



The Milby COED Cadettes:

100 YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP, HONOR, AND SERVICE

The 1964 COED Cadettes form an “M” for their school and its namesake Charles H. Milby, a business leader and county commissioner who helped secure a deep-water port for the region.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, Milby High School yearbook, 1964.

By Dan Broughton

For nearly a century the Milby COED Cadettes have entertained students and residents from Harrisburg and the East End, as well as across Texas and in Hawaii. Mathematics teacher Fannie Davis founded the organization in 1926 as the Milby High School Pep Squad, and since that time, alumni have credited the COED Cadettes with giving them lifelong friendships and skills that have carried them through their careers. Their motto of “Friendship, Honor, and Service” stands as a guiding principle to the thousands of students who served on the team over the past century.

Davis, one of Milby’s original teachers, founded the pep squad with thirty members.¹ The 1938 yearbook described Davis as the “General sponsor of Milby and official pep-upper,” and the COEDS eventually named an award for her. Yearbooks were dedicated to the beloved teacher in 1928 and 1939; and on her retirement in 1946, the



Pep squad founder Fannie Davis served as its initial sponsor and sparked the organization that became the COED Cadettes.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1938.

yearbook dedicated a page to Davis proclaiming, “First in the heart of Mrs. Davis is Milby, and first in the heart of Milby is Mrs. Davis.”²

Drill teams played an important part of school life in Texas in the 1930s, with one in six female students being members of these teams in the six HISD schools that sponsored them. The *Houston Post* reported in 1939 that “some... estimate more than 25 percent of the crowd that jams Buffalo stadium on high school football nights goes just to see the girls... drill.”³

Although principals lauded these organizations for their discipline and benefits to school spirit, the Texas State Teachers Association recommended eliminating them in 1939, citing five criticisms: the high cost, the false perception that “the biggest show [indicates] the highest quality of education,” the excessively strenuous drilling, the unhealthiness of marching, and the inappropriate display of sexuality on the field. School officials criticized the annual \$30 (\$673 today) participation fee that alienated some girls, the noise and distractions created by the teams, and the long hours that detracted from studying.⁴ With the support of their principal and staff, Milby’s COEDS flourished over the following decades and drill teams continued to operate throughout HISD despite criticism.

The pep squad, which initially included girls and boys, took on the name “Milby Co-ed Cadets” in 1929 but became an all-female organization in 1932. It organized a drum and bugle corps the following year. By midcentury the COED Cadettes were regularly boasting an average of



Milby's COED Cadettes present the American and Texas flags as patriotic fervor increases and war looms on the horizon in 1940. They modeled the uniforms on those of the French Foreign Legion.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1940.

150 to 200 members, adding a business manager in 1952. In 1977 the team added social officers to coordinate, “the vast number of public events sponsored by the Coeds.” The team was disbanded in 1997 and reorganized in 2003 as a dance team called Charlie’s Angels (a homage to the school’s mascot Charlie Buffalo, named for Charles Milby). After former COED and current Milby principal Ruth Peña joined the administration to pull Milby out of Improvement Required (IR) status, she resurrected the drill team as the Milby Cadettes in 2019, competing under University Interscholastic League (UIL) guidelines.⁵

Service has always been an important pillar and character guide for the COEDS. They sold poppies every year on Armistice Day (now Veterans Day) to raise money for veterans, and in 1942 sold thousands in war bonds to help the Allied effort. For decades they performed annually at the Shriner’s Ball, a fundraiser for Shriner’s Children’s Hospital, often held at the Sam Houston Coliseum near City Hall. They organized the annual Carat Show for Milby students, including “the first talent show at the City [Music] Hall presented by a Houston high school” in 1955. The 1958 Milby yearbook was dedicated to the COED Cadettes, praising their school, charity, and civic services to the Milby and Harrisburg communities.⁶

The COED Cadettes marched in multiple renowned parades. For example, they represented Milby at the Battle of the Flowers in San Antonio in the 1930s. Founded in 1891, the Battle of the Flowers honors the heroes of the Alamo, Goliad, and the Battle of San Jacinto. Today it draws hundreds of thousands of spectators every April as the centerpiece of Fiesta San Antonio, and is the only all-women, all-volunteer parade in the country. The team traveled to Mardi Gras in New Orleans in 1953 and 1959. They marched in the Veteran’s Day Parade in 1955 in downtown Houston and participated in the Fiestas Patrias Parade and Foley’s Thanksgiving Parade in 1977. They made two appearances at the Astrodome that same year, with

another visit to the storied stadium for the first round of the 1992-93 5A Division 1 football playoffs, where Milby lost to Jersey Village.⁷

The Cadettes have honored their community and their predecessors by performing in ceremonies for local milestones. On October 10, 1966, they performed at a ceremony dedicating a historical marker for Old Harrisburg. Maintaining a fierce local pride, Harrisburg predates Houston and was an important port until a fire occurred, and Houston’s rapid development caused Harrisburg to agree to annexation by its larger neighbor in 1926. The COED Cadettes also entertained dignitaries at both the 1954 groundbreaking and the 1956 opening of nearby Gulfgate Mall, Houston’s first regional mall.⁸

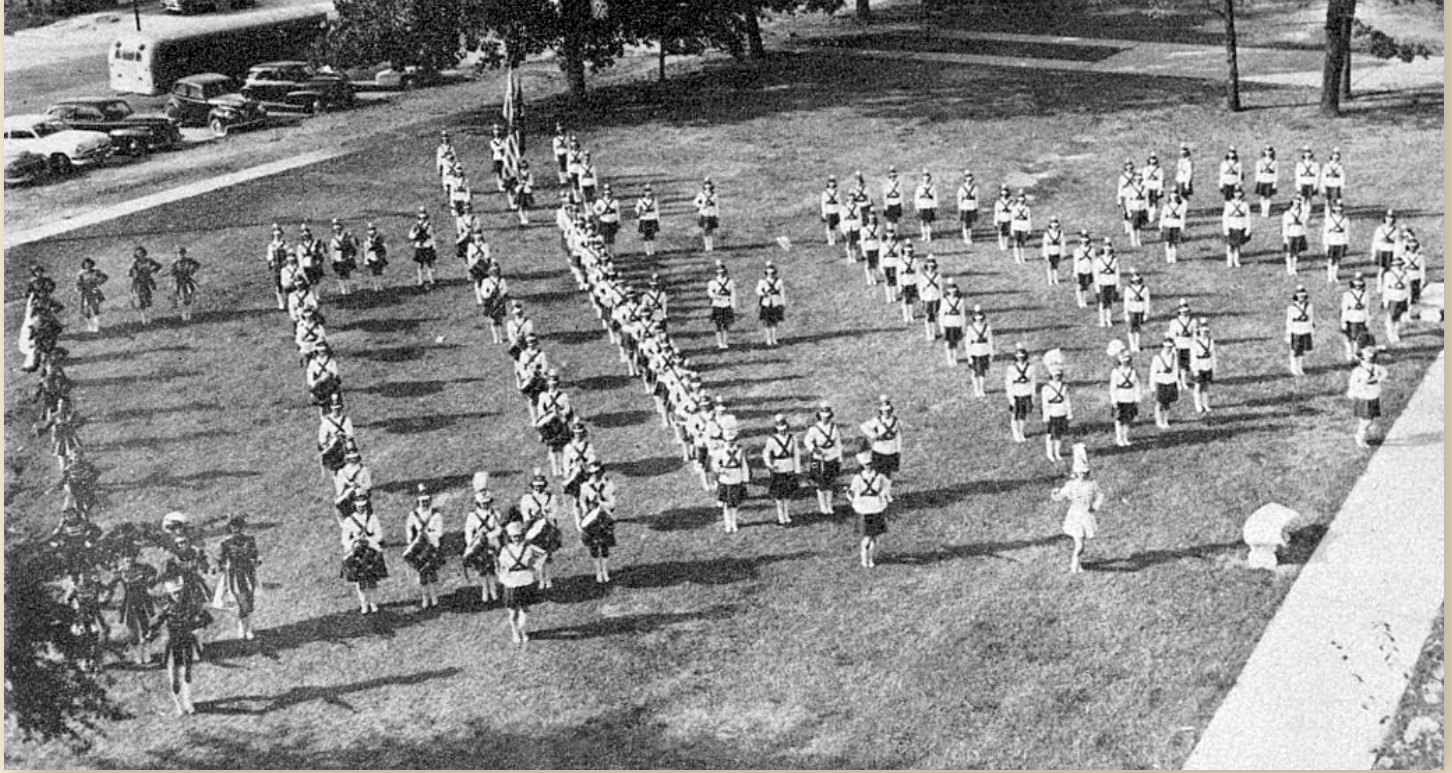
COED Cadettes members established and nurtured life-long friendships during their years at Milby, taking senior trips and attending events that forged their bonds. Teams occasionally travelled internationally, heading to Mexico in 1965 and to the Bahamas in 1977. To pay for her senior cruise in 1984, alumna Frances Castañeda Dyess, now head of the East End Chamber of Commerce, took her first job at Eckerd’s Drugstore, which she now recognizes as a first step toward becoming a leader and building ties to the community. In addition, COED officers learned leadership skills from annual summer competitions sponsored by Showtime International and led by Kilgore Rangerettes at Texas A&M University in the 1980s. The COED officers also formally transferred their responsibilities to their successors at an annual banquet every spring.⁹

Many alumni return to revisit their high school memories, even years after graduation. In 2023, fourteen former COEDS gathered to perform at the Spring Show to support the current cadettes. “It all started with Georgia Ann Spears, a 1955 graduate, who wanted to perform with the cadettes again,” Mary Montemayor Morales, class of 1988, explained. Morales then reached out to former members through Facebook, and the women reunited to perform a routine choreographed by Anna Marie Protz and Sonia



The 1958 COED Cadette officers, sporting more modern uniforms, twirl fire batons in a colorful display. The Buffalo dedicated this issue to the Cadettes in recognition of their spirit.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1958.



The 1953 COED Cadettes exhibit discipline while drilling and maintaining their formation.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1953.



Senior First Lieutenant of the Drill Corps and 1986 Miss Showtime, Anna Marie Guzman, now Protz, played an instrumental role in creating the Milby COED Cadette Drill and Dance Alumni Legacy organization.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1987.

Ramirez. Alumna Vickie Tamayo participated in the dance and recalled that members from the classes of 1984 to 1990 raised, “a lot of money” to help the drill team. Participating in the dance reminded former members how the teams and the girls had different experiences over the decades, but they also had connections as COEDS. This, in turn, led the group to begin preserving the COED Cadettes’ history. They began by recording oral histories with alumni; collecting photos, documents, and memorabilia; and digitizing their research. Additionally, they are donating those materials to University of Houston Libraires’ Special Collections.¹⁰

The tight camaraderie that developed between members was a common refrain. Former dancer and 1986 Milby graduate Sonia Ramirez, a journalist and podcast host, compared the drill team to a sorority, and continues to keep in touch with her “sisters” today, likening them to a chosen family. After moving from home to home throughout her childhood, she sought a group of peers and begged her mother to let

her transfer to Milby to find that family. Ramirez found the legacy of the drill squad particularly striking— something “bigger than us” that would continue after their time at Milby. The leadership roles that junior and senior COEDS took on reinforced the feeling of family for Ramirez. They were like big sisters; they adopted new members and served as mentors and role models for them. Ramirez remains close with her COED big sister Letty Quiñones and her little sisters Mary Morales and Marycela Lopez.¹¹

Like Ramirez, 1987 graduate Vickie Tamayo, a retired oncology nurse and volunteer, developed deep-rooted relationships with her classmates through her involvement in the COED Cadettes after a nomadic youth. Tamayo drove her COED friends to and from school and loved the sisterhood, describing them as her “whole world.” She also served as a big sister to new COEDS, quickly adopting a mentoring role for the team in her second year.¹²

Many former COED Cadettes credit the team with instilling valuable life skills that assisted them in their lives and professional careers. Tamayo learned leadership skills as a Cadette and an officer, such as the need to adapt her teaching style to fit her students. Protz learned responsibility, time management, teamwork, flexibility, and leadership during her time with the Cadettes, skills that she relies on today as an independent business owner. She noted that no one micromanaged them, and the girls were independently student led.¹³

The COEDS taught Ruth Peña etiquette, discipline, and self-respect. Ramirez found personal inspiration from her time at Milby, claiming she learned to stand up for herself, believe in herself, fight for her dreams, and never give up. She relied on this tenacity during her time as a Latina student at the University of Houston and in her career as

a journalist. Dawn Rodriguez, a 1993 Milby graduate, was grateful that serving as a COED Cadette equipped her with time management skills, flexibility, and respect. In addition to teamwork, 1987 graduate Josette Glaze learned how to control her emotions, and how to work with different people. She continues to put those skills to use, recently earning an MBA and working towards an MA in professional development.¹⁴

Many former members fondly remembered the COED sponsors and other faculty. Cadettes drill sponsor and AP English teacher Katie Ekstrom had a particularly profound influence on several former Cadettes during their time at Milby. For example, Ramirez cited Ekstrom for instilling a love of reading and writing that inspired her journalistic career. Dyess still finds motivation in a quote loosely paraphrased from “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley that Ekstrom inscribed to her in a dictionary: “The tide of life is sometimes very rough, but each storm ridden through makes us a better captain of our souls.” Morales remembered Ekstrom mentoring her on her future plans.¹⁵

Following founder Fannie Davis, Mildred “Mama” Rust sponsored the COED drill squad from 1940 to 1957. The Cadettes initiated an award dedicated to Rust, as they had done for Davis. Joan Camacho and Ella Jefferson were other sponsors whose legacy is honored today, and Protz credited principal Claude Brinkley for his light-handed approach that taught her leadership and discipline.¹⁶



Milby COED Cadettes alumni actively work to preserve the group’s history and support the current Cadettes. Officers shown left to right in 2024: standing, Yvonne Gonzales and Theresa Cochran; seated in chairs, Josette Glaze, Vickie Volrath Tamayo, Elizabeth Gonzales, and Tina Marie St. Cyr; seated on the floor: Dawn Rodriguez, Anna Marie Guzman Protz, and Samantha Thrasher Briggs. Not pictured, Susan Baker and Tracy Adair Vecchio.

Photo courtesy of Milby COED Cadette Drill & Dance Alumni Legacy.

Ruth Peña was the Sophomore Lieutenant of Drill in 1990. Today, she is Milby’s principal.

Photo courtesy of Milby High School.



The current Milby Cadettes drill team is earning high accolades, with twenty-six members competing in the 2024 Crowd Pleasers national competition in Nashville, Tennessee.

Current member Gabriella Guzman is glad to give back to the school and community, despite feeling some pressure to maintain traditions and the challenge of competing against teams with more money and props. Now a 501(c)(3), the Milby COED Cadette Drill & Dance Alumni Legacy held a professional development day for the 2024 Cadette alumni and provided each graduate with \$100 for their future academic endeavors, as well as awarding \$500 to the Deady Middle School Hornets Dance team.¹⁷

The COED Cadette alumni group is working to have the Cadettes recognized as the oldest drill squad in the country.¹⁸ Although this accolade would certainly solidify the organization’s legacy, the team’s lasting impact on the lives of thousands of young Houstonians remains its greatest gift and continues to resonate in former Cadettes’ hearts as they continue to live by their guiding principles of friendship, honor, and service. **HH**

Dan Broughton graduated from the University of Houston with a bachelor of arts in history and a minor in phronesis in May of 2024. A member of the Honors College, he is most interested in Roman, British, and Houston history.

To learn more about Milby COED Cadette Drill & Dance Alumni Legacy, please visit

www.milbycoedcadettealumni.org