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napa valley
Summer/Fall 2019

Summer
• IN THE
vineyards

Bonding OVER ART

How four months at the Oxbow School changed our lives

ZOÉ MURPHY

On a warm May morning in Napa, 44 students stood shoulder to shoulder across an expanse of bright green grass. All dressed in their most fashionable attire, their hair styled, and faces sufficiently buffed, the students whispered among themselves as the voices of happy parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents hummed softly in the background.

The culmination of these students' efforts over the past four months finally came to fruition. After experiencing the innovative academics, launching into the intensive research, and diving into the vast world of art offered at The Oxbow School, the students each produced a distinct piece of art for their final project. A week of installations later, the art hung proudly in galleries, ready to be viewed by family, friends, and locals.

After an emotional speech by the head of school, the faculty began introducing themselves and passing the microphone down the line of students. A shy introduction here, a boisterous introduction there, the students introduced themselves and where they came from: Texas, Rhode Island, Maryland, Vermont, Minnesota, Colorado, Georgia, two Maines, two New Hampshires, two Virginias, three Massachusetts, three New Mexicos, a few New Jerseys, a couple New Yorks and a handful of Californias later, the students started filing into their respective gallery spaces with their families following close behind.

Presentations and lunch followed before the galleries finally opened to the public. As the audience trickled in, students could be seen standing proudly by their work ready to answer any

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Submitted photo

The 2019 Oxbow School art program students, including author Zoé Murphy



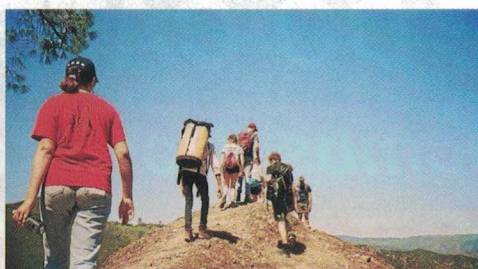
Zoé Murphy

Oxbow School art students Bailey and Marly on an outing.



Zoé Murphy

2019 Oxbow School art students Lucy, Shira, Bailey, and Brie



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questions on their art and topic of research.

Let's backtrack to clarify a few key terms. What is The Oxbow School? The Oxbow School, located in Napa, is the only art-focused semester boarding program for high school students in the United States. According to the Oxbow website, their mission is "to create an interdisciplinary student experience that fuses the life of the mind with the skills of the hand, leading to habits of lifelong learning that cultivate and empower productive lives."

What is the final project? The final project is the chance for students to create an artwork based on in-depth research on a subject of their choice. The goal of the final project is to foster an ongoing dialogue between inquiry, research, writing, and art-making. Now back to the story.

That warm May weekend will forever be a special memory. It marked the end to lively discussions about "What is Nature?" It marked the end to creating art in Oxbow's large studios. It marked the end of being surrounded by the supportive faculty of The Oxbow School. It marked the end of the impromptu musical performances by the students. It marked the end of the late-night dance parties in the dorms. It marked the end of so many beautiful memories, and yet two fundamental aspects remained: our community and the change we instilled in each other.

The theme of "family and home" found by the students at the Oxbow School was a strong influence throughout the semester. Emma C-H., a student from San Francisco, explored the theme of home in her final project. In her research paper, Emma states her meaning of home as "safety" and "comfort" and explains how she found a "second family" at Oxbow. She elaborates by stating that Oxbow created such a robust community because "we are bound by where we live [the Oxbow



Maria Sestito/Register

Bryan Meehan, a parent, speaks with Eloise Janssen, 16, of Florida, about her painting during the fall student show at The Oxbow School in Napa in 2015

campus] and our similar interests, because we influence each other, and because we have maintained a balance of sharedness, humility, and honor."

Another student, Jill N. from New Jersey, defined home as a space where she felt "supported and happy" with herself. When asked if she found a home at Oxbow, she answered that she "found a strong home here because of the people and the faculty."

These two students are not alone. Ayla K. recalls calling Oxbow her home when she was back in Santa Cruz for spring break.

I, for one, believe that the phenomenon of finding a home and family at Oxbow does not merely stem from the fact that we lived nearby and ate together in the same dining hall. I, like Jill, hold that it goes further than just the students. The Oxbow program and its faculty deserve credit.

From the myriad creative team-building exercises at the beginning of the semester to the engaging classes presented throughout the semester, the faculty of The Oxbow School work hard to create a happy and safe place for their students.

I remember the very first full day at Oxbow. The faculty had set up large pieces of paper atop the tables in the sculpture studio, along with boxes of oil pastels. They then asked us to walk around the tables while creating marks as they gave various additional instructions. An hour later, we completed three masterpieces which hung on the wall.

The exercise not only showed us our capacity to create, but it also opened communication

between the newly arrived students. From "Can you pass me the blue?" to "How should we arrange our paper on the wall?" we started to become more comfortable with each other, thus completing the first step to creating a healthy community.

The classrooms were just as enriching. Instead of lengthy lectures where only the teacher speaks, questions and discussions form the culture of the classroom. The questions and ensuing discussions allow each student to speak their mind on a subject, enabling them to not only to dive deeper into the ideas being explored, but also to improve their communication skills, thus allowing them to get to know each other.

Through these and various other ways, Oxbow created a place of trust and safety and a community that every student who has attended Oxbow will carry with them forever.

The community, the new people, the different ideas, they supported each student while also pushing them to grow. Jill N. said, "I became more confident with myself and my art skills" throughout the semester.

She adds that Oxbow taught her the "importance of happiness" as she reminisces of the late nights in her dorm and the days out at the local swimming holes. Ayla K. echoes Jill in saying that her confidence has grown, reinvigorating herself to go after what she wants. Ayla says that she learned at Oxbow that "You don't have to settle for less than what you want to do. You can always work towards what you want."

Bailey T. adds a thoughtful and

accurate comment. She explains that Oxbow showed her a snapshot of "all the different kinds of people that she will see, meet, and connect with" as well as taught her to be "super open to everything." Ayla adds to this by stating that she "understands people better" and can see "different perspectives" after her semester at Oxbow.

I find the last statements incredibly accurate. To be able to spend a semester close to people from around the country opened my eyes. I was used to "the bubble" of a small town. There is a sameness that permeates small towns. Our slang is the same; the teenagers try to achieve the same style; we all have similar habits. Oxbow allowed me to see outside of the bubble. I learned new phrases, explored different styles, and acquired new habits. From expressions such as "word?" replacing "for real?," midi dresses taking over short ones, and going to grab a coffee, changing from the hangouts at the "Big Target," I stepped out of my habits and opened my eyes to see beyond the small town. As the semester passed, I grew both inside and out due to the diverse people that surrounded me.

At The Oxbow School, I found a family of different, yet like-minded, people. I now have and am part of a support system that stretches across the United States and encompasses all Oxbow students past or present. At The Oxbow School, I found people that helped shape me into a better more open person. From the supportive staff to the incredible student body, they built me into a better version of myself. Oxbow pushed me out of my comfort zone and showed me a whole new world. I would not be the person I am right now without this experience.

Because of Oxbow, that warm May morning will forever remain in my memory. It marked the end of the most magical semester of my life, but it also marked the beginning of a life that Oxbow taught me to live the fullest. A life I now live outside the bubble surrounded by a strong community.