

ORHS Class of 2023 Story

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 15, 2023)

Benita Albert and Jessica Steed bring us another of their annual stories about the graduating class from Oak Ridge High School. Each year they take select a few individuals who are used to represent the class of that year. This year is no exception, they have selected five outstanding representatives. Enjoy the reflection on this 2023 class.

Reflecting on his high school years, ORHS senior Luca Filigenzi proposed that the Covid pandemic might be how his high school generation will be identified and remembered. Certainly, if that is the case, the ORHS Class of 2023 had their mettle tested and have now emerged triumphant.

It was their freshman year, 2019-20, when Oak Ridge students learned, during spring break, that they would not be returning to school for the remaining nine-weeks. Their sophomore year gave the option to students of at-home virtual instruction, or they could choose a hybrid schedule with two days in the classroom weekly combined with virtual lessons for the remainder of the week. Their junior year was another adjustment as students were introduced to block scheduling, a design whereby students could complete four course credits each semester via lengthened class hours. Finally, the 2022-23 year was, as one senior described it, our first "normal year of high school."

The ORHS Class of 2023 is the eightieth graduation class and the beginning of the ninth decade of instruction in the Oak Ridge Schools. The Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF) published the book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1943-2018." The book contains Class stories from each of the first 75 years, and since then, the Foundation has collected and archived successive, student class stories on their website: www.orpsef.org.

Through submitted senior anthologies as well as teacher referrals, five students have been chosen to represent the 371 seniors in the ORHS Class of 2023 for this story.

Luca Filigenzi and his twin sister, Sofia, are the children of Maria Fleming and Marc Filigenzi. Luca and Sofia attended St. Mary's Catholic School through eighth grade before transferring to ORHS for their freshman year. They followed their older brother, Anthony, who graduated from ORHS in 2021. The remainder of their family unit includes a menagerie of "furry and feathered children": dogs, a cat, ducks, horses, and a few chickens, all of whom are blessed to have a veterinarian as their "human mom."

I asked about their introduction to ORHS, and Sofia made me laugh out loud with her response: "I thought I'd be taller and more fashionable. I had watched a ton of teen shows on TV to prepare me. I expected weird drama, but the expected did not happen. In fact, high school seemed a lot like middle school."

Sofia wrote her anthology memorializing her sophomore English class project and the lessons it taught. Sofia wrote: "In preparation to read William Golding's '*Lord of the Flies*,' our teacher Mrs. (Jamie) Robin put us into groups and gave our groups objects that represented an item we'd need for survival. She told us that we could barter or trade items from each other while we pretended to live on an island."

Sofia's group of four girls chose two of them to guard their items, a third girl to steal, and Sofia to serve as bodyguard for the stealer. She reported the results, saying: "The class fell into chaos, and as a result Mrs. Robin cut the activity short." Later they learned that they were the only one of Mrs. Robin's classes to achieve such infamy.

Sofia summarized the lessons learned: "I think the reason I cherished this memory so much was because it furthered the themes of '*Lord of the Flies*' and how people can become chaotic without any sort of laws or restrictions. I feel bad for Mrs. Robin and for the chaos my group and I unintentionally caused...At the same time, I'm glad she had the patience to help us, because it helped us all understand the book much better than if we had just read through it."

"*Lord of the Flies*," a book often criticized for the violence within, is considered a classic treatise on the importance of individual actions and teamwork in structuring a workable, humane society. It is a widely read sophomore English course selection in American schools.

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Sofia received a Girl Scout Gold Award for her published children's book, "Daisy Sisters from the Heart." Her book, available on Amazon, concerns young Girl Scouts working to earn a badge for kindnesses shown to others even when their well-meaning actions are not reciprocated. Sofia loves all things artistic, thus her college choice of the Savannah School of Art and Design where she says, "I can pursue many artistic options." She named two future career dreams, namely writing and voice acting. She said, "I want to entertain and help people, to help them laugh, and yet also advise."

Luca wrote, "Perhaps the greatest gift ORHS gave me is aiding me in discovering my passion for so many things in life." He listed some of those passions as history, theater, school political opportunities, and in general, developing his passion for reaching desired goals. His theater credits include numerous roles in ORHS plays and musicals and even radio plays during his Covid-confining sophomore year. The latter performances were offered to interested audiences via Zoom technology and featured scripts from radio classics such as "*Flash Gordon*" and Orson's Welles' "*War of the Worlds*."

Back to live audiences in his junior and senior years, Luca took the stage playing a variety of characters for Masquer's productions of "*Clue*," "*The Curious Savage*," "*Percy Jackson*," and "*Sweeney Todd*." Hilariously, Luca recalled one his favorite roles as the nonspeaking half, the rear end, of a centaur named Chiron in "*Percy Jackson*." I asked Luca if his friends knew he was in this unique role. He answered, "Yeah, my friends knew. I was very outspoken to people that I played a 'butt.' It's a role I'll brag about forever."

Luca's school leadership roles include president of his sophomore class, an ORHS Boys State delegate in junior year, and vice president of the ORHS Student Council in senior year. He has also served as an intern on the floor of the Tennessee State Senate during breaks in his school schedule.

He summarized his goals, writing: "I hope to keep the passion ORHS has taught me and carry it through a college degree in history and the difficulties of law school. After law school, I hope to practice criminal law, while also actively participating in local and state politics. In time I plan on eventually shifting my career to politics, and my ultimate goal will be a seat in Congress." Luca will begin pre-law studies, majoring in history at Xavier University in Cincinnati this fall.

Blake Steed, the son of Jessica and Chad Steed and the brother of Julia (ORHS Class of 2020), has received a four-year, full-tuition Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps Scholarship at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). His trajectory toward this appointment was influenced by his admiration for Jefferson Middle School (JMS) football coach, Brian Wilson. It was during middle school that Blake not only learned the game of football as a left guard, but he also learned of his Coach's West Point and military service prior to Coach Wilson's teaching career at JMS.

Blake began his education at Woodland Elementary where a favorite memory was serving as a school Safety Patrol in the fourth grade and the resultant Washington D.C. trip he and fellow patrols earned as a reward. His passion for football in middle school continued into high school where he lettered all four years as a linebacker on the ORHS Wildcat defensive line. During junior-year preseason, Blake suffered an injury to his knee which required ACL reconstruction and rehabilitation. He came back quickly and ran track at the end of his junior year. Blake said, "Track was hard at first, but it also served as a good way to build strength and stamina for my return to football in senior year." A second knee injury during the fifth game of his senior season ended Blake's playing career, but he remained on the sidelines as a student assistant to the coaching staff. He received an Academic All-Region Football Award his senior year.

Blake can claim that every year of high school has been different for him. Like his classmates, he experienced the Covid-effect on his learning choices. He took advantage of the extra-credit, virtual work offered to finish his freshman math class, and he chose the hybrid schedule in his sophomore year. He said that the hybrid schedule was not his favorite, that he preferred being with all his friends (instead of the ½ student body present on the alternating days schedule). He added, "I wanted to be at school full time where I could ask questions and get additional help." His junior year block-scheduling coursework allowed him to accrue a total of eight course credits and thereby set up his senior year for a different scenario.

Blake completed all but one state-required math credit by the end of the first semester of senior year at ORHS. Therefore, he elected to enroll in Roane State Community College for the second semester, where not only is he finishing his high school math credit, but he is also earning college course credits. Blake said he hopes that the combination of these

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college credits as well as Advanced Placement course credits from ORHS will afford him the time to begin work towards a MBA during his four years at UTK. His undergraduate plans include a major in Finance and a minor in Military Science.

Kylee Thompson is the daughter of Daryl and Shayne Thompson and the last of her siblings to graduate from ORHS. She follows siblings Durrell ('09), Caelyn ('16), and Keyanna ('20) in receiving her 2023 ORHS diploma. Kylee attended Woodland Elementary where her admiration for her kindergarten and third grade teachers, Amanda Tiller and Inger Scudder respectively, influenced her choice to return as a student assistant during the first hour of her senior-year schedule.

Kylee's school career is rich with strong academic and leadership choices. At JMS she played basketball, played clarinet in the band, and served as president of the JMS Interact Club.

At ORHS, Kylee fell in love with Masquers and anything musical or theatrical. Before freshman year ended early, she served as an understudy for a "*Little Women*" role, and as a dancer and singer in "*The Little Mermaid*" production. Sophomore year was spent online, because she said, "I didn't feel comfortable coming to school." Returning to school in her junior year was a challenge at first as Kylee reported that her procrastination habits of the last year met up with a much more demanding schedule. She conquered this challenge quickly, and she enjoyed the return to daily student and teacher interactions.

Her theatrical resume grew as she played the role of Little Red Riding Hood's Granny in the Masquers production of "*Into the Woods*" during her junior year. Kylee loved this comedic role. This year, Kylee accepted a new challenge as student director of the Masquers play, "*The Curious Savage*." She is currently directing a scene for the Masquers medley of skits, scenes, and improvisations called "*Atomic Acts*."

Kylee and friends took the "lemons" of Covid and turned it around for the social and emotional life of ORHS students. Kylee had a leading role in establishing "Wildcats for Change," a group dedicated to positive advocacy for student engagement and involvement. This effort, initiated during her freshman year, was a prophetic response to student emotional and social needs. Wildcats for Change launched such activities as a Back to School Bash and Game Nights encouraging student and faculty interactions, as well as working to enhance the school's physical environment with such as spirit posters and art.

Kylee's ORHS course of studies includes numerous honors and AP academic credits. Though her college choice has yet to be determined she wishes to pursue studies in film production and/or audio-engineering with possible minors in music, writing, and artist management.

Anshra Ajaz, the daughter of Ajaz Iqbal and Nausheen Akhtar, will attend UTK where she plans to major in Psychology and minor in Neuroscience. With the fifteen AP course credits she will bring to her undergraduate program, Anshra hopes she can enroll in medical school early. At present, her career specialization interests lean toward pediatric psychology. Her time at UTK will briefly overlap with that of her brother Anhaar Ajaz, ORHS Class of 2020.

Anshra was part of an interesting "looping experiment" for grades 1-4 at Woodland Elementary. She spent grades 1 and 2 with teacher Bobbie Spangler followed by the same classmates in grades 3 and 4 with teacher Jennifer Little. This schedule design, since abandoned by the school system, was much liked by Anshra who praised her teachers. In particular, she cited "the fun science experiments we conducted in Mrs. Little's class."

Anshra's move to fifth-grade at JMS found her in a special English class with five other peers as well as early placement in a sixth-grade Pre-algebra course. She loved the new elective options available at JMS including serving as a teacher's aide, Math Bowl, Science Bowl, Orchestra, and Interact Club.

Anshra said, "After Covid I basically stopped all extra activities except for tennis." She is a member of the ORHS varsity team where she reported being "somehow ranked as number one (for now)."

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As for Covid and her school experiences, Anshra successfully completed four AP courses in her sophomore year while later complaining that she too often procrastinated on the hybrid schedule. This self-critical comment was followed by the typical realization that not only she, but also her peers, faced a challenging new reality upon return to daily, in-person classes their junior year. They had to adjust to block scheduling and the longer course hours required to accomplish completion of a full year's curriculum in one semester. She described her sophomore, hybrid schedule as "interesting with so much free time and an opportunity to work at your own pace." She contrasted that with a junior year that she said brought back "hard deadlines and earlier wake-up hours."

Finally, I **asked what advice these 2023 graduates would offer to future Oak Ridge Wildcats.** Their responses follow.

Sofia: "Expect the unexpected. We can't control what terrible things happen, we can only control how we respond."

Luca: "If I could go back in time, I'd tell myself that it's not a matter of doing stuff. Be true to yourself in finding the right way forward. Do what you love and friends come naturally."

Blake: "High school goes by way faster than you think. Join a club or sport and make friends."

Kylee: "Don't rush it, don't hurry to be an adult. High school goes quickly, stay on track, and enjoy the last few minutes."

Anshra: "Find a balance between studies and fun. Don't slack off, keep trying. It goes so fast, make the most of it."

Their sincerely given advice is not only wise, but well-learned through a high school career full of dynamic educational twists and taxing pandemic concerns. Sofia, Luca, Blake, Kylee, and Anshra have persevered along with their Class of 2023 peers. May their next journey follow the counsel of Americana author Mark Twain, "Give every day the chance to become the most beautiful day of your life."

Congratulations to the ORHS Class of 2023.

Yet again I am amazed by the insights Benita and Jessica bring out of a few individuals who truly are representatives of this year's class. Thank you both for another excellent review of the ORHS graduating class.

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Luca Filigenzi (photo by Jeff Tidwell, a family friend and photographer)

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Sofia Filigenzi (photo taken by her mother, Maria Fleming)

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Kylee Thompson (photo by Morgan Metcalf of MDM Photography)

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Anshra Ajaz (a selfie)

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Blake Steed (photo by Chad Steed of Chad Steed Photography)