

Orinda Aquatics

Class of 2021

Senior Letters



“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 - Syracuse University 2013



Olivia Eukel – Oberlin College, swimming

It is hard for me to believe I am sitting down to write this letter. The extraordinary opportunity to swim with Orinda Aquatics during the past six years has easily been the most formative and transformative experience of my life thus far - I cannot imagine my life without it. The time has passed quickly, and the emotions are bittersweet. In the often used but very true words of A.A. Milne, “how lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.” I feel so incredibly lucky to have swam and grown alongside you all. Thank you for teaching me through your words and actions, thoroughly and beautifully, the profound significance of living a life filled with care, compassion, determination, community, selflessness, and integrity.

In my first two months with Orinda Aquatics, as hard as I tried, I just could not tell Donnie and Ronnie apart. I would constantly be shuffling up to a teammate and shyly asking who was who, incredulous when they would instantly give me an accurate answer. But over time, I learned that other than the first letter of their first names, there are actually some differences...Donnie’s hair is fuller, and he is slightly taller, and their voices are different. But in all seriousness, here is how they’re the same. They are both supportive in every definition of the word. They both live their values in every action and interaction. They both care deeply about their swimmers, their program, and the values they teach.

Donnie, you have such a big heart. You are one of the most kind, compassionate, deliberate, and sincere people I have ever met. Thank you for being an extraordinary leader and listener, and for being a friend to me and to so many others. Thank you for motivating me, trusting me, respecting me, and believing in me. Those weekly meetings, articles, team talks, and after-practice conversations, both with Orinda Aquatics and Miramonte Swimming, were some of the most formative influences in my development, and I am forever grateful. Thank you for giving your swimmers the gift of the most important values in life that they then go on to teach others - your impact truly cannot be measured. I am eternally grateful to have gotten to know you over the years. Being coached by you and being your friend have been and continue to be among the best gifts I have ever received.

Ronnie, thank you for your determination, care, and good humor. You know the value of hard work and truly have a great sense of humor - one of the best kinds. You tease good-naturedly and make people smile. You have the gift of putting people at ease. Thank you for encouraging your swimmers to work as hard as they can in practice every day. You have certainly fostered self-motivation and confidence in countless athletes. I have the poem “The Journey” that you showed us, on the wall above my desk. Whenever I glance up it reminds me that there is a reason I choose to be out of my comfort zone, and it motivates me to keep moving forward. When I choose to “just go” forward, just to take the next step, I learn so much more, and have much more fulfilling experiences. I would have never known what could be if you didn’t help me gain the courage to “just go.”

Matt and Marc, although 7-year-old Olivia apparently “never said a word” to you during Polar Bears fall swim, and I could never seem to keep my head down in breaststroke (or any stroke for that matter) despite your many reminders, I very much appreciate your continued support and guidance. Matt, thank you for your positive, proactive energy and your humor, and for giving so many young swimmers like myself a strong foundation for success in the sport. Marc, thank you for your endless support, deliberate positive reinforcement, and dedication. I have very much enjoyed being coached by you both in three phases of my life: as a young child, a middle schooler, and a high schooler.

Kati, thank you for being kind to me and for trusting me. You are one of the strongest people I know. I very much admire your determination, heart, and compassion. It has been so fun and meaningful getting to know you, and I wish you all the best.

Dom, thank you for your support and humor. I will always remember the entire group bursting into genuine laughter after one of your jokes. Thank you for pushing us to work as hard as we could to improve.

Jill, if this letter finds you, thank you for believing in me and supporting me. You truly taught me the definition of hard work and made a profound and positive impact on me in my freshman year.

To my parents, I cannot thank you enough for your extreme and unwavering support, patience, sacrifice, and love. I am forever grateful for you, and I love you.

To my teammates, thank you for motivating me to work hard, asking me how my day has been, cheering for me, inspiring me to be the best version of myself, and for becoming like family. It is my greatest hope that I have done the same for you.

To those who have time remaining on their OA journey, I implore you to live in the present as much as possible. Read the articles and stories that are printed out for you, and spend time soaking in their wisdom. Delight in the small moments with your teammates and find joy in the difficult sets and early mornings. They truly are the moments you will remember and cherish. Here is a quote, found in the book *Ever Wonder*, which was recommended to me by Donnie. It has helped me many times, and I hope it will help you too. "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to *live everything*. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, some day far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer." - Rainer Maria Rilke

Live in the present, love the questions and the people around you, appreciate every opportunity, thank those in your life that support you, and I promise that you will find yourself living into the answers.

No words I could write would be powerful enough to describe the way I feel for this team, and the impact it has had on me. I will carry the lessons I have learned and relationships I have built on this team with me for the rest of my life, and they will influence my every action. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this truly unparalleled opportunity. I will miss you all so much, but I will look forward to coming back to visit.

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." -Mahatma Gandhi.

With much love and gratitude,

Olivia



Connor Ormsby – Gap Year, swimming

My time on OA has had a major impact on my life. I joined Orinda Aquatics in February of my sophomore year in high school. Having only done rec and high school swimming my entire life I was pretty new to the sport. Not only was I new to the sport but I was awful at swimming. Prior to joining OA I was extremely nervous about going year round. I was afraid I was not going to be good enough or I was not going to make any friends. My first day I was instantly hooked to the atmosphere this team created. Kids went out of their way to introduce themselves to me. While in the pool most of the swimmers were extremely positive which is something I had never experienced. I started in the Senior 2 group under Coach Donnie. He helped me improve my stroke and introduced me to OA's motto of "character first". From there with hard work and the help of my amazing teammates and coaches, I was moved up to Senior 3 with Coach Marc, and then to my surprise, I was moved to

Senior 4 with Coach Ronnie. I can't even begin to describe all of the positive experiences I have had on this team. It has been an amazing journey that will definitely play a role in what the future holds for me.

My experience on OA has been extremely impactful on the person I am today. The friends that I have met and the memories that have been created have been something that I will hold with me for the rest of my life. I'd like to thank a few people that I felt played a huge role with my journey on this team.

Donnie, I remember the first day I showed up on the pool deck. You welcomed me to the team and instantly started to help me improve my stroke. You worked with me even though at the time I was awful. You instilled hope in me and helped me believe that one day I could hopefully become an amazing swimmer. You worked with me in the afternoon every day for three months helping me not only become a better swimmer but an overall better person. The dedication you have toward your swimmers inspires me. Thank you for teaching me the value of character and the integrity that follows with it. I am extremely grateful to have had you as a coach. Thank you, Coach Donnie.

Ronnie, to this day I am still unsure as to why you took a chance on me. I remember after swimming my 200 breaststroke at Clovis and going a 2:20 you came up and helped me with my stroke. At every morning practice after that you helped me improve my technique. You were one of the only ones that believed in me. You saw something that quite frankly no other coach saw, and I am extremely grateful for that. When I joined your group, I was blown away by the group of kids that I was training with. The discipline and leadership they displayed was something that I had never experienced. I knew this was a result of your coaching. I remember thinking to myself how lucky I was to be in your group. You have been extremely influential on my life. You helped me achieve goals that I never thought I could ever achieve. You have helped me become the best swimmer that I can be. Thank you for all the laughs and great memories that you have brought me. I am so grateful to have you as a coach and I am excited to get the opportunity to spend another year with you. Thank you, Coach Ronnie.

To the Senior 4 boys, I just want to start by saying I love all of you. The number of fun memories we have made together is insane. You all are such a special group of guys. Every single one of you wants nothing but the best for the people around you. During practice and at meets you all push me to be the best swimmer I can be. The amount of support you display not only to me, but your teammates is unmatched. I am so lucky to have you boys in my life. Thank you.

Channing, Nate, and Aidan, thank you guys for pushing me during practice. You are all a crucial part of where I am today. My breaststroke would not be the same without the three of you. You three are such amazing people and being able to match up with you guys during practice has been a blessing. I am extremely thankful to have all three of you in my life. You all have made me laugh to the point where my stomach hurts and have pushed me in practice to where my entire body hurts. I am so grateful for you. Thank you.

Mom and Dad, I would not be here today if it was not for you guys. You guys are the reason I am a part of this amazing team. Thank you for both supporting and encouraging me to go year-round. You have been nothing but supportive through my journey on OA. With injuries, illnesses, and bad meets you are always there still supporting me. I am extremely grateful to have you both in my life. You both have loved me unconditionally and sometimes I take that for granted. Thank you again for everything you have done for me. I love both of you. Thank you.

Lastly, I want to thank all my teammates. Thank you all for being a part of this amazing part of my life. We have all gone through a lot together. We have all experienced the same physical and mental pain while in the pool. We all know what it's like to have a goal and do everything we can to achieve it. Thank you for everything.

Connor



Jalen Evan – MIT, swimming

I've been swimming on Orinda Aquatics since I was in the 8th grade and my time on this team has been transformative to say the least. I think the most outwardly visible impact this team has had on me is through my athletic growth and success. I remember that before I joined this team, I was not very deliberate in my training. For example, on my previous year-around team, my personal philosophy was that if I finished a practice and made all of the intervals, then I had done a good job. As such, I would often go easy on sets toward the beginning of practice so that I could make the intervals at the end. However, once I joined Orinda Aquatics, my mindset changed entirely. Orinda Aquatics taught me the value of working hard in practice and pushing myself to the point of discomfort. The team taught me the value of focusing on my technique in training and having the discipline to work on it even through fatigue. The team taught me the value of being deliberate about what I was working on every day to ensure that I will be consistently improving as a swimmer.

This new, more intentional, outlook on training did wonders for my swimming career. From a humble beginning, struggling to finish a 100 fly, a found myself at Sectionals going 56.5 long course. This was certainly the result of dedication, but now I can see it was equally the result of the training process that was fostered in workout and with my teammates.

Although the athletic success I have had, thanks to this team, is notable, I do not think that it is the most valuable thing that I will take with me when I go off to college. Instead, I believe that it is the life lessons that I have gained from being on this team that have truly shaped me as a person. It is these life lessons that have helped me get to where I am today and that will continue to help me reach my long-term goals.

For example, I believe a lot of the success that I have had academically, outside of the pool, comes from lessons that I have learned in the pool. Since I knew I had to wake up early for morning practices, and that I would get home late, due to the afternoon practices, I became very good at managing my time and developed good study habits. I became proactive about addressing the work that I had to complete so that I could get my schoolwork done, while still attending as many practices as possible.

Swimming on this team also taught me about the value of hard work and how to deal with failure. On Orinda Aquatics, I learned that the amount of effort you put in the pool at practice every day is directly correlated to the success you will have. It is always possible to cut corners in a workout, but in doing so, you are only hurting yourself. I apply this same mentality to everything I do outside of the pool, and it has helped me have success in all aspects of my life. However, I also learned that it is possible to work really hard in workouts and do everything right and still underperform at the next big meet. Nevertheless, when this happens, I have learned how to persevere through the disappointment, refocus, and continue to push myself in practice until the next meet opportunity. This mentality has really helped me persevere through the challenges and obstacles that I have experienced outside of the pool.

I also learned about what it means to be a leader on this team. Ronnie and Donnie have always emphasized a character first mentality. That could mean many different things to different people, but to me it means knowing who you are and what moral values you believe in and using those principles as a guiding force for everything you do in life. Oftentimes, this requires you to be willing to go against what your peers are doing and to stand up for what you believe in. I believe having the courage to do this is a core component of being a good leader, and I believe that I have gained it during my time on Orinda Aquatics.

I also want to take a step back and comment on the supportive culture of this team. Many people don't know this, but I actually joined this team unwillingly. I used to swim on another year-around team in Livermore and my grandfather would drive me to practices from my school in Oakland to Livermore and then home in Danville.

However, as his eyesight began to go bad, he could no longer drive me. As such, I had to pick a new team. I tried out on many different teams, but I remember, I specifically chose to join Orinda Aquatics because it was where I felt the most welcomed and supported. I was still able to make good friends and feel fully integrated into the team within a couple of months. I think the ease of my transition onto the team really exemplifies the inclusive team environment and positive culture this team provides, and I am truly grateful for it.

Lastly, I want to give thanks to the people who have helped me get to where I am today. First, I would like to thank the coaching staff for continuing to not only support me athletically, but also for genuinely caring about and supporting me in my life outside of the pool. Second, I would like to thank my peers for being such good, supportive friends and really pushing me to be my best both in and out of the pool. Lastly, I want to thank all of my family members for continuing to support me throughout my athletic career. In particular, I want to thank my parents for always being willing to go above and beyond to make sure I was always supported. Whether it was finding ways to take me to practice every day (including waking up for the early mornings) or coming to every swim meet they possibly could, I always knew I could count on them to do everything in their power to support me and help me achieve my goals.

Although I am very excited about my journey to come and all that it holds in store for me, my time on this team has meant the world to me and I am very sad to be leaving it. I am very grateful for Orinda Aquatics, as I truly think I would be a different person had it not been for my time and experiences on this team. I wish the team continued success in the years to come and I will be sure to stay in touch.

Sincerely, Jalen



Lindsay Lew – Claremont McKenna College

My start at Orinda Aquatics was anything but typical. I had just made the monumental decision to leave a team, mid-season, that I had been with for five years. I had no idea what I was getting into upon joining OA. I didn't know that the decision I was making wasn't just about swimming; it was going to change my life and surround me with a team that felt more like a family.

I attended one practice with OA before embarking on the five-day Western Zones meet in Clovis. Donnie had managed to get me a late entry to the meet, gave me a red OA t-shirt from the shed, and off we went. Getting onto a bus for three hours with 60 people I had never met before was daunting, but by the end of the trip, nearly every single person had welcomed me and I already felt like part of the team. I had never experienced cheering anywhere close to the way that OA cheers; but there were my new teammates, standing behind the blocks fifty meters away from me, cheering on my 100 fly although we had hardly just met. And even though I hadn't yet distinguished Donnie from Ronnie, they were already filming my stroke and seeing my potential in a way that no one else ever had. I will never forget the text I received from Emily Gebhardt, telling me that this team would quickly become family to me and that she would be looking out for me even though she was on her way to college. Emily and so many others on OA were- and still are- role models that I admire.

From then on, I loved every second of being on this team. I loved how every practice was made fun with music and camaraderie, I loved the chicken teriyaki bowls at home meets, the weekly team meetings with inspiring stories from Donnie, getting pulled out of practice to talk about crop circles and watch music videos with Ronnie, and most of all the way that everyone encouraged each other to swim fast and to be good people, no matter how different we were.

First off, I want to thank Marc for being an amazing coach, friend, and supporter. You cared about us as people, beyond just our performance in the pool, and I appreciated that more than anything. Thank you for being the guy we could talk to about anything and for making practice something I looked forward to everyday.

Ronnie, thank you for believing in me and putting your time and energy into helping me become a better, more hard-working swimmer. I'm immensely grateful for all the times that you stayed after your practice to watch me train or the occasional Saturdays when you let me slide into the Senior 4 lanes and do your sets. Thank you for showing me funny YouTube videos and for putting up my painting in your house. I am a better person because of you.

Donnie, you inspire us all with your wisdom and dedication to making this team the best it can be. Thank you for teaching me to widen my perspective, one of the most valuable lessons I have ever learned. Thank you for giving me the chance to be a part of something this amazing and for making me feel like I always have a place on the team.

To my parents, thank you for your unwavering support. I could not have done the 4:45am wake- ups without my dad getting up with me to make sure I had enough food to last me through two practices and a full day of school. I swam the best times of my life in the pouring rain and freezing cold with my mom there cheering me on and taking shaky iPhone videos. I know it wasn't easy for either of you, but you did it for me and I am eternally grateful.

This team taught me to be a leader both in and out of the pool; to show humility and think of others before myself; to be tough and push my limits, but to also be compassionate and enjoy the journey. I am truly so proud of everyone on OA and I know that you will succeed in all of your endeavors. I wish everyone the best of luck in the future and want to thank you for being the best friends and teammates I could ever have asked for.

Love, Lindsay



Mac Follmer – Gap Year, swimming

Dear Orinda Aquatics,

I will forever be grateful to have been a part of such an amazing organization, with some of my favorite role models, and the majority of my closest friends. Orinda Aquatics truly has allowed me to fulfill my full potential both in the pool, and as a person. When writing this I reflected upon my life without Orinda Aquatics, and realized just how big a part of my life it really is, without Orinda my afternoons are completely different, my friend circle looks completely different, and most of all my maturity looks completely different. This team is such an amazing place and continues to nurture class after class to become leaders, and high-character individuals. I know that when I am gone this will continue to be the case, and the next class of leaders will be born. Thank you for everything.

Love, Mac



Jennifer Fong - Merritt College

Orinda Aquatics has been a lifeline of which I am infinitely grateful for. The memories I have made and the lessons I have learned hold immense value, and their impacts will continue to shape who I am, *as well as who I want to be.*

When I turned 13, I aged off of the Montclair Swim Team and joined Orinda Aquatics. On my first day of practice, I was awestruck by how welcoming everyone on deck was, embracing current teammates as well as the possibility of new ones. Orinda Aquatics is an entire support system in and of itself. The team cultivates an environment that encourages individuals to thrive both in and out of the pool. Whether it is cheering for teammates at practices, cheering for teammates at meets, or checking in with one another to see how we are doing, this show of support can make the biggest difference. The opportunity to become immersed in such positivity and vibrancy is a rarity, though Orinda Aquatics creates these opportunities within every practice, dryland, meet, event, and celebration.

Orinda Aquatics is a community that is much like a family, and a strong example of this can be found in the cheering crowds that span the pool at Clovis. This team has introduced me to so many wonderful people, and I hold so much appreciation for you all. Thank you for the unforgettable memories that will always be reflected upon with a great fondness. Your presence has made each and every moment more enjoyable, from challenging practices to back-to-back meets, rain or shine. Your insight, which has been greatly influential, has made such a positive impact. Your successes bring me such joy, and I am so excited to see what the future holds for you all. Thank you to the OA coaches, who have been an absolute honor to work with. Thank you for your time and for your unwavering support and encouragement. It continues to be a source of motivation and drive in times of hardship and struggle. Thank you for cultivating such a warm and welcoming team environment, and for setting examples of who and what we should strive to be both in and out of the pool. Matt, Donnie, Marc, and Ronnie, your coaching has taught me invaluable life lessons of which I will forever cherish.

Thank you to the OA parents, who have made all of this possible. Your efforts are a part of what makes this team so special. Thank you for driving us to our practices and for working at our meets, even if that does entail waking up before sunrise and facing the onslaught of water behind the blocks. Your dedication and commitment is admirable, and I appreciate you all and all that you do.

Lastly, thank you to my parents and to my family. Thank you for holding open the doors to these incredible opportunities, and for offering a lending hand in fulfilling them. The time and energy you have devoted and the sacrifices you have made are infinitely appreciated. Thank you for enabling me to find and explore my passions and interests. Your compassionate and understanding presence has been the greatest gift, and you continue to inspire me daily. To my mom, who passed away last year, no quality or quantity of words can express how grateful I am to be your daughter. The appreciation and admiration I have for you is endless.

Thank you, and congratulations to the Class of 2021! Jenn



Channing Hanley – Texas, swimming

Thank you, Orinda Aquatics. Thank you for everything. As I reflect on my six years at Orinda Aquatics, it is safe to say that this team and the sport of swimming have shaped me into the person I am today. Orinda Aquatics taught me how to push myself, manage my time, and be disciplined, all while having the best times with my best friends. Orinda Aquatics is truly a family, and I am so grateful that I got to be a part of it. I will forever be thankful for the environment of this team, the lessons I've learned, and the people it has brought me close to.

As we all know, this past year and a half has been unforeseeable, but I think it is a perfect example of how special Orinda Aquatics is. Although we did not have countless hours in the pool or team activities, as we did in the past, it was inspiring to see everyone come together, make every workout count, and manage the emotional stress of a pandemic together. We are all lucky to be a part of a group of teenagers with a common goal and a craving for success. Since joining in 7th grade, I had seriously no clue what this team would do for me. Each year I grew close with my teammates and coaches, and they pushed and inspired me every single day.

Thank you, Donnie. I am so fortunate I got to spend a year in the Junior 3 group with you and have your continuous support to this day. Your passion for coaching and helping people is so inspiring, and I feel my time spent with you not only changed the path of my swimming career but helped shape me as a person.

Thank you, Ronnie. I am so lucky I got to spend four years with a coach who believed in me. You never gave up on me, spent countless hours helping me reach my potential, and cared about me. There have been many ups and downs and lots of teasing these past four years, but I can say, confidently, that I am very thankful for it all. Thank you to my teammates. You all are my family, and I cannot imagine where I would be without you guys. I am so honored to be surrounded by such caring, hardworking, and authentic people each day. I will miss you all so much, but I have no doubt you will all be successful in the future.

Thank you to my parents. Ever since I was four years old, you two have been my biggest supporters. I cannot put into words how thankful I am for the time, money, and emotional stress you guys have gone through so that I could succeed and do what I love.

To the younger swimmers: Although I am super excited to move on to the next chapter of my life and swimming journey, leaving this team is bittersweet. I have no doubt the younger generation will carry on the legacy of what it means to be an Orinda Aquatics swimmer. You guys are in great hands. Orinda Aquatics is such a special place, and your time on this team will go by in a blink of an eye, so enjoy it!

Thank you, Orinda Aquatics. Much Love, Channing



Cole Griscavage – Swarthmore, swimming

My first experience with Orinda Aquatics started a couple years before I actually joined the team. I had been swimming rec with LMYA for a couple of years and my appreciation for the sport had been growing. In an effort to take my swimming to the next level, I signed up for the Polar Bear fall swimming program. This was my first taste of what OA had to offer. The practices were primarily focused on proper stroke technique, and the coaches tried to push me out of my comfort zone more than I was used to. As I walked into practice and passed by the senior group swimmers, I caught a glimpse of a more serious level of swimming. After training a couple seasons with Polar Bears and watching the progress of my former LMYA teammate Mac Follmer after his first year with OA, I was inspired to take swimming more seriously.

I quit my other sports, track and basketball; I persuaded my parents to let me make the switch. I remember driving home with my dad after my first practice with Coach Matt and being impressed with the level that the group trained at. The practices were longer, the coaching was serious, and the athletes were driven to improve.

On LMYA, I was used to outperforming everyone in practice and winning at most of the meets I swam in. I was quickly humbled my first few months as a member of Junior 2. I was easily one of the slowest in practice and struggled to race anything longer than a 50.

However, even as the slowest in the group, I never regretted my decision. I found the new environment stimulating and motivating. While at first my progression was gradual, in time I was able to leave the “rec kid” label behind and transcend into a year-round swimmer.

Moving into the senior group was a difficult change. My stroke, which due to its inefficiency underutilized my strength, could no longer hold up to the yardage and more aggressive training. I soon became frustrated, as I compared myself to other members of the senior group whose times made mine look beyond sluggish. It was at this point in my freshman year when I learned the art of goal setting, not just goal times, but setting goals to complete the steps that it would take to achieve them. I set a goal to see how many practices I could hit in a row and ended up making around 22 before I was forced to miss. I set goals to improve my stroke technique and be competitive with other swimmers in practice.

Eventually, my main goal became to make it all the way from Senior 2 to the Senior 4 group. I admired their dedication, maturity, and achievement, and was hungry for a piece of it. However, having already spent a year in Senior 2 and being a ways away from dropping any times that might earn me a spot, I had a long road ahead of me.

After working the hardest I had ever worked in practice for a few months, I talked to Ronnie about earning a spot in his group; I was met with a forceful no. At this point I was crestfallen, as his approval had been all I had wanted for so long. But from this came a lesson of patience. It wasn't enough to act with maturity and integrity for a week, a month, or even three, but something I would have to commit to until it wasn't an act, but a representation of who I actually was.

For a while, I believed that maturity as an athlete was all about speed. However, after many hard conversations with both Donnie and Ronnie, it became abundantly clear that they were looking for much more than that. I would have to prove myself as not only a beast in training and a fierce competitor in meets, but an overall “positive” teammate; by positive, he meant someone who not just showed up with a smile on their face, but an integral member whose absence would make the group feel incomplete.

Finally, on January 15, 2020, at the start of my second semester of Junior year, I earned the official move up. I vividly remember when Ronnie handed me my workout and I saw my name printed in the lane assignment. Through two and a half years of setbacks, hard work, and most importantly determination, I finally felt like my swimming career was on the right track. I nearly threw up multiple times that week and was the most sore and tired I had ever been, yet I showed up to practice enthusiastically as I formed new goals. While I was once again one of the slowest swimmers in the group, I was welcomed in with open arms and made to feel like I was important.

To be surrounded by such dedicated athletes and positive teammates has been the biggest honor. Even now, a year and a half later, I feel thankful every time I come to practice. This team and all my teammates feel like a family, and practice is often the highlight of my day.

As I look back six years later at my time on this team, I invoke emotions of gratitude towards all my coaches and teammates who made it the one-of-a-kind experience it was and I credit it with much of my personal growth. As Ronnie told me himself, I was “terrible” freshman year, but if anything, my time here proves that if you match self-confidence with a tenacious yet patient attitude, you can manifest your own success.

Thank you again to my coaches, teammates, and parents, I will truly miss all you.

Sincerely, Cole Griscavage



Zach Le-Nguyen – Brown, swimming

Long before I was even on the team, OA has been a significant presence in my life. I spent my fair share of races swimming, and losing, against swimmers from this team. I heard stories about the legendary speed of Sven Campbell and knew I wanted to achieve what he had. And as I grew and developed on Montclair, I watched as Camille Killeen, Winston Fong, and Mallory Owyong turned 13 and left to swim for the team that countless Montclair swimmers graduated to before them. These three swimmers played no small part in my early improvement: much of my motivation to swim well came from years of chasing them up and down the pool each day in practice, and I knew Orinda had its fair share of fast swimmers for me to chase.

I was so anxious to start my Orinda Aquatics experience that, once my older sister Anna was on the team, I began showing up to the occasional practice years before officially joining the team. I was warmly welcomed by coaches Matt and Marc in these early practices, and despite a few dubious practice performances (what if I really did need to use the bathroom, Matt?), they pushed me through workouts much more difficult than any I had done before. I will never forget swimming what very well may be the most daunting set I will ever do, 3x2800 IMs on the 45 minute interval descending 1-3, a New Year's set conjured in the depths of Kevin Lai's devious mind. My nerves in the days leading up to were so bad that Christmas did little to take my mind off it. Thanks to the coaches' motivation, the grit and determination of the other swimmers around me, and the chocolate milk table for between the swims, I made it through the set and quickly found my place in the OA family even before I was a part of it. I finally became a part of the team under Donnie, and I once again found myself facing sets harder than any I had previously experienced. His precise emphasis on distance per stroke, breath control, and turns for every stroke created a base for me to build upon with more intense training, setting myself up for the next four years of swimming and will continue to for the next four. However, undoubtedly even more impactful was Donnie's relentless pursuit of perfect character. Donnie understands that despite the important life lessons taught by swimming, becoming a better person isn't a side effect of swimming well; impeccable character actually has a direct influence on performance. The Character First mentality that he encouraged us to constantly maintain will surely impact the way I approach life for much longer than just the next four years.

My high school swimming career got off to a rocky start, but before long I was back on my feet (literally) and more ready than ever to train under Ronnie. Ronnie recognized the importance of matching up with others in practice more than anyone, and it was in his group where I was able to return to my love of chasing those faster than me in practice. The bulk of my first two years in high school were spent underwater next to Harry Flanders as he handily beat me by body lengths on every lap. Despite the constant losses, I loved it. I couldn't get enough of swimming against people who wanted to improve and who loved to compete as much as I did, and this team has no shortage of them.

At the end of my five years on this team, a period of time all too short but filled to the brim with memories, all I can express is gratitude. Thank you to the coaches that supported me through hard times and harder practices. Thank you to the families that make up the Orinda Aquatics community, putting in countless hours to ensure us swimmers can do what we love most. And above all, thank you to the surplus of incredible teammates that have swam, cheered, suffered, laughed, and cried alongside me every step of this journey. Orinda Aquatics would not be the same without each and every one of you.

This chapter in my life may be over, but it will be one that I look back upon frequently, and always with a smile on my face.

Zach



Lindsay Hemming – Pepperdine, swimming

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to be a part of such an extraordinary team for the last six years. It feels like just yesterday that Channing, Sophie, and I joined the junior group at Orinda Aquatics. Coming from a different year-round team, we were welcomed with open arms by OA and Kevin Lai. The encouragement and attention I received from Kevin dramatically improved my abilities as a competitive swimmer. I learned very quickly how impactful the positivity of the Orinda Aquatics family can be, and that its success comes from deeply caring coaches.

Donnie, thank you for instilling the values of character, discipline, and perseverance in me. I will forever remember being coached by you as a Junior 3 and at Miramonte High School. Your inspirational stories, letters, and experiences have impacted me in more ways than you will ever know. I will take these life lessons with me onto my next chapter. I am thankful for all the kindness you have shown me these past years.

Ronnie, I am grateful for your endless support and never-failing belief in me. Your faith in me made it easy to show up every day and work my hardest. You have shown me that while improved times and performance are encouraging, the real value of swimming is in the work itself. I appreciate your acknowledgment of my dedication and your willingness to help me through challenging times.

To all the younger swimmers, I encourage you to put in the work and enjoy the moments you will have on this team, both will be priceless building blocks for your future in and out of the pool.

To all the OA coaches, thank you for the time, dedication, and heart you have for coaching this team. I consider myself very fortunate to have found OA where I am continually uplifted and challenged by the culture and my teammates. I know I will always be able to count on the friendships I have built here and cherish the memories I have made. I will miss this team, but I'm inspired to build upon the foundation we have created and am looking forward to working hard and being an OA-model teammate for the next four years at Pepperdine!

Love, Lindsay Hemming



Maggie Buckley – Harvard, swimming

First, I would like to thank all the coaches at Orinda Aquatics: Ronnie, Donnie, Matt, Marc, Dom, and Kati. I wouldn't have made it to this point without your support.

I have vivid memories perusing through senior letters at the yearly Orinda Aquatics banquet. Carefully crafted by a graduating senior, each one would trigger an emotional response in me, and I would think to myself all the things I would write once I graduated. I did not anticipate that I would end up sitting at my computer for hours trying to surmise something meaningful enough to encapsulate my Orinda Aquatics experience. However, one thing comes to mind.

Before Ronnie and Donnie ever knew me, I was a crier. I cried when I was yelled at, I cried when I was disappointed in myself, I cried when practice was hard, and I cried after races constantly. I was a dramatic kid and lacked the perspective necessary to get through short-term failures. Defining my success by the

accomplishments of people around me, I rarely found satisfaction in anything I did. And although Ronnie and Donnie never had the opportunity to experience that, Matt Ehrenberger and Marc Cavallero were blessed to deal with it daily.

There's something character-building about being a crier. In the moment, you feel a release of emotion, but afterward, you feel a wave of embarrassment. Most meets, Marc and Matt, would watch seventh-grade Maggie cry over races and repeatedly tried to lecture me into having a better perspective. But meet after meet, I would continue with my behavior as though they never said a word. Being a recreational coach myself now, I applaud their patience.

Surprisingly, I slowly caught on and have a vivid memory of Marc talking some sense into me. We were at a CBA+ meet in Pleasanton; I had just swum a race and was bawling my eyes out over something. Although I don't quite remember what he said precisely, it was along the lines of, "you can cry, but it won't change how insignificant this race will feel in five years". And he was right.

I don't remember what race I swam, I don't remember my time, and I don't remember why I was crying. I'm sure, in the moment, it felt like my world was collapsing around me, but the reality of the situation was that my life would move on no matter the outcome. And that mentality is not only what helped me grow out of this "crying phase" but also helped me get through the last five years of being a competitive swimmer with Orinda Aquatics.

As cheesy as it might sound, life is full of setbacks and failures. You're not unique by experiencing any of those things. Instead, the way you come out of those periods of your life is what makes you unique. Looking back at my youth, I don't regret, nor feel embarrassed about being a crier. Although I sympathize with those who had to deal with it, I would not be the swimmer or person I am today if I wasn't a crier at some point. And to those reading this letter as I read my mentors for the last six years, I want you to know that no journey is the same. Don't waste your time comparing yourself to your peers or obsessing over a race you won't remember in five years. There is so much to learn and grow from; give yourself the mobility to allow that growth to occur.

And most importantly, thank you, Marc and Matt, for being one of the biggest influences on who I am today. I sometimes think about the people who impacted me during instrumental times in my life, and you two are easily at the top. You gave me the reality checks I needed and never babied me in the way seventh grade me wish you did. You are, truly, figures I will always look up to and a friendship I'll cherish for the rest of my life. Thank you.



Vincent Castillo - Johns Hopkins

When I think of Orinda Aquatics I am truly filled with gratitude. Reflecting on my time with the team there are so many people, parents, coaches, teammates, and experiences to be grateful for. I joined Orinda Aquatics when I was 11 years old and was in Matt's group for the next couple of years. I learned so many valuable lessons on what it means to work hard and perform my best when feeling at my worst. I transitioned into Donnie's group for 8th grade and had great experiences.

I really think that the values of hard work and accountability translated into my academic successes in high school. As I moved into the senior group and progressed through High school, I learned how to manage my time and how to prioritize my activities. The team was there for me throughout all of the challenges and successes that I experienced growing up. It is crazy to think that I will be moving on because Orinda Aquatics was such an integral part of my upbringing.

I will never forget waking up for early morning practices, but I will also never forget the wonderful, fun times I had on the team. Whether it was on the pool deck in Clovis or in the lanes during practice, I forged lasting relationships with my teammates that extend beyond the pool deck.

Orinda Aquatics really exists as a family. The atmosphere of the team taught me how important it is to have positive role models and how to be one myself. I look forward to hearing about all the successes this team will see in the coming years and will definitely miss it.

Vincent



Jeromy Change – Santa Clara University

First and foremost, I want to say thank you, especially to my parents. Throughout my eighteen years, my parents have done nothing but work hard and make countless sacrifices just to provide me with the best possibility of success and happiness in the future. They have always been supportive of me and pushed me to be my best. They've driven me to morning practices, stayed late to count for my distance events, and spent hundreds of dollars on swim gear. So mom and dad, thank you for everything. And of course, the coaching staff. From my junior group practices with Marc and Matt, to senior group/high school practices with Donnie, Dom, and Marc (again), to even a short private lesson on backstroke with Ronnie at one summer long course meet in Pleasanton, I have had the honor of being coached by each and every one of the coaches here at OA. They truly know what they are doing and have made my time on this team enjoyable.

This is my ninth year of being on OA. Through almost a decade of being on this team, I have made great memories and of course, read some great senior letters. While it is exciting to finally have it be my turn to write one, it is also sad because it means I have to leave soon. As I look back through my swim career on OA, there are a few things I would like to share to explain why I enjoyed this process so much.

Swimming as a sport already promotes a strong mindset. We have to wake up early for morning practices, train when it's so cold there's ice on our kickboards or when it's raining so hard it hurts our skin, and have long swim meets that drain you so much that it feels impossible to get homework done on the weekends. However, OA also trains us to go just a little further. Everyone knows the quote "be above the weather", we also are trained to never complain, and to never give up. We are all hard-working people with a goal to put "character first". Everyone is expected to act with integrity in and out of the pool. This team creates young adults that are talented and mature.

The biggest lesson I learned while being on this team was the importance of pushing yourself. I found success during my early years on the team, getting cuts for JO's and Far Westerns. However, after reaching these achievements, I let myself slip. I thought that what I had done was "good enough". My younger self didn't really comprehend the idea of pushing yourself every day. I just showed up to practice, swam the laps, and went home. My times stayed the same while all the teammates I used to compete against seemed to skyrocket. For some reason I expected this situation to fix itself as if time was the only answer. It wasn't until I was so demotivated that I decided to take a break from competing that I realized that the problem was me not pushing myself every day. And there was a simple solution. Just put in the effort and "trust the process" as Donnie says. I'm glad that I had Dom constantly pushing me even though I wasn't one of the faster people on the team or even in the group. It was also nice to have people like Nathan Pompeani and Regan Stambaugh that wanted to match up and race me in almost every practice. After a couple months of hard training, I saw improvement at Clovis my junior year and realized it was that simple, just put in 100% and consistently keep pushing. This lesson has changed my approach to the things I'm most passionate about and has made me appreciate the uphill battle.

In my senior year, after the college application process and trying to balance AP classes, I decided to take a break. Being able to have more free time to spend with friends or just rest in general was nice. However, as time passed, I saw myself still checking the workout emails every once in a while to see what I was missing; a part of me still missed swimming. This made me realize that I wanted to come back. Plus, I wanted to say a proper goodbye to all the friends I had left behind. The environment that OA creates where everyone pushes each other even at the hardest of times is what makes this single player sport seem so united. It is something I will miss. Being on OA has allowed me to make strong bonds with people I would not have met otherwise. The people on this team will be what I miss the most.

Since I joined this team in fourth grade, I have made priceless memories and have learned valuable lessons along the way. I am so grateful that I joined, and it is sad to see my time on this team coming to an end soon. It really seems like not too long ago I was meeting Marc and Matt for the first time. So, if there's one thing any of my fellow teammates can take away from my letter is to truly try and enjoy the time you are on this team even if there are ups and downs. I know it doesn't seem like it but one day you will miss swimming through hard practices with friends, competing in your best events, and attending team bonding events. I haven't even left yet, and I have already started to miss it. I wish everyone on Orinda Aquatics the best of luck in the future!

Sincerely, Jeromy



Owen Lewis – Lehigh University

Orinda Aquatics has been one of the best experiences of my life. I've found that it is an outlier in the sense that there is not another team that I know of with the same level of character and dedication to work hard. It makes me proud that I had the opportunity to join the team and watch myself improve dramatically over my three years.

I was not a good swimmer when I joined. Before I joined Orinda Aquatics, I would go to my swim team practices and do the bare minimum and would be satisfied. But upon joining OA, I realized that I could not play by the same rules. The team culture was nothing like I had seen before. I felt (positive) pressure to commit myself to this team, as everyone else was pushing themselves and I did not want to be the weak link. And as time went by, through the challenging practices, I began to take pride in completing the hard sets with my teammates, knowing that I put in the best effort I could, even at the moments where I could barely move.

Initially, I improved a great deal and my hard work had paid off. But during my second year I started adding time. I was frustrated as I would put in my best effort in practice and saw little results. I started to lose motivation, but I worked through it as Clovis was coming up and I didn't want to give up, and I couldn't let anything affect the rest of the team. At Clovis I finally dropped time and found even greater satisfaction than before, as the struggle made the improvement much more significant. I also realized that it was also my teammates who pushed me through every single workout to get to that point.

I'm unbelievably grateful for all the teammates I swam with as I couldn't have done it all without them. If I could take away one lesson from OA, it would be don't give up, because before you know it, it'll be over. Even though it was challenging, I am so glad that I put in the effort and was there for my teammates.

Owen Lewis.

Orinda Aquatics

A poem by Olivia Eukel

In a world
of greed
And persons
Who feed
Off of cynicism
And bond
Over apathy,
In the midst of all this
Lies a golden land
Of peace
That transcends
Fears and
Builds bridges -
And allows us to climb mountains.
And at the heart of this land
Of harmony
Is a jewel
Which reposes
In a place.
A place that
each of us possesses
The correct clues
To find.
A gem discovered
By those
Who are willing to search for it.

Being a part of Orinda Aquatics
Has forever amplified for me
The meaning behind
One of the most beautiful,
All-encompassing words:
Love.
This team has made it plainly
But profoundly
clear to me
That love
And love in *action*
Is the not-so-hidden
Gem of life.
And it's not so far away,
If only we continue to
dedicate our lives
To finding it
And acting upon it
Over and over again.