



## *Buffaloes at Work and Play: A History of Milby's Curricular Programs and Clubs*

*By Leo Green*

*Four students dutifully watch a scientific reaction occur before their eyes. With their desks covered in educational materials, these scholars carefully record the results of their experiment.*

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

*“The classroom should be an entrance into the world,  
not an escape from it.”*

*— The Buffalo, 1976*

**H**igh school is a confusing, complex time, and much like a rollercoaster, full of twists and turns. It is a memorable experience that stays with us for a lifetime. For some, the time is packed with teenage romance, rigorous studying, or a happy medium of the two. For others, the extracurriculars stand out in their memories. Whether it is setting students up for economic success through top notch vocational programs or simply encouraging a healthier lifestyle, the



*Welding is one of Milby's many vocational programs. Through a variety of projects, students learn to cut, grind, weld, and polish their creations in an authentic workshop environment.*

*Photo courtesy of the Milby Welding Program.*

activities Milby High School has provided have a long history of impacting the students and the community.

Today, Milby principal Ruth Peña makes it clear to her students that failure is not an option — she refuses to “sit back and just watch [them] fail.” She notes that in addition to college prep classes, the school’s programs offer students certifications in welding, HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), cosmetology, engineering, Excel, culinary, and health science. Milby assistant principal Dr. Shelbi Blackmon says, “We make sure that every student has a CTE [Career and Technical Education] pathway so that they’re getting a certification if they choose not to go to college ... because college isn’t for everyone.”<sup>1</sup> Milby also provides licenses to become a nail tech or medical assistant and is working to add EKG (electrocardiogram) certification. But Milby High School is unique when it comes to its vocational programs, not just for the variety but also the quality.

### **Oil and Milby**

When one thinks of Houston, there are two main things that come to mind: oil and trade. Oil is the blood that pumps through the city’s veins, refined and carried by tankers along the Houston Ship Channel. These economic engines feed the hungry flames of Houston’s job market, providing employment for countless Milby alumni over the years.



*The 1926 chemistry class included male and female students, a progressive notion for the time. These students seem eager to use their newly donated lab equipment.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1926.

For Milby students, the ship channel and the oil industry were an integral part of their childhood. Kelly Guzman, an Austin High School graduate and mother of a current Milby Cadette, fondly recalled the times her stepfather came home from work at the ship channel with little goodies for her. “A few times the crates would drop and open,” she said, smiling, “... [so] they couldn’t claim the crates anymore ... and [the workers would] bring home the treasures.” She paused a moment before adding, “Those were our special gifts.”<sup>2</sup>

Houston Independent School District (HISD) started its magnet school program in 1975 and has continued to expand those offerings. By the 1980s, Milby’s Oil and Petrochemical Program stood as a beacon of vocational success, educating students in a lucrative field. Alumna Anna Marie Guzman Protz recalled the big oil companies that helped sponsor the Petrochem Program and offered student internships. In 2007, Shell Oil co-donated 100 laptops to Milby, and Halliburton shared its Real Time reservoir management. This was not the first time Milby had such benefactors. In 1926, the Texas Chemical Company gifted Milby High School top-of-the-line laboratory equipment valued at \$2,750 (the equivalent of nearly \$49,000 today).<sup>3</sup> From the beginning, the quality of its vocational training has long set Milby apart, but more so in recent years with trade skills being undervalued and undertaught.

## JROTC

Milby, along with San Jacinto, Davis (now Northside), Reagan (now Heights), and Sam Houston High Schools, initiated HISD’s Military Training Programs in 1926. Ten years later the name changed to Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), and Milby had 181 cadets. Originally a source of military recruits, JROTC evolved into

a “citizenship program devoted to American youth’s moral, physical, and educational uplift” that focuses on values of citizenship and responsibility to prepare students for the future.<sup>4</sup> The Milby JROTC is affiliated with the Army.

Over its history, JROTC has included many types of opportunities, such as award-winning drill platoons and rifle teams, and instruction on hunter safety. In addition, the platoons and Color Guard have taken part in parades, community events, and volunteer service to organizations like the March of Dimes.

## Bon Appétit!

Culinary arts education dates to the early twentieth century when schools offered home economics and cooking classes, which Milby’s predecessor, Harrisburg High School, had as early as 1916. Over the decades, Milby’s cooking classes, paired with the emphasis on vocational training, evolved into a full-fledged, four-year culinary program. Thanks to building renovations, the school added a restaurant and kitchen area that serves as both a community dining area and a classroom for culinary students. With professional-grade equipment and a large walk-in cooler, the space is identical to a real restaurant and is certified as one by the City of Houston.<sup>5</sup>

Lunch is served to Milby students by both the staff and culinary students twice a week. The operation is led by Chef Carlos Ramos, who has over twenty years of experience in the restaurant industry. Under his expert guidance, chefs-to-be learn how a restaurant operates in real time and familiarize themselves with working on the line. Many of these students go on to pursue culinary school. They dream of becoming professional chefs or opening their own businesses someday, like 2019 Milby graduate Roberto Blas. After receiving a \$32,000 scholarship from a top-tier culinary college, Blas said that while nervous about the challenges



*Though formed in 1930, it was not until the next yearbook was published in 1936 that Milby’s JROTC Battalion was captured on camera. Starting with thirty-five cadets, the program quickly grew to 181 members in six years.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1936.



*The Culinary students prepared and served a special Thanksgiving dinner to show their appreciation of the Milby faculty and staff who support them.*

Photo courtesy of Milby Culinary Program.

ahead, “The Culinary Arts program here at Milby prepared me to support myself with the leadership, management and technical skills I have learned.”<sup>6</sup>

The program has also made a name for itself through various competitions. In April of 2023, culinary students were finalists in the NASA Hunch Culinary Challenge, and in January 2024 participated in the Taste of the Championship cooking competition. Students commented on the importance of the program and what they do, saying, “I will remember this all my life,” “cooking is life,” and “cooking makes my heart happy.” Additionally, the culinary program gives back to the community through contributions to holiday meals at Milby, such as Thanksgiving or Chinese New Year.<sup>7</sup> Milby’s culinary program teaches its students practical skills and compassion they will use long after they leave the kitchen.



*Hi-Y clubs, meaning “High School YMCA,” often included attendance at Older Boys’ Conferences, where the pictured founders of Milby’s Hi-Y club first met.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1925.



*Chef Carlos Ramos and Representative Sheila Jackson Lee share the excitement with some of the Milby Culinary students chosen for the Taste of the Championship. The students prepared a char siu duck dumpling with mango tamarind ginger glaze.*

Photo courtesy of Milby Culinary Program.

## Flying Hi-Y

People know the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) as a place to get fit – or as a 1970s song by the Village People! The YMCA was originally founded as a means of promoting “Christian Character” and values like good sportsmanship, kindness, equality, and clean, alcohol-free living. These Christian values, innate to the YMCA’s original purpose, had a strong presence in promoting local sports teams, athletics classes, and Hi-Y clubs.

Mostly composed of teenagers, Hi-Y clubs were small groups of young people who got together to hold meetings, host events, and plan fundraisers, all to “create, maintain and extend, throughout the home, school, and community, high standards of Christian character.”<sup>8</sup> It was not until the arrival of YMCA secretary, C. E. McGeath, in Harrisburg that the dream of Milby’s own Hi-Y club came true. After meeting at



*Caught in action, the 1941 officers discuss an upcoming event sponsored by the Hi-Y club.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1941.

an Older Boys Conference at Texas A&M University, founders Ross Pond, Pat Welch, William Pigue, Ernest Fivecoat, and Sidney Laf'onta felt so inspired that they wanted to bring Hi-Y home to Milby to promote kindness, good sportsmanship, and congeniality among Milby students.

Milby's Hi-Y club quickly found its purpose in encouraging respectful behavior among students. They studied Bible passages, held church services, and organized charity fundraisers. Additionally, Milby's Hi-Y became so popular that it spawned several other Hi-Y clubs in the area, including a female version of the Hi-Y club called "Tri-Hi-Y." The Tri-Hi-Y club appeared in yearbooks as late as 1933, when it merged with the original Hi-Y club. Another offshoot group specifically for girls, Y-Teens, was sponsored by the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association).<sup>9</sup>

Though the Hi-Y club faded into obscurity by the 1980s, its constant presence throughout the years serves as a testament to the character of Milby's students – not only because they cared deeply about each other and wanted to create a warm,



*Milby librarian and sponsor for the Peace Club Rowena Verdin teaches students how to care for the gardens. The Peace Club meets during school breaks, including summer, to ensure the plants flourish year-round.*

Photo courtesy of the Milby Peace Club.

welcoming environment but also because they made the effort to actualize this dream.

As the times changed and students graduated, clubs also moved in new directions. The same students who enjoyed class parties at their friends' houses became the parents picking up their children from school activities.<sup>10</sup> Their children had new priorities, and the Hi-Y clubs faded, giving way to clubs of the modern era.

## Peace Out!

Peace and love on planet Earth is the main goal of Milby's Peace Club, headed by sponsor and Milby librarian Rowena Verdin. Created in 1985 by Milby student Alex Salazar and teacher Joyce Roberson, Milby's Peace Club offered a means to involve students in the ever-expanding effort to improve

their environment, engage with nature, and participate in peace-oriented activism. As early as September 2009, Milby's Peace Club debuted a school-wide paper recycling program that had club members collecting and recycling the paper waste of thirty teachers across campus.<sup>11</sup> Verdin noted that they unfortunately had to temporarily shut down the program due to COVID but resumed their efforts in 2024.

What do they do with all the materials they pick up? When they are not recycling them, they put them to use making art. From 2015 to 2019, the Peace Club proudly represented Milby at the City of Houston Waste Management's "Cart Art" competition. Verdin recalled, "I remember our kids being so excited and [they] would plan months before the contest. They like to win."<sup>12</sup>

The Peace Club strongly emphasizes being in tune with nature, going as far as renovating their old, neglected garden beds. The move to the renovated building in 2017 kickstarted it all. Upon seeing the unused garden plots, the Peace Club members decided to turn something forgotten



*Even in the heat, the members of the Peace Club diligently maintain their garden beds. Through gardening, students learn about sustainable practices and how to grow their own food.*

Photo courtesy of the Milby Peace Club.

into something beautiful. They also applied to the National Wildlife Federation's Monarch Heroes Program; an initiative aimed at revitalizing butterfly species across Texas. Today, you can buy a *paleta*, or ice pop, from the library for a few dollars and smile knowing the sweet treat supports a butterfly's home.

The Peace Club is a conduit for success for current members and alumni. They attend conferences like the Houston Youth Leadership Summit and the Houston Earth Tomorrow Conference, as well as learn valuable life skills. Planting and cultivating tomatoes in their communal garden have strengthened the members' problem-solving, time management, and organizational skills. "When something isn't working, they figure out what can be done to correct it," Verdin explained. "They learn to be better planners



*The first documented Beauty Culture class at Milby appeared in 1944, making Milby's current cosmetology program around eighty years old. Students participated in both lectures and demonstrations on the latest fads in beauty culture.* Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1944.

because they need to know what to plant at the right time.” Additionally, many students report back to Verdin with positive tales of their at-home recycling set-ups, and she has seen Peace Club alumni continue advocating for the environment after leaving Milby.<sup>13</sup>

### Looking Good, Buffs!

Milby's Cosmetology Program stands out as another pioneer vocational program that holds real world application. As early as the 1940s, Milby was paving the way for beauty-oriented students to hone their skills in a professional environment and providing them with professional experience.<sup>14</sup>

Milby's cosmetology program, led in 2024 by teachers Carolina Arredondo, Valencia Fry, and Athanise Bluntson, encompassed multiple classrooms and upwards of 200 students. However, it was not all glam and glitter. When Fry started fifteen years ago, she was the lone teacher with barely one hundred students. But in the years since, she has seen an explosion of applications, causing them to implement a waitlist. Eighth graders visit their program, seeing firsthand the skills and techniques these talented students use on a daily basis. Arredondo explained that not long after one of the eighth-grade tours, they were swamped with calls from parents asking how to enroll their children.<sup>15</sup>

The program's appeal reaches beyond the barricades of gender. In recent years, Milby's Cosmetology Program has seen an influx of young men with a passion for cosmetology. "I just see how the boys, to me, are more focused..." Fry said, "They're just excited." She shared her plans to get her "cross-over" in barbering, in the hopes that Milby can put a barber school into its toolbox.

COVID took significant wind out of the sails of the "Cosmo kids." The pandemic completely shut down many of their exploits, like nursing home residents' manicures or giving facials to nurses. Nevertheless, COVID did little to

stop them from caring for the Milby community. Teachers and students alike, especially the neighboring Life Skills students, come by to get their hair or nails done. When two Milby teachers got married, former cosmetology students sprang into action, doing the hair and nails of the bride and bridesmaids.

The impact is not only what students learn from the program, but what the teachers learn from them. Bluntson fondly pointed out the most meaningful thing for her was "the students ... teaching me Spanish ... and helping me understand their culture." To Arredondo, it is the "line of communication" she shares with them, being able to help them understand the content in a way they had not before. "Then I just see ... the light bulb moment."<sup>16</sup>

Like the Petrochem Program, the Cosmetology Program provides students with the resources they need to make a living, including faculty with established connections to the salon industry. What draws many students initially is the financial stability of cosmetology in today's market, but they also come back to help with lessons or just to say hello.<sup>17</sup>

One thing that all Milby's clubs and curricular organizations have in common is their students — young men and women who are kind to a fault, exponentially talented, and driven by the need to care for others. Time and time again, Milby students have continued to provide significant support to the community, whether by championing wholesome values, fostering a welcoming environment through creative expression, or acting as a catalyst for revolutionary social change. Ultimately, it is the clubs and programs working together with the students that contributes to the success of Milby and its graduates. **HH**

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*Although the formal cosmetology program did not start for a few more decades, the Beauty Culture students of 1977 were as passionate about hair and nail care as today's "Cosmo kids."*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1977.