

**Selma Shapiro and stories of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge**  
**(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 3, 2011)**

I first met Selma Shapiro in the mid 1970's when Cub Scout Pack 220 began meeting in a class room of the west wing of the Highland View School building that had just become home to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. She graciously allowed us to use that room weekly on Monday evenings and the gym for our monthly Pack meetings. During the 16 years that I remained the Cubmaster, I got to know Selma well and grew to appreciate her tremendous dedication to children and creative energy applied to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

She was creating an institution, truly a living museum, and she was devoting her life to that goal. I admired her then and admire her more now that she has guided the establishment of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and has successfully transitioned it into a viable sustaining museum with exceptional leadership and one of the premier elements of Oak Ridge's unique heritage.

We who know Selma and the museum she helped create, respect her and see her as a visionary leader, an example of what is needed in Oak Ridge today if we are to reach our full potential. Selma was dedicated to her life goal of creating something for children that would last. What a joy to see her accomplishment being enjoyed daily by children, parents and visitors from all across our nation. The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge is a treasure, not just for Oak Ridge, but for the entire region of East Tennessee and beyond.

The following comes from an oral history interview Selma gave during the filming for the Secret City documentary films by Keith McDaniel. It gives us an insight into Selma that I believe you will find truly remarkable.

When asked about the history of the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, she went back to a very early history of teachers as early as the 1940's that started "their little children's museum" from things they brought back from trips they had taken. She also noted that during the 1970's there developed a significant drug problem in our city that had a terrible impact on many of the youth.

Selma said, "The children's museum has a unique beginning – it was a grassroots effort. No one handed the board of directors a million dollars to start a children's museum. It came into being out of a need. In the early 1970's, around 1971 or 1972, Oak Ridge was still a perfect community in that you didn't have to worry about your children being out and about, you didn't have to worry about anything that some of the surrounding communities and cities and states were beginning to see. And that is, drugs coming into their community. (But that was about to change and change radically – Ray)

Selma noted that the girls were just beginning to see pot and all the different drugs coming into Oak Ridge. Several of these girls were very disturbed that some of the kids they were sitting next to in school were becoming part of this situation. They talked to their scout leader, Joyce Maienschein about their concern. There were about 50 or 60 girl scouts in this troop. The girls all had stories about why was this happening in our wonderful community.

Selma said, "There was so much good in Oak Ridge, the kids all went to Sunday School, there were recreation programs at every school, and everything was wonderful, but here was this, this thing, and it was coming into their school system by way of mostly boys, that were having temptations into drugs, and, they sat around and decided to have workshops. The title of the workshops was 'What was wrong with Oak Ridge' and what could be done to make it better.

"Out of that idea, came the idea for Awareness House. You may not even be knowledgeable about Awareness House, where you have the old the Wildcat Den, which is now the historic preservation group [Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association], was then selected to be the place for something called Awareness House. Awareness House was going to be very similar to something they had in California, where they were seeing this [drug problem] years before.

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"The girl scouts were very excited about the fact that this building hadn't been upgraded or fixed. They took it upon themselves to clean it and paint it and bring in things for activities, art activities and special places where counselors could come in and talk to these children. They were beginning to gather money to make this work.

"The reason I know more about it than most people, my husband was president of the United Way at that time, and I know there were calls coming to our house, "how do we get the money to open a place like this, it could really help these children?" Before they finished their workshops about how they felt that this could work, they decided that what Oak Ridge needed more than anything, was a place where kids and adults could work together.

Selma continued, "So the girls were very excited about cleaning up this building to make it become Awareness House. Awareness House started to shape up and people started to give money to pay a director of this Awareness House, and in a couple of months, it came into being [in early 1972].

Unfortunately, the Awareness House concept, while a great idea in principle, did not result in the type situation envisioned. The girls who were instrumental in starting this effort, while devastated at the failure of their effort, did not give up, rather they set their minds to work at what alternative would allow the desired place where kids and adults could work together.

Selma describes it as, "they kept thinking about a place where kids and adults could work together, could learn together, and could be together. Out of that, came the idea for a children's museum. I think, in looking back, I wasn't involved at that time, I had my own Girl Scout troop and I had four children, but I kept hearing about what was the beginning of this children's museum.

"They went to the superintendent of schools, I think it was Ken Laughlin at that time, and asked him if there was some space somewhere in the city, where they could have something they could start and call a museum. That was when they were building the new Jefferson Junior High school. This building had been turned over to the city which was the old Jefferson Junior High School, up on Kentucky Avenue, and they offered the library of that building, temporarily, until they saw when the building was going to be built, and they would have to get out of the building so they would tear it down.

"It was a very exciting project for these kids, and as I said, I was not there at that time, but I was a Girl Scout leader and I had my own Girl Scout troop that I was taking up from 2<sup>nd</sup> grade on through, and I was very active as a leader in the Girl Scout movement.

"These students, and there must have been 50 or 60 of them, got together and essentially took the library of the old Jefferson Junior High School and turned it into a museum. They did it in a very innovative way. They took collections that had been left in the storage room by teachers who had something they called a children's museum, when they used to go on trips and bring back things for their class or the children made projects. They were stored in a storage room right off of that library.

"So they took bamboo poles and really rough-textured material, and they divided the whole library into various areas. They had a doll section, an international section, a science section, a music section, and they had an Appalachian section, among other things. And this was in late 1972.

"I watched it through news releases in the paper and was real excited for them. I thought I would take my troop up there. On March 11, 1973, these girl scouts, their leaders, their parents and their teachers opened the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

Selma saw the early beginnings of the Children's Museum from a distance, but she saw something that interested her. Next we will look at how things developed to engage Selma and forever link her to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

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Selma surrounded by the children she loved at the fourth birthday celebration of the Children's Museum in 1977



Selma as she appeared at the Children's Museum last year when I was researching material for Historically Speaking series on the history of the Children's Museum.