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THE SALEM NEWS

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REAL NEWS IN SCHOOLS

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Salem's legendary Oquendo becomes first female in school history to have number retired

SALEM — Evelyn 'Evie' Oquendo became the first female athlete in Salem High School history to have her uniform number retired when her iconic No. 24 basketball jersey was officially taken out of the rotation in a ceremony at Veterans Memorial Fieldhouse.

Oquendo, thought by many to be the greatest female high school basketball player in North Shore history, was a spectacular guard who could score, defend, dish the ball and force turnovers while piling up more than 800 points her in Witches' career. She guided Salem High to an unbeaten 27-0 season and the Division 1 state championship in 1980.

A teacher at the Collins Middle School in Salem for more than 20 years, Oquendo went on to further greatness at Salem State College (now University). A three-time First Team All-American for the Vikings, she became the school's all-time leading scorer (1,738) and led them to a 29-1 mark and the Division 3 NCAA title in 1986.

Oquendo was feted by a large gathering of family and friends Friday night, Jan. 23, in the ceremony, which took place before Salem's home game against rival Peabody High. Among those in attendance who paid tribute to Oquendo's excellence on the hardwood while at Salem High were state Sen. Joan Lovely and Lt. Gov. (and former Salem mayor) Kim Driscoll.



JARED CHARNEY PHOTO

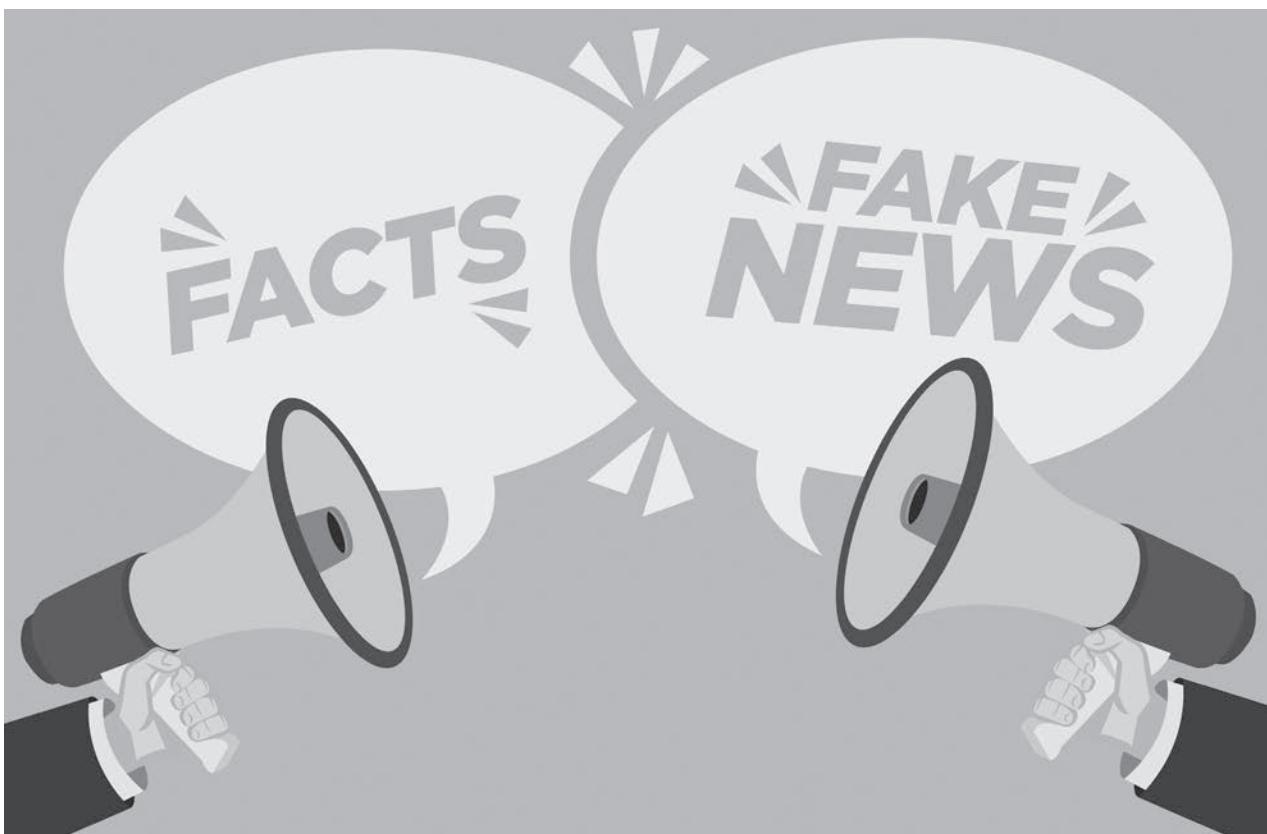
Salem High School Athletic Director Reilly Christie presents Evelyn Oquendo her framed Salem High girls basketball jersey after it was officially retired in a ceremony at the Salem High Fieldhouse Jan. 23.



Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll gets a selfie with Salem High basketball legend Evie Oquendo and her family.



Friends and family cheer on Salem High basketball legend Evie Oquendo at the ceremony to retire her jersey.



Looking to combat fake news?

Here are some resources to help you determine if what you've read is true:

» **Politifact** is the Pulitzer Prize-winning fact checking operation run by the nonprofit Poynter Institute. The site fact-checks statements by politicians and debunks myriad Facebook hoaxes.

<https://www.politifact.com/>

» **FactCheck.org**, run by Annenberg Public Policy Center, performs much of the same tasks, and also lets you ask questions of the fact checkers. An example question: Did the Supreme Court rule that it is illegal to take the oath of office with anything but the Bible? (The answer is no.)

<https://www.factcheck.org/>

» **Snopes** is the original fact-checking website. Use the site's search bar to get to the bottom of political statements, viral videos and urban myths.

<https://www.snopes.com/>

» **A Google reverse image search** is the best way to find out if that photo you saw making the rounds on Twitter or Facebook is real. This story from PC Magazine walks you through how to do it on your desktop or your phone.

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» **Still need help?** Contact us at the Gloucester Daily Times or Salem News, and we'll get the answer for you, no matter the topic. Email Gloucester editor Andrea Holbrook at aholbrook@gloucester-times.com, or Salem editor John Castelluccio at jcastelluccio@salemnews.com



REAL NEWS IN SCHOOLS

How the program works

Your school can have access to local, trusted journalism from The Salem News and Gloucester Daily Times on a daily basis. We report on news throughout the North Shore and Cape Ann, covering all things local — from schools, to sports, to government, people profiles, business, entertainment and more. You get the facts — the real news — from experienced reporters, photographers and editors you can count on at no cost to your school.

Here are the basics of the program:

What is it? The Salem News and Gloucester Daily Times partner with local businesses to provide free digital access to our newspapers to anyone within a school in our coverage area at no cost to the school. This access encourages students to value the vital news coverage being produced by The Salem News and Gloucester Daily Times. They will build awareness and gain critical thinking skills in the process.

Who can participate? This program will benefit teachers, students, and others in the school community.

Where does it take place? You can access our newspaper online. Teachers can incorporate the program into their curriculums, even having reporters, photographers and editors visit your class.

When can we start benefiting? As soon as we have your commitment to participate in Real News in Schools we will go to work to find a local business who wants to sponsor you. Once we have one, we will work with your IT Department to get the program up and running.

Why is this valuable? There's a lot of fake news out there on social media and elsewhere. The Salem News, founded in 1880 as The Salem Evening News, and the Gloucester Daily Times, founded in 1888, both award-winning publications, have long track records of fair and accurate reporting that cuts through the misinformation.

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7th grader finds voice through essay

By Stephen Hagan

Staff Writer

MANCHESTER-BY-THE-SEA — For seventh-grader Maren Beltramini, patriotism isn't only discussed in history class or observed on holidays.

It's something she thinks

about and practices every day.

The seventh-grader's perspective helped assist her become the winner of the Patriotic Pen



Maren Beltramini

District 10 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Her composition will represent Manchester's VFW chapter at the state competition.

The annual contest invited sixth- through eighth-graders to reflect on a patriotic theme through a 300- to 400-word essay. This year's theme — "How are you showing patriotism and support for our country?" — challenged students to connect civic pride with their lived experiences.

Beltramini was one of nine students from the Manchester Essex Regional School District to participate in the contest. In her essay, she explored how patriotism can be expressed through gratitude, reflection and service — all ideas shaped partially by her family's history.

Beltramini's father served five years in the U.S. Army, including a year deployed in Afghanistan. She credits his service with helping her understand the sacrifices made by members of the military and their families.

"The heroic actions of those

that have and continue to pay for America's freedom made me think 'What can I do for America?'" Beltramini wrote in her essay.

Beltramini in her essay said that question led to action.

She shares her appreciation for service members by writing cards each Veterans Day, offering messages of encouragement and thanks to those

who have served and those who are serving.

Beltramini's English teacher, Vidula Plante, said Beltramini's essay stood out for its strong and thoughtful writing.

"I am very proud of my students for thoughtfully considering their role in our country's democracy," Plante said in prepared statement. "They explored how civic pride and democratic engagement can be expressed beyond military service."

Plante also recognized the efforts of the other students who participated in the contest; Bella Arnold, Harry Larabell, Eva Ollington, Amelie Munroe, Georgia Kordonis, Lucia Ochs, Candace Stremple and Ciara O'Rourke.

District 10 VFW Commander Kim Emerling will present the regional award to Beltramini later this month. In addition, an awards banquet will be held Jan. 25 in Sturbridge to celebrate the essay submissions from across the state. During the banquet, students will be awarded scholarship funding for their essays.

Other District 10 posts are in Gloucester, Amesbury, Beverly, Boston, Danvers, Georgetown, Haverhill, Ipswich, Marblehead, Methuen, North Andover, Peabody, Revere, Salem, Saugus and Swampscott.

Teens move on to state business contest

By Times Staff

Cape Ann high school students recently found success at the DECA district contest qualifying for the statewide competition.

DECA — founded in 1946 as the Distributive Education Clubs of America, a career and technical student organization designed to test the capabilities of students for the working world — tests its members on a variety of different tasks, including business administration, decision making, business operations and personal finance.

Last month students from Gloucester, Rockport and Manchester Essex Regional high schools competed at the District 6 competition held at the Doubletree by Hilton Hotels in Danvers. Seventeen North Shore schools were represented. About 95 Cape Ann students who finished in the top five in Danvers qualified for the State Career Development Conference competition in Boston on March 12-14.

Forty-four Gloucester High students competed, with 45% of the school's DECA members qualifying for the state competition, according to the chapter's marketing and outreach director, junior Aleena Marie Brown, herself a district champion and state finalist.

Brown said 10 Gloucester DECA students are returning to the state competition for the second, third, or fourth time, and 10 others qualified for the first time.

In the written/prepared events, winners were Brown for Sports and Entertainment Marketing Operations in collaboration with Extra Innings Middleton; sophomore Janelle Brancaleone, Integrated Marketing Campaign Event; and juniors Julia Palk and Mackayla Allen earned a fourth placer in Travel and Tourism Team Decision Making, while junior Ava Vidal was bumped up to fifth place for her Retail Merchandising Series after a competitor declined a states bid.



COURTESY PHOTOS

Juniors Maia Gibson, Rumi Corum, Izzy DaCruz, Hannah Aspesi, Ruby Lyman, Abby Horne, and Reese Swanson are among the members of Rockport High School's DECA chapter who qualified for a state competition in March.

Cracchiolo, International Business Plan in collaboration with Robinhood; Isla Black, Finance Consulting; and Magnolia Giddings. Hospitality Professional Selling.

In third place, were chapter President Julian Nixon and fellow seniors Keira O'Brien, and Desire Dimino, Hospitality and Tourism Operations; and senior Myles Tran-Harrison, Innovation Plan.

Fourth place went to sophomores Nathan Gorman-Melo and Merina Earl, Career Development; and seniors Niava Friday and Madison Jewell, Start-Up Business Plan.

In Roleplay Events, juniors Julia Palk and Mackayla Allen earned a fourth placer in Travel and Tourism Team Decision Making, while junior Ava Vidal was bumped up to fifth place for her Retail Merchandising Series after a competitor declined a states bid.

Rockport High also sent a DECA team of 60 students. Moving on to the state finals are Hannah Aspesi, Adam Beaton, Rumi Corum, Izzy DaCruz, Naia Gibson, Sam Kesterson, Ruby Lyman, Kaylee Delaney and Kacey

Kor Routt, Wyatt Wilkinson, O'Connell, teammates Bissy Finn Wilkinson, Reese Swanson, Lucy Mae Whelsky, and Abby Horne.

Dozens of students from Manchester Essex Regional High School also will compete in Boston as 26 students finished first, 17 in second, 12 in third and seven students finished in fourth place on the districts.

"DECA growth in Massachusetts, providing fewer opportunities for open spots, makes the accomplishments of our chapter that much more impressive," Manchester Essex Chapter Advisor Barrett Alston said. "I couldn't be prouder of the effort of our students."

Manchester Essex students advancing to the state competition are first-place finishers Parker Woodman, teammates Izzy Zagrobski and Ellie Morgan, Will Connell, Jacob Zachareas, teammates Maya Chaghouri and Claire Masters, Luke Renzi, teammates Alex Hatfield and Ben Rubens, Noah Cohen, teammates Sarah Cort and Kiernan Day, Violet Jakes, teammates Lila Brady, Kaylee Delaney and Kacey

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As we look into 2026, we look forward to connecting with our community and keeping it in Cape Ann.



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City firefighters' union raises more than \$8K for Salem High athletics

SALEM — The Salem Firefighters Union Local 172 raised more than \$8,000 through the sale of apparel during Halloween season to benefit Salem High School athletics and the Class of 2026.

During the month of October, union members worked closely with the Salem High athletic department, student-athletes and the Class of 2026 officers for 10 days selling t-shirts and other apparel outside the Fire Department's Lafayette Street headquarters.

Salem Firefighters Local 172 donated \$8,250 to the

participating teams and the graduating class — each receiving \$750 in support. Participating teams included softball, baseball, golf, cross country and wrestling, along with football, boys basketball, boys lacrosse, girls volleyball and boys soccer.

"We are very, very grateful to the Salem Firefighters Union Local 172 for its generous gift," Athletics Director Reilly Christie said. "This will significantly benefit each of the teams which participated, as well as the Class of 2026. The partnership between the city's

firefighters, police officers and public servants has always been a strong and special one, as this collaboration emphasizes."

The fundraising mission

was two-fold: Salem High students also had the opportunity to spend time at the firehouse, allowing them to learn more about the operations in fire service.

"Our department viewed this experience as a valuable way to introduce students to potential future careers and encourage interest in joining the department," fire Capt.

Wayne Silva said. "The Salem firefighters are proud to continue offering this annual fundraising opportunity to Salem High School students."

Salem firefighters helped raise more than \$8,000 to benefit athletics at Salem High School.

Generals run past Swampscott for first Danvers Holiday crown

By Matt Williams

» Asst. Sports Editor

DANVERS — Head coach Mark Cole likes to remind his Hamilton-Wenham girls that the layup and the free throw are the two easiest shots in basketball.

On Dec. 30, the Generals heeded his advice and made their fair share of those to win the first ever Danvers Holiday Tournament.

Hamilton-Wenham used a dominant third quarter and a major advantage on the boards to topple Swampscott, 53-39, in a festive ballgame at Danvers High's fieldhouse.

The Generals (3-3) spread the wealth, with all five starters scoring and four of them in double figures. Tournament MVP Margot Bryce Morris, a senior guard, scored 12 while All-Tournament selection Asa Labell, a junior captain, shot the ball very well and scored a team-best 14 points.

"I was surprised to see us put up 53 because we haven't got into the rhythm of running our offense yet," admitted Cole, whose team won back-to-back games in this



Grace Harres of Hamilton-Wenham tosses the ball to Asa Labell as they look to set up a play. The Generals downed Swampscott to win the first Danvers Holiday Tournament.

DAVID SOKOL/Staff photo

tournament to get back to .500 after dropping three of its first four games.

The big difference came in the third quarter when Hamilton-Wenham used a 15-2 run to build its largest lead and seize control. Swampscott (4-2) went cold from the floor and H-W's Lilly Giovannucci and Graces Harres controlled seemingly every rebound,

then made smart outlet passes for transition baskets.

"We like to push the pace, run the floor and get those easy baskets," said Cole. "Our intensity was much better in the second half, too."

All-Tourney choice Anna Kanders led Swampscott with a game-high 22 points, including five from behind the arc. The Big Blue were hot from

long distance early, building a 9-2 advantage and leading 12-9 after one quarter. In

fact, Swampscott didn't make a 2-point field goal until the third quarter and only made four in the entire afternoon.

"We do launch it," admitted Big Blue head coach Kathryn Leonard, whose team got three triples from Eve Byrne and two more from captain

Sam Ward. "That's great, but also at time you can rely on it a little too much. You want to get some of those paint touches, too."

Swampscott cut a 17-point Generals lead down to 11 twice in the fourth, but couldn't slice it any further. It wasn't so much the missed shots that doomed the Big Blue as much as not boxing out or getting to the rebounds, thereby never getting any second chance points and allowing the Generals to move the other way.

"By not controlling the boards, we didn't give ourselves any easy opportunities to break out," Leonard said. "We turned it over a lot, too. Credit (Hamilton-Wenham) because they played great defense and deflected a lot of passes."

The Generals also shot 11-of-14 from the free throw line. Gabriella Jewitt pitched in a tremendous defensive effort and Hamilton-Wenham's entire lineup was careful to close out on shooters whenever they could.

"Our defense over these two games was as good as it's going to be," said Cole, whose team beat host Danvers High

on Monday to corral two wins over Northeastern Conference opponents. "Swampscott had four kids who can shoot it, so you come in hoping they miss a few. In the first half, they made them and when they started missing in the second half, we were able to get out and run."

Labell made three triples for H-W, including tying the game at 9-all in the first. Bryce Morris was a force at both ends in her MVP effort, with Cole noting that "Once she gets going, she's tough to stop."

Hamilton-Wenham's largest lead was 19 at the midway point of the fourth.

Kanders, who can shoot both inside and out, also impressed with a half-dozen steals.

Leonard enjoyed the experience of playing in the tourney, which also featured host Danvers and Essex Tech.

"It was fun. I like playing over the break because when you have such a long time off, there can be some cobwebs," she said. "We fought hard (today) and we had some players gain some valuable experience. I'm happy with where we're at right now."



COURTESY PHOTO

From Mass. to Michigan

Fope Ayo takes a shot at Division I basketball

By Kim Tauro

» Student writer

Most basketball players spend years trying to get ahead, trying to be bigger, faster, and more prepared than everyone else around them.

Fope Ayo, a senior captain on the Austin Prep girls basketball team in Reading, Massachusetts, has taken a different path.

Rather than chasing comfort or early dominance, Ayo has repeatedly put herself in situations where she had more to learn than to prove, trusting that growth would come from challenge. And her growth has paid off.

Learning by Stepping In

Ranked No. 1 in Massachusetts from ESPN's 2026 SportsCenter NEXT 100 list, Austin Prep senior captain No. 32 Fope Ayo, a 6-foot-5 center from Methuen and a University of Michigan commit, is preparing to make one of the biggest jumps in basketball. She does so with clear eyes, aware that the advantages that once separated her will no longer be enough.

Ayo recently reached 1,000 career points at Austin Prep and is on pace for 1,000 rebounds, milestones that reflect her size and steady development. She is averaging 22.5 points per game this season, a figure higher than Paige Bueckers averaged during her senior year of high school, when the No. 1 pick in last year's WNBA Draft and one of the league's leading scorer posted 21 points per game.

Ayo's growth did not begin early or follow a traditional path. She was once a swimmer and dancer, and when she first picked up basketball in seventh grade, it was

largely because of her height and encouragement from her father.

Her basketball journey accelerated after joining the Rivals, a club program run by Austin Prep head coach Ushearndra Stroud, known as Coach U. After about a year, Stroud noticed something beyond Ayo's physical tools.

"I told her, 'I want you to come work with these kids. They're older than you, stronger than you, better than you,'" Stroud said. "And I watched her jump in as a 12-year-old with 17- and 18-year-olds who were already headed to high-level college programs and be able to hold her ground."

That willingness to step into harder rooms would become a pattern. In 9th grade, Ayo was playing for Central Catholic, where she didn't get much playing time on varsity. In 10th grade, she transferred to Austin Prep, a completely new environment. Rather than chasing immediate dominance, she worked hard to earn playing time.

From the start, Stroud believed Ayo had the potential to play at the highest levels of college basketball, even envisioning a Big Ten future before she had fallen in love with the sport. That love came later, during the summer before her junior year while competing on the Adidas National Circuit. Facing the top center in the country, Ayo held her own, recording stops and scoring against elite competition.

Now, she is a student of the game.

"College basketball is something you see on TV a lot when you're younger," Ayo said. "And now that's me."



: TYLER FLEMING/Austin Prep.

Fope Ayo is interviewed by NBC Boston at Richard J. Meelia Hall at Austin Prep after being named Hometown Hero.

Finding the Game Later and Falling in Love with It

Despite her resume, Ayo approaches the transition to Michigan with humility and perspective. She knows she is leaving a place where she dominated for a program that is deep, fast, and ambitious. At Austin Prep, her height was often an advantage, at Michigan, it will be more common. As a captain at Austin Prep, Ayo was an experienced leader; at Michigan, she will be a freshman competing against older, more seasoned players – many on the path to becoming WNBA draft picks – forcing her to rely on more than just her size.

"It's a good nervous," Ayo said. "Because now I have the opportunity to prove myself and to learn, get better, and develop."

Michigan, under head coach Kim Barnes Arico, the winningest coach in program history, has emerged

as one of the nation's most consistent programs over the past decade, regularly reaching the NCAA Tournament and pushing toward the next tier of women's college basketball, a challenge that mirrors Ayo's own trajectory.

Coach U believes Ayo's basketball IQ will be her greatest asset. "She has grown so much as a facilitator," Stroud said. "She reads where defensive help is coming from and makes the right pass. I trust her IQ the most."

Those traits are rooted in Ayo's mindset. Though often perceived as calm and confident, she does not see herself as a finished product. "Even with all these amazing things I'm thankful for, in my head I still think I haven't been playing basketball for that long," she said.

That perspective shapes how she leads. As a captain at Austin Prep, Ayo mentors

younger players, remembering what it felt like to learn the game later. Off the court, she serves as the senior class public relations officer, modeling leadership beyond athletics.

"She leads with her faith," Stroud said. "She's heart-first, compassionate, and competitive that fits with what Michigan is building."

Faith and values guided Ayo's college decision. When it came time to commit, she prayed extensively and carefully weighed basketball, academics, relationships, and fit. After a final conversation with Barnes Arico, she knew Michigan was home. While transferring has become common in college sports, Ayo approached her choice as a true four-year commitment.

Plus, with NIL now part of the landscape, Ayo is navigating a new dimension of college athletics, approaching name, image,

and likeness opportunities with the same discipline and perspective she brings to the game. Notably, she built her reputation without a significant social media presence, keeping her focus on substance over spotlight.

Looking ahead, Ayo keeps her future open. She hopes to play professionally, but is also interested in paths beyond basketball, including law, diplomacy, or intelligence work.

A New Beginning at the Next Level

At Michigan, Fope Ayo will not be the biggest name or the most experienced player. What she brings instead is something harder to teach: a willingness to learn, adapt, and embrace discomfort. It is the same choice she has made all along, and it is the reason her story continues to unfold.

Kim Tauro is a sophomore at Austin Prep

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