

# MILBY HIGH SCHOOL'S MAGNETISM

By Diego Guerrero with Cameron Wright



Muralist and Milby alumnus, Donkeeboy (Alex Roman Jr.), completed this mural at the Milby entrance in 2023 as part of the Houston Loves Teachers Mural Project. It captures the affection students and alumni have for Milby and its faculty. Photo courtesy of Alexander Mizerik.

What is the most important institution in Harrisburg? “Milby,” Anna Marie Guzman Protz, a 1987 graduate, responded immediately.<sup>1</sup> Not the Houston Ship Channel or any other Greater East End landmarks but Milby High School because it has supported the community and its growth for the last century.

Public history students at the University of Houston (UH) conducted oral history interviews with thirty Milby alumni and community members as Harrisburg approaches its bicentennial and the school celebrates its centennial. These dedicated alumni, spanning generations, continue to contribute to the school’s legacy through mentorship, philanthropy, and community engagement. Their unwavering support and involvement underscore the enduring impact of Milby High School, fostering a dynamic environment where past and present intertwine to inspire future leaders.

The interviews repeatedly show Milby alumni have a unique bond that has persisted for eight decades. For some the connection had to do with a group, like the football team or Milby’s COED Cadettes, but for everyone it was rooted in the Milby experience, although many found it hard to put into words what that entailed.

Les Fullerton, class of 1959, suggested this project to the UH Center for Public History. Fullerton grew up in a two-bedroom home in Pecan Park, near present day I-45 South and Loop 610, where he lived a “simple but joyful life” with his parents and two brothers, in the days before air conditioning. He mowed



Les Fullerton, left, stands with his mother and brothers in front of their Pecan Park home on Japonica Street in the 1940s. Growing up in the East End and attending Milby were foundational for Fullerton and other alumni who followed.

Photo courtesy of Les Fullerton.



Milby alumni, shown left to right, attorney Gordon Quan, principal Ruth Peña, dean of students Karla Garcia, and African American studies instructor Dr. Don Williams. Photo courtesy of Milby High School.

lawns and delivered the *Houston Chronicle*, which taught him the importance of doing things right. As someone who loved learning, he attended Southmayd Elementary and Deady Junior High School, before going to Milby, all of which had outstanding teachers. Today he is impressed by the way Milby principal Ruth Peña, class of 1993, has maintained that tradition, hiring many alumni who “care about their students and teach their subjects well.”<sup>2</sup> Fullerton went on to become a dental surgeon and professor. An advocate for education, he supports scholarships for Milby students, UH public history students, and others.

In 2018 Ruth Peña became the first alum to serve as principal of Milby High School where she feels deeply connected. Her family also lived in Pecan Park, and Peña’s mother got her GED at Milby, so Ruth was familiar with the high school when she enrolled in its magnet program in 1990. Peña attended UH to become a teacher and advocate for children in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

Having served in the classroom and administration for several years, when the principal’s position opened at Milby, Peña was ready to “go back home.” This presented a challenge as the state labeled Milby “IR,” for improvement required, which Peña described as “the lowest of the low campuses.” This did not discourage her, recalling, “I came in with some fire. I had to establish some systems.”<sup>3</sup> She knew Milby was capable of greater things; and in her first year as principal, the school moved out of IR.

Peña, whose three children attend Milby, credits her success to caring deeply and engaging with students by having an open-door policy. This policy helps form a connection with her students when coupled with the similarities she

has with them: growing up in the same area and going to the same schools. Being involved fosters a community where students become the best versions of themselves.

With a community that consistently helps each other, it is not surprising that 65 percent of Milby’s staff, Peña estimates, is made up of alumni.<sup>4</sup> Some of those faculty include Jim Duffer, Carlos Morales, and Don Williams.

Jim Duffer, a 1980 graduate, spent his adolescence in Houston’s East End going to Milby games because his older sister was in the band. Duffer recalled the anticipation of walking through Milby’s doors for the first time as a student, saying, “To know that you were a part of the school now, it was a great feeling.”<sup>5</sup> An athlete under the legendary Coach Boyce Honea, he became the basketball manager at UH, during its historic Phi Slamma Jama run in the 1980s.

Duffer later returned to coach at Milby when Honea retired and led the team to an undefeated 39-0 record and state championship in 2004 before retiring in 2016. About the same time Duffer retired, Ruth Peña became Milby’s principal. Excited that a Milby graduate would be principal, Duffer invited Peña and some of the coaches to dinner where Peña asked Duffer to return. He was hesitant, but she replied, “I just need you back.” Duffer accepted the offer and says, “[I] will be back for as long as I can.”<sup>6</sup>

As someone who has been a part of Milby their entire life and because so many alumni keep up with each other and the school, Duffer coined the term “Buffs for life” to describe that spirit they share. Nevertheless, he cannot pinpoint the thing that draws people back; it is just about the experience, seeing students in the neighborhood establishments or their parents or grandparents who were your classmates. Duffer claims that over the years, “even if things have changed [in the neighborhood], it’s still Milby’s culture.”<sup>7</sup>

Carlos Morales is another example of an alumnus and current staff member at Milby. Morales was born in Brownsville, Texas, but his family moved to Southeast Houston when he was two years old. Having grown up in the area, Morales made a seamless transition attending Milby as an adolescent. His sister and cousin had attended Milby, and he recognized many students who went to the same



Noah, Carlos, Mary, and Cristian Morales all graduated from Milby and University of Houston. Carlos and Mary graduated together in 1988.

Photo courtesy of the Morales family.



*Josette Glaze, Dawn Rodriguez, Anna Marie Guzman Protz, and Les Fullerton, shown left to right, construct a timeline of Milby and the COED Cadettes through images. They collect oral histories and documents, which would otherwise be lost, to preserve this valuable piece of history.*

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

elementary and middle schools he attended. Being familiar with the people around him, Carlos Morales quickly made friends and met his girlfriend, now wife, Mary Montemayor Morales, O.D., a second generation Milby graduate. Mary felt that Milby never got enough credit for being a very good school with teachers who cared about helping students succeed.<sup>8</sup>

Carlos played on the baseball team and graduated from UH with a kinesiology degree and a minor in health, before returning to teach and coach baseball at Milby. The Morales' children also attended Milby, where they commuted to school with their father and played baseball. At first, Mary noticed changes, especially in the school spirit and traditions, with less participation. However, with Peña's arrival, the school returned to past traditions and saw an increase in participation, with the stands filling up for football games. Other schools, Carlos Morales points out, "have a lot more funds or better facilities ... [but] I wouldn't trade that for the closeness of the people that are at Milby."<sup>9</sup>

Retired First Sergeant Dr. Don Williams did not like school as a child and often skipped class. But when he got the chance to attend Milby, he never missed a day until having the flu on the last day of his senior year, yet, he still tried to attend. He joined the Army just before graduation. Twenty-eight years later, in 2022, he walked across the Milby graduation stage to mark receiving his Ph.D. in public policy. Today he is proud to teach African American studies.<sup>10</sup>

Several Milby COED Cadettes participated in interviews for the project, including Protz, Peña, and Mary Morales. As Cadettes they looked out for each other. Dawn Rodriguez, class of 1993, explained that a core part of being a Cadette



*Jim Duffer, coaching the 2004 state championship game.*

Photo courtesy of Jim Duffer.

was not forgetting where you came from and to "turn around [and] help the person behind you." They learned teamwork, adaptability, decision making, time management, self-respect, and conflict resolution. Because of the time they dedicated to the Cadettes, their relationships developed beyond friendship; they became sisters. "As professionals we are in the workplace every day," Josette Glaze said with a smile, adding that now, "when we come together, we are those girls again."<sup>11</sup>

Frances Castañeda Dyess and Sonia Ramirez said finding Milby grads was like finding family members. Assistant principal Dr. Shelbi Blackmon's maternal grandfather and great aunt attended Milby, and she grew up visiting her grandparents in the East End, so she is excited to claim her connection as part of the Milby "extended family." Plus, she explained, Milby consciously fosters that feeling: "Milby is just a big family. ... Parents are awesome. They really embrace you. We try to include the community in the school."<sup>12</sup>

After speaking with alumni from the 1950s to the early 2000s, the UH students discovered a universal devotion to Milby, which has shaped their lives regardless of when they attended. From the members of the COED Cadettes to those who joined the faculty or offered scholarships, Milby offered them what they see as a unique experience. Theresa Cochran called her days at Milby "the best time of [her] life." At Milby they were taught to "be people's people" and "love on others," she said. Glaze reflected, "Milby just draws you back, I don't care who you are or where you are going ... that school is a great place. I don't even know how to put into words how proud I am of Milby."<sup>13</sup>

For almost a century, alumni have preserved the essence of Milby – its ability to positively affect the community around it – by remaining active in the school. This raises the question: Is the community great because of Milby or is Milby great because of the community? From my observations, the answer is not one or the other, but both. 🙌

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**Cameron Wright** is a junior at the University of Houston majoring in anthropology and history. An Army veteran, he will be the first in his family to earn a four-year degree when he graduates in 2026, and he plans to go on to graduate school.