

Selma Shapiro and the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, from a dream to a legend

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 24, 2011)

As we continue reciting the Oral History of Selma Shapiro, we now see how she managed to grow the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. Hers was a labor of love throughout the years spent there. She never quit dreaming and never quit experimenting and plowing new ground in the concept of children's museums.

Now back to the oral history where Selma traced the history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

Selma said, "We went before city council, and they sold it to us - an 11 1/2 acre tract of land. We gave two acres back to the city of Oak Ridge for the park, and we paid for the land. They said the building was worthless. I was like 'I don't think so, but I'll take your word for it.'

"We started to work real hard to see the most important thing to do first. We were able to get that Challenge grant. That meant a whole lot. Because, I'll always remember, Gordon Fee, was the co-chairman and Dr. Bill Hardy, a pediatrician in Oak Ridge, were co-chair of that effort. They both, along with the committee, were determined to succeed.

"Both of them loved the museum. Gordon works with us to this day, his daughter, Debbie, was in the Girl Scout troop that started the museum. He's been just like the Rock of Gibraltar of our board. Gordon has followed through with so many other things to do with the museum.

"They went out, and broke into committees, and sought money everywhere. We were able to match that money, and to start the renovation. Not long after that, the old original boiler and heating system gave out, and we had to really go forward with all kinds of fund raising so that we could put in a whole new heating and cooling system.

"We had to replace the roof and the siding and all the rest of what makes it a usable space. Over the years, I would say that the museum has really been blessed. Wonderful personnel that have worked over the years selflessly, who have wanted to see the museum be a success, and now we're recognized as one of the most wonderful Children's Museums in the United States!

"I can't get over it, it's unbelievable. It was done as a grassroots effort and it's still a grassroots effort.

"People say to me, 'you did it.' But I couldn't have done it by myself. No way. I did provide leadership, but with wonderful people.

"Now, in the latter years there are so many things that have taken place over these years that have made the museum what it is today, including the train section of the museum and what's happening right now up there, with the outdoor train garden. Working with the Oak Ridge Fire Department, we're going to have a whole Fire Department Section where the 1940's fire truck is the center of it, and people are responding so beautifully.

"It's very satisfying to raise money for the Children's Museum. I'm sure it is the same as with any other nonprofit. But it's extremely satisfying the way the people respond, they're so excited about it. They feel it's their place. And that goes on from generation to generation to generation

Selma noted that in the Children's Museum is the cornerstone of the Highland View community. She pointed out that the community has used the museum building as a meeting place for upgrading the entire community.

The Children's Museum is like an island in the middle of rental houses and other houses whose families Selma has known over thirty years. She said, "They didn't accept me right away, they wanted to check me out essentially, when I first, started to work there, because they, at that time, all the children could just

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wander in and out all the time without any adult, and, they checked me out. Once I was checked out, they knew that I would care about their children and love their children and help their children. And I felt the same way about them too.

Selma concluded her oral history interview by saying, "I have never felt negatively about the city of Oak Ridge. There was a time when the museum borrowed money from what was then Nations Bank, to expand the renovations more quickly than we probably should have, but we had to because of the heating and cooling system, and the city of Oak Ridge came right to our assistance. I don't believe that I have ever felt that the city of Oak Ridge, the council people or the people who worked for the city were not supportive of the museum.

"The museum is there for the community, for the region, is there for the children that live close by, for all of the counties that are around Oak Ridge, but it's also there as a tourist attraction. That just came along with it. And so, all of a sudden, and now, with our own website, they're coming from everywhere! And, it's still never fails to amaze me when we get a call from a teacher in Atlanta or Nashville, or some small community somewhere.

"Young parents figure out what's good and what's not good for their children, and one of the things that we do with this museum is to assure that it is a children's museum but it's also a family museum. Because it's a family museum, we have our museum constructed so that a parent doesn't have to be bored in that building. Some children's museums are very much like activity centers, and that's fine, maybe they have lots of museums in their community. But for us, it's a joint family learning experience.

"The same kind of feeling is in all the school systems that we serve. I see Oak Ridge without any borders. It is Oak Ridge's Children's Museum, but I see the audience. I drew lines once, and it showed me 250,000 people!

"I feel like so many other things could happen in Oak Ridge if everybody had that vision, I guess, that Oak Ridge is wonderful, and all around it, the people are coming, and taking advantage of all the wonderful things that we have. I think that we're at a wonderful time in the city's history, I'm so excited about everything, it's almost like Oak Ridge has been discovered.

"It's going to be a wonderful place for families to come and live. I think that the federal monies are coming in, I think that the Children's Museum plays a key role in, not only tourism, but I think it plays a key role in people bringing their children long distances, lot of people work in Oak Ridge, don't live in Oak Ridge, but they bring their children to our summer camps, those kinds of things, the potential is endless.

"I'm particularly excited now, because I have retired, and I am still involved with the museum to a certain degree. We have a wonderful young woman who is now the director of the museum, and a staff that had worked with me before, wonderful people that are carrying on all of the things that we've all talked about all these years that would be good for Oak Ridge, and good for our Children's Museum. So I think the best is yet to come!

Wow, what a spectacular lady was Selma Shapiro! Oak Ridge needs more such visionaries! I hope you have enjoyed a look inside the Oral History provided by Selma Shapiro. I have edited her remarks slightly to make her comments more readable as a written document, but have strived to maintain the flavor and insight that reflects her as I have known her. Selma is yet another of my HEROS!

As you know, Selma died the day the first of this four-part article published. I was saddened as I had hoped she would see her oral history published. However, early that morning the phone calls came in telling me how much the family appreciated the first article and asking me to continue them all. I was glad to do that and am pleased you readers got to read what Selma thought was important.

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Her admiration for Oak Ridge near the end of her oral history is remarkable. She obviously never faltered in her support and love of Oak Ridge. She was an example of leadership that we sorely need to replicate. Yes, Selma was someone I admired and am most proud to have been associated with through the years. She will be missed by family and friends, but the whole of Oak Ridge has lost a giant we will not soon forget.



Selma pictured with famous cooper, Alex Stewart, an example of the Appalachian heritage she considered a major part of the Children's Museum's mission to adequately interpret. Examples of his handmade wooden buckets can be seen in the museum even today.