

ORHS Class of 2021 Memories

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 31, 2021)

Benita Albert and Jessica Steed bring us another of their reviews of several seniors from graduating classes from Oak Ridge High School. This 2021 version features interviews with four seniors, Raylee Mitchell, Marian Vacaliuc, Jina Jiang and Mitchell Gibbons. You are in for a treat as you learn about these students!

The Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) Class of 2021 has written their memories of special teachers, cardinal and gray teams created for the hybrid schedule resulting from COVID-19 restrictions, virtual days, contact tracing, and a delayed start to the 2020 football season that ended with a state TSSAA championship game. This graduation class has a story unlike any previous alumni classes, and the memories of many of these seniors are soon to be virtually archived on the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF) website at <http://www.orpsef.org/home>.

The Foundation published a book, *Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education, Oak Ridge Schools (1943-2018)* which included stories from the first seventy-five class years of the Oak Ridge Schools. Since then, the ORPSEF has pledged to continue future class stories via their virtual archive collection. This year's numerous class anthologies came from students in AP English Literature upon prompting from their teacher, Michael Feuer. Four of those writers are herein featured as representative of this talented and resilient class. Be sure to read all the soon-to-be published further student accounts on the ORPSEF website.

Raylee Mitchell is the daughter of Dana and Scott Mitchell who moved to Oak Ridge from Texas at the beginning of Raylee's eighth-grade year at Robertsville Middle School. Raylee said she was grateful for a first-year introduction at the middle school level, a school of larger size than her fifty students to a grade in Texas. It was an important year to establish special friendships before advancing to the larger ORHS student body. Raylee has a younger sister, Rainee, who is a rising junior at ORHS.

Marian Vacaliuc is the daughter of Bogdan and Karen Vacaliuc who moved from New Hampshire at the beginning of Marian's first grade year at Woodland Elementary School. Marian aspires to a career in theater, and she has built an impressive resume' toward that goal. She mentioned, in her interview, the joy of being able to continue Masquer's productions while under COVID-19 restrictions, rehearsing for Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" in masks and only taking them off for the actual public performances. She held the starring role of Ariel in the Masquers production of "The Little Mermaid" as well as the role of little orphan Annie in "Annie." She most recently served as stage manager for the Oak Ridge Playhouse's virtual play, "Proof." Marian's siblings are also ORHS graduates, Anna in 2014 and Gabriel in 2016.

Jina Jiang is the daughter of Meirong Lin and Diantan Jiang. Jina attended all grades K-12 in the Oak Ridge Schools: Woodland Elementary School, Jefferson Middle School, and Oak Ridge High School. Jina entered school being fluent in both English and Mandarin, and to perfect her English language skills, she holds fond memories of the English as a Second Language course in which she participated through second grade. Reading her memories, it is clear that Jina challenged the best opportunities, both academic and extra-curricular, throughout her schooling. Her brother, Han, is a 2013 ORHS graduate.

Mitchell Gibbons is the son of Heather Hartman and Jeff Gibbons. Mitchell moved mid-year in fifth-grade to Jefferson Middle School where his gym teacher, Brian Wilson, recognized his discipline, attitude, and effort as attributes for the JMS football team. Mitchell began football practice at the end of his sixth-grade year and secured the starting quarterback position during his seventh- and eighth-grade playing years. His continued sports career at ORHS included being undefeated as the ORHS Wildcat freshman football team and the Class 5A state runner-up during his senior year.

All four of these students agreed to answer further questions of interest about their schooling, the challenges of COVID-19 on their education, their future plans, and their advice to future ORHS students. All were quick with praise for their Oak Ridge Schools' opportunities and for the many memorable teachers in their lives. A bit of each of their written anthologies follows:

Raylee Mitchell: "My four years at ORHS have been marked by many events and unique opportunities, some of which happened every year, like the two weeks of band camp that started off (almost) every school year, getting the class schedule and asking my friends in upper grades which teachers were fantastic and which were...interesting, and always

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managing to eventually settle into a routine, even in a year no one could have anticipated, with numerous challenges presented by contact tracing, virtual days, and the heavy workload synonymous with AP classes, even during a global pandemic." Raylee completed three AP exams in Biology, Calculus BC, and European history, but she had to postpone her AP English Literature test because of a temporary reaction from her Moderna COVID-19 vaccination. That delayed AP exam was completed in the last week of classes for ORHS seniors.

Marian Vacaliuc: "The best quality of the Oak Ridge School system is hands-down its teachers." She follows by citing many teachers from first grade to high school who were her special encouragers and confidantes. She continues, "I couldn't possibly talk about every single teacher that I've ever had in my twelve years of schooling, but I am just grateful to have been taught by them all...they all want you to succeed and be happy. I'm glad I was molded by Oak Ridge teachers. They're 'kinda' the best."

Marian told me about a special memory from her second-grade teacher, Mike Carvella. She described her young self as a shy and a defiant second grader who was charmed by Mr. Carvella's "stress animals." She said that he used these individually assigned stuffed animals as a social tool, helping us to bond with each other. She laughed when recalling a picture of the class and her scowling face while holding her snow leopard, stuffed pet. She learned to enjoy the "sleep-overs" arranged for their animals in the classroom where pets would swap student desks for overnights. This was a further way to meet and make friends, to bond with her classmates, and to lighten her mood.

Jina Jiang: "These four years (at ORHS) were interesting to say the least, challenging for sure, but definitely memorable. I pulled my first all-nighter junior year, traveled abroad with fellow students my freshman year, I went to my first football game, I procrastinated probably way too much, my sleep schedule got worse over the years, I cried for the first time over homework, and there's so much more. I didn't properly finish off junior year, and senior year still seems incomplete with many unable-to-continue traditions." Jina praises her fostered friendships that she hopes will continue, a supportive community, and her Oak Ridge teachers. She concludes by saying, "I'm honored to have attended this school system, and I'm grateful for those I met here, for everything; for shaping me into the person I am now."

Mitchell Gibbons: "My anthology contribution takes place during the 2020 Oak Ridge football season. First, I'd like to thank my teammates and coaches for believing in me to be their quarterback. I quickly noticed the difference between this year's team and the previous ones. Everybody cheered when somebody scored, and teammates were happy for other's success. I think the most important aspect of our team was that we were one big family. I will never forget this tight group who stuck with each other from 2017-2021. This process all started in our freshman season when we went undefeated. That was when we all knew the connection and the bond was unique and unbreakable. At the beginning of our senior season, we started out with a losing record at 2-3, but bounced back and beat the odds. We ended up beating everybody in the playoffs and made a state championship appearance, for the first time since 2005."

Further interview questions and their responses follow:

What were your greatest challenges during COVID-19? Everyone mentioned being separated from friends, while Jina rued the lack of a full club and activities experience; Mitchell and Marian mentioned the lack of close contact with teachers while working virtually for three of the five days each week on the hybrid schedule. Also mentioned were: the temptation to procrastinate on studies, no prom during junior year, precautions that allowed the football season to continue such as masks on team buses, routine temperature checks with those above 100 degrees dismissed from any event, canceled band camp after the second day, no marching at band halftime performances, and no church or off-campus lunch gatherings.

However, there were lessons learned and special moments during COVID-19: Marian felt she drew closer to her family being at home much more, and she enjoyed being able to sleep late. Mitchell mentioned that the precautions taken for Wildcat football players were key to Oak Ridge never having to cancel a game due to COVID-19 infections. Jina praised the exceptionally understanding and flexible teaching staff, and Raylee mentioned that she made new friends in her "Gray Team," hybrid-schedule assignment. During the hybrid schedule, students' surnames beginning with A-N were on the Cardinal Team, and the Gray Team students comprised the remainder of the alphabet. These teams separately attended

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two of the five days of in-person classes each week with the fifth day, Wednesday, being a virtual day for all ORHS students.

Do you have special memories from your early years of education? Every student lauded their teachers for their caring, accessibility, creative instructional programs, and high expectations. Read more about these teachers in the virtual archive for the Class of 2021. Other comments centered on field trips, club sponsorships, and the traditions of the Oak Ridge Schools. On the latter, Mitchell commented that moving into Oak Ridge, he quickly noted how different this community was, citing: active parent networks, student friendliness and acceptance, and an incredible emphasis on excellence and tradition. He remarked that he had played football as a lineman in first- and second-grade in Georgia before his reading score went down and his mother pulled him from the sport. He would return to football as a sixth grader at Jefferson Middle School under the encouraging guidance of his coach, Brian Wilson.

What are your summer plans and your college choices?

Raylee plans to assist her mother in her baking business and helping with weekly sales at the Maryville Farmers' Market. She will also prepare for her transition to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she is enrolled in the University Exploratory Program. This program will allow Raylee to investigate her diverse interests in such as microbiology and forensic anthropology and to design her ultimate academic specialization.

Marian is off to the Savannah College of Art and Design where her plans are to major in musical theater with a possible minor in stage management or costume design. She is eagerly awaiting a summer trip to a small coastal town in Costa Rica and many fun hours at the beach.

Jina hopes to tutor elementary age students in core subjects and to secure a virtual internship during this summer. She looks forward to studies at the University of Pennsylvania in the Wharton School of Business. She seeks an individualized major in business with major emphasis on study abroad, namely international experiences. Though Penn was not on her original list of college choices, she admitted that she was undecided about her future studies until the eleventh grade when an advisor recommended that she investigate Penn's program. Though she was concerned that her classmates seemed to have their futures well defined, she found that Penn's program seemed customized to her need for exploring options.

Mitchell will leave after his ORHS graduation for his dad's home in Georgia where he hopes to "have fun, gain weight, and participate in an exercise regimen and also throwing sessions" in preparation for an early August football practice season at Sewanee, formerly known as The University of the South. He plans to major in computer science and/or mathematics, and he, like his peers above, looks forward to in-person class instruction.

My final question for these soon-to-be ORHS alumni was:

What advice do you have for future ORHS Wildcats?

Jina emphasized the importance of exploring the many options available in academics, sports, and clubs. She advised, "Don't be afraid to try many new options which you may later choose to narrow. There are so many wonderful choices at ORHS including many challenging courses."

Raylee stressed having a positive attitude and knowing that every course will have its own unique challenges. She added, "There are experiences awaiting you that you might never have unless you try."

Mitchell felt it important to counsel students to "Not procrastinate. I did a lot of that. It harms your sleep schedule ultimately. Pay attention to what your teachers are saying, hang on every word, don't get behind and therefore stressed." Mitchell added that he recently attended a spring 2021 ORHS football practice, and he mentioned that his backup quarterback, Hayden Tarwater, is a special friend whom he had the honor to mentor. Of course, he wishes much success to future seasons of Wildcat football.

Marian advised future Wildcats to know when to ask for help, that there is always someone you can turn to, that teachers and counselors want to help—"to have you learn--to love to learn." She ended her answer with, "I am so grateful for my

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time in the Oak Ridge Schools and for the wonderful friendships I have been privileged to share, both with my teachers and my peers.”

These four Oak Ridge students from the Class of 2021 are fine representatives of a class that has known the most unusual of circumstances, restrictions, and interruptions to their educational program. They and their peers are an especially bright and resilient group ready to take on the future. The community of Oak Ridge salutes the ORHS Class of 2021, their teachers, and all the special programming leading to a successful completion of their high school journey.

Roll Wildcats Roll!

Thanks Benita and Jessica! You can see more interviews at the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation website: <http://www.orpsef.org/home>.



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Marian Vacaliuc



Mitchell Gibbons

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Raylee Mitchell