

Former ORHS principal's remarks, made 36 years ago, still relevant

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | January 3, 2007

The following remarks were made by Tom Dunigan, principal of Oak Ridge High School from 1954 to 1971, at the Chapel on the Hill on August 2, 1970. They were provided me by Tom's daughter, Pat Postma. Tom Dunigan was the principal with the longest tenure — 17 years. While Tom's remarks are over 36 years old, it is amazing how much can be learned from his insightful commentary on the generation gap.

Other principals of Oak Ridge High School have been: Charles Oliver, 1942-1945; E.C. Cunningham, 1946-1947; Donald Roe, 1948-1953; Jim Schott, 1972-1973; Don Bordinger, 1974-1982; William E. Hodgers, 1983-1994; James F. Duncan, 1995-1999; Kenneth E. Green, 2000-2005; Becky W. Ervin, 2005-2006; Chuck Carringer, 2006-present.

Chuck Carringer has been most helpful to me by providing access to historical information needed to confirm the above information, as well as providing leads to other key information about the Oak Ridge schools history. Thanks, Chuck!

Now, here is the first part of Tom's remarks.

Time Marches On! ...or, Will It?

"There is a time and a season for everything under the heavens." That's the King James version of that first verse of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes and I was required to memorize it as a high school student. You see, there was a time when a teacher considered that I had spoken out of turn, and the prescribed penalty was that I should memorize the third chapter of Ecclesiastes. Over the span of years since I memorized them I have continued to feel that there is much food for thought in all the eight verses. Has there ever been a time when these verses were more timely than now?

When George Jasny honored me with the invitation to speak to you, I said to him that I would be open to any of his suggestions as to what I might talk about. In his reply he kept the door open to me to talk about school-related topics. Certainly, there should be a time and a place for that. (You may feel this is not it.) Certainly 'The times are a changin'' when it comes to schools. Time was when a student seen going to the principal's office might have been assumed to be in trouble. Nowadays, when a student goes to the principal's office it may be assumed that the principal is in trouble.

I can explain that I am talking about high school matters because that is my involvement; that's what is relevant to me. I can say also, that I might talk about Oak Ridge High School because no other organization or institution in Oak Ridge is so intimately related to so many Oak Ridgers. When a class of 600 is graduated here, it represents an investment of about \$12 million on the part of parents plus another \$5 million on the part of the school system. It is a pleasure and an honor to be connected with an organization turning out a 17-million-dollar annual product.

Certainly, it's to be expected that the stock holders might be interested. But there are more and better reasons for public interest in high schools in these times than for the dollars involved. There are those among today's dissenting voices who might place the indictment of materialism against me for having mentioned dollars so early in my remarks today. Be that as it may, the deep satisfaction and the sad disappointments that educators feel from day to day usually are not directly associated with dollars.



Tom Dunigan was Oak Ridge High School principal from 1954 to 1971

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We shall proceed this morning on the assumption that most of you have some interest, some curiosity and perhaps some concern about young people of these times in regard to their behavior and dress; their involvement in drug use; their activist concerns; their demonstrations; and their race relations. And now you are saying, "There's a time for everything but not all of it this morning, please." I shall proceed informally to make some comments on some of these topics as they seem to affect us in Oak Ridge, and then conclude with some general observations about the younger generation in these times.

One great educator became so infuriated with what he called the licentious, outrageous and disgraceful behavior of students at this school that he quit in disgust. That was at a college in Carthage in the year A.D. 383, and the dismayed teacher, as he relates it in Confessions, was St. Augustine. Sometimes we are inclined to take consolation in such evidence that these things have happened before — and, that student behavior can try the patience of even a saint. Let me hasten to add that I have not yet reached the distraught state of St. Augustine. And, also, I hasten to add that such observations by St. Augustine, Socrates and other ancients does not mean that there is not something new in our present youth problems.

The involvement of young people in the abuse of drugs is a matter of grave concern nationally. It's reported that from 35 to 50 percent of all teenagers across the country are involved with drugs in varying degrees. Why they indulge is one of the more baffling questions in the minds of most adults. Some of the whys are undoubtedly more profound than the drug users themselves are fully able to understand. The extent of use of drugs by Oak Ridge High School students is not a thing that can be easily observed and sized up. Most drug use probably occurs at times and places away from school.

Some student attempts at surveys would indicate an amount of abuse to be concerned about, but a pattern below the national averages in my opinion. You may already know that several junior high school students are reported to be involved in drugs each year. In the high school we have had only a few cases where students have been definitely identified in drug activities at school. Certainly there are students who are suspected of being involved in drug abuse even though specific evidence cannot be provided. My observations are that drug use is not a serious problem on the high school grounds, but that does not mean that any parent should ease up on his own alertness.

The school has instructional material on drugs as a part of the health course which is required for all students. We have also carried out a few special programs of education on the effects of drugs. To adults some of these programs would seem to be impressive, but to teenagers the films and other programs seem less impressive and are even rejected as unrealistic by some of them. School systems across the country report a variety of attacks on the drug problem but no one claims to have found a highly effective approach.

There are a couple of points that may be worth passing on. First, preventive education, to be effective, probably has to be done in the elementary grades. Second, young people already extensively involved in drug abuse need, more than anything else, someone they can talk to as they become concerned about themselves. That will not be parents or teachers or other authority figures. Young people of their own age group appear to be the most effective help.

A more conspicuous pattern than drugs in the youth culture is the pattern of dress and hair styles that many people frown on when they are not resorting to less-restrained expressions than frowns. We have never, in years past at the high school, put a dress code in writing. We did have for many years some unwritten understandings about the kinds of dress considered appropriate for school. At the beginning of

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school about three years ago I said to the faculty that there appeared to be a world-wide trend in styles of dress that would like give us some concern.

Based on my observations of schools in the 1920s trying to regulate the length of girls' dresses, I suggested to the faculty that we might be just as well off to devote our time and energies to the more central tasks of education, and try not to become too much involved in any confrontation on styles of dress. The majority of the faculty felt so inclined. We have operated from that position, not without some annoyance and displeasure, for the styles went to extremes that we did not anticipate. I certainly do have some personal preferences on styles of dress. I have not found faculty or students inclined to want to dictate a dress code to others. Of course I know that some of you feel that the school should put its foot down and stop such deplorable hair and dress patterns.

Some of you would say, "Anybody knows that slovenly dress, long hair, beards and bare feet encourage general poor conduct." And there are others of you who say that your child's clothing is none of the school's business. In any case the best and safest guidelines that come to us about legal action on these matters can be stated as follows (it's sometimes referred to as the "doctrine of actual interference or disruption"):

"School authorities should not impinge on the freedom of students, unless student behavior substantially and materially interferes with the discipline and good order of the school. In all equity and justice, it is not enough that a segment of society — be it teachers, school board members or administrators — disapproves of elements of pupil behavior or dress. Nor is it sufficient that school authorities think that the pupil, if unrestrained, will create some future disorder."

Even though this court opinion will be questioned by some of us at first reading, there is some understandable basis for it. It takes the position of protecting the rights of students in the same way that it would protect the rights of adults. Middle Tennessee State University in its grappling with the problems and concerns about dress finally said, according to the newspapers: "So long as your dress is legal it's your business; if it becomes illegal, it's you and the law for it."

And now, about the music of these times — I could suggest ear plugs and move on but I have another point to make. A couple of years ago, after a student-produced Soul Show at the high school, I was expressing my feelings of never-again to a teacher. I made the comment that young people were not there to listen; they were participants in the music. The teacher responded quickly and with enthusiasm: "Yes, that is exactly right. Music these days is not something to listen to, it's something to respond to and be involved in." I mention this because it pinpoints a dominant quality in the spirit of many of today's young people — INVOLVEMENT.

We will continue Tom Dunigan's speech next week.