

Oak Ridge High School Class of 2026

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 11, 2026)

Benita Albert brings us another annual insight into the graduating class by using three of the graduates. Their perspective will give readers a better understanding of the thoughts and aspirations of our youth. Enjoy learning about these three up and coming young folks who are heading off into the world with a firm foundation provided by Oak Ridge schools.

The Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) Class of 2026 is in the last month of their high school career and looking forward to being present on Blankenship Field (weather permitting) to receive their diplomas on May 15th. Three ORHS seniors, Riley Cureton, Charlie Taubenheim, and Elena Vogt, agreed to share memories of their school and community experiences as well as offer advice to future Wildcats. They are excellent representatives for their class. During a very busy last few days of school, I am honored that they made time to do a sit-down interview. Their inspiring stories follow.

Riley Cureton

Riley Cureton wrote a reflective piece on her thirteen years (K-12) in the Oak Ridge Schools. Her words of gratitude, of lessons learned, and of academic and social growth, reinforce the importance of the Oak Ridge community's investment in their public schools and this community's most valuable resource, our children.

Riley said, "As a member of the ORHS Class of 2026, I've had the privilege of growing-up through the Oak Ridge system. From the first elementary school book fairs (at Linden Elementary School) to senior year projects that challenged me to think critically, every stage taught me something about curiosity, persistence, and collaboration."

"One of my most meaningful experiences was being able to go off campus to have a hands-on experience in the art class at the middle school during my senior year. It was the first time I saw how words could bridge ideas and people, a lesson I'll carry with me far beyond high school. I also think back to teachers who noticed when we were struggling, who stayed after class to explain a concept or just to listen. That kind of support shaped who I am."

"Oak Ridge's traditions, like the Wildcat spirit at homecoming, the dedication to academic excellence, and the sense of belonging in every classroom, are ones I hope continue for future students. They remind us that education here isn't just about grades; it's about growing together, surrounded by people who genuinely care."

Riley's parents, Adam and Julia Cureton are both educators at opposite ends of the educational continuum. Julia teaches kindergarten at Linden Elementary School while Adam is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). Riley's brother, Carson, is an ORHS Class of '24 graduate and a student at UTK. Riley will attend UTK where she plans an undergraduate major in Philosophy and a minor in Spanish. Her future goal is law school and a career as an attorney specializing in disability law.

As I was interviewing Riley, I was delighted to learn of her passion for the visual arts. She praised the strong arts program she was exposed to across all grades. She spent the first semester of her senior year as a student aide for art teacher Jim Dodson at Jefferson Middle School. She displayed her talents locally in sidewalk chalk-art competitions where she won first-place awards three different years. She recently prepared an art portfolio to be submitted for Advanced Placement credit, a fifteen-piece selection of mixed media artwork.

Touchingly, Riley spent a recent Sunday afternoon chalk-drawing pictures and words of encouragement to Linden Elementary students on the front sidewalk entrance to the school. She was inspired to do this for students who were about to face a week-long battery of state tests. "Today is your day" and "Good morning stars!" were just two of the encouraging phrases the students walked across while entering the school.

Charlie Taubenheim

Charlie Taubenheim wrote of what he called, "One of my most memorable moments of being an Oak Ridge Wildcat." Charlie reminisced, "It was March 10th, 2025. Oak Ridge had one of the toughest basketball schedules in the state, and

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after defeating Maryville High School, the Wildcats advanced to the sectional match in the Wildcat Arena. It was our last match to go to the state tournament." Charlie's narrative continued, describing the huge support of the Wildcat student body in a tight game eventually won by Oak Ridge, the final score being 51-50. Charlie, who was the only junior in a starting lineup of seniors, fondly remembers: "We made history that night."

Charlie's writing makes one feel that he could be a future sports announcer/color commentator; his narrative was so full of passion and joy. The 2025 season closed with a state championship final game that Oak Ridge lost to Nashville's Hillsboro High.

Charlie's basketball career will go on as he joins 'The Scots' of Maryville College, a NCAA Division III team. He has received a four-year McGill Scholarship, a highly selective award which recognizes academics and leadership. He says that his options are open as to an academic major. He explained that it is his love for a diversity of subjects from history to science that complicates his decision making at present.

Charlie's parents, Anna and Ty Taubenheim, are respectively a psychologist and an orthopedic nurse practitioner. Anna (nee Daniels) is an ORHS Class of 2002 graduate. Charlie has three younger brothers: Jackson in 7th grade, Henry in 2nd grade, and Ben in Pre-school. Adding to a family row of bleacher fans is his Uncle Rick Daniels-Mulholland (ORHS '05) who also played Wildcat basketball. Hopefully, future Wildcats are in the making as Charlie's brothers, Jackson and Henry, have begun playing basketball.

Charlie's early sports interests centered on soccer. However, when he began basketball in the Boy's Club, followed by AAU league and Robertsville Middle School play, he found his niche. He was 6' tall in eighth grade, growing to a current 6'6" height and playing at the small forward position during his ORHS years. He has won numerous court honors including being nominated for Tennessee's 'Mr. Basketball,' selected for the 2026 District and Regional tournament teams, awarded the Otis Howard Most Valuable Player for 2026, and twice honored by the CAREacter Star Athlete Program. The latter award recognizes exceptional attitude, character, grades, community service and performance for ORHS athletes.

When I asked Charlie for special memories from Oak Ridge Schools, he was effusive. "At Linden, it was Mrs. Little's color-coded behavior chart that reminded me to always do my best. And the field days were my favorite. At Robertsville I loved making new friends, playing in Bond Park during recess, participating in sports, and making the graduation walk through Robertsville as eighth graders. I now look forward to returning to Linden for a graduating seniors walk through my alma mater."

Meeting Charlie, I quickly recognized a magnetic personality, a young man who makes friends easily. He described himself as a "huge people person." He continued, "I love going to support all ORHS sports teams. I love being a part of the Wildcat Nation whether on the court or in the stands." And his enthusiastic spirit extends to volunteerism in the community where he has worked with city summer camp programs and with special events such as children's Easter egg hunts and Halloween and Christmas parties. Additionally, he has served four years as an all-ages soccer referee with Grassroots of Tennessee.

You can read more of Charlie's writing and other Class of '26 memories soon on the virtual archive of class stories collected by the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF) at www.orpsef.org. The class archives are temporarily unavailable while a new alumni page is being created on the ORPSEF site. The alumni page will include, among other services, the collection of ORHS class stories from 2019-2026. The archive project is designed to annually collect class stories beyond the first 75 years of stories published by ORPSEF in the book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1944-2018."

Elena Vogt

Elena Vogt and her family moved to Oak Ridge near the end of her kindergarten year at Woodland. Her parents, Megumi (nee Murakami) and Kevin Vogt, returned to their hometown after a career in the U. S. Air Force. Megumi and Kevin are

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both ORHS Class of '89 graduates. Megumi is a neurologist who currently works at the Knoxville VA Medical Center, and Kevin is self-employed. Elena has two older brothers, Robert (ORHS '22) at Rochester University and Daniel (ORHS '24) at Northeastern University.

Elena had humorous school memories to recount in our interview. She remembered an April Fools Day at Woodland when teachers glued quarters to the school sidewalk. She said, "We spent all of our recess getting them unstuck." (And no doubt, the teachers enjoyed watching their efforts.) She recalled delightful lunch times with friends in eighth-grade teacher Scott Linn's classroom at Jefferson Middle School (JMS). She smiled and recalled, "When friends learned that I had not seen 'The Princess and the Frog,' (Disney movie) they arranged for me to view it with them over several lunch periods in Mr. Linn's room." It was also at JMS during spirit week that Elena especially enjoyed a fifth-grade door decoration project. Teacher Jennifer Little's class took screen shots of each student with their hands in the air and built a poster collage for the classroom door, an "every-student-an-Eagle" statement.

Elena played for the JMS/RMS school soccer team and all four years at ORHS. She beamed when describing a recent win over 4-time state champion, Bearden High, this year. She has served as a volunteer for SCOR, coaching a preteen girls' team for two years. In the eighth grade, she began rowing and continued through her junior year, eventually learning to scull as well as being part of quad and double rowing teams.

Academically, Elena elected an ambitious curriculum including numerous AP courses across all academic disciplines. Along with student partner Nathan Kizzire, Elena has pursued a two-year research project through the ORHS Math Thesis program with Dr. Rich Archibald at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Their research is focused on using machine learning to aid in the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. Elena has also been a member of the ORHS Robotics Club for four years. She observed, "I love the hands-on experience, and ultimately seeing all the little pieces of the project come together for a fully functioning robot."

Elena was selected for the prestigious UT Governor's School for Engineering, a 4-week, summer immersion in advanced topics. She chose the field of materials science for extended studies from various STEM course options. Having completed all ORHS advanced math course offerings, Elena traveled to UTK during the first semester of her senior year to complete a course in Graph Theory.

One could rightfully ask, does Elena have time to sleep? I have only surfaced the entirety of all that she has accomplished. In the community, she earned the rank of Eagle Scout through her project to plant grass on the city's Pine Wood Park making it adaptable as a soccer field. She is the president of the ORHS Student Council. She expressed gratitude for her executive officers' teamwork in creating the first-ever Fall Ball, a social dance for ORHS underclassmen. She mentioned plans for a new ORHS tradition, a "sideline social" that would be akin to an end-of-year field day for all high schoolers.

Elena has chosen Northwestern University where she will continue as a "Wildcat," yet a purple and white version of a mascot named "Willie the Wildcat." Elena will major in biomedical engineering and premed studies. She added that, should time permit, a minor in political science would meet another of her academic interests, noting that participation in Girls State her junior year inspired her.

All three seniors, Riley, Charlie, and Elena are members of the National Honor Society and also serve as Wildcat Mentors for underclassmen. They have all chosen rigorous academic subjects and completed Advanced Placement and dual-credit coursework that offers course credits and advanced standing in their college placement. And they all have been civic volunteers.

Before they leave for college, there are busy summer plans. Riley will work with five-year-old children as a teacher assistant in the Tate's School Summer Camp program. Charlie will return for a fifth year as a counselor for the Oak Ridge Civic Center summer camps. Elena looks forward to a trip to Japan with her grandmother and cousins.

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As is my tradition in writing each ORHS class story I posed two additional questions to the trio. Those questions and the students' thoughtful responses follow:

What is special about the ORHS Class of 2026?

Riley: "We are close. We all came together as freshmen from two different middle schools and quickly bonded. We found our special group of friends, but we also discovered an easy fluidity among groups."

Charlie: "Keeping Wildcat traditions and our amazing school spirit."

Elena: "We are a strong community. We excelled in many sports."

What advice do you have for future Wildcats?

Riley: "Put yourself out there. Take advantage of the diverse academic offerings and clubs. There is something for everyone."

Charlie: "Enjoy every second! Hard work pays off. Get out in the community. Volunteer and do something for others. Be kind to each other. Put more love and kindness in the world."

Elena: "Be a self-advocate, fight for yourself. ORHS offers incredible opportunities for every student who seeks them."

The 83rd ORHS graduating class, the ORHS Class of '26, counts 369 seniors who will now take on the future in a variety of ways. Riley, Charlie, and Elena have provided a snapshot of their school and community experiences that represent their class well. They, and most assuredly their classmates, are grateful for the many educators, coaches, and community mentors who have invested their time and talents in their lives.

For each new graduate, I wish you a lifetime of learning, of exciting challenges, and of dreams accomplished. "Believe you can, and you're halfway there," a piece of wisdom first shared by President Theodore Roosevelt, is my parting advice and my hope for all members of the ORHS Class of 2026.

Thanks, Benita, for another excellent look into the amazing graduates of ORHS...Wow, what a great trio of students! Makes one proud of what is being accomplished by our young folks and their education in Oak Ridge Schools.

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Charlie Taubenheim (Courtesy of Charlie Taubenheim)



Charlie Taubenheim enjoying basketball (Courtesy of Charlie Taubenheim)

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Riley Cureton (Courtesy of Riley Cureton)



One of fifteen visual art pieces Riley submitted for her AP Art portfolio requirement "Expectations vs. Realities," an original acrylic painting by Riley Cureton (Courtesy of Riley Cureton)

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Elena Vogt (Courtesy of Elena Vogt)



Elena with the Yellow Jackets soccer team she coaches. They are celebrating a recent win with a frozen treat. (Courtesy of Elena Vogt)