

# A tribute to Colleen Black by Denise Kiernan

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 24, 2015)

I am delighted that Denise Kiernan has given permission for this tribute to our beloved Colleen Black to be published in The Oak Ridger. It was first published at [www.denisekiernan.com](http://www.denisekiernan.com) on her blog and is republished here with permission of the author, Denise Kiernan.

But first, let me add a bit of my personal insight. Denise had asked my help to identify women in Oak Ridge that she could interview for the book she wanted to write about women in Oak Ridge during the Manhattan Project. She was attracted to this story after seeing the famous Ed Westcott image known now as "The Calutron Girls" showing young women at the controls of the Y-12 Calutrons.

I had already thought of Colleen Black, but before I could act to introduce them, they met at the senior living center now known as Greenfield. The rest was easy, Colleen took over and I dare say the vast majority of women in Oak Ridge that Denise interviewed for her bestselling book, *The Girls of Atomic City*, were introduced to her by Colleen.

Here is Denise's wonderful tribute:

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Written on March 19, 2015, Denise Kiernan titled her post on her blog: *Colleen, I miss you.*

Into the lobby of Greenfield Assisted Living stepped a vision of sassy Christmas cheer. She was bedazzled in glitz, animal prints and smiles with a blinking holiday-light necklace draped around her neck and antlers sprouting from her head. Now burned into my memory like some nuclear-powered yule log, this was my first glimpse of the force of nature that was Colleen Black.

Colleen entered my life as a potential interview subject for the book I was writing at the time, *The Girls of Atomic City*. She was surprised I wanted to talk to her about her role in the Manhattan Project. After all, she assured me, she had no idea what she was working on at the time. While she couldn't imagine why I would want to hear about her adventures as an 18-year-old single gal living and working in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, during World War II, I couldn't imagine this vibrant 80-something-year-old not having plenty to say once I'd sat with her for a bit. Boy, was I right.

Long after interviews were logged and the manuscript edited, Colleen and I stayed in touch. We wrote and called, and I often visited whenever I was in town for an event. If I didn't get a hold of her beforehand, I always knew I could find her holding court at Panera's after morning mass, where their old-timer's coffee klatch often turned into impromptu book signings for Colleen. Friends and strangers often approached and asked her to sign their copies of *The Girls of Atomic City*. Colleen would write to tell me about these and other "celebrity" experiences, as she called them. She was Skyping with book clubs across the country, speaking to school kids down the road, and charming everyone in her path with her ration tales, wartime songs and Irish country wit, all wrapped up in that Tennessee twang.

I have a collection of collages Colleen has sent me over the years, most of them given to me long after the work on my book was done. Photos casually snapped in her apartment showed up in my inbox and mailbox, draped with historic news clippings and photos of the other atomic city "girls." She was always there with a daily joke or up-by-your-bootstraps encouragement, with remembrances and prayers for my own mother, who is next to me as I type this, sleeping, waking and sleeping again, nearing the end of her own time with me. Colleen's daughter Suzanne called me earlier today to tell me that Colleen had died this morning. We had been in touch, Suzanne and I, two daughters waiting and watching as the mothers they loved began to move on from this world.

She is a collage all her own now, my Colleen. My mind today is a visual mish-mash of leopard-spotted, fuzzy-slippered, sing-songy snippets of chats—both on the record and off— and babblings over cheap wines with goofy or naughty names that gave her a giggle. (Fat Bastard was a house favorite.) Colleen died as she lived, surrounded by family and song and love, held close in the hearts of many of us who

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knew the joys of her friendship. I will lift a glass of Marilyn Merlot in her honor. I can almost hear her laughing.

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Denise and Colleen grew to be close friends. Sad to see that friendship end, but so very many of the women Denise interviewed for *The Girls of Atomic City* are passing away. She will tell you that she was fortunate to catch them when she did. It saddens me to see them passing away so quickly, but we must realize that an 18 year old person in 1943 – 1945 is now 88 – 90 years old!

If you have a relative or friend who worked in the Manhattan Project, PLEASE get them to have their oral history done NOW, if they have not already done so. Stop by the Oak Ridge Public Library or call them and they will take it from there.

Just as Colleen thought she did not have anything to contribute and she had so many amazing stories, such is the case with your relative or friend. They DO have a lot to say, they just don't realize it.

Let me leave you with a portion of an email that Colleen sent me after the Lunch 4 Literacy event in March 2014, where Denise Kiernan was the featured speaker. Colleen always sent me an email when I wrote something about her that caused her to get more recognition. Here is what she said about the "chain reaction," a term that she used often to describe what had happened since she came to know Denise. She credited me with that, but I am convinced she and Denise did it on their own...I just reaped the benefits of their great relationship.

Colleen's email: "Dear Ray, Your chain reaction continues...What a story! Everybody is still talking about the Literacy Luncheon and your wonderful coverage. We, the "GIRLS" here at Greenfield, are so proud to have been mentioned as a part of it. You and Denise have made us all celebrities! Thanks!!"

See what I mean. Colleen was a jewel!!



Colleen making her NPR debut with author Denise Kiernan

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Colleen promoting *The Girls of Atomic City* at the Secret City Festival



One of the last talks Colleen gave to a group of Christian Women where she gladly promoted the idea of a Manhattan Project National Park – photo by Sara Wise