

CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee, an Oak Ridge icon of trained listeners, part 4

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 20, 2014)

This is the final installment of the brief history of CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee.

Over the years the Executive Directors have been: Pearle Cobb, September 1973 – December 1973; Marie Vandermeer, January 1974 – September 1976; Linda Doyle, October 1976 – August 1978; Janet Finamore, September 1978 – May 1980; Doris Jolley, June 1980 – 1996; Dianne Wilgen, 1997 – 2002; Holly White, 1998 – 2013; and Deborah Patterson 2013 – present.

Linda Doyle was named the CONTACT director on October 9, 1976. Here is what she had to say at the 40th Anniversary celebration, “It was such an exciting new adventure, being a part of the very first CONTACT training. As I remember, approximately 400 began the training in 1973 and 200 of us completed the 52 hour program which involved meeting 2 hours a week for 26 weeks.”

“It was at the most intense ecumenical pioneer project in which I had ever participated. There was high energy among all participants and an accompanying synergy. The training was presented by many members of the Oak Ridge Ministerial Association each with a different spiritual tradition.

“I remember the feeling of exuberance, anticipation and excitement when our training was completed, we had our commissioning service and the very first volunteer telephone worker, Edith Baxter, left the candle lit commissioning service to go to the confidential location and to answer the first call with, “This is CONTACT, may I help you.” I also began soon after and worked as a telephone worker, as we used to call ourselves.

“After some time, I began to substitute for the director when she was sick, went out of town or was on vacation. When she learned she would be moving out of town, I decided I wanted to apply for the job.

“The committee formed to find a new director was led by John Chilton. I applied for the job and was hired. It felt like a dream in progress of coming true. I loved my job: sometimes answering the phones, working with volunteers, and board members, becoming more familiar with many members of the ministerial association, being involved with the training.

“These were all parts of the job I loved. As Director I had attended The Annual National Directors conference. I became familiar with other centers. We shared ideas that helped our centers.

“Concurrently I became increasingly more aware of the solid foundation our original Steering Committee had laid for the birth of Contact of Oak Ridge. As time went on, I saw many centers that had to close for various reasons and I noticed that many of those did not have the good fortune to have had that solid foundation that was laid for CONTACT of Oak Ridge.

“I continue to feel a deep sense of pride rooted in the comprehensive ground work that was done by the original steering and organizing committees. I feel pride in being in the very first training class. I also owe CONTACT a debt of gratitude for validating my early aspiration to become a psychotherapist, because It was after volunteering for several years and then becoming executive director that I knew without a doubt that I wanted to go to school, get my graduate degree and become a therapist.

“I did go to graduate school. I want to add here that the listening portion of the CONTACT training was the best “listening” education I experienced- better than early graduate courses. I later had colleagues and supervision that offered superior help with deepening listening skills. Those listening skills learned in CONTACT became a foundation for me in the importance of deep and active listening.

“I have worked in my profession now for 33 and 1/2 years.

“CONTACT has been a major contributor to my early beginnings as a therapist and still feels like part of my professional birthing center, part of my professional family of origin. The follow through of our beginnings to our present day continues to inspire me.

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"Each time I think about the facts I realize that for 40 years, 365 days a year, including every single holiday (for 30 years around the clock and since then from 8 AM to 11 PM daily) there has been a trained volunteer answering the phones with the backup of skilled professional support workers and a functioning board behind them.

"I still experience deep awe when I reflect on this long term commitment of many people in our community, the collaborative effort involved and the solid foundation that was laid making it possible for our center to have served for 40 years and the profound contribution to our community that has been made.

"The contribution has been made in obvious ways for the lonely, depressed, distressed callers, and also for the gifts of connected listening, deep friendships and meaningful service we as trainees, telephone workers, support workers and board members have received and had the opportunity to pass forward. I feel deeply grateful.

Linda Doyle and Betty Anne Domm both went on from their initial experience with CONTACT of Oak Ridge to attend graduate school and became professional counselors. Here is what Betty Anne said about her experience at CONTACT: "I had recently moved to Oak Ridge with a husband and a two year old son.

"I was expecting an addition to the family in the early summer of 1973. Being a little bored and lonely, the mention of CONTACT training at the church we were attending caught my attention. The fact that a nursery would be provided helped confirm my choice to attend the training class.

"At the time, I had a family member suffering from severe depression and mental illness. I knew firsthand how exhausted, helpless, and exasperated family members feel in this situation. It was my hope that this training would help me and my family members cope better with the situation.

"Little did I realize just how important this decision would be for my life. And, never did I expect it to lead to a very satisfying career. Yet, it formed the basis for continuing my education and has provided many rewarding counselling experiences over the years.

"The training I received from CONTACT was better than any psychology course I ever took. I could not continue my education immediately since I had (by the time the training ended) two small children at home.

"However, as soon as my youngest entered kindergarten, I began to plan for my future by returning to graduate school. I knew that this was the career path I had been hoping to find.

"After 28 years as a school counselor, I can honestly say that CONTACT has given me far more than I could ever give back to CONTACT. I also made many wonderful friends through CONTACT. I have never been lonely or bored since!

Holly White was the CONTACT director for 15 years starting in 2008. Her tenure ended July 16, 2013 when Deborah Patterson took over.

I asked Deborah for her thoughts on CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee. Here is what she had to say, "Every day, for the past 40 years, CONTACT has answered calls from people in need. This is an astonishing achievement—one that we could not have made without the heartfelt labor of this community."

"Today we are on the cusp of some exciting developments. Within the next few years we hope to increase the number of volunteers so that we can resume our 24/7 coverage and expand our presence in

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Knox and surrounding counties. We know that we can do more for teenagers and young adults in crisis, so we will launch text and chat options on our crisis line.

Deborah concluded, "Volunteers are the reason for our success. This year, Mike Durbin was awarded our annual Beyond the Call Award for exemplary service. In honor of our 40th anniversary, we established the Leading Lights Award for volunteers who've provided long-term support and guidance for CONTACT. Six founding members received the award, as well as two additional long-time phone volunteers who are also former board members.

Anna Shugart, chairman of the board of directors, said, "Those of us involved in the day to day operations of CONTACT Care Line are deeply appreciative of all the people and organizations in our area who choose to support CONTACT, not only through their volunteer efforts but also their financial support. I believe the future for CONTACT is bright as the organization actively stretches its boundaries to cover the 865 calling area.

Anna concluded, "CONTACT has a dedicated group of caring volunteers, including people who work on the phones, those who are available as back up for crisis calls and a focused group of professionals who make up the board of directors. There are also two very talented staff members who work very hard every day to get the word out about the service to the people in our communities who need to hear about it. With all of this going for it, I know CONTACT will continue to be successful in its mission to help people in need or crisis.

I hope you agree with me that we have just completed an insightful look at an extraordinary organization in our midst that typifies Oak Ridge and its contribution to East Tennessee and beyond. I believe we too often take such people and organizations for granted. Please, if you know people who are volunteers for this worthy cause, take the time to let them know just how special they are. Contact Care Line of East Tennessee is truly an Oak Ridge icon of trained listeners.



Betty Anne Domm and Linda Doyle (photo by Bill Moehl)

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Doris Jolley receives an award, Executive Director, June 1980 – 1996

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Linda Doyle, Executive Director, October 1976 – August 1978

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Anna Shugart, chairman of the board of directors of CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee