

CELEBRATING  
**150**  
OES

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CELEBRATING **150** YEARS!



Boarding students at OES gather each Wednesday evening to dine and reflect within their dorm “families,” followed by team-building games like this one with Nanati Fetene (left), Mimi Papathanasopoulos, and their teammates speed-brainstorming synonyms for the word ‘good.’

# 150 Years of Boarding

## “We Are a Family”

By Sydney Clevenger

Leaving a piano lesson in Salem, Oregon, one October afternoon in 2017, Mimi Papathanasopoulos '22 and her parents decided to drive north to Portland instead of the opposite direction to their farm in Scio. Their destination? Oregon Episcopal School.

“We were already halfway there and had heard so many good things about the school that we decided to go check out the Open House,” said Papathanasopoulos, now a sophomore boarding student. “The people were welcoming and kind and what we heard from the faculty and administration sounded like a gold mine of educational and extracurricular opportunities. We just fell in love with it.”

“It was different from what my parents envisioned for me for high school, but we all thought OES was so amazing that we couldn’t pass it up. I miss home, but I’ve created a second home at OES.”

“Having been here now for a year and a half, I think OES is the best school in the United States! Whatever your passions and interests, you can pursue them here. I’ve already had more experiences at OES in a short time than I would have had in four years at another high school because so much is offered. If you’re up for learning and adventure, I think OES is the perfect place.”

For 150 years, Oregon Episcopal School and its precursors, St. Helen’s

Hall and Bishop Dagwell Hall, have offered a boarding option with the day school. Celebrating its sesquicentennial in 2019–20, the school is now one of the longest continuously running independent boarding and day schools west of the Mississippi.

Boarders in the early days were primarily domestic students—the daughters of prominent families from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, California, Alaska, and Hawaii. But beginning in the 1960s, international students began finding OES and this school year, 45 of the 54 boarders—83 percent—are from non-United States countries.

“The international component to boarding school helps us fully live our mission of students being global citizens day in and day out,” said Sarah Grenert-Funk, director of residential life and citizenship. “OES is diverse in the number of countries represented [14 in 2019–20] and our goal is to enroll students from all over the world to benefit *all* of our students.”

Boarding schools are far more common on the East Coast than the West, said Grenert-Funk, who grew up in New England and the South, and attended a boarding school as a teen long before joining OES in 2010 to teach seventh grade English and coach basketball and lacrosse.

Because she enjoyed relating with the international students, when a dorm parent position opened, Grenert-Funk applied. “I asked my husband if he’d ever consider living in the dorms. He said, ‘That could be interesting. Besides, you practically live there now with teaching and coaching so what’s the difference?’

“We moved in with our two-year-old into a one-bedroom apartment [a second daughter was born in 2017, a year after Grenert-Funk began directing the program]. I love it for our kids. They have big brothers and sisters from whom they are constantly learning. And many boarding students miss their younger siblings and cousins, so they enjoy having small children ‘at home.’

“OES is a place where diverse community matters and that is important to me and for my children.”

Vermont native Peter Buonincontro, who is assistant director of residential life and a performing arts teacher, found boarding school a foreign concept. When his wife, Colesie Tharp, was offered a dorm parent role, Buonincontro was reluctant to move since the pair had recently bought a home. But when the recession hit in 2009, the couple decided to rent out their house, and move onto the OES campus with their two sons, ages five and three.

“Our [now three] kids love being raised by an extended family,” said Buonincontro. “They are uniquely independent and have a clear understanding of group collaboration, global connectivity, and the social-emotional skills necessary to get along with anyone. That’s the payoff of this powerful residential experience you’re not going to get anywhere else.”

Grenert-Funk and Buonincontro said residential life more than keeps them hopping. “This is a full-time job and the learning opportunities are endless,” said Grenert-Funk. “There

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**Top: Sarah Grenert-Funk (bottom right) is the boarding program’s director of residential life and citizenship.**

**Bottom: Dorm parent Peter Buonincontro with his dorm family in December 2019, along with two of his biological children.**



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are always questions and tasks to tackle 24/7. In the span of an hour a student might need care for a hurt ankle, another is trying to microwave food in tinfoil, and still another needs lessons on how to load a dishwasher.”

“I don’t sleep very much!” said Buonincontro. “I’m a doer so dorm life appeals to me. When someone locks themselves out of their room at one in the morning, you are it! If you can be that person, there is no greater feeling than knowing you made a difference.”

Teens’ needs have changed with the times and residential care has adapted. “The access to technology and how students communicate with their peers, teachers, adults; how they access, leverage, and control information; how screen time affects their health; and the pros and cons of social media all have been interesting to watch and study,” said Buonincontro. “Dorm parenting is about teaching skills and helping students develop healthy habits and adapting policies as their needs fluctuate.”

Added Grenert-Funk, “Residential life is so powerful. The relationships developed through boarding school are unlike any other because you’re dealing every day, all day, with students’ needs. That’s not happening for most classroom faculty. We get insight into the students that enables us to really support them because not only are they in our classes or on our sports teams, but then we go home, and we see them there, too.”

Boarders rise early enough for breakfast between 7 and 8 a.m., with check-in no later than 7:30 a.m. for non-seniors. Students attend academic classes beginning at 8 a.m. with the dorms closed to non-senior boarders.

At 3:05 p.m. when school is out, the dorms are open again and begin buzzing. After school, many boarding students participate in activities until dinner at 6 p.m.; others invite friends to hang out.

There is a two-hour required study hall Sunday through Thursday

evenings. One unique feature of the academic program are the three dedicated Upper School faculty who provide academic support beyond the school day.

Grenert-Funk and eight other dorm parents each head a “family” of five to seven students. Every Wednesday evening, the families gather to eat, play games, share news, and reflect.

“We sit with our family and have fun, laugh, and eat,” said Mason Hill ’23, a Rainier Scholar\* from Seattle, Washington. “And a little competition is always healthy!”

At 10:30 p.m., non-seniors turn in their technology and all students are in their rooms with lights out by 11 p.m.

“At first, I was like ‘where’s my phone?’ said freshman Clara Michaux ’23 from Turner, Oregon, “but now I actually really like the tech turn-in. It’s easy to get used to and it’s nice because I just read a book until I fall asleep.”

\*Rainier Scholars are under-represented students of color who have been selected for their academic potential and leadership skills for a comprehensive 12-year educational program (fifth grade through college).



OES boarders this school year hail from 14 different countries including (from left to right) Alexis Dang (Vietnam); Marcelo Morales-Gutierrez (Mexico); Mason Hill (United States); and Jason Jiang (China).

On weekends, from 10 a.m. to midnight, Grenert-Funk says the activity is nonstop. “This is the most active bunch we’ve ever had,” she said. “They are really social and activity is absolutely endless between studying, playing ping pong, watching practice debates, doing laundry, participating in peer study groups, completing chores, and driving them places—the list goes on.

“The campus is very alive and active beyond the school day because boarding students, especially, are still accessing the buildings, classrooms, and athletic facilities.”

Grenert-Funk said there are not many pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade day schools like OES with a boarding component. “With its low student-to-teacher and student-to-dorm parent ratio (7:1), no-cut sports, dozens of clubs and activities, emphasis on project-based learning, and ideal locale in the relaxed Northwest, OES is well-established as having an excellent reputation for students who want to become leaders,” she said.

“People who select us often want to be big fish in a small pond,” she said. “There are more opportunities here because we’re smaller. At OES, boarding students are actively engaged in our Upper School and have ample opportunity to initiate new clubs, captain sports teams, and lead activities.”

Successful boarding students embrace not only academics, but experiential education, health and wellness, and service learning, said Grenert-Funk. “Students that understand and value experiences as much as academics will thrive in all ways, including the scholastic piece.

“This is an encouraging, safe, thoughtful, and supportive environment where students are curious, ask questions, and try new experiences. The gentle scaffolding, where students solve problems and achieve skills while gradually becoming more independent, is why

our students feel so successful in college and beyond,” she said.

Boarding alumna Nahida Moradi ’17, from Kabul, Afghanistan, is now a sophomore at Bates College double majoring in economics and European studies. “OES was a place that nurtured, challenged, and helped me form lifelong relationships, all while giving me a sense of dignity, self-worth, and love,” she said. “Community and service learning shaped my view as to how one wants to lead a meaningful life. Everything I experienced at OES helped me grow in ways that are prevalent in my everyday life. The OES that I attended, I would recommend 100 percent and more.”

*“Residential life is so powerful. The relationships developed through boarding school are unlike any other because you’re dealing every day, all day, with students’ needs.”*

*—Sarah Grenert-Funk*

The essential life skills of communication, critical thinking, connectivity, and collaboration are further enhanced at boarding school, said Buonincontro. “Arguing over wet laundry or communicating with your roommate over a mess builds empathy and offers students a chance to engage one-on-one with their peers, learn how to make concessions, and understand others—skills more relevant than ever in today’s world,” he said.

Hill said he chose OES because of its academics, sports, debate team, and diversity. “The system here gets you ready for the future and it’s very inclusive.”

To strengthen that inclusivity, Grenert-Funk strategically integrates boarding and day students by allowing day students to plan overnights in the dorms and inviting day families to host boarders during holiday breaks as part of the school’s Backyard Exchange program.

“The connections made and the conversations had are so powerful and create lifelong friendships. When you live with people, it’s a completely different experience than spending time with them in the classroom,” said Grenert-Funk.

“Where else in the Northwest can you find anything like OES and its boarding program? We are a hidden gem,” said Buonincontro.

Grenert-Funk and Buonincontro are already thinking ahead to graduation and the moment in June when boarders go home for the summer. “Of course, we all like some alone time to recharge and there’s this anticipation of relaxation,” said Grenert-Funk, who began to tear up. “But the end of the school year is bittersweet. The hallways are so quiet and there is a real feeling of sadness. The kids become part of your life and you really miss them when they’re gone.”

Agreed Buonincontro, “The day after graduation is brutal. The dorms are silent and empty. Drawers are turned inside out and all that’s left in the dorm rooms are the kids’ names written in Sharpie on their closet doors. The lead-up to when the kids arrive in August is a bit like Christmas, and it’s so sad the day after graduation—like emotional bookends to the school year. Knowing you love someone that much is a full feeling and a real one and you get to do it every year with the boarding kids if you do it right.

“We are a family. We don’t always agree and we get into arguments. But at the end of the day, it’s unconditional love. We really love these kids.” 🐜

*“I didn’t expect to be a Thai Scholar. It’s a great honor. I saw my mom cry for the first time because she was so happy.”*

- Phirataya “Aim” Poobunkhong ’20

## THAI SCHOLARS AN HONOR FOR OES

Phirataya “Aim” Poobunkhong ’20, knew in fourth grade she wanted to become a mechanical engineer. But in her native Thailand, mechanical engineering programs focus more on the design of moving objects rather than the nuclear physics Poobunkhong hopes to someday help coordinate at the Office of Atoms for Peace, her country’s nuclear regulatory agency.

Knowing that her dream career likely meant an advanced education in the United States, Poobunkhong sat last January with many hundreds of other Thai students for a “very hard” two-day examination of her English, writing, physics, chemistry, and biology skills. Then, 50 of those students—Poobunkhong and OES

classmate Pracha “Kim” Promthaw ’20 among them—were selected as Royal Thai Scholars based upon their test results and interviews.

“I didn’t expect to be a Thai Scholar,” said Poobunkhong, a soft-spoken only child who grew up in the northeastern city of Ubon Ratchathani. “It’s a great honor. I saw my mom cry for the first time because she was so happy.”

Sponsored by their government, Royal Thai Scholars attend a post-graduate high school year, college, masters, and doctoral programs in the United States, then return to Thailand to serve their government for at least two years for every year of supported education—contracts of up to 30 years for some. The program was created in 1897 by King Rama V to “gather western skills and knowledge appropriate for the development of his nation.”



Pracha “Kim” Promthaw ’20 (left) and Phirataya “Aim” Poobunkhong ’20.

OES has welcomed 17 Thai Scholars since the 2007-08 school year. Thai Scholars like Poobunkhong and Promthaw live on the OES campus in the school's dormitories for boarding students.

"Being chosen to host Thai Scholars is a huge gift for the school and it's an even bigger honor to have two students at the same time," said OES Upper School Head Asha Appel. "Thai Scholars have an enormous weight on their shoulders because they carry the hopes and dreams of their entire country. The Thai Scholars we've had on campus take their responsibility very seriously and really demonstrate what it means to learn and why education matters."

Poobunkhong's academic advisor Katrina Perry agrees, calling Poobunkhong warm-hearted, positive,

and a "young woman who clearly doesn't back away from challenges."

Once selected, Thai Scholars spend 11 weeks at Brewster Academy, orienting to US culture and taking classes that hone English speaking and writing and offer college guidance. At OES, Poobunkhong and Promthaw boost those skills further by taking a full load of college preparatory classes.

"Most of the Thai Scholars study in New England," said Poobunkhong, who hopes to attend Brown University. "It was a surprise to come to Portland, but I love it here because the people are nice and the weather is a cool temperature, different than in Thailand, which is very hot! I had a chance to play junior varsity volleyball, which was the best experience, and I went kayaking for the first time."

"In Thailand, there is no opportunity to participate in class," she said. "Here, it is open and everyone respects different perspectives and has a turn to say how they feel. If I'd known about OES before becoming a Thai Scholar, I would have wanted to come here as a freshman."

"OES is a very supportive community and a nice environment." 🐼



Aim Poobunkhong (right) with her dorm family.

- Afghanistan
- Brazil
- Canada
- China
- Ethiopia
- Germany
- Hong Kong
- India
- Iran
- Jamaica
- Japan
- Kenya
- Mexico
- Nigeria
- Romania
- Saudi Arabia
- Serbia and Montenegro
- Sierra Leone
- Singapore
- South Korea
- Spain
- Taiwan
- Thailand
- USA
- Vietnam
- Zimbabwe

## OES Borders from Around the Globe (Past and Present)

