

2011 Secret City Film Festival - a huge success

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 27, 2011)

Let me start by saying that, in my opinion, the *Secret City Film Festival* took a giant leap this year. A first-of-a-kind documentary film series was shown. It represents a departure from standard film making and from standard documentary films as well as demonstrates a new and unique approach to capturing oral histories.

The *Oak Ridge Stories* are a series of short films (less than 10 minutes each) that feature a specialized focus on a part of our history that has been researched by high school students. Video interviews are conducted and the film is edited using what is known in the film industry as "B-roll." This is just background film footage that illustrates or enhances the commentary being made by the person being interviewed.

The *Oak Ridge Stories* were shown for the very first time to audiences who responded with strong positive feedback. The series was a huge hit with the viewing audience.

The first six films in the series created by high school students who interviewed Oak Ridgers were very professionally done. The films were very much at home in the audience of film makers. I was pleased to see them there and was excited to know that new ground in film making was being made.

The *Secret City Film Festival* just completed its eighth year. The unique Oak Ridge film festival was held on September 16-18, 2011, at the historic Grove Theater, now the High Places Community Church. The venue is exactly what is needed for a film festival.

Festival Founder/Director Keith McDaniel said, "What a tremendous festival we had this year. Although we screened films from across the United States the majority of the films were from Tennessee filmmakers." I would add that Keith has done a lot to promote and encourage local filmmakers. It is good to see the number of local filmmakers growing. I like to think that the *Secret City Film Festival* is one reason for that increase.

McDaniel continued, "That's what I envisioned when I began the film festival - a venue for local and regional filmmakers to present their work. We also were very pleased to feature several historical documentaries about the region, including the *Oak Ridge Stories* series - short documentaries about specific aspects of Oak Ridge and her history. Working with area students to produce these short films was a real treat."

McDaniel added, "It is a great honor to help aspiring filmmakers achieve their goals and help them learn, not only about our region's unique history, but about how to make films. We at the *Secret City Film Festival* are honored to work with so many talented local filmmakers."

I asked Liz Shugart of the Greenway School in Farragut to tell me what she thought about the *Oak Ridge Stories* series in which her students participated this year and were among the short films featured at the film festival. Here is her response:

"Working with Mr. McDaniel on three of the documentaries for his 12-part series was truly a highlight for my students last year. I think sometimes that middle school students aren't given the chance to participate in projects of this magnitude and I know that my students learned a great deal.

"From Mr. McDaniel my students learned about the importance of lighting and sound when conducting an interview. They learned how a professional puts a documentary together from beginning to end. They read lots of transcripts, highlighted sound bytes and ordered them into a cohesive story, wrote an outline and narration, learned about editing and the importance of music and picked out photographs to go along with their script.

"The students gained so much from the interviews themselves. We interviewed 15 Oak Ridgers and my students came away from that experience with a sense of pride and confidence. They realize that they were probably the last interview that Selma Shapiro gave and they were happy to have met her.

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"Last week as we were writing in class to some pen pals in Germany, one of my students said "remember to ask open ended questions because you will get better responses than a yes or a no." We worked on this extensively last year about how to conduct an interview and it was nice to see that they have carried some of what they learned with them.

"One student (Ryan Flint, who is now at the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics high school) continued to work with Mr. McDaniel over the summer on several of the remaining documentaries. He sent me several email updates and in one he said "we got to interview Mr. Wilcox again, it was great!" Bill Wilcox spent several days with my students and they were so impressed by him.

"Abbey Huber feels that people tend to forget about Oak Ridge and the important part it played in the war. She also feels that she has a very good understanding of Oak Ridge history from doing this project.

"Benjamin Toedte said the best part about this project was hearing from someone who actually lived through those times.

"Emma McCleod said the first hand experience of the interviews gave her a different perspective of Oak Ridge.

"All of the above students participate in National History Day which emphasizes the use of primary source documents. Emma actually used two of the interviews she conducted with Oak Ridge women in her performance about working women of World War II.

Wow! Now what do you think of that? Looks to me like an excellent example of students learning more by doing than by just listening. We are anxious to get more students engaged. We are anxious to show what can be done through video oral history interviews.

Michael Twardy, who was on the team working with these students, had this to say, "This was a very rewarding experience for me. I couldn't have asked for a better team of individuals to take on the challenge and deliver the amazing results that we achieved.

"Being able to share this with teachers, students, and their parents, was an added bonus. I was especially pleased to see that parents took an active interest in this project, and got to share the experience with their kids as well.

"I truly hope that this project continues, as we have just scratched the surface of the incredible stories that Oak Ridge, and other Department of Energy sites have to tell.

I believe the *Oak Ridge Stories* series of short documentary films opens up a new and unique approach to capturing oral histories that engages the next generation in a most positive manner. As you saw from the Greenway School's experience, the students learn from this interactive and very engaging practical experience of interviewing the Manhattan Project survivors.

The same will hold true for the Cold War warriors who helped us win that war as well. Interviewing them with high school students will be much more effective than standard approaches. Passing our history on to the next generation cannot be done through lectures on history. The students must be personally involved in capturing our history and then it will stick. Video is the medium they understand and works best for information sharing.

Oak Ridge is not unique in this regard. There are other Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security Administration sites that are filled with individuals who have exciting and pertinent stories to tell about the Manhattan Project and the Cold War. We need to expand this successful concept of using high school students to interview the previous generation.

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Soon these twelve videos will be available online. The first six titles are: *Daily Life*, *A Child's Life*, *On The Job*, *Building the City*, *Graphite Reactor* and *Sworn to Secrecy*. Others will be forthcoming and next year we hope to present even more. It is exciting to see these students learn and get to better appreciate their heritage.

I will have complete summaries of the films in an upcoming *Historically Speaking* column.



A young Liane Russell conducting her experiments with mice was the subject of one documentary film and she held the students spellbound

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Just to get to listen to Oak Ridge City Historian, Bill Wilcox, tell his stories was a huge treat for the young high school students