

Graduating Class of 2010

Thank you for putting

Character First



**and for leading this extraordinary team both in
and out of the pool.**

**With love and appreciation,
Ronnie & Donnie**



**“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial
and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and
success achieved.”** Helen Keller

Name	High School	College	Notes
<i>Brooke Woodward</i>	Miramonte	Emory University <i>Swimming</i>	Team Captain OA/High School All-America (swim/academic) NCSA Jr. Nat'l Qualifier
<i>Jill Jones</i>	Berean Christian	Cal Poly SLO <i>Swimming</i>	Team Captain OA/High School Jr. National Qualifier/Sr. Nat'l SC Virginia Hall Award Winner
<i>Andrea Ward</i>	Campolindo	UC Santa Barbara <i>Swimming</i>	Team Captain OA Sr. National Short Course All-American
<i>Rachel Cleak</i>	Campolindo	Cal Poly SLO <i>Swimming</i>	Team Captain OA High School AA Jr. National SC
<i>Ben Smith</i>	Campolindo	Chapman University <i>Swimming (club)</i>	Team Captain OA NCS Team Champion Eagle Scout, Scholar Athlete
<i>Delia Salomon</i>	Berkeley High School	Grinnell College <i>Swimming</i>	Team Captain HS/Far Western Qualifier International Baccalaureate/Academic AA Swam 2/3 of English Channel
<i>Christy Tormey</i>	Carondelet	Duke University	NCS team champion Nat'l Merritt (Honor Society/Aca. AA Sectional Qualifier
<i>Amanda Schlenker</i>	Campolindo	University of the Pacific <i>Swimming</i>	Sectional Qualifier Most Improved OA – 2009 Swazi Suit Project
<i>Hayley Russell</i>	Campolindo	University of Texas	Sectional Qualifier/HS AA Hall Award Winner Scholar Athlete
<i>Lauren McGill</i>	Athenian	Cal Poly SLO	Far Western Qualifier High School Team Captain Athenian Wilderness Experience
<i>Jenny Hu</i>	CPS	Tufts <i>Swimming</i>	Sectional Qualifier Team Captain HS Scholar Athlete
<i>Micaela Hahn</i>	CPS	Carleton College <i>Swimming</i>	Far Western Qualifier Team Captain High School Mission Trips
<i>Kayley Watson</i>	Campolindo	University of San Diego <i>Crew</i>	Sectional Qualifier Mission to Haiti
<i>Katy Yeh!</i>	Miramonte	Lewis & Clark <i>Swimming</i>	Team Captain High School Sectional Qualifier Scholar Athlete
<i>Stephen Kingery</i>	Campolindo	John Hopkins <i>Water Polo</i>	Sectional Qualifier High School AA/NCS team champion Scholar Athlete
<i>Lindsey Mascheroni</i>	Campolindo	Loyola Marymount <i>Swimming</i>	Sectional Qualifier Scholar Athlete NCS Top 16
<i>Aly Levine</i>	Berkeley High School	Williams College <i>Swimming</i>	NCSA Jr. Nat'l Academic AA International Baccalaureate
<i>Alanna Hulburd</i> <i>Joined summer 2010</i>	Bentley High School	Georgetown University <i>Swimming</i>	Sectional Qualifier Academic AA
<i>Lizzie Peiros</i> <i>Joined summer 2010</i>	Campolindo	Stanford <i>Water Polo</i>	AA Water Polo/Academic Top 100 East Bay Athletes

To the past, present, and future Orinda Aquatics swimmers and families,

You are so lucky to cross paths with Orinda Aquatics. No quote, story, or video could ever fully explain the feeling and deep connection that this team provides its swimmers. Through commitment to this team we learn pride and purpose, sacrifice and discipline, and love and passion.

It is extremely hard to write this letter because I am not ready to leave the team that has been my backbone through the past six years. Reflecting on my Orinda Aquatics swimming career, I will never remember my times, the grueling sets, or any important meets. Instead, I will always cherish the lifelong relationships that I built over my years on the team and how they have changed me.

In life, we gradually shape our identities through our reactions to the people and environments that surround us, so we truly become that to which we are most exposed. For this reason, every Orinda Aquatics swimmer is incredibly lucky to be influenced by the team's philosophy, have access to the coaches' wisdom, and have the constant support of extraordinary teammates.

Orinda Aquatics is not a regular team. The pool environment is a haven where passion, dedication, unity, and character thrive. Our team truly lives its mission statement. Some outsiders may call it cultish, but it is hard not to be extremely close with those with whom you share morals, goals, and a lifestyle. In a community where drug and alcohol use increasingly threaten teenagers, Orinda Aquatics is a sanctuary that encourages us to pursue athletics, academics, and personal growth at the highest level. When the academic, athletic, and social pressures of high school hit, I found myself splitting my time between studying and training at the pool. Where schoolwork often seemed tedious, swimming became the exact opposite. This team has taught me how to live a life of value and leadership, but as much as I have grown from my years on Orinda Aquatics, it may be an even greater privilege to watch how the team has changed the life of many individual team members.

Ronnie and Donnie: you are blessings to our team, our families, and our community. No amount of description could truly do you justice. You are the cornerstone of the true purpose of athletics. Thank you for passionately showing us life's most important lessons and changing our lives selflessly and humbly. Thank you for teaching us humility, integrity, compassion, respect, honesty, work ethic, and commitment. Although you convey your wisdom through talks, quotes, stories and videos, we learn the most from watching how you live your daily lives. I could not have asked for better mentors, role models, and coaches, and I know my friendships with you will last forever.

As my last summer weeks pass by, it's hard not to wish for a few more days, weeks, or even years to spend with the team. My largest fear as I head off to college is that I will not find a group of people who matches my Orinda Aquatics family. However, I know that the relationships formed on this team are ones which will last a lifetime and my class graduating means another fresh group of swimmers who are lucky enough to spend their high school swimming career with Orinda Aquatics.

To the teams past swimmers: thank you for being the framework for an incredible program and setting the standard for the years to come. To the team's present swimmers: enjoy the time you have left on Orinda Aquatics, soak up the lessons there are to learn, love everything for what it is and how it can help you as a person, and remember that your swimming career is not defined by your time on the scoreboard. To the team's future swimmers: I envy that you are just beginning your Orinda Aquatics journey and I wish you the best, continue to set the standard for the years to come.

Thank you Orinda Aquatics. From the bottom of my heart, my daily life will not be the same without you, but your message will always guide me. I will miss you.

Love, Brooke Woodward

It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end." (Le Guin)

As I prepare to leave for college, I have an opportunity to reflect on the "Orinda Aquatics Journey" that has shaped me and laid the foundation for the rest of my life. At 9 years old I stepped onto the pool deck of (what I thought to be) just another swim team. However, I soon began to realize a uniqueness that could only be found on deck at the Soda Center with Orinda Aquatics. Not a single person was treated better or worse than another; everyone was considered an equal asset to the team. Even my little sister, who was the youngest on the team at that time, became the only member of the "Cub" group. Everyone was given an opportunity to do the sport they loved and a chance to improve despite their ability.

Over the years I have learned to place my trust in the coaches. It wasn't easy to trust Matt when he told me at 11 years old that I was swimming the 1650 at the next meet. Little did I know that while I swam the mile ten times over the next 2 years, Matt had been looking at the bigger picture. He knew that if I was able to handle the mile, I would be mentally tough enough to handle any obstacle or race that would come my way.

Similarly, two years ago it wasn't easy to trust Ronnie when he told me to sign up for the 400IM. I believed myself to be a sprinter and presumed he was joking. As fate would have it, the 400IM is now one of my best events. You were right Ronnie!

OA coaches have dedicated their lives to every single swimmer. I encourage you all to trust the coaches wholeheartedly; they know your potential and how to get you there. Orinda Aquatics has successfully prepared me for my future and every challenge I may face. Through both success and failure I have learned how to be humble and confident, how to be a leader and a follower, and most importantly, how to apply the team motto "Character First" to every aspect of my life. Being a swimmer isn't everything; in fact, our weekly group meetings usually consisted of an inspirational article rarely pertaining to swimming. Because of their interest in us as swimmers and people, Ronnie and Donnie harnessed every opportunity to make a difference in our lives.

Not only have the coaches taught me valuable lessons, but my teammates also have significantly influenced my life. I was fortunate enough to have excellent role models like Shelbi, Molly, and Caroline, all of whom inspired me to represent nothing but excellence as I took on a "Senior Leadership" role. I am inspired daily by my teammate's dedication and hard work. This one-of-a-kind team would not have been possible without the incredible people that define Orinda Aquatics.

My journey is far from over because Orinda will forever be a part of my life. The valuable lessons I have learned and the friendships I have made will never be forgotten. I have spent half my life with this team and will forever consider myself to be an ambassador of Orinda Aquatics.

Marc- Thank you for your unfailing support and positive post-race feedback.

Matt- Thank you for believing in me and for always helping me through the hard times. You not only helped me grow as a swimmer but also as a person, and I cannot thank you enough for that.

Donnie- Thank you for never losing sight of the bigger picture and finding the positives in everything. Your dedication and passion for this team is contagious.

Ronnie- Thank you for reminding me to look at the glass as half full, for pouring your life into this team, for caring about me as person and a swimmer, and for always supporting me. And don't you worry, my sassiness will live on in Shannon and Courtney. They're all over it.

Mom & Dad- Thank you for waking up early to drive me to practices, driving me across the Bay Area for swim meets, all of your support throughout my swimming career, and the countless hours you have worked so that I could be a part of such an amazing program.

My teammates- Thank you for inspiring me daily. You have no idea how big of an impact you have made in my life. Thank you for supporting me; nothing makes me want to swim faster than swimming into the screaming "**Red Wall.**" If you ever need anything (except maybe a date), I'm always here for you.

Much Love, Jill Jones

Dear Orinda Aquatics /Coaches,

I was a pretty shy and timid kid when I first joined OA and I honestly had no idea the impact that a single program would have on my life. I originally joined the program to improve my times and nothing more. I am pretty sure that I didn't even know what "character" was. Orinda ended up creating a family away from home for me. This was something that I cherished and something I could always count on. When things at school or home weren't going well, I always knew my teammates would be a constant in my life.

The first year on the team was difficult for me because I didn't really know anyone and the workouts were something completely new to me. When I became a part of the senior group, I really began to fit in. I remember after one of my first morning practices one of the seniors came right up to me and introduced himself and even offered me some stroke advice. This was probably one of my most memorable moments from the team. A senior who barely knew my name was coming over and introducing himself to me. I learned that this was characteristic of every person on the team. By the end of that first year I started to get the whole character first aspect of the team. I began to realize that Orinda Aquatics was not just a swim team. I began to notice that every single swimmer I had met embodied the "Character First" motto. After that first year I began to train harder, I learned to push myself through sets, to be more positive, to support others more, to be grateful for what I had been given, and to really bond and connect with my teammates.

Orinda Aquatics gave me not only incredible coaching, but offered me so many other skills that I would not have acquired anywhere else; confidence, team commitment, leadership. I built lifelong relationships with people on the team and with the coaches. In general, I learned incredible life skills. Looking back on my swimming career it is incredible to see what you can accomplish if you are physically and mentally disciplined. I think one of the reasons that swimmers on Orinda are able to work and train so hard, is because of the intense focus on the TEAM. No one swims races or does sets for themselves. Everything is done for the good of the whole. The emphasis of Orinda is not on how well you do individually but how you help your teammates. After just finishing what may quite possibly have been my last OA meet (I am writing this after JOs) I know that I am leaving the team in great hands. This feeling is due to the fact that I personally feel a connection with every swimmer on the team and I truly do feel that each and every person is capable of doing great things both in and out of the water, and each person is capable of being a strong leader. I will miss the coaches, this incredible team, the travel trips, the great camaraderie, the life long bonds, and even the tough workouts. I think the thing that I will miss the most is walking on the pool deck each day and knowing that no matter what I had going on in my life I would always have someone to talk to and I always felt at home.

Thank you to everyone for making my Orinda Aquatics experience such an incredibly memorable one. I will sincerely miss everyone on the team as well as all the great parents that help so much and of course the coaches. Thanks, and I hope to stay in touch with everyone.

Donnie, I also want to thank you personally. Over the past seven years it has been difficult at times not having a father in my life. I honestly feel so incredibly fortunate that I joined Orinda Aquatics and that you have played an incredible role in my life that you probably don't even know. Like many people have said before me, the coaches are the ones who create and foster this great program. We have the best coaches in the entire nation, so I would assume that means we have the best team too. Orinda Aquatics has single handedly shaped my life more so than any other program I have been in during my high school years.

Sincerely, Ben Smith

Beeeeeeep sounded the starter. Nothing new. How many times had I heard it since I was four years old? My start is reflexively quick...one of the best parts of my race I had been told by my coach of eight years. I bursted off of the blocks and began the race—not just any race but THE long-awaited race wherein I sought to deliver a dream time—a much sought-after time, a time that would turn the heads a handful of collegiate swim coaches. Well, the result was a disappointment. To say I cried is understatement; I was at a total loss. How will I get into college, I wondered. I'm smart but there are smarter. I'm fast, but there are faster.

Enter...Donnie. Sure, he likes fast swimmers, but he values character above all else. He has it printed on our swim caps: *Character First*, they read. "Very intimidating," we responded mockingly when he handed them out at a practice one balmy afternoon. "These will remind you of what is important," he replied. "I want you to wear them every time you compete," he added.

No one argues with Donnie. We all have far too much respect for him. In my view, it's because he is who he says he is, and he shows us this by treating us all equally, regardless of swim times. He also models the value of discipline. He's there after great races to extend heartfelt congratulations, and he's there when we're devastated.

In some sense, the swim coaches of my youth will always be with me because they have taught me far more than technique, quick turns, and discipline. They have taught me the value of a positive outlook. I know I can conquer any obstacle because I've struggled and I've survived. Most important, I know that success and failure are part of the journey. And either way, it's OK. The coaches often quotes writer Ursula Le Guin. One of the favorites: "It is the journey that matters in the end." I couldn't agree more. Thirty years from now it will be my morals, respect for the views of others, and integrity that endure, and define me.

To the coaches: Donnie, Ronnie, Dave, Matt, Mark, Armo thank you so much for all you do. You put your life into this team and truly care about each and every swimmer. Thank you for having Orinda Aquatics serve as a positive atmosphere in this community where so many of the traditional values of respect and integrity are not continued. You have provided a safe haven for me throughout my high school years. You can continue to call me "Noodle" anytime you like, I was a crazy five year old so I don't blame you.

To the team: I will miss all of you so incredibly much. There have been endless laps and laughs that I have shared with you all. You have all touched me in such a positive. Definitely enjoy the rest of your time on Orinda Aquatics and in high school swimming. These are some of the best memories you will ever create and I can tell you that I already miss it. A special shout out to the bum lane! - my family (you know who you are), and jajap..., keep working super hard everyone and don't worry eventually one of those morning practice days you will go to Nations and it will totally be worth it!

To mom and dad: I can't tell you enough how thankful I am for your support. Dad, thanks for driving me (incredibly slowly ☺) to every morning practice before I got my license, and for going to and working at endless meets. Your support has meant the world to me and when swim parents can get over involved and over intense, you were both perfect. Through every race, good or bad, you guys were there. I love you both so much and I wouldn't be the person I am today without you.

With Love, Hayley Russell

When I was first addressed in a group of graduating seniors by Donnie about writing letters to the rest of the team, I was a little nervous about coming up with things to say to a team of which I had only been a part for a month and a half. I think what I can give you though, the Orinda Aquatics team, is a sense of perspective coming from a new member and someone who was once an outsider. I had heard about Orinda Aquatics through a close friend, and it seemed to me a perfect fit at a time when I was doubting my capabilities as a swimmer and also questioning my decision to swim in college. Joining a new team is hard, but joining a new team the summer before you go off to college, as well as joining a team that has already had time to grow together for years, is even more difficult. So naturally I was terrified about starting at Orinda.

But I don't think I ever could have anticipated how welcoming and friendly the Orinda team members were my first week of trying the team out. I knew within the first day that this was where I wanted to be. I think what really inspired me to join was the sense of modesty each swimmer had about them, the way that every single swimmer on the team was so down to earth and kind. And what was really refreshing was to see a team where the coaches cared so deeply about the general welfare of the swimmers, in their lives, beyond the pool deck. After first talking to Ronnie and Donnie when I was starting out with the team, I was so amazed by the way they talked about their swimmers, and the way that they took pride of their swimmer's achievements beyond the pool deck. They seemed more like parents to the swimmers than coaches, which is how the relationship between coach and swimmer should be. You should know that this is a team that every other team in the nation should look to as a model – the epitome of humble, well-rounded, and mature swimmers.

Good luck in the future, and thank you for making me feel so welcome.

Best regards, Alanna Hulburd

Dear Donnie, Ronnie and OA,

It is so strange to be writing a goodbye letter. As cliché as it sounds, it really does feel like just yesterday I was bowling in Carson City during my first season on the team, over four years ago. As quickly as time has gone by, I can still remember each and every moment that has made my experience on Orinda Aquatics an unforgettable one and one to cherish.

As I look back at my time on the team, I find that I have experienced and gained so much more than I ever knew I could. Orinda Aquatics has shaped my personality and everything that I am today. Waking up at 5 'clock in the morning provided me with so much more than a practice opportunity. As the rain fell, and we huddle on the "warm" grate in below freezing temperatures, I found mental strength, the perseverance to get through the morning, and the courage to come back the next day. Every hard practice that I had viewed as a way to achieve a better time was much more beneficial to me than I had realized. Every time my path in life brings me to a hurdle, I always find myself remembering an extremely hard practice, and it gave me the strength to continue. Every practice, meet, and team event has provided an invaluable bonding opportunity between the team and me. We all experience the same challenges that the sport of swimming inevitably brings, but Orinda Aquatics is a second family, and I realize now how different things would have been without the people on the team, and the coaches that hold us all together.

I truly believe that I have gained so much more personally on Orinda Aquatics than any success could have brought. Trophies and records are ephemeral, but the qualities I have gained as a person will last the rest of my life. Thanks to Donnie, Ronnie and my teammates, I will never forget that in life, it is not the things you have to show, but your character that comes first. As I move on to the next chapter of my life, I will always hear the words of Donnie, Ronnie and Orinda Aquatics: "It's the journey that matters". Because when I look back on my high school years, I do not see one defining race. I see a long journey, and it is crystal clear to me how much better I am because I had the courage and support of Orinda Aquatics to make it.

Thank you Donnie and Ronnie for everything, both in and out of the pool. I wish the best of luck to all my teammates. Because of the genuine care and knowledge of Ronnie and Donnie, I know that your experience will be just as amazing as mine was. Thank you guys!

~Christy Tormey

I began Orinda Aquatics when I was in Sixth Grade. Over the past seven years I have seen this team work wonders not only in my life, but also in the lives of many others. It is true that Orinda Aquatics is comprised of an extraordinary group of kids, but I firmly believe that it is the foundation of this team, the coaches, that inspire the desire of young people to achieve success the right way. The most prominent aspect of this team is the "Character First" motto. It is so easy for athletes to lose sight of the fact that their character is what matters the most. After having a bad race, or peak meet, or even an entire season, the most natural response would be to give up or blame something else for those results. I have never seen any Orinda Aquatics swimmer react this way. The kids on this team pick themselves up and throw themselves at it harder to improve in whatever way possible. They push each other, encourage each other, and congratulate each other throughout the entire process.

Though this has never been the easiest road, I feel it has well prepared me for situations I will encounter in the rest of my life. One of my favorite things about this team is the fact that the coaches are always approachable

on any front. Whether it be school, family, social, or anything else, they are always there to give experienced advice or offer another perspective. They are there to motivate and encourage even when you're struggling in practice or seem to have hit rock bottom. I know that without coaches like these, I would not have the same work ethic or desire for success that I do now.

When we go to meets, I always look around to see how the other teams interact with each other and if any of them compare to Orinda Aquatics. All I see is swimmers, usually not in team attire, sitting in the team area rather than behind the blocks cheering for their teammates. And I ask myself, "would I want to be a part of that team?" And then I take a step back and look at Orinda Aquatics and realize how fortunate I am to be a part of such a special group.

I will miss my teammates very much but hope to carry on the qualities they have instilled in me throughout the rest of my life. I look forward to the future and the opportunities to share with the world what Orinda Aquatics has given me.

Thanks for everything, Andrea Ward

Dear OA swimmers, coaches and parents,

As a graduating senior from Orinda Aquatics, I decided to take a good look at my teammates over the past few months to take advantage of my time left with them. I like to look at the new swimmers on the team and wonder if they have the same thoughts I had three years ago... "Can I use a nose plug with a snorkel... and if I do that will I still have friends?" I along with many others had difficulty switching to the longer events (100s in my case). I used to think, "they expect me to finish a 100 butterfly?" and "they want me to go *how far* underwater?" Eventually I got the hang of the year round lifestyle, but the practices did not get any easier. I had to look to my teammates for support countless times to finish the 50s no breath butterfly (easy of course) or the medicine ball chest passes with a flutter kick. Even someone saying "you can do it," made all the difference to me when I felt I could not go any longer. Not only has every one of you shaped my experience on this team, but you have also impacted my life and character as well.

I know that each of you has made my day at some point in time when you least expected it. The people on this team are so sincerely nice, all of the time, that it makes me thankful to be in their presence on a daily basis. I see smiles and hear laughter at 5am, every single morning without fail. This is a team where being fifteen minutes early to swim practice is considered late. Does this frustrate me? The answer is no, it only pushes me to wake up the extra five minutes early so I can contribute equally to setting up the pool. During practice I notice people working harder than they need to and I wonder how I can push myself so I can be more like them. Everyday our coaches give us much more than stroke technique, sacrificing practice time to teach us about humility, dedication, focus, hard work, and the importance of friends and family.

Donnie has shown me that in life it is better to be the most respected athlete regardless of one's ability, than the most celebrated and least respected. Ronnie has taught me to do everything with all my heart and to never doubt myself (after all he said "under"...). Now as I look down the 50m pool as a college bound athlete, I say I will finish this 200m fly, regardless of the outcome.

Thanks Ronnie and Donnie for all of the fond memories and for always believing in me, and to the team for being wonderful role models and friends. I will miss you all very much.

Love, Rachel

Dear Orinda Aquatics families and swimmers,

Before I head off to college in the fall, I would like to take some time to reflect on my time on Orinda Aquatics and the impact it has had on my life and the individual that I am today.

Ten years ago when I stepped onto the OA pool deck for the first time, I was a scared, immature eight year old who had much to learn. Junior group was a time for fun and building skills that I'd use when it came time to move onto the senior group. Through my time in the senior group, my character began to develop. Being on Orinda Aquatics has taught me so much more than any other sport or extracurricular activity ever could. I learned the importance of teamwork, leadership, and a strong moral foundation. The early mornings and late afternoon workouts day after day taught me dedication, perseverance, and how to manage time. While it may have seemed frustrating at times that my whole life seemed to revolve around swimming, the things I've learned from it are no comparison to anything I may have missed out on. I can confidently say that I would not be anywhere near the person I am today if it weren't for swimming and Orinda Aquatics.

Orinda Aquatics makes a family out of friends. Through all the time you spend together as teammates, bonds are formed that cannot be created other way. Something about starting and ending each and every day with the same people makes an indescribable connection. All of my closest friends are from Orinda Aquatics. In a sense, we're all brothers and sisters. We pushed each other through sets, saw each other at our absolute worst, and at the top of our peaks. Through the thick and the thin, my teammates were *always* there for me. These are the experiences that will form the friendships to last a lifetime. There is something about my Orinda Aquatics friends and teammates that sets them apart from everyone else. To all the swimmers with time left on OA, I encourage you to optimize these relationships. These relationships will be the ones that you hold on to in the years to come.

Team unity is an element of Orinda Aquatics that sets it apart from other teams as well as the sport of swimming. People generally consider swimming an individual sport, but after my time on Orinda Aquatics, I have a different opinion. OA's focus on putting the team first results in each member doing things for the benefit of the team. In the end, everyone receives more individually as they sacrifice for the team. Throughout all the sports I've participated in, I have never seen any team so focused and revolved around the element of a team, and how each individual member of the team is a key element to the ultimate success of the team as a whole. Nowhere else have I seen members of a team lifting each other up and encouraging each other like on Orinda Aquatics. It is truly amazing to see team members sacrificing things that could ultimately harm them as individuals for the benefit of the team. Typically, swimmers worry about themselves, their swims, and their well-being only. This is not the case with OA. There is no greater joy than giving something up for the team and watching the team benefit because of what you've sacrificed.

One of the most important aspects of Orinda Aquatics is the "Character First" motto, and the coaching staff. This motto is seen in action in every member of the team. The coaches give us the ultimate example by living out their lives with the character first mentality. Living by anything but the most impeccable character is simply not acceptable. The high standards that the coaches set challenge us to be both a better team and better individuals. The coaches are always there through the times of difficulty, seeing things on the optimistic perspective. Through my times of doubt and discouragement, Donnie was there to provide words of encouragement, always looking at the glass half full. The coaches have guided me through my journey and helped shape me into the individual I am today. Their wisdom and outlook on not only swimming but also the "big picture" of life helped me through the toughest of times. To all the coaches, thank you for all you have done for me, the guidance you provided, and knowledge you shared.

Words truly cannot sum up my experience or memories at Orinda Aquatics. It was an experience, but it is also something that I will associate with for the rest of my life. I will use the things I learned on OA in college

and beyond. Already I have witnessed the importance of leadership and team unity in my recent mission trip to Haiti. The things I learned through swimming can not only be applied in swimming-they can be applied in every aspect of my life. Over the past ten years I have been transformed from a child to an adult with knowledge, a mindset, and character to last throughout my life. Thank you to Donnie, Dave, Ronnie, Matt, and Marc, my family, and my teammates. I appreciate all you have done for me and will cherish it with me the rest of my life.

With love, Kayley Watson

Dear Orinda Aquatics coaches, swimmers and parents,

From Orinda Aquatics I have learned that to being a great leader does not mean being the fastest swimmer or the strongest personality. Real leaders are the mentally strong. They are ones that look forward to pushing not only their bodies but their minds to the limit every day. The best leaders are those who work the hardest in practice, never complain, and look forward to most challenging sets. They are the first ones in the pool, and embrace challenges like cold mornings in December at 5:30, or swimming fifties with no breath. These are the swimmers that I began to look up to in early in high school and they are the swimmers that make up Orinda Aquatics.

The past year I have watched as Donnie helped the Dolphin Swim Club in Swaziland, Africa. After he shared the story about his trip to visit the coach and the team I was amazed at the whole situation, about the kids who had so little but were so excited to swim. The story made me rethink what was important in my life. And during JO's weekend I was reminded yet again how lucky we are to be able to swim on Orinda Aquatics. I also wanted to thank everyone who has donated suits to support the kids. We collected over 600 suits, 130 goggles, and 40 caps!

When I joined Orinda Aquatics I was one of the slower swimmers on the team. I had not even qualified for the County Meet in the summer. Now, I am going to swim for a Division 1 college. I give much of the credit for my success both in and out of the pool to the coaches and my parents. They have supported through challenges in swimming and in life. I want to sincerely thank them.

Over the past eight years on Orinda Aquatics I not only developed friendships but I became part of a family. There is something special about being on Orinda Aquatics that no other team has that I have seen. It cannot be explained, only experienced. Donnie has said that although he does not have children of his own, he really feels as though he has 100 kids that he cares about deeply and will watch grow up and succeed in life. When he first told me that, I realized how much we really are like a family. One of my favorite things I heard Donnie say was when I was joking with him and I asked "How's your other job?" his response was "Coaching is not my job. It is my lifelong passion."

Love, Amanda Schlenker

By the second semester of my junior year, my previous swim team had literally fallen apart. The senior team had a total of five members; me and four pre-teen boys and all of my good friends had moved forward into college or onto other teams. Yet I was still there. Swimming had become such a burden in my life. I dreaded driving thirty minutes to practice and getting home well after dinner was over. The negative

atmosphere and attitude of the boys on my team often brought me home in tears. My mom finally gave me an ultimatum, I had to switch teams.

When I arrived on deck at Soda Center to give OA a try, I was amazed. The Senior team was already swimming in the pool. There were so many of them. All clad in white OA caps, they seemed to be in perfect unison. I swam in a group of five with mismatched caps. I was well past intimidated. After a few weeks of learning names, the differences between Ronnie and Donnie and other general protocol, I became to feel more and more comfortable with my new team.

Being on OA has undoubtedly been one of the best experiences of my life, and I'm not just saying that to be nice. I finally have come to enjoy the sport of swimming again. A big part of this change was being in a positive environment. On my old team, my coach turned a blind eye when people would cuss, arrive late, or wear non-team attire. But on OA that did not fly. Every single member of OA is expected to act with the utmost integrity at all times and even in my minimal years of experience on OA I have never seen anything but Character First.

People who don't know OA often laugh off our motto of Character First, but they obviously haven't talked to any of the swimmers on our team. All swimmers on OA work hard to embody our motto and this creates a truly positive, wonderful group of people. I have never felt more welcome or more comfortable with a group people in my life. My teammates are some of the silliest, nicest, craziest, hardest working people on the planet. No matter how tired I am, how bad my day was or how little I want to get in, it is guaranteed that the moment I see one of my friend's faces that all changes. The support of my teammates is unparalleled. It is not often that you will find friends who will stay to time your 400 free and do cheers behind your block or that understand you need to go to bed so you can get up at five to go swimming.

Donnie and Ronnie have also been a really important part of my experience on OA. Yes, they have taught me how to improve my freestyle (which I'm still working on), but they have also taught me lessons that go far beyond swimming. They have taught me to appreciate my life, because although at times it may seem difficult, it is guaranteed someone else out there is worse off. They have reminded me to cherish my parents and friends. They have taught me the importance of hard work and consistency. They have guided me through college rejections and poor swims. And they have taught me that times aren't the only thing that matter, it's the journey that matters. And if I didn't go fast during that one 400 free, the hard work and lessons I learned will remain with me far after my suit dries.

I want to thank every single member of the OA family for taking me in and making my time on OA some of the best times I have had as a swimmer and a person.

Love, Delia Salomon

I started swimming for Orinda Aquatics in my sophomore year, after my decision to quit Volleyball because of a shoulder injury. At first, I wasn't sure about the team. I didn't go to any of the schools in the area and had no idea what I was about to get myself into. After just a few weeks on the team, I quickly came to understand the intensity of this team, and the standards each of its swimmers lived by. To be honest, I had doubts about whether or not I would stay. Each workout was extremely challenging, and I was swimming at a level I never had before. Trying to balance swimming for Orinda Aquatics and my high school swim team (The Athenian School in Danville) proved to be a challenge. Getting out early from morning practices and coming late to

afternoon practices was difficult. On top of going to a private school with a bit of a commute, I would always take a lot of time off of swimming to visit my dad who lives in England. I can't exactly put a finger on it, but despite all the obstacles, something about the character of this team inspired me to stay. I knew that being surrounded with people like my teammates would have a huge impact on my life and the decisions I would make throughout high school. And as I write this letter now, "graduating" from OA, I know that it did.

This is after all, a letter to the team, in which case I would like to thank the coaches, for always being there, especially in helping me make my college decision. And finally, I would like to thank this team, for always inspiring me to be the best I can possibly be.

Lauren McGill

The summer before my sophomore year I decided that I wanted to join a new team. I visited Orinda Aquatics and I was amazed by the kindness and dedication of the other swimmers and the coaches. The emphasis on 'Character First' was a unique quality about the team that I wanted to know more about. The workouts were very different than what I was used to. Focusing on race strategy was completely new to me.

During my sophomore year, I injured my shoulders. It was hard to keep a positive attitude because swimming had always been my outlet from my hectic life. For six months straight, I kicked. It was hard watching everyone improve. It would have been easy to just give up and quit swimming but I had to remind myself of the big picture, which was to get healthy again. During this time, I realized what 'Character First' really meant. I learned that my accomplishments and successes do not define who I am but that my values and my compartments do. I realized that when I get older I will not remember how fast I was but I will remember the lessons I learned from swimming.

If I had allowed myself to lose track of the big picture I would not have been able to get healthy again. I am really thankful that I can continue swimming in college and I want to thank Donnie and Ronnie for teaching me how to not lose sight of the big picture. I know that this skill is vital in making and achieving goals and I am confident that I can apply this knowledge to my life in the future.

Micaela Hahn

When I first joined the team last year, I remember being confused about how I had been swimming on teams in the Bay Area for ten years but had never known how uniquely special Orinda Aquatics is. It was exactly the team I was looking for. With my mom in the hospital being treated for cancer, the time of my transition to OA was one of the most challenging in my life. Yet as soon as I spoke to Donnie on the phone and arrived at my first workout, I knew that OA would become a wonderful constant in my life during the ups and downs of senior year.

Becoming an OA swimmer was such a comfortable process because of the atmosphere of family on the team and the incredible support I received from my new teammates. Training on OA always felt like a group effort. Orinda Aquatics reminded me of how much of a team sport swimming has the potential to be. Just having a teammate in the next lane to "match-up" with and mutually push and be pushed to the end of the set made it feel like the result of each race was partially a result of the hard work we had done together as a team.

Swimming is what we do, but after being a part of OA for just one year I realize that the team is so much more than that. Our motto of, "character first", fully illustrates the kind of team OA is. We come to practice to work towards our goals of swimming fast, but that is simply the literal product of what we do as a team. In addition to becoming faster swimmers, kids on OA develop the self-motivation, responsibility, and work ethic that will continue to bring success even after our competitive swimming career ends. This is truly invaluable, and it is certainly something that I hope to find in my teammates in college.

Though I am sad to leave the team behind this fall, I know that I will never really leave OA completely. I think it's a "once an OA swimmer, always an OA swimmer" kind of team, and I am so glad that I got to be a part of it!

Love, Aly Levine

Coaches Notes

Team Success

From a competitive viewpoint, our team has had a great deal of success over the years. But the most significant aspect of this team's success lies in what cannot be seen or quantified in the pool or in the classroom, and is generally not seen by anyone but us.

Our greatest success lies in the virtues of character, humility, and respect.

Our team is known nationally for preparing swimmers to move on, to develop, and to be leaders.

Any team would be very fortunate to have one of these seniors in their program. They are leaders in every way.

And while college coaches look for speed and talent, they crave character, humility, work ethic, and team spirit. At Sectionals I spoke to two college coaches (that we have had kids swim for). They each just lost their best swimmer to alcohol. And not surprisingly, an OA swimmer is trying to bring a character culture to the program.

As for this Class and what they represent...

This group of nineteen has an average GPA of 3.8 with many 4.0 or better

They are leaders of OA and of their high school teams

They are inspirational award winners and inspirational people

They graduated from among the best high schools in the state

They held school offices

They supported charitable causes

They went on mission trips

One swam 2/3 of the English Channel

They were All-American in the pool and in the classroom

*All while swimming year-round and putting **character first***

They debunk common myths that year-round swimming challenges academics, causes burn-out, and is *not* a team sport. *They* make it one.

They support their teammates, even through their own struggles.

They *never* have to be asked twice, and usually volunteer before being asked the first time.

They take off pool covers, put in lane lines, set up pace clocks, stock the storage room, and do every little thing that makes a big difference.

Their only internal competition appears to be the most humble.

They cheer for each other unconditionally – “the red wall”.

They have the implicit trust and respect of the entire staff and team.

On this past trip, when a younger swimmer asked if they should wear their team shirt on the way down to Sectionals, an older swimmer responded with, “when do you not wear your team shirt?”

They have not done these things for a season or a year, but a career.

This team and this graduating group is unquestionably the greatest character group we have seen in thirty years.

They are the quintessential student-athlete and they are the character model for any sport at any level.

They are invaluable to this team, our community, and our society.

Our Intention as coaches is to be in partnership with these young adults in swimming and in life. And it is an honor and a privilege.

To our Junior Group, this is the direction you are headed. On this team, you are either a leader or a future leader.

And finally, we would like to recognize and honor the parents of these Seniors. Of course the spotlight is on them, but in reality it was a partnership and a success shared by both swimmer and parent.

We hope that each swimmer appreciates and honors their parents for the unconditional commitment and sacrifices made. As we do. As we try to teach teamwork – it always starts in the home! So thank you to the parents for sharing your children with us, and supporting this extraordinary commitment. And also to the parents in general, as your children pursue higher levels of swimming, please don’t lose sight of what really matters, not only in their athletic career but in their life. It will not be their time.

The gift we have for each senior is a plaque thanking them for their commitment to put Character First, a book about pursuing your dreams, and a book entitled, *The Difference Maker* – for the difference they have made.