

CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee, an Oak Ridge icon of trained listeners, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on January 6, 2014)

Continuing to recognize the 40th anniversary of CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee, we take a look first at information from their web site and then explore personal experiences of some of the founding members of the organization.

On the CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee web site <http://www.contactcarelinetn.org/> the following information can be found CONTACT Care Line is a free, confidential, nonjudgmental telephone helpline serving Anderson, Blount, Grainger, Jefferson, Knox, Loudon, Roane, Sevier, and Union counties in East Tennessee. The hours of operation are 8 am to 11 pm, seven days a week.

“CONTACT volunteers answer approximately 10,000 calls annually from people needing a listening ear, a referral to community resources, or crisis intervention.

“People of all ages call CONTACT about loneliness, depression, loss of a loved one, mental illness, financial need and economic pressures, domestic violence, sexual abuse, homelessness, marriage problems, worries about their children, addiction, school and work related issues, and suicidal feelings.

“In addition to our helpline, CONTACT offers a special program, Reassurance CONTACT, for seniors, disabled persons, and other homebound individuals who live alone. Clients who apply for the service receive a daily call to check on their safety and well-being. For more information, call the business office at 865-312-7450.

“CONTACT received the East Tennessee PBS ‘Be More’ award in February 2013.

Now, let's look at how the organization formed and developed over the past 40 years. I think you will enjoy the insights of these people who have been at the heart of this phenomenal organization of talented volunteers who help so many people regularly and routinely by just taking time to listen on the phone.

Lee Morris, who is one that has been involved from the very beginning, tells us of his experience in what he obviously considers a unique and special time in 1972 and 1973 when CONTACT of Oak Ridge was formed. He was asked to help lead the first Training Committee who arranged to provide training in 1973 to some 400 volunteers, 116 of whom volunteered to start the first CONTACT in Oak Ridge.

Lee said the concern he expressed at the time regarding who the volunteers might be and just how effectively they could be trained to be effective listeners was unfounded. The 116 volunteers more than met the requirements for good listeners.

Lee begins to explain what happened during that epic time of over a year of exploration and beginnings by saying, “An amazing synergism occurred in the early spring of 1973 in Oak Ridge resulting in the beginning of CONTACT.” It took much of the year to get the organization formed and the huge number of potential volunteers trained.

Lee goes on to explain how Ben St. Clair, Pastor of the First United Methodist Church was instrumental in creating this synergy and through contacting his acquaintance, Curtis Schofield, another Methodist minister who had written his doctoral dissertation on CONTACT and who was the Director of CONTACT in Chattanooga, TN.

This early meeting where the experience of CONTACT of Chattanooga was shared with church members of various congregations in Oak Ridge was successful in convincing the Oak Ridge people interested in doing something to help what they were convinced was a large segment of our community. The meeting actually led to the immediate formation of a Steering Committee in November, 1972.

The committee consisted of: Mrs. John M. Chilton (St. Stephens Episcopal Church), president and coordinator; Mrs. Frank Wuest (First United Methodist) and Roy a. Vandermeer (Covenant Presbyterian), co-chairmen of the recruitment committee; the Rev. Manny Reid (St. Stephen's Episcopal), finance; Dr.

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Ben St. Clair (First United Methodist), training, and Mrs. Roy Vandermeer (Covenant Presbyterian), publicity and information.

In addition to Chattanooga, Cleveland, TN, had also formed a CONTACT initiative. A number of trips were made to both these cities by Oak Ridgers interested in forming their own CONTACT of Oak Ridge organization.

On Thursday, February 15, 1973, Rev. Calvin Maas, who had founded the CONTACT of Cleveland group from his experience in Chattanooga, spoke at the Covenant Presbyterian Church. He brought along several committee chairmen of the Cleveland organization to help the local steering committee to understand the functions and responsibilities of CONTACT.

On March 5, 1973, Robert E. Larson, Executive Director of CONTACT Teleministry, Inc., Harrisburg, Pennsylvania spoke at the Robertsville Baptist Church. He also met with the Steering Committee.

So you can see the substantial amount of activity that took place primarily in 1973 to form CONTACT of Oak Ridge. By far the most important and time consuming activity was the extensive training provided throughout 1973...right up to the formation night of November 3, 1973.

This first training effort was a huge success. Lee says that four of the original training participants went on to serve CONTACT of Oak Ridge, two on the Board of Directors, Betty Anne Domm and Claudia Lever and two as Executive Directors, Linda Doyle and Doris Jolley.

By September 17, 1973, an article in *The Oak Ridger* stated that Dr. Robert Bigelow, a local surgeon, had been elected president of CONTACT of Oak Ridge. The article tells of the massive ongoing training effort and identifies one of the Executive Committee's first tasks as that of hiring a coordinator, intended to be the sole paid participant in the program.

Other members of that early Executive Committee were listed as, the Rev. Manney G. Reid, vice-president; Mrs. John Chilton, secretary; Frank Callaghan, treasurer; the Rev. Ben B. St. Clair, chairman, training committee; Roy A. Vandermeer and Mrs. Frank Wuest, co-chairmen, recruiting committee; Mrs. Roy A. (Marie) Vandermeer, chairman, publicity and information committee.

By October 9, 1973, much progress had been made. It was on this date that Rev. Robert E. Larson again spoke in Oak Ridge. This time at the First United Methodist Church. An article in *The Oak Ridger* on October 8, 1973, announced the meeting and also introduced the new coordinator, Mrs. George H. (Pearle) Cobb. She had recently retired from the Oak Ridge High School Adult Education Program office. She was working out of her home until a permanent office could be secured.

Next we will see how the opening commissioning service caused that first volunteer to be assigned to answer the phone to feel, the fear she overcame and the enormous relief she felt when she needed help and found a fellow CONTACT person who stepped in and helped. In following articles in the series we will also learn the personal feelings of Betty Anne Domm and Linda Doyle, both of whom were also there from the very beginning of that first listening class.

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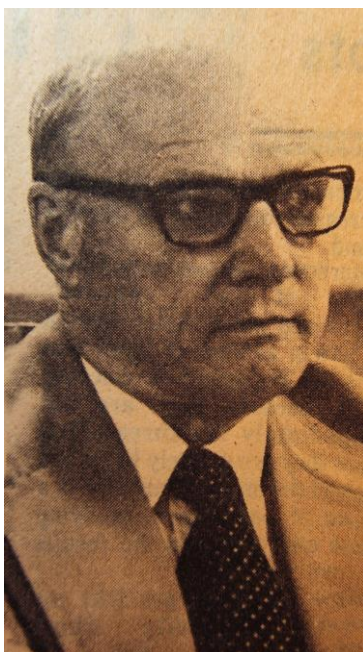
Lee Morris, one of the founding members of CONTACT of Oak Ridge who recalled the years of 1972 - 1973 as a "special" time in Oak Ridge (photo copied from a 1973 article in *The Oak Ridger*)



Curtis Schofield, director of the CONTACT of Chattanooga and who assisted in the formation of CONTACT of Oak Ridge (photo copied from a 1973 article in *The Oak Ridger*)

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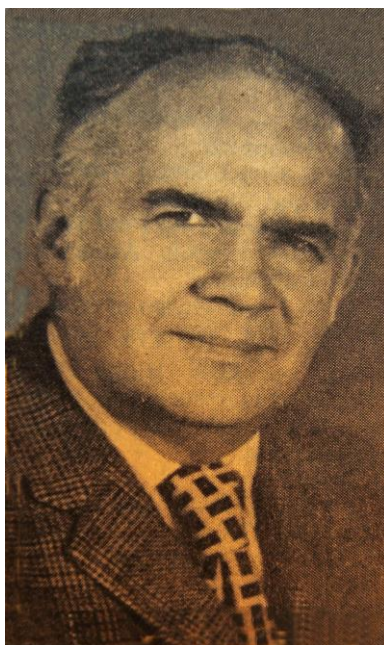
Ben St. Clair, Chairman of the first Executive Committee that led the initial efforts to form CONTACT of Oak Ridge (photo copied from a 1973 article in *The Oak Ridger*)



Robert E. Larson, Executive Director of CONTACT Teleministry, Inc., Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, who spoke in Oak Ridge during those special formative years (photo copied from a 1973 article in *The Oak Ridger*)

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Dr. Robert Bigelow elected first president of CONTACT of Oak Ridge in September 1973 (photo copied from a 1973 article in *The Oak Ridger*)



Pearle Cobb: The very first Executive Director (actually called the “coordinator”) in October 1973 (photo copied from a 1973 article in *The Oak Ridger*)