

A brief history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 4, 2010)

As I began my research into the early history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, I found considerable information that caused me to stop and think about the 1950's and 1960's again. I did not realize, but should have known, there were several things in progress pointing toward a Children's Museum of Oak Ridge well prior to 1973.

As with most really good ideas, there were people working toward a children's museum years before it became a reality. The true origins of several initiatives that culminated in one of the greatest treasures of East Tennessee were more diverse than I had thought.

As early as 1948 the members of the Association for Early Childhood Education had created an exhibit center for children and by the time a Children's Museum was being considered, they had maintained the center for nearly 20 years before closing it down and storing the contents. These teachers worked hard to provide enriched educational experiences for children. They sustained their purpose for helping children within the scope of their ability to do so.

An Oak Ridger article of March 22, 1992, listed three of the teachers as, Pauline Miller, Margaret Wait and Julia Moore. Joyce Maienschein added Norma Woy as the name of another teacher who worked on the early efforts and Viola Ergen added the names of Maggie Eckerd and Burnice Williams as helpers as well. As is often the case when there is a struggle to produce new initiatives, those working so hard longed for the more complete and permanent experiences for children that a full children's museum could bring.

Viola Ergen came to Oak Ridge in 1947. She recalled the early history of the teachers' efforts and helped me better understand the first attempt at a children's exhibit. The teachers evidently started the effort in the first Linden Elementary School, moved to Woodland, then to Cedar Hill Elementary School. At each location, space was often hard to keep when other school needs came into play. Eventually the carefully collected materials were finally stored in a closet at Jefferson Junior High School in 1965. This is where they were found when the Girl Scout Troop 69 effort took off.

Additionally, I found in my research into original documents that the Awareness House, a drug prevention center, also preceded the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. This center was initiated by Girl Scout Troop 69 with a Reader's Digest grant in 1970 and in conjunction with Oak Ridge schools, city staff, community leaders such as Alvin Weinberg and Bill Pollard and with the leadership of Joyce Maienschein.

Why am I not surprised to find Alvin Weinberg engaged here? I want to do a series in Historically Speaking on him, but doing a series on him is much like attempting one on Liane Russell, I am somewhat intimidated by the hugeness of their contribution to society and afraid I would not be able to do justice to their phenomenal careers. But I am getting up my nerve! I have talked to Liane about it and have written about her contributions outside of biological research, maybe she will agree to help me do a series on her brilliant biological research career as well. She is truly a scientific giant among us!

Joyce Maienschein is helping me with the early history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. As a first introduction to her vast knowledge of those early years, let me share with you some insights gained from a document she wrote on July 8, 2005.

She said that several of the girls in Girl Scout Troop 69 recalled their time in the one-room children's exhibit organized by the Oak Ridge teachers in 1948 and that senior girl scouts had worked in that "museum" on Sunday afternoons for many years. It had closed in 1965 according to Viola Ergen, but

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some of the materials were pulled from that closet in Jefferson Junior High School in 1973 and were included in the Children's Museum displays. I know those teachers who had originated that initial effort were proud as punch to see their work now being incorporated into the new museum!

The early success of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge is indicated by the 400 visits in the remainder of March, 1973, the first month after opening day on March 11, 1973. Attendance quickly rose to over 600 per month in April and May of 1973.

On May 1, 1973, the Awareness House board gave their remaining funds, some \$700, to Girl Scout Troop 69 for use in supporting the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. The proceeds from the sale of Awareness House office equipment added another \$300 to the effort.

The girls in the troop, with the experience gained in creating the Awareness House and acting far more mature than their age, voted to use the funds for a summer director, not to exceed \$15 per week. These young ladies were tackling tough problems effectively. Hands-on and constant leadership was vital to the success of the fledgling organization.

Here are the duties of this "summer director" who turned out to be Pan Zachry, a graduate student at the University of Tennessee and a former member of Girl Scout Troop 69. She was to: 1) coordinate all classes, 2) meet with Youth Advisory Council, 3) help plan each new Sunday program with the Girl Scouts, 4) help with the Anderson County Community Arts Program held at the Children's Museum, which used their craft equipment from Awareness House, 5) oversee publicity to The Oak Ridger prepared by the girls, and, 6) help establish a provisional board of directors to be responsible after the Girl Scout Troop 69's Reader's Digest Grant that ended on August 30, 1973.

Now how would you like that job for \$15 per week? Actually, I found that Pan's salary was only \$25 per month! She worked from June 1 to September 1, 1973 when a full-time director and a program director were hired.

Joyce went on to recall that Dr. Bob Smallridge, who had just been hired as the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and who would later become Superintendent of Schools for Oak Ridge in 1978, assured her that the newly forming Children's Museum of Oak Ridge could use the library space in the Jefferson Junior High School building as long as the building stood. He also assured her that with the extraordinary success of the program that he was sure the city would help in finding a new home if the building were to be razed.

She said that on July 10, 1973, at 7:30 PM at the Children's Museum, a public meeting was held and a provisional board of directors elected. They were, President Pro-Tem – Lawrence Akers, Liz Lieberman, Dot Thompson, Norma Spejewski, Mary Elizabeth Alexander, Ben Adams, Russell McCalley, Carla Gunderson (senior Girl Scout representative) and herself as Senior Troop Advisor. I must comment on Ben Adams...why am I also not surprised to find him listed here. Ben has been engaged in many such efforts in the history of our city.

As a side note, I mentioned this fact of his being a charter member of this board to Ben at Breakfast Rotary and in his usual self-deprecating manner, he changed the subject and told me a joke. I am proud to call him my friend and admire his untiring dedication to Oak Ridge and East Tennessee.

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Next the Girl Scouts ran an advertisement in The Oak Ridger for one week asking for resumes of interested individuals for the position of part-time director of the new and highly successful museum. Remember, they had received \$1,000 from Awareness House.

Interestingly enough, 16 letters from interested candidates were received. They represented a wide range of experience and education, however none had actual museum experience. The selection committee consisted of, Larry Akers, Liz Lieberman, Dot Thompson, Carla Gunderson (Girl Scout) and Joyce Maienshein.

When the candidates were told their pay would depend largely on their ability to raise funds with a guarantee of \$75 per month for four months, four withdrew. Lorin Costanzo, an outreach social worker with experience in fund raising, offered to work with no pay until he could secure a grant. He was selected as Director, and Selma Shapiro was selected as Program Director starting September 1, 1973.

Joyce goes on to tell that Lorin Costanzo was called to National Guard duty with his Kentucky unit during the Suez Canal crisis and Selma Shapiro agreed to assume full responsibility as Director of the Children's Museum on November 1, 1973, at \$75 per month, the same salary she had agreed to as Program Director. Selma went on to serve over 31 years with distinction as the museum director.

The girl scouts of Girl Scout Troop 69 were well ahead of the times in their thinking and mature beyond their years in their ability to execute a plan of action. We are still reaping the benefits of their pioneering spirit and successful venture into experiential learning through hands-on museum experiences.



Jefferson Junior High School library as it looked when Girl Scout Troop 69 agreed it could be made into a Children's Museum

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Pan Zachry, the Children's Museum's first Director



The girls of Troop 69 transformed the library into a vibrant display of interesting exhibits for children

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Ribbon cutting for Children's Museum at Jefferson Junior High School library, from left: Joyce Maienschein, Marian Metcalf, Dr. Schott's daughters (he was ORHS principal and VERY supportive of Girl Scouts - Susie is cutting ribbon), Dr. Ken Loflin (School Superintendent) and Nancy Hudson. In back are Joan Wallace from The Oak Ridger, girl in front of her unknown, behind Dr. Loflin is Laurie Stirling, Jan Moyers, Pat Yee (behind little girl with glasses who is unknown), Beth Schultz is behind Nancy Hudson.



Marian Metcalf, girl chair of the Reader's Digest grant Children's Museum project, Beth Schultz and Joyce Maienschein, a key element in the project to form a Children's Museum