

Virginia Coleman: A career change and child abuse concerns

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 19, 2017)

This is the fourth in the series on Virginia Coleman, one of the eight Oak Ridge women involved in the Manhattan Project who are highlighted in Denise Kiernan's "The Girls of Atomic City."

Susan Frederick has written the series of articles and Carolyn Krause has edited them. Enjoy this forth installment:

For a while, Virginia was content as a wife, mother, homemaker and active citizen, but it was while volunteering for Planned Parenthood that she became aware of the many needs of women and children in Anderson County. So, wanting to better prepare herself to do something to help, she returned to school when her youngest son was in sixth grade.

In 1978, she received her master's degree in clinical social work from the University of Tennessee College of Social Work. A press release issued in advance of a talk she gave to the Oak Ridge branch of the American Association of University Women in 2013, confirmed that "Coleman...had worked to get a degree in clinical social work so she could help abused children."

Oak Ridge and Anderson County continue to reap the benefits of at least one program helping women and children that Virginia had a hand in starting. As she told Ray Smith in her interview for the Center of Oak Ridge Oral History, "I worked for four years (1978-82) at Child and Family Services in a federally funded research project, and I love research.

It was a sex abuse program, and sex abuse was just beginning to be talked about openly, so it was really hard. It was shocking. The University of California at Berkeley was overseeing the research, and they were coming in every quarter to test and interview us."

After a year, The Project Against Sexual Abuse of Appalachian Children started having seminars for policeman, judges, and lawyers to share with them what we had learned. For example, a child will lie/deny in court about the abuse under pressure from her family and to prevent her father from going to prison.

In 1982, she opened a private practice in which she continued to work with abused children. Continuing her story, Virginia told Ray, "Well, after I left Child and Family Services, I went into private practice here. I was very concerned about children."

"I saw a little article in the newspaper about how Hawaii has a five-year program to work with brand new mothers whose children were subject to being abused. Hawaii had a very high rate of abuse."

"A pediatrician who was a member of the Hawaiian state legislature and also of Congress was able to get Hawaii to pass a totally paid program for all of Hawaii and its islands. Program employees start interviewing women right after they go to the hospital to have their babies."

"I was surprised when I learned that the answers the women gave to a list of questions indicated whether their babies were going to be in danger of abuse. (The list of questions had been validated.)"

"So, anyone who fell into that category was offered five years of home visits to help the new mothers raise their children in a safe environment. Later, the program was changed to offer home visits up until the child attends preschool or school.

"And, the employees initially would go into new mothers' homes and help each mother bond with the baby. Then she would protect her baby, would not let her boyfriend or anyone else abuse her baby."

Janie Hiserote was working for Dr. Darling in a state health program and was thus able to call Hawaii. She talked to the person in charge of the research a couple of times and then was invited to attend their conference.

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She invited Virginia to go with her. Not until later did they learn that only two persons per state could attend. The conference was to share with each state what Hawaii had learned and how very successful the program was in preventing child abuse in defined families.

"I think Janie and I were the only ones there who had not been sent by their state," Virginia concluded by way of introduction to the subject in her COROH interview.

Virginia gave a talk to the Oak Ridge American Association of University Women chapter in 2013 that described how she and Janie helped establish the Healthy Start program in Tennessee.

According to the press release issued in advance of Virginia's talk, "She and Hiserote followed up on what they had learned (in Hawaii), and persisted in getting legislative and community support for this program." Diantha Pare, Candi Kelly, Judge Meredith and many, many, others worked diligently to help develop the program.

Thanks again, Carolyn and Susan. Feedback from readers has been really good on this series. Ginny is a jewel, that's for sure, and loved by all who know her.



Virginia shown with her two sons, Frank and Art

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Virginia and Charlie

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Virginia and Charlie with their first son, Frank