

We Are The Bucs

I am a fourth generation Buccaneer. Not an actual buccaneer that is out to steal treasure, but one from O'Connell College Preparatory High School. Open since 1847, O'Connell is full of history and traditions that have contributed to the city of Galveston since its beginning. These traditions create an ever-growing family made of those from the past, present, and future.

O'Connell's focus on developing students' characters and not just minds has fostered the growth for this family atmosphere throughout the years. O'Connell is not a stereotypical American high school filled with divide and teenage angst. To the contrary, it is a community with a rich history, unique rituals, and caring atmosphere that shapes virtuous individuals.

O'Connell has an uncommon history my family has gotten to be a part of throughout time. O'Connell began in 1847 as a private, all-girls school named Ursuline. Thirty-five years later, a rivaling private, all-girls school named Dominican opened. Even though several decades have passed, women of both schools can still be found firmly stating that their school is clearly superior. My grandmothers and great aunts from both my mom and dad's side of the family attended Ursuline and grew up together. I always heard them talk about "those Dominican girls" and how "Ursuline girls had much better figures because of all of the stairs we had to climb." Little did my grandmothers know while attending Ursuline, that their future children would get married and have children who would one day attend the same school. In 1927, the all-boys high school opened and was named Kirwin. While attending an open house event at my school, I decided to take a peek at the old yearbooks. One of my grandparent's friends was in charge of the table and told me to look at a certain yearbook. It was then that I discovered my great grandfather was in the first graduating class of Kirwin and attended classes in the very same building I was in at the time. I was also able to look at pictures of his son, my grandfather, in

another yearbook and old school newspapers. Ursuline, Dominican, and Kirwin consolidated in 1968 on Kirwin's campus to become O'Connell Catholic High School. Since that time, my father, aunts, uncles, brother, and I have attended the same high school on the same campus with the same traditions. Just like the night of open house, Ursuline, Dominican, Kirwin, and O'Connell alumni can be found attending and volunteering at current school events. This helps them stay connected with their old friends and become acquainted with students who are currently enrolled.

O'Connell's unique traditions bond those who are involved in the school and help citizens in Galveston be a part of the community. During homecoming, each grade has a few weeks to create its own float to compete against the other grades. First, each grade has a meeting to create a theme for their float and how to decorate it. Then, they have what are called flower making parties. During these 'parties,' classes fold tissue paper to look like flowers so they can be stapled onto the side of the float and make it look extravagant. These flowers must be on the float or that grade's float is disqualified. Once the flowers are made, the float building and decorating may begin. The floats are presented during the homecoming parade where people in Galveston gather on the streets to see the creative floats students have built that year. I have many fond memories of flower making parties where I spent time with friends eating, watching movies, and jamming to our favorite music while creating what I consider the best floats O'Connell has ever seen. Another tradition during homecoming week is the Snake Dance. The O'Connell community gathers in the historic downtown area of Galveston and is led by the cheerleaders throughout the event. It begins with the cheerleaders performing a cheer on the corner of the street and then everyone linking arms to form a long line. This line then 'snakes' around the block, zig-zagging across the street and weaving around lamp posts, bushes, and

trees. Once the line reaches the end of the block, the cheerleaders perform another cheer. This process continues down two blocks and then returns to the original starting point. People around Galveston sit outside of restaurants to watch the Snake Dance and take pictures. To onlookers that are not from Galveston, this ritual must seem very odd, but islanders expect and enjoy it every year. It was an amazing moment my senior year to look back at a yearbook from the fifties and see students like me participate in the Snake Dance. I tend to think people who are older did not have many of the same experiences as teenagers, since we have grown up in very different eras. Looking at that picture and seeing former students taking part in the same event, which I have taken part of for four years, made me feel a wondrous connection.

O'Connell was formed with the intent of being more than a school: it is structured to create a family. Because the school is very small, the teachers are able to build close connections with students. Furthermore, because Galveston is such a small and connected island, everyone in the school or their families has most likely known each other for a very long time. My calculus teacher, Mrs. Potts, taught a few of my aunts and uncles and her children attended O'Connell with them as well. It seemed like every week I got to hear a new story about my aunts and uncles when they were in high school. Because Mrs. Potts is a family friend, we bonded immediately when first getting to know each other at school. My mother even attended high school with my principal. Even if a student does not have these kind of prior connections, the teachers care about each student as a person rather than a number. They take the time to ensure each person thrives academically and is doing well in his or her personal life. Because of O'Connell's small environment, it is fairly hard not to know everyone and know them quite well. O'Connell, as with any family, experiences trials, but the community is always there to support its members. My freshman year, our school's priest and theology teacher, Father Ron, passed away. He had

been teaching at O'Connell for many years and was loved dearly by each student. The response from the community was incredible. Students who had attended O'Connell as far as six years prior returned to Galveston to attend the funeral service. The student body president that year also arranged a memorial during school to honor and remember Father Ron. The atmosphere at school was filled with sorrow, but the students responded to one another with compassion and understanding. O'Connell's warm atmosphere shapes students into caring individuals so that they may face these kinds of adversities with love and strength.

I am proud to say that I am a fourth generation Buccaneer. I am still not the kind of buccaneer that is out to steal treasure, but the kind that finds it by running down the street linking arms with friends and folding tissue paper to win a float making contest. These traditions may sound silly, but every community has its unique quirks. The fact that these quirks can be traced so many years back also makes everyone feel they are part of something bigger than themselves. My time involved with O'Connell helped shape my story, and continues shaping it from the encouragement I receive from those within the community. I am not the only one with this story, as O'Connell has had a positive impact on almost every individual who has crossed its path. Malala Yousafzai's famous quote, "Let us remember: One book, one pen, one child, and one teacher can change the world" (The Full Text) perfectly embodies O'Connell and its values.

Works Cited

"The Full Text: Malala Yousafzai delivers defiant riposte to Taliban militants with speech to the UN General Assembly." Editorial. *Independent*. Independent, 12 July 2013. Web. 6 October 2016.

