

TIMBER! High winds cause 30-foot branch to crash Spikeball game; seniors barely escape without injury



Nicolas Muñoz and Michael Daichman retrieve their phones from underneath a damaged Spikeball net after a tree limb fell onto the Quad. Students had left their phones under the net during their game earlier that afternoon.

PHOTO BY Grace Randall

By Noura Jabir and Ella West

Chris Curran was in her first-floor office when she looked out her window and noticed fallen leaves swirling in an unusual pattern on the Quad. Concerned about the prospect of severe weather, she superstitiously knocked on her wooden desk.

Then she heard a loud crack. At approximately 2:36 p.m. on Oct. 23, a 30-foot branch splintered from a live oak tree in the center of the Quad, falling dangerously close to a group of seniors playing Spikeball. Other than a minor scratch on Ken Matsunaga’s leg, no one was injured.

The students — William Stingl, Michael Daichman, Luke Alexander, Nicolas Muñoz, Aidan Via and Matsunaga — had reached matchpoint in their game when the temperature “dropped ten degrees,” a gust of wind rustled the trees and a sharp cracking noise rang out across the Quad.

“I thought it was lightning,” Stingl said. “I look up, and this massive branch is about to fall.”

According to Alexander, the boys reacted swiftly, “bolting out of the way.”

“That’s all we could do,” Alexander said. When Curran, Associate Head of School, saw that no students had been harmed, she felt a flood of relief.

“We are responsible for a lot, but students’ safety and the safety of our staff is truly our number one priority,” said Curran. “I’m grateful we have such agile students.”

Director of Curriculum Dwight Raulston (’71) witnessed the branch’s fall from the Quad patio, where he had been reading prior to the incident.

“The wind kept coming faster, and you could see the tree’s big branches [swirling] around,” Raulston said. “I started to text my wife about the weather, and that’s when there was a big crack.”

As soon as the branch landed, students began congregating on the Quad.

“We were all just screaming like banshees,” Alexander said.

Several faculty members exited their classrooms and directed students to move away from the debris.

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WILLIAM STINGL

Anne-Charlotte Gillard, a senior, was on a Zoom call during the incident. From her vantage point on the Quad patio, it looked as though the Spikeball players “almost died.”

Stingl was relieved that his reflexes prevented him from sustaining any injuries.

“Sometimes near imminent death, you get that feeling that tells you to get out of the way,” Stingl said. “I felt that feeling, and I got out of the way.”

After the incident, the staff secured the area and Head of Safety and Facilities Richard Still contacted a tree service company to request an examination of the Quad’s trees.

It was determined that the tree was diseased, so its limbs were cut off the next morning. Still says the entire tree will eventually be removed.

The School has trees inspected and pruned annually to ensure that wind can travel through the canopies without causing branches to fall.

“It was a little too close for comfort, but I’m glad everyone is well,” Curran said. “Luckily, the only casualty was a Spikeball.”

Curran considers the trees on campus some of the prettiest in Houston.

“I love the trees, but now I’m looking at them a little differently.”



Dwight Raulston, Director of Curriculum, contemplates the fallen limb. He had been reading on the Quad patio when the branch fell.

PHOTO BY Grace Randall

We were all just screaming like banshees.

LUKE ALEXANDER

English teachers Clay Guinn (’92), Warren Rawson and Kristiane Stapleton, who were inside Rawson’s first-floor classroom, rushed onto the Quad upon hearing what sounded like a “shotgun blast.”

“We all jumped two feet off the ground and ran outside to see the boys scattering,” Rawson said.