

The Unique Life of Baby Owen

By Sophie Braccini



Baby Owen in his mother Mary Volmer's arms, with his father, Chris Jones (right), and Assumption students around him. Photos Sophie Braccini

Owen Jones is in many regards a typical 2-year-old Moraga toddler. He has two loving parents and a lot of friends. What sets him apart is that most of his friends are between the ages of 18 and 22 years – *not months* – old.

Baby Owen is not a prodigy who discusses calculus with his buddies; he is a happy little boy who just happens to have spent his entire life on the Saint Mary's College campus, living at Assumption Hall. His growing up there has brought a unique atmosphere to the hall – a sense of bond and family that the students love – while his parents, Mary Volmer and Chris Jones, are happy living their family life among the students.

Many of the 80 Assumption residents came down to the lawn Oct. 9 where Owen and his family celebrated his birthday; they were joined by Assumption alumni who share memories with the family. When not in his mother's or father's arms, Owen was running around happily from one group to the next, exploring stairs, ramps and lawn, with always one or more students keeping an eye on him. He was the center of attention, and at the same time left free to roam and explore.

"We're happy here, he is happy here, we have an immediate sense of community; if you talk about a village raising a child, we have our village, right here," said Volmer, looking lovingly at the little bundle of energy, fluttering about with an absolute sense of safety.

Volmer and Jones are both SMC faculty members. Jones is the chair of the mathematics department and Volmer is a creative writing lecturer and published author; they are also resident directors at Assumption, the honors and science hall. "The tradition was that each hall had a Christian Brother as a resident director," explains Volmer. "Now some of the faculty have taken that role." Jones adds that he met Volmer in a resident directors' meeting at Saint Mary's seven years ago, and they married on campus. "We manage the RAs (older students serving as resident advisors), organize social events and provide the support any student may need," he adds.

For the students, having a little boy in their dorm provides a comforting family atmosphere. "When it is 9 p.m. and Owen goes to sleep, the whole floor becomes quieter," says

Monica Daggett who has the room directly across from the couple's apartment. "When we work hard and he suddenly shows up, he is a welcome break," adds Daggett's roommate Belen Sanchez, "and it is a way for us to stay grounded."

Owen knows the girls so well that he has a nickname for them. "She's Den and I'm Nini," says Daggett. The girls add that Volmer and Jones are wonderful mentors.

Callie Coker is the RA on the same floor; she was living at Assumption when Volmer was pregnant and she remembers the day she saw her take off for the hospital. "From our perspective, he was a pretty good baby," she remembers. "He never woke me up, and everybody loved to have him there. Assumption has always been close knit, and people love hanging out with him because he is so sweet."

For Volmer, raising a child amongst students is not strange; it is the only thing she's ever known. "Only when my mother came to visit, I realized that it was odd to her to have the open door policy we have here," she remembers. Anybody is welcome in the family's apartment until 9 p.m. and often there are more than three people around the dinner table. "We know that when the door is closed they want some private time, and we respect that," adds Sanchez with a smile.

Being on a campus also gives Volmer access to many professional resources. "When Owen had a rough patch at school I asked one of the child education specialist what she thought I should do," remembers Volmer, "and the response was to wait and see, which worked great." She also passes on the wisdom to the students, who now know to act aloof when Owen throws a typical 2-year-old tantrum.

The little boy's reach extends even further than the Hall on campus. His dad is also the coach of the women's soccer team and at 2, Owen, who has started to show an interest in the sport, is the team's mascot.

As for the future, Volmer and Jones have no plan to leave Assumption anytime soon, even if their apartment is just three consolidated dorm rooms, with a little kitchen and a small bedroom for Owen. "This is all he's ever known, and as long as we are all happy here, there is no reason to go," concludes Jones.



A New Year's Eve Twist

What is the most unusual way you or someone you know has ushered in the New Year minus champagne, party hats and noisemakers? Contact cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com by Nov. 30.