

An Oak Ridge perspective on Keith McDaniel's documentary film: Alvin Weinberg

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 20, 2015)

One of the strengths of Oak Ridge is the legacy of Ed Westcott's black and white images of the Manhattan Project. As I have often said, without Ed's photographs we would have a much worse time trying to convey our history.

The medium of documentary films is one of the most effective methods to tell our story and Ed's images form the backbone of many of those documentary films as well. They serve to set the time and place of the events and provide the authenticity required for successful documentary films.

Local filmmaker, Keith McDaniel, understands the value of Ed's photographs and knows how to incorporate them into his films. He has proven that with a number of highly successful and award winning films. Keith has created a style that has become well known and is distinct and recognizable as a "Keith McDaniel Film." His documentary films of the history of Oak Ridge are popular with visitors who come to learn about Oak Ridge and serve to communicate our heritage most effectively.

On April 23, 2015, a new documentary film written and directed by Keith McDaniel was shown at the American Museum of Science and Energy. The 300 plus seat auditorium was filled. Knowing Keith's previous successful documentary films such as *Secret City: The War Years* and *Secret City: 1945 – 2006*, the audience knew they were going to see a quality documentary film and see one they surely did. This film featured the story of Alvin Weinberg, an Oak Ridge iconic scientist and a favorite citizen who was world renowned. The film is simply titled, *Alvin Weinberg*.

I was privileged to be in the audience that evening and to have been asked to photograph the event. While I had not been personally involved in the project to honor Alvin Weinberg, I had watched the progress and appreciated the efforts of a dedicated group of people, many of whom had known Alvin personally. The results of their efforts to memorialize Alvin Weinberg have been most successful.

Tom Row, one of the members of the Alvin Weinberg Memorial Committee had this to say about his relationship with him: "Alvin was the Oak Ridge National Laboratory Director when I arrived in Oak Ridge in 1959. His continuing interest in assuring that the nuclear power industry succeeded by making the right decisions was most prominent in our conversations in the 1980s when nuclear waste and spent fuel questions were at their peak in the industry as well as ORNL operations and research. His comments and writings were of great value to all."

Tom continued, "My most pleasant memory of him was at an American Nuclear Society meeting. I was walking down a long hotel corridor from one session to another when piano music began with to emerge at the end of the hallway. My initial thought was that this was an unusual but very pleasant touch offered by the hotel! As I came into the open area where the piano was located there sat Alvin at the piano, relaxing with the beautiful music he brought from the keyboard. I waved hello as I passed and thought how very fortunate I had been to know this man."

Tom's comments provide some insight into an important and lasting aspect of many people's relationship with Alvin Weinberg. The respect shown him. He was a leader who was held in highest regard by those who worked for him and who knew him personally as well. This is one of the important elements Keith was able to include in the documentary film.

Steve Stow, another member of the Alvin Weinberg Memorial Committee, said of him, "Alvin's unique ability to foresee future scientific and social needs was unparalleled. He anticipated the need for nuclear power and the social impact of power production, perhaps more so than any other individual. The beneficial aspect of nuclear power with regard to what we today know as "global warming" was only one example. He, more than anyone else, saw the need for innovative management of the waste materials from nuclear power and research, warning the Atomic Energy Commission of this need decades ago, long prior to the more recent attention that has dominated environmental issues in the last 20 years and that has cost society tens of billions of dollars for clean-up."

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Steve's reference to the broad issues is also something Keith captured in the film. Alvin's "Big Science" is but one example of the range of his thinking.

Here is what Keith had to say about creating the documentary film. "I knew when I was asked to make this biographical documentary on Alvin Weinberg, that it would be a big undertaking. Weinberg is one of the major Icons in Oak Ridge history and I wanted to make sure I got it right."

"The format of the film is fairly traditional for a documentary. I used numerous photos along with interviews of people who worked with or knew Alvin. Also, I utilized a narrator the move the story along."

"One of the surprising interviews in the film was that of Alvin's son, Richard. Richard was able to give a very personal recollection of his father. Many people interacted with Alvin at ORNL but Richard was able to talk about Alvin at home when he wasn't working. That was important to me. I wanted the film to be not only about Alvin's professional accomplishments but also about who he was as a person."

"I had met Alvin only once. I interviewed him a couple of years before his death for my Secret City: The Oak Ridge Story documentaries. He was very gracious during the interview. One of the things I learned about Alvin, in making this film, was how people felt about him. I know he was respected but I didn't know how much he was admired. Alvin was someone that people looked up to and admired greatly."

"I am very pleased with the way the film turned out. I think it tells Alvin story and will stand as a long-lasting testament to this great man and to his role in Oak Ridge history."

I agree with Keith. I believe this documentary film has accomplished what he and the committee set out to do, elevate the public knowledge of Alvin Weinberg and his life. One of the key approaches that Keith used was to rely heavily on Alvin's son, Richard. That decision, rather than using footage of Alvin himself, resulted in a perspective of unique insight that only Richard could provide.

In the closing pages of *The First Nuclear Era, The Life and Times of a Technical Fixer*, Alvin stated in the "For me it has been a gloriously fulfilling life..." He went on to say, "My 50 years with nuclear energy have been filled with excitement, elation, disappointment, frustration, and fun..."

Keith chose these words as the final expression of Alvin's life in the film. He chose wisely. Those words captured the Alvin Weinberg Oak Ridge has come to admire and love. It is good for us to be reminded of the greatness of this "technical fixer" who had a tremendous impact on the world but also could make those closest to him feel important by his intent attention to them and what they had to say. A unique and often missing trait in the rest of us.

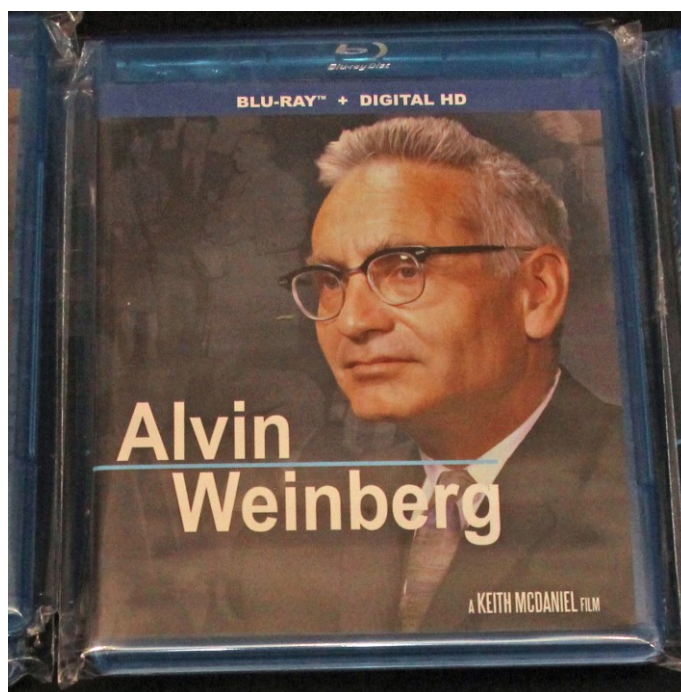
The Alvin Weinberg Foundation, created in his honor is a tribute to his scientific accomplishments. The lasting impact his life has had and will continue to have thorough such broad based initiatives is only now beginning to be realized. If, in years to come, some of Alvin's ideas resurface, it should not be surprising...he was thinking ahead of his time and pointing out things that he could see that not many others were capable of seeing.

Finally, U. S. Senator Howard Baker said of Alvin, "Alvin Weinberg was a true technical giant of the 20th century. He was my close friend, colleague, and advisor, providing invaluable insight to me on technical issues during my many years in Washington, D.C. He was the author of numerous books and articles that helped lay the foundation for nuclear science and its applications to world development. Professional recognition of Alvin's excellence was shown in no less than the Atoms for Peace Award and the Enrico Fermi Award, among other honors."

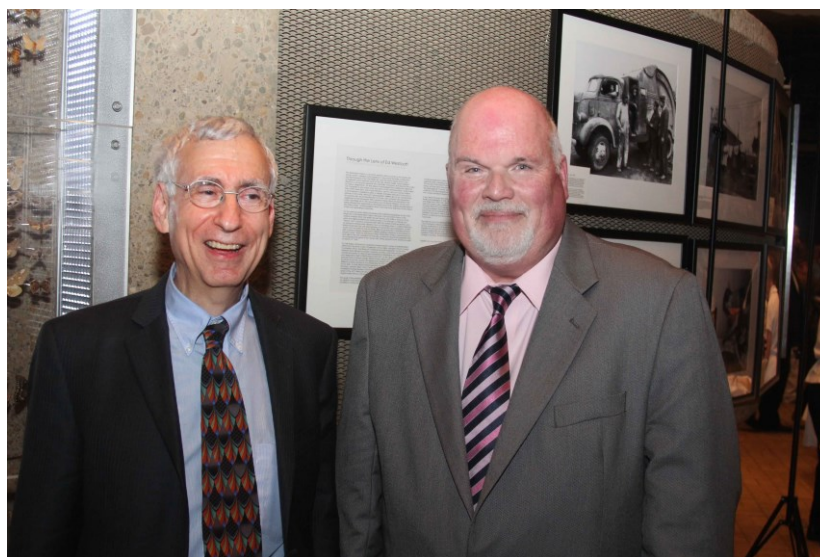
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Keith included the above quote on the back of the DVD case. The film is available for sale at The Discovery Shop at the American Museum of Science and Energy.



Alvin Weinberg the documentary film is available for sale at the Discovery Shop at the American Museum of Science and Energy



Richard Weinberg and Keith McDaniel – a great team who by working together created a memorable documentary film honoring a favorite Oak Ridge citizen and world renowned scientist, Alvin Weinberg

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Alvin Weinberg documentary film poster