along with my teammates welcomed me back with open arms. At the conclusion of that water polo season, I decided that I would fully dedicate myself to swimming and see just how far I could go.

Once I told Ronnie about my decision, he started working with me on my stroke (and there was a lot of work to do, y'all've seen the video). After threshold sets he would ask me my stroke count and I would hit him with the ol' "Well, it was somewhere between 11 and 15 but it could have been 16 if we round up..." Ronnie was not amused. He sat me down and told me that the only way I would ever be able to keep up with the other guys was if I "actually pulled some water". I had made a commitment to swimming and I trusted Ronnie knew what he was doing, so, I started "pulling some water", and a few months later, my stroke count dropped and so did my times. I got my first Junior National cut just in time for recruiting season at Far Westerns before my senior year (thanks for the cap Ronnie). I know it was a lot of work to get me to where I am today. Thank you, Ronnie, for sticking with me. You always held me to the highest standard and did not accept anything less than my best. Without you, my success would not have been possible.

Thank you Ronnie and Donnie for creating a culture where I could thrive and become both the greatest swimmer and best Percin (lol) I could be. I became invested in my teammates and wanted them to succeed as much as I wanted myself to succeed. My first sectional cuts at Clovis would not have been possible if my teammates had not been cheering for me throughout the entire 1,000 and mile (and if Alec Kong had not been so good at counting). Similarly, as I cheer for Ryan and Isaac as they get closer and closer to my times, I feel a sense of pride and look forward to their future accomplishments.

The most influential aspect of the OA culture is the great role models I had the opportunity to follow. From Cole Stevens who welcomed me on my first day, to Michael Wheeler who became not only a role model, but the best training partner I have ever had. It was truly my honor to swim beside such great teammates and chase them up and down the pool day after day. Michael's punishing work ethic and commitment to the team showed me exactly what it meant to work hard and be the best I could be. I found myself trying to emulate his actions even after he left for college. Looking back on these experiences, I can say I have no regrets. These were the hardest four years of my life and there were a couple of times I thought of quitting and just playing water polo, but it was the OA culture of relying on my teammates and pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones that made swimming so rewarding.

In addition to my coaches and teammates, my parents and my sister have always been there for me. No matter how fast I was or which sport I was doing, they came to all my games and meets and helped me wake up at 4:45 for morning practice even though it was the last thing they wanted to do. I truly can not thank you enough for everything you have done and your continuous support.

Thank you to the entire OA community. I will never forget my time here and will carry the lessons I have learned with me for as long as I live (or the next kick set). Good Talk, Sean Austin Percin, (Ronnie's Fav)

Mason Loyet
Carnegie Mellon
- *swimming*

Junior National
Academic All American
Scholastic All American
Swimming All American

When I first joined Orinda Aquatics, it was like I had made it to the big leagues. Going from being a faster recreational swimmer to the slowest club swimmer is a transition most aspiring swimmers have to make. Walking onto the deck and seeing the national OA group training at a level my recreational swimming mind couldn't comprehend could have been very discouraging, but the intermittent cries of "On the top!" and "Last one!" coming not from the coaches but from the swimmers were, to me, inspiring. The group dripped with camaraderie, and in everything they did, they set an example for the less-experienced swimmers. The swimmers in my group must have felt the same awe, and before we knew it, we became a tightly knit group just like them. Together, we were able to push each other harder than we thought possible. As we moved up in the system, we learned about leadership and work from our coaches and saw their ideas in action with our idols. Years passed, people graduated, and my lowly training group, which had grown to be anything but lowly, populated most of Senior 4, and it was our turn to be role models for the younger swimmers. Suddenly, at meets, I felt like I was not just swimming for myself, but to provide inspiration for the younger swimmers. I remember watching Ronnie's group in awe. Now, it is us yelling "On the top!" and "Last one!" at the top of our lungs, knowing that the new swimmers and junior groupers could hear it from the deck.

Orinda Aquatics is more than just a team, it's a life changing experience, and in this letter, I'd like to thank a few people who I felt guided and taught me the most.

First and foremost, I thank my rec swim coach Chris Chuck. I hope this letter somehow makes it to you. Although I never interacted with this man through Orinda Aquatics, he is an alumnus, and to me represents the kind of positivity Orinda Aquatics puts out into the world. One of the kindest guys you'll ever meet, he was the first person to really support and believe in me and my swimming career. Without him, I would have never signed up for Orinda Aquatics.

Next, I need to thank Matt Ehrenberger. As my first year round coach, he played a massive role in my commitment to the sport. He was able to overlook my less-than-two-black-line pulldowns and three and a half “off-strokes”, developing the fundamentals I would need in the senior group. We still laugh from time to time about shaky beginnings. Now he’s an easy-to-talk-to guy whose meet cleanup leadership skills are simply unparalleled. He showed me what I believe to be the most important attribute to a leader, that they work with their followers.

Even though Kevin has moved on from Orinda Aquatics, I have never forgotten about him and probably never will. He elevated me from basically a lazy water polo player with pretty good technique to a year-round, dedicated swimmer, and did so while cultivating my love for the sport. He taught me how to have fun on a team and also be a focused athlete, which cannot be understated. Thank you Kevin, for helping me develop my interest into a full passion for the sport. Sometimes when swimming is going poorly, thinking back to the days in your group help me remember why I’m still here.

Let’s just say I was thinking about the Kevin days quite a lot during Donnie’s workouts. They were the first of which I still can only describe as grueling. Donnie, you really tested my commitment to the sport, and truly, I thank you for that. However, more impactful were Donnie’s meetings. I’ve never met someone more passionate about character than Donnie. Even voiding the amazing lessons he taught, it’s incredible just to see how much he really cares about the lives, fulfillment, and success of every single person on the team.

Two swimmers I met in Donnie’s group probably had the greatest influence on my identity today. Ryan Teshima and Rishabh Roy showed me that it’s possible to be a high-level swimmer and simultaneously be a high-level student. They encouraged me to take rigorous class schedules and shoot for the most ambitious colleges while never missing practice, balancing two worlds that I previously thought were mutually exclusive. Ryan was also a great training partner. Even this year, two years after Ryan left, I still hear his words, “you know, I actually train best when I’m sore.” A funny, nonsensical statement that never fails to give me a boost of energy when I feel like I’m at my limit. Thank you guys for helping me become the best student-athlete I could be.

To all my breaststroke training groups and partners, we’ve been through a lot. There are too many to mention, but you know who you are. Thanks for everything!

Tony, you are one hell of a training partner. I know no one with an equal go-hard-until-your-body-shuts-down mentality. You’re definitely not afraid to yell during practice, sometimes on every wall. You’ve driven me to levels of concentration and effort I had no idea I was capable of. If I had to attribute my success in swimming to two people, one of them is definitely you Tony.

The other, perhaps obviously at this point, would be Ronnie. He’s been my coach for about two years now, and continues to impress me with his humor, knowledge, and big picture mentality. To those who haven’t learned this lesson yet, Ronnie is always right; I’ve doubted him enough to tell you that. Ronnie, without you, my swimming career would be in the ground. You’ve been the perfect coach to me. Thank you.

To those of you who are just beginning the Orinda Aquatics experience (and the parents possibly influencing them), you’ve made a great commitment of your time. You will likely have a different experience than me, but I have no doubt in my mind that you will find it equally impactful, enlightening, and rewarding as I have. Support your teammates, have fun, work hard, don’t give up, never compromise, and trust your coaches. Thanks again for everything. Mason

Bernave Twyman
Clark University
- *swimming*

**Western Zones Qualifier
Scholar Athlete
(multiple) Coaches Award Recipient**

Swimming for Orinda Aquatics has been an experience that has gone by altogether too fast. I vividly remember my very first practice in sixth grade walking onto the deck and seeing so many new and unfamiliar faces. Little did I know that these kids were some of the smartest, kindest, and most compassionate people that I would ever meet in my entire life. The wonder of Orinda Aquatics' legacy lies in the fact that it supports such high caliber athletes and high-character kids, and I've had the pleasure and luck to be part of this extremely generous community. From encouragement to work hard during practice to a "congrats" after a good swim, my teammates carried me through the ups and downs of my swim career. And I, in whatever way I could, would always try and be there for them. This is one of the most valuable lessons I've learned from my time on Orinda Aquatics: it doesn't matter what your times are nearly as much as what kind of person you are outside of the pool. As I came to understand this, my goals as a swimmer became less time-related and became more team-oriented. Time standards mattered less to me as trying to be the best teammate and person I could be to others became the top priority.

Whether it was reaching out to new people in the different senior groups, being sure to always help out with covers and lane lines, or being the last one at the pool for meet cleanup, I decided to put the team first, because a team can only be a team if people care. To all my teammates: I will miss you all so much next year and wish you all the best of luck for the future. It's been fun! Bernave

Richard Zhang
USC
- *club*

**Academic All American
NCS Champion
Swimming All American
Junior National Top 8 relay**

Seven years, 2,275 days, and millions of yards. That's how long I've swum with this team. In a deeper context, that's how far I've grown into a mature young adult, and behind me an unbelievably close-knit family that fostered, vouched, and cared for me through the twists and turns of life.

I began to view with gratitude my seasons of pain and glory: five AM practices plunging into chilly water, teammates who became my closest friends, triumphant tribal cheers as one of us placed first, tears and laughter celebrating as together we became champions. I thought about the courage I'd gained and the stamina I'd built--the intangible grit that would transfer to later on, and the more profound life successes. This program/philosophy not only molded me into a better swimmer, it made me a better person.

Here is what I leave to the swimmers. Thank you for staying with each other on this journey. It's been an incredible seven-year run. Some may have struggled at times, but we always had an open shoulder to lean on and helped each other out. I hope that the younger generation will keep embracing and exercising this **compassion and camaraderie**. And for the coaches, and the countless hours of support, instructing, guiding, joking, and rejoicing, I thank you for the tireless efforts that you put into the program. Thank you all for these memories that will be forever set in stone for the rest of my life. Richard

Cristian Twyman
Providence College
- *swimming*

Sectional Qualifier
Scholar Athlete
NCS Qualifier
Coaches Award

When I first joined Orinda Aquatics I never imagined that a team could have such an impact on my life. Over the last seven years it has not been the meets or practices that have shaped my experience on this team, but rather the interactions I've had with you all, and I can truthfully say that people on this team have played a role in my personal growth. I remember starting out on the team only thinking about my own goals. The main reason I chose to swim was because I enjoyed the individuality of the sport. But day in and day out, I was amazed by the compassion and support you've shown towards each other and myself. It has been surreal to see you push each other during difficult sets, with the intent to not only better yourselves but also those around you, as such a thing is uncommon. The camaraderie on this team is incomparable and it has driven me to give my best effort in and out of the water. From cheering behind the blocks to high-fives after hard sets, I have learned the importance of lifting each other up and supporting one another. In doing this I have forged invaluable friendships that I know will last a lifetime. I am wholeheartedly grateful for the lessons I have learned from you and I will carry them with me throughout this next chapter of my life. I will cherish the unbreakable bonds and unforgettable memories I have made. Cristian

Harry Flanders
Indiana
- *swimming*

- **2020 Olympic Trials qualifier**
- **SRVHS Athlete of the Year**
- **2019 State Meet team champion/State Meet record holder (200 free relay)**
- **8x All-American**

My time here at Orinda Aquatics has been simply unforgettable. I am so lucky to have had the opportunity to learn and swim in such a positive environment with great teammates who love and support each other. Without a doubt, some of my most valuable life lessons have been learned while swimming here.

Ronnie, you have taught me so much over these past few years. What I know I will take from you and try to apply to the rest of my life (in and out of the pool) is that with consistent, hard work you can achieve things you never thought were possible. The older swimmers in the group set the bar high and inspired me to see a future in the sport, and to be an inspiring leader for the younger kids, just as they had been to me.

As Ronnie can attest to, my start in his group was a little rocky and I thought I knew a lot more than I did. As a sophomore, I learned that he was never going to view me as a serious swimmer unless I showed that I could work harder and focus on the things that had to be better, no exceptions. It was a constant effort and focus that I had to put in to every week, every practice, every set, every stroke until it became a part of my daily routine. What he expected of me was more than I ever knew I could give. Since then, I've been a believer that hard work works. Although it would have been very easy for him to give up on me in the beginning, I'm so grateful that he didn't.

In my opinion the most unique thing about Orinda Aquatics is that every coach cares a lot more about the type of person you are rather than how fast you are. So often you see kids have relationships with their coaches that are solely based on performance, a win at all costs attitude often fueled by fear. I am glad we are all viewed as much more than just swimmers. This allows us to build trust and have honest relationships. Every team would benefit from seeing the way our coaches coach. To Donnie, thank you for being a role model and guide to everyone on the team. Especially now that I'm heading off to Indiana I will remember to "be above the weather." To Ronnie,

thank you so much for everything you have done for me. You have made me a better swimmer and person. I consider you more than a coach, you are like family to me.

Lastly, I want to thank my teammates. We've all gone through some pretty physically and mentally tough experiences in our time swimming. We've endured early morning practices, theme week practices, disappointing meets, sacrificed social lives and, for some, have embraced the fact that our hair just might be damaged forever. But through it all, I'm so glad we've had each other to lean on. Most of all, I am thankful for all the amazing friendships I have made and the countless memories we have together. I could not have asked for a better training group and will miss you all so much. May the Soda Daddies live on forever! Harry

Paige Hanley
University of Iowa
- *swimming*

- **Junior National Qualifier**
- **Swimming All American**
- **NCS Finalist**
- **Scholar Athlete**

Over the course of my four years on Orinda Aquatics I have had the chance to grow tremendously both in and out of the water. Starting out, my first six months of freshman year I swam in Senior 2 with Kevin. Before I knew it I was moved up into senior three with Donnie, only to start my sophomore year off in a new group, with Ronnie who has coached me for the last three years. In reflecting back over the past four years I can see the dramatic changes I have made. While my journey was anything but easy, I would not change a single thing. Being on OA has taught me life lessons I will cherish forever, gave me friends I will never forget, and fostered my true love and passion for the sport.

While thinking about what life lessons I have learned on OA, I often reminded of two words, Big Picture. In other words, that big test you have or intimidating finals race should not be what matters to you. The "big picture" approach places the emphasis on the hard work you did and the memories you made in the process. Ronnie would always tie everything back to the "big picture" to widen our scope of what is important. In particular, my senior year I did a lot of big picture thinking. I am thankful Ronnie took interest in my personal growth which also paved the way to tremendous self discovery. He was always dedicating time to talk about my fears and giving me books to widen my perspective. I would like to extend a special thanks to Ronnie and Donnie for teaching me the most important core value of putting Character First, something I will consider with every action for the rest of my life.

On top of the life lessons, I have found my best friends for life on OA. The environment Ronnie and Donnie cultivated was the basis for these friendships to grow. Hard sets never seemed too bad with my sister, Channing, and Sophie Lurie by my side. While these two helped me in the pool, their lasting impact took place out of the water. With Channing, we were together all day, every day. For two whole years we shared every good and bad moment. Every up and down in my career, Channing was there to support me. While we had the occasional sibling argument, getting to spend this time together was the greatest gift. As for Sophie, the amount of laughs we shared could not be counted. She was always there to pick me up. I found a certain part of me reflected in her. Other than my breaststroke group, every single person in the group offered me a unique but equally valuable friendship. The underclassmen, whom I didn't know for too long, all the way to my fellow seniors, all supported and guided me throughout my journey. I also would like to thank my graduated friends over the years, for setting the example of hard work and leadership for me. Lastly, I would like to thank my best friend over the past four years, Eloise, for being a true example of strength, and the ability to persevere through challenges, but also being my biggest support.

To my parents, thank you for the endless encouragement and support. When I was eight years old, I told my parents I wanted to win the OMPA and break the record. Although I was nowhere near that lofty goal, my mother

also supported my other ambitious goal, which I ultimately reached ten years later (my senior year), when deciding which college I wanted to swim with, taking the unknown but more ambitious path. My parents have been nothing but supportive. I also would like to specially thank my mother for her never-ending mental support, as I would take hours out of her days talking through my disappointments and frustrations. The role of “psychologist” she played was so special to me.

Again, I would like to extend a huge thank you to my amazing coaches, friends, and family. The time and energy spent on the betterment of myself and swim career cannot be replaced, and were truly the best gift I can ask for.
Paige

Gaby Rego
Westmont College
- *swimming*

**Four-Year Scholar-Athlete
OA Coaches Award
Volunteer Service Award
One of the first recruits to Westmont**

I joined Orinda Aquatics when I was 13 years old after retiring from being a competitive gymnast for 6 years. I swam recreationally during the summer since I was 6 years old, but gymnastics took up the majority of my time so I barely made it to any swim practices. I felt very nervous and intimidated going into my first Orinda Aquatics practice because I hadn't been swimming for a while and I didn't know anyone. From the moment I walked out onto the pool deck, I remember being greeted so kindly and feeling welcomed by almost everyone. After my first day of practice I could feel the positive atmosphere that the coaches created for the team and I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

In the nearly five years that I have been on this team I have grown as an individual in so many ways. I have learned the importance of humility, selflessness, patience, perseverance, discipline, and so much more. Orinda Aquatics provided a safe environment where I could learn not only about swimming but also about life in general. I could not be more thankful for this team and the coaches for helping me grow into the person I am today.

The most impactful lesson that I have learned through Orinda Aquatics is not to lose sight of what really matters in life. It is very easy to only focus on yourself, and your speed, and forget about what is going to matter in the long run. While you should always work hard to improve and dedicate yourself to be the best athlete you can, positively impacting another person's life is much more important.

I have been dealing with shoulder pain this past season that has prevented me from training as hard as I want to. Every time I begin to feel frustrated and discouraged by not being able to push myself harder in practice or swim in a meet, I take a moment and realize how fortunate I am to have the ability to do this sport and be a part of this team. Even without being the fastest swimmer, I could still have a positive influence on the team.

Life is about perspective; don't lose sight of the bigger picture. I would also like to encourage the younger swimmers to really listen to what the coaches have to say. The articles that we read in meetings along with the wisdom and knowledge of the coaches can truly transform your life if you remain open minded and really take in what they're saying. Really take the time to apply the lessons you learn to your life and I promise you will be much better off in the long run.

I would not be where I am today without the help of many mentors in my life. I would like to first thank my parents for the support they have given me for so many years. You do so much for me and always believe in me. It would be impossible for me to be where I am or who I am without you. Thank you both so much.

I also want to thank my teammates who have supported me and have been there for me through the years. Thank you for pushing me in practice and for all of the fun times. My experience on the team would not have been the same without you all.

Lastly, I want to thank each and every coach who has invested in me throughout my time on Orinda Aquatics. Thank you for the time you put into the team and each swimmer. Thank you for not only caring about our swimming but who we are as a person, and how we are doing. Thank you for demonstrating what it means to be a person of high character. I am forever grateful for the impact you have had on my life and the lessons you have taught me. Gaby

Charlotte Wu
Diablo Valley College
- *swimming*

North Coast Consol Finalist
Western Zone Qualifier
Scholar Athlete

Dear Donnie (and the OA team), first off, I can't stress enough how incredibly blessed I am to be a part of this team. You have all revitalized my passion for swimming, and my life has only gotten better because of it.

About a little over a year ago, I was a part of a sport with (unfortunately) an incredibly toxic team culture. The environment caused a number of issues for me both inside the sport and in my personal life, which included both my grades, which were suffering badly, and also my relationship with my parents, since my past sport would cause us to argue constantly about whether or not it was good for me. I was incredibly dejected and finally decided to quit and returned to swimming rec over the summer. Through some of my incredible friends (on Orinda Aquatics), I decided to try out OA in the fall.

I will never forget my first day of OA practice: I was so nervous as I walked into the Soda Center. But all throughout the day, I got incredibly warm welcomes from so many people. This was a shock to me, since I expected no one to talk to me (being the new kid). I have been on many teams before and I have never experienced this type of utterly welcoming and kind environment. That day definitely had a profound impact on me, and it is a true testament to the culture that Ronnie and Donnie have built, and the amazing people on the team that carry on this culture every day.

From that day on it's been nothing but inspiring. This team has taught me what it means to live with character to the best of my ability inside and outside of the pool. My work ethic significantly improved, and my final year of high school I got the best grades I have in all four years. My relationship with my parents has also significantly improved, as they can clearly see how much of a positive impact OA has had on me.

But beyond all of that, I gained a new family. And I'm beyond excited to continue my journey with them as I go on to the first chapter of my college experience at Diablo Valley College. So, from the bottom of my heart, I want to say **Thank You** Orinda Aquatics for everything you have done for me. Charlotte

Camille Valvur
NYU
- *swimming*

Sectional Qualifier
Scholar-Athlete
Campo Diving Record
Presidential Volunteer Service Award (4 years)

Dear my thirteen-year-old self - You have just quit gymnastics which you have done for basically ten years and you don't know if you did the right thing. But one day Matt Ehrenberger is going to see your photo at Luna and you're

going to see that you made the right decision. I'm not saying the 5 years on OA were easy or that you didn't get disillusioned, but you learned more about yourself and grew a lot more than you could've hoped for. Your strokes became more technically sound and you weren't too bad by senior year. You will even be swimming at NYU in the fall.

So here is what we learned in our five years at Orinda Aquatics. In the junior group, you were able to find friends that would help you in high school and, although, not all of them made it to this banquet, you're still friends with them. Senior group made some of these bonds stronger and invited you to become friends with the older kids, and each year it gets harder to say goodbye. Travel meets can be challenging but the memories you make are not ones easily forgotten. The friendships are what make the team and swimming something to be part of, even if that is because you can groan together about the cold morning or the difficult practice. Together we bonded through the hardships. Thank you to all of my teammates that have made the practices a little easier and the freezing winter mornings where you are forced to scrape the ice off your car a little less cold.

When I count the number of coaches you've had at Orinda Aquatics, just in the four years of high school (6), you'll look back and see that each one gave you a lesson that created who you are today. Matt Ehrenberger helped me understand that everyone has to start somewhere and there is some good that comes out of everything. Sometimes you just have to look a little harder to see the good. Sophie showed me that you need to try every event and then you'll find the one that fits you. Kevin gave me the fundamentals to a proper handshake. Jill showed me that in everyday there are your bad moments, your good moments, and the moments to look forward to. Matt Armanini taught me that hard work pays off and that the small six lane lap pool is not the short end of the stick, but rather an opportunity to see how well you can do an impossible set in a very warm pool. Marc has explained to me that technique is one of the most crucial things in swimming. Ronnie has proposed the idea that all one needs is personality and ability. And lastly Donnie, talked loudly about respect for oneself and the impossibility of wearing two hats, i.e., you cannot wear one hat in the pool and go outside only to switch it. Each coach gave me important life skills that will help me in the future and for that I am grateful.

So a deep thank you to the coaches who helped me understand that; although I was not the fastest swimmer, I had potential; that swimming was the correct choice; and that all of the pain and discomfort was worth it. Mom and Dad, thank you for all of your support over the last five years on OA and how you have gone above and beyond to help me accomplish all that I have. Camille.

Simone Ostler

TCU

- club (tbd)

Western Zone Qualifier

OA Coaches Award Winner

Scholar Athlete

High School Team Captain

The very first day I tried out Orinda Aquatics I fell in love with the team. The incredible people, supportive coaches, and the "Character First" culture are what make this team truly unique and stand apart from any other team. This program is one of the places where I feel like I belong. Being on the team for the past five years has helped shape who I am as a person and taught me many valuable life lessons and for that I am forever grateful to Orinda Aquatics.

Matt and Marc - Thank you for being my first coaches on the team and for helping my transition from a rec swimmer to a year-round swimmer go smoothly. Matt, thank you for insisting that I was a butterflyer even though I tried to fight it many times. Marc, I have enjoyed all of our conversations about random topics and thank you for always being so positive, and for letting us stretch before practice.

Ronnie and Donnie - I cannot put it into words how grateful I am for both of you and for your dedication to every single swimmer on OA. Thank you both so much for always supporting me, and for all that you do behind the scenes. I will never forget your kindness and generosity. Ronnie- thank you for always keeping me on my toes and for making me laugh. Donnie- thank you for understanding my situation and for working with me, especially when I started to really struggle. I would also like to thank my parents for driving me to the very early morning practices, working all of the meets, and for being my number one supporters. To my teammates- thank you for being my second family and for being there for me no matter what. We have laughed together, smiled together, cried together, and grown together these past five years. I love you all so much and I can't wait to hear about all the amazing things that all of you will accomplish.

Two and a half years ago I severely injured my back in a weight lifting accident and it has been quite the journey to say the least. This year, has been especially hard for me and I seriously considered quitting swimming. My back was constantly flaring up and my pain levels were significantly higher than normal and I couldn't get them back down. I had forgotten why I chose this team and how much I loved the sport. I started to lose hope of my back ever healing. If I was on any other team I probably would have just quit. However, the team helped to get me through this mental block by constantly checking on me and helping me in any way that they could. I received texts after doctor's appointments, words of encouragement, and hugs when it had been a particularly rough day. Although this injury has been extremely frustrating for me, I wouldn't change any of it. This experience has helped me grow stronger as a person and has taught me to look for the silver lining in everything. Orinda Aquatics - you mean the absolute world to me and although it breaks my heart that my time here is over, I will take all the lessons I have learned with me, and continue to live my life putting "Character First". I can't wait to come visit next year and hear all about how everyone is doing. Thanks for the best five years. Simone

Eloise Engs
UC Davis
- swimming

State Finalist
North Coast Final/Champion (relay)
High School Team Captain
Swimming All American

While reflecting back on my four short years on Orinda Aquatics, *I remember nothing but learning valuable lessons and making many lifelong relationships and memories.*

I started to love the sport of swimming on my recreational team: Orinda Country Club. When I started high school, I made the decision to join Orinda Aquatics so I could fully commit myself to swimming. It wasn't always easy being a student-athlete in high school, but I don't regret a minute of it. Waking up at 4:45 on weekdays for morning practice definitely weren't my fondest memories, but being there with my friends made it so much better.

Coming into this program, I expected nothing except swimming, but it is much more than that. Swimming isn't easy to say the least, and the lessons I have learned my past four years on this team, such as never giving up and working hard day in and day out, have shaped me to be the person I am today. But most importantly, I was surrounded by a team throughout the entire journey that cared just as much as I did about my improvement, and vice versa. The support the people on this team gave me kept me determined to do well. I would like to thank a few of these people.

To the Senior 4 ladies: first, I would like to thank the tough freshman, Lexi Fok, Sydney Griscavage, and Amber Van Meines who pushed me everyday to do my best. I seriously could not have done it without you three. I am so thankful I got the opportunity to train with such talented swimmers and awesome human beings. There is no doubt in my mind that the three of you will do amazing things in your three years left of high school and beyond. Keep working hard ladies! And to the rest of you, I couldn't have asked for a better support system throughout

the years I have been on this team. Lastly, I would like to thank a forever friend, Paige Hanley, for teaching me the true meaning of positivity and perseverance. You are one of the strongest people I know and I am so lucky I got to ride along with you on this journey. Thank you for never giving up on me and making me a better person. I am so lucky to have such strong young women in my life and I know these friendships will last forever.

To Ronnie, Donnie, and Marc: thank you for the endless support throughout my years of high school. I really appreciate your encouragement to make me a faster swimmer and a better person. Marc, thanks for gossiping with me. I can always find a friend in you! Donnie, thank you for being a fantastic high school coach. I am so lucky to have a coach like you for both high school and club swimming! Thank you for everything. Ronnie, thank you for making me the swimmer I am today, making me laugh until my stomach hurts, and more importantly, teaching me valuable lessons in which I can take into the next chapter of my life. I am so grateful for both of you.

To my family: thank you for being by my side and putting up with me for 17 plus years of craziness. Thanks Mom and Dad for never giving up on me. And thanks to my brothers for never failing to make me laugh. Because of you, I have become an independent young woman and I'm excited to take the skills you've taught me into college. I am going to miss you all so much.

As my high school years come to an abrupt end, I can't help but feel happy and sad while reflecting upon my years on Orinda Aquatics. As I am sad to leave such wonderful people around me, I am excited to start the next chapter of my life and I feel ready to do so after learning such valuable lessons on this team and from the people around me. Thanks for a great four years!! Eloise

Anna Le-Nguyen
UC Davis
- club

Academic All American
North Coast Finalist (soccer/swimming – consol)
Four-year Scholar Athlete/CSF
President Community Service Award

I've been swimming for nine years, and more than half of them have been with OA. Throughout those years I've met my closest friends, swam my fastest races, and made my favorite memories. It's hard to believe that my time on this team is about to end. It seems just like yesterday I was the scared thirteen-year-old who had no idea what to expect coming into my first official OA practice.

There are many words that can describe my five years on OA, but nothing defines it as well as the people who made my time on this team so memorable. Although she is no longer with the team today, I want to thank Sophie who believed in me from the very beginning. She pushed me past what I thought possible. She developed me to be the person and swimmer I am today and I am forever grateful.

Thank you to Matt Armo, who is no longer on the coaching staff, but will always be a part of the OA family. You made the most of every practice and encouraged all of us in the Senior 3 group to work harder. I will always remember your sarcastic comments and indescribably hard morning distance workouts. You taught me the meaning of work ethic and how to be an athlete.

Thank you to Marc who always managed to make me smile and turn bad situations into good ones. I'll miss the long talks we'd have as everyone else was warming up and I'd be procrastinating getting in myself. I won't forget the many hours we spent each week on freestyle technique. Even though I complained every time, my stroke thanks you now.

Thank you to Donnie who pushed and inspired me to be a leader when I never thought I could be one. You always took the time to coach each swimmer individually whether it was giving them advice, filming their swims, or

working with them on their stroke. Your care and devotion to this team is something I greatly admire and will miss next year. And thank you for letting me get out of practice early to get donuts for the team on special occasions.

Thank you to all the team parents who put in so much effort and give so much time to this team. Whether it's timing at meets or bringing us food after a hard workout, you all do the absolute most. The team wouldn't be the same without all of your help.

Lastly, to all my teammates who created the culture and family that I am sad to leave and will miss dearly next year. You guys are what makes this team so special. Thank you to you all. Anna

Nicole Edwards

Cal Poly

- club

Western Zone Qualifier

Scholar Athlete

State Meet/North Coast Final (relay)

I cannot even begin to describe my journey as a swimmer over the years. I began swimming when I was four years old, and swam for Rancho Colorados Swim Team for thirteen years. For the first few years, I considered competitive swimming just a fun extracurricular activity, but as I got older, I began to take a different approach towards the sport. I developed a profound love for competitive swimming, and everything that came with it. I became obsessed with competition and big swim meets where I got the opportunity to race other fast swimmers.

When I reached the 13-14 year-old age group, many swimmers I knew converted to year-round to take their swimming to the next level. At this time, I did not plan on switching, and continued to swim for my recreational team because it was consistent and what I knew. However, I wondered for a while what it was like, and if I should make the transition.

When I began swimming for Acalanes High School, I competed against many talented swimmers. They challenged me, and pushed me to work even harder in practice. Inspired by them, I strongly considered year-round swimming.

A set of circumstances lead me to join Orinda Aquatics my senior year, and it was by far the best decision I ever made. On the first day of practice, I slid into a random lane with six other swimmers. I told them that I was new to the team this year, and they immediately welcomed me with open arms. They gave me an overview of the team, and said that if I had any questions, they would be happy to answer them. Something was different about Orinda Aquatics. I had never felt more welcome and a part of the team than any other team I experienced. The rest of practice, I was filled with great excitement. I was excited about the team, the meets, the activities, and everything about Orinda Aquatics.

Over the months, I made a lot of new friends that I quickly became close with. I was overwhelmed and surprised by how many people walked up to me and asked how I was doing. During practices, I felt motivated and energized to work hard because of the immeasurable support from my teammates. The sets were difficult, but because of the positive energy generated by my teammates, we were able to push through them. As the season progressed, I found myself swimming events that I did not usually swim while I swam rec and qualified for NCS for the first time. I was also able to travel to the state meet in a relay for the first time because of Orinda Aquatics, and we placed fourth overall.

First, I would like to thank my coaches Donnie, Marc, and Ronnie for everything they have taught me from smart swimming, to being a positive and supportive teammate. I have definitely reached out more and offered my support because of your valuable lessons that I will take with me to college and beyond. Thank you for always believing in me. I am so grateful to have had you all as coaches!

Second, I would like to thank my parents for supporting me throughout this entire journey. Thank you for coming to basically every single swim meet, and cheering me and my teammates on. It means the absolute world to me! Lastly, I would like to thank my incredible teammates on Orinda Aquatics. You all made joining a new team very fun and exciting. I cannot thank you enough for everything you have supported and helped me with, especially when I got stung by a bee. You all are the best training buddies I could ever ask for, so thank you!

Overall, I cannot even explain how glad I am I joined Orinda Aquatics. This team has not only made me a better swimmer, but a better person. I will miss being called “Senior” (Emma Bustamante) every time I step foot on the pool deck. I wish I had joined sooner, but I am so grateful for this past year. I wish everyone the best of luck moving forward! Thank you, Orinda Aquatics! Nicole

Serena Siow **San Jose State**

Scholar Athlete
Volunteer – Camp Krem & Performers for Progress

Throughout the years of being on Orinda Aquatics, I remember coming to the banquets and reading all of the letters of the graduating swimmers. After the banquet I would go home and try to think of what I would say when I graduated. I wanted to reflect on how this team has changed my life for the better and all of the valuable lessons I have learned. However now that the time has come, I am at a loss for words. Because I can no longer think of a way to describe how formative this team has been, I came up with a short list of the most important lessons that I have learned and I hope others will take away as well.

- I have learned how to lead as well as be a supportive teammate
- I have learned the importance of challenging myself
- I have learned self-discipline
- I have learned how to be a role model

Moving on into this next chapter of my life I’m not certain where I will end up, however I do know that I will take what I have learned through OA with me. The lessons I learned on this team have become the building blocks of my character and because of this I know that through my experiences on Orinda Aquatics, I will be able to face the challenges that come next. Serena

Andrew Devlin **UC Santa Barbara**

Academic All American
Scholar Athlete/National AP Scholar
Western Zone Qualifier
NCS Qualifier

I have been a part of the Orinda Aquatics community since I was seven, yet it is only as I prepare to leave Orinda for college that I really get the chance to look back and appreciate how special the entirety of Orinda Aquatics is. Swimming, to me, is unique as a juxtaposition of intense competition and the calming feeling of moving through the water. Orinda Aquatics is similarly special to me. Building athletes with character seems to be a popular theme in youth sports, yet I am fairly confident that there is not another team where athletes and coaches lead by example in order to create an atmosphere of integrity, modesty, and kindness to the degree that Orinda Aquatics does.

Since making the decision to end my rec swimming career and join Orinda Aquatics fulltime, I have learned a lot of important lessons. Lessons about victory, defeat, humility, hard work and dedication, compassion, and of course,

teamwork. Yet while early morning practices and time spent training have certainly taught me plenty about those nouns, so have the seemingly mundane interactions with the many extraordinary individuals that make up this team. For example, when I was ten, after mustering the courage to ask Ronnie, “how do you recover from a crooked dive?” he answered, “don't dive crooked in the first place.” At the time, that answer seemed beyond useless, but in hindsight there was even more wisdom than I was looking for. Or look to the consistent support from teammates, before, during, and after races. Such interactions and my time on Orinda Aquatics as a whole have given me lessons I will carry into my college life and onwards. These interactions, individuals leading by example, Friday meeting articles of people doing what is right, and the lessons of the sport as a whole make up a good part of what being a good person means to me. The atmosphere that surrounds this team is undoubtedly special.

Finally, I have a lot of people to thank, for without them my life and swimming career would not be the same. First and foremost, my family whom without my swimming career would not have been possible. Many kids never get a chance to be a student athlete, others have to give up their dreams; I am thankful for my parents always helping me to follow my aspirations. The term that comes to mind is, “heroes without capes.” A special thank you goes to my dad who has spent innumerable hours in the sun as a rec swim starter and USA swimming official. A further thank you goes to all of the Orinda Aquatics parents for making all that this team does possible.

Additionally, thank you to Anthony Estrada for believing I could be a good swimmer when I first started polar bears, to Tony Ravnik and the rest of the Sleepy Hollow staff for creating my love for the sport, and to Trevor Rose for being an awesome guy.

Thank you to Jill Jones for helping me rediscover my love for the sport. To Marc Cavallero for coaching me at four different junctures of my Orinda Aquatics career. To Matt Ehrenberger, the coach with whom I've likely spent the most time with, for helping me improve and always looking out for me even if it meant kicking me out of Sleepy Hollow practice for flirting, cheering in the rain at JO's, or reminding me of a practice I missed even when I thought I'd escaped him in the senior group. To Ronnie, for holding me accountable in practice and for good wisdom, technique advice, and humor. And to Donnie, for helping me grow as a swimmer and a person, pushing me to intervals and breath control segments I didn't think were possible, helping me on my college search, and showing the importance of having the right mindset and practicing what you preach.

Although it certainly is difficult to walk away, I will hold onto the memories of my time on this team. I can certainly say Orinda Aquatics and swimming has changed me for the better. For this, I am grateful. Andrew

Ashleigh Loney

Chapman
- *swimming*

Western Zone Qualifier

North Coast Qualifier
Scholar Athlete

Four years ago, when I stepped foot onto the pool deck ready for my first Orinda Aquatics practice, I could have never imagined a team could impact my life in the way it has. This team has not only provided me with swimming instruction, but lifelong friends and skills that have impacted my character. Having the opportunity to surround myself with many driven and selfless individuals has pushed me to better myself as a person and has shaped my ideals for the future. Although I have endured much throughout my time at OA, I wouldn't trade my experience for the world, for it has molded me into the stronger person I am today.

I started swimming at the later age of nine years old and developed a strong passion for the sport through recreational swimming. At an early age I would listen longingly as my friends talked about being on the swim team, so when my parents decided to sign me up I developed a deep appreciation for the sport and everything that came with it. I woke up each day excited to go to practice and eager to compete in meets every weekend.

When I made the switch to Orinda Aquatics my love for swimming was changed into something much deeper. Here I had the opportunity to not only grow as an athlete, but be in an environment that would push me to improve upon myself as a person. Now, when I think of swimming I don't necessarily think of the sport itself. I think of the time spent with friends before early morning practices. I think of the connections I've made with people I otherwise never would have met. But most importantly I think of all of the lessons being on this team has taught me that will propel me into the future.

Swimming has never been easy for me, but that is part of why it is so rewarding. Since my freshman year of high school I've been dealing with health issues and injuries, from shoulder injuries, to dislocated ribs, to VCD (a breathing disability similar to asthma but without the help of an inhaler). I don't know if there has ever been a point in my OA swimming career where I was physically able to train like everybody else. More mentally straining than anything, these difficulties made the frustrating parts of swimming that much more frustrating, but also the gratifying parts that much more gratifying. Through it all I have learned that even if you run into problems, it should never be used as an excuse to give up on something you love. Nothing is necessarily impossible, sometimes you just need to approach situations differently than others.

To my amazing parents, I am eternally grateful for all of your love and support you have provided not only in swimming, but throughout my entire life. Throughout the past 18 years of my life you have not only been my role models but my best friends. Thank you for the sacrifices you both have made in order to drive me to practice on time everyday for the past four years, and support you have shown me throughout my swimming career. Your enthusiasm, compassion, and wisdom has helped shape me into the person I am today. No amount of words can express how thankful I am to have both of you in my life.

To my coaches, thank you for spending the time and effort helping me with my stroke and creating such a positive team environment. Your values have helped me create my own, and have taught me what it means to be selfless and a leader. Thank you for helping me get through my injuries and checking up on me to make sure I am doing well. I will miss having coaches that care as much about me as a person, as me as an athlete next year in college.

To the team, I am so incredibly fortunate to have gotten to meet all of you. When I first joined the team four years ago, I was so frightened that I would feel left out or wouldn't be accepted by anyone in the beginning, but I was so wrong. I was immediately taken in by all of the other freshman swimmers and invited to hang out with them outside of swim practice from the start. The friendliness that you all showed me my first few days of practice is a prime example of the OA team character. Your humility and drive has pushed me to better myself and reminds me to stay grounded. From my fellow seniors, to the freshman I have only met this past year, thank you for making my experience at Orinda Aquatics incredibly valuable. Ashleigh

Isaac Lopez
UC Santa Cruz
- *swimming*

North Coast Qualifier
State Qualifier – Cross Country
Scholar Athlete
Western Zone Qualifier

I would like to sincerely thank the parents, coaches, and my teammates for supporting me throughout my high school swim career. More than swimming itself, it's the relationships I've developed with people in the swimming community that have meant the most to me. I joined Orinda Aquatics during the fall of my junior year. Most of the people on Orinda Aquatics had been on the team for many years. I was lucky enough to have a friend on the team and in my group. We trained together and race one another. This relationship allowed both of us to improve significantly and I learned the importance of positive and supportive interaction between teammates.

From my experiences at Orinda Aquatics, I also realized the importance of older, more experienced swimmers connecting with newer swimmers. Early on I did not talk to the younger swimmers on the team. After my experience on Orinda Aquatics, though, I made a strong effort to welcome the freshmen on my high school swim team. I would support them any way I could, with rides to BART and anything they needed. From OA, I learned how important it is to be a mentor and I hope I've inspired the younger members on my high school team to be mentors to future freshmen. Isaac

Camille Killeen
UCLA

**Academic All American/Scholar Athlete
Sectionals Qualifier/NCS Qualifier
Miramonte Highest Academic Honors;
Miramonte Math Department Honors Award**

I was 13 when I joined Orinda Aquatics, taking the path from Montclair Swim Team to Orinda Aquatics. At the time, switching teams simply meant reuniting with my friend Mallory, but later meant much more during my six years on the team. Orinda Aquatics represented harder practices, longer workouts and a whole new group of teammates and coaches to get to know. These new aspects of my swimming career led to better endurance, meeting some of my best friends and learning from inspiring coaches who pushed me to be my best, both in the water and on deck.

I was so fortunate to have the chance to be coached by Kevin Lai for my first three years on the team. Not only did I learn how to have a much firmer handshake and not take everything he said seriously, I learned to appreciate the harder workouts and I had a mentor who truly cared about me and my success. As difficult as his sets were, I learned to value the importance of challenging workouts. I would go home exhausted after a long day of school and swimming, but I was able to feel proud of what I had accomplished at practice, bragging to my parents about what I was able to do, giving more meaning to each practice and pushing me closer to my goals. Kevin also made it very clear how much he cared about all of us and always did what he could to help us reach our goals. His support helped me continue to work hard and believe that I would eventually get the times I wanted.

Kevin's move to Virginia was very sad for me but similar to my move to the team, the change led to another great mentor in my life. Matt Armanini was an incredible coach. For most of my freshman, sophomore and junior years, I went through a period when I hardly dropped any time in any of my events. Many of my best times were from 8th grade with an occasional small drop here and there. I kept working hard at practice and trying my best at meets but not dropping time was extremely frustrating. Finally, during the spring of Junior year something clicked at practice one week. I started feeling faster and my times in test sets were reflecting that. At DAL that year I improved in both of my events, made NCS for the first time and dropped close to a full second in the 50 free.

That summer continued to be a success as I dropped in all of my events and got the sectional cut in both 50 and 100 free. After my race in the 50 free I ran over to Matt, double checked that I got the time, gave him a big hug and went to the warm down pool with the biggest smile on my face. He texted my parents immediately because he was so excited for me. Matt was always genuinely excited for his swimmers and their accomplishments, big or small, making me always feel like I had a mentor who was truly rooting for me to do my best. This type of support made it so much easier to come to practice every day, bear the cold morning practices and get through the toughest workouts. Matt was always there for me, whether that meant giving me the challenging set I needed to get stronger or the reassuring talk to keep me going mentally.

I couldn't have continued to push myself and put in the work necessary without both Kevin and Matt. I can't thank both of them enough for being the fantastic and inspiring mentors and coaches that they are. I don't know where I would be without them. Thank you!! Camille

Additional Seniors in our Graduating class:

Alec Baker

Bucknell

- *swimming*

Futures Qualifier
Swimming All American
Scholar Athlete
North Coast Finalist

Will Barber

Colorado College

- *swimming*

Sectional Qualifier
Scholar Athlete
NCS Consol Finalist
High School Team Captain

Daniella Moroz

Hawaii

- *sailing*

Multiple Kiteboarding World Champion
Member of the USA Sailing National Team
A candidate for 2024

Jackson Masson

Whitman

- *swimming*

Scholar Athlete
NCS Qualifier
League Finalist
Western Zone Qualifier

Arman Saghafi

Cal State Long Beach

- *club*

Sectional Qualifier
Scholar Athlete
NCS Consol Finalist
OA Most Improved

**Your integrity is
your gift to yourself
and to the world.**

**Integrity – being
honest and having
strong moral
principles.**

Myles Pitts, slideplayer