

# Virginia Coleman: A Great Lady and a Good Friend

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 26, 2017)

This is the fifth and final column 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."

By way of a bit of review, we have seen how Virginia (Ginny) Spivey Coleman came to Oak Ridge and based on her education landed a job as a chemist at Y-12. There she worked for Clarence Larson, a major figure in the management here in Oak Ridge who went on to become a commissioner of the Atomic Energy Commission.

Ginny's job was to support the separation of uranium 235 for Little Boy, the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare. She also met and married her husband, Charlie Coleman, who was her supervisor in 1951 and rules in the workplace against allowing anyone to report to a family member caused her to have to change departments.

Charlie and Ginny were married in 1952 at the Chapel on the Hill and Ginny soon became a housewife and mother. Later she would seek additional education and even help start a unique organization to help give area children a healthier start in life. Now learn more in the final installment in Ginny Coleman's story.

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

The organization Virginia helped start is "Healthy Start."

Virginia fleshed out some of the details in her Center for Oak Ridge Oral History interview, telling Ray Smith that when the two women returned home, with their infectious enthusiasm for the concept, they partnered with a whole bunch of local people. Among them included, "Judge Meredith (who) was just resigning as head of juvenile court, and he wanted to start something and had called for a meeting. The teachers were just getting out for the summer, and so, we had this meeting. And it was at the, I guess, the hotel."

"They had to open up the room, the dividers because there were so many more people that came. So, we got this organization going called CREAM, and I forget what that acronym stood for, but Judge Meredith had thought of it on his way back from Nashville one night, and he loved it."

As a result, the Healthy Start Program was able to start pretty quickly elsewhere in Tennessee, and to finally start, after securing funding from Methodist Medical Center, three years later here in Anderson County.

From that early seed money, the Healthy Start program has continued to grow and spread, both locally and across the state.

While Virginia was working to establish Tennessee's Healthy Start Program, and to launch it in her own backyard here in Oak Ridge, she also maintained her private practice. There she continued working with abused children and their families, until she closed her office and retired in 1996.

Never the type to rest on her laurels, though, Virginia continued to enjoy the many perks of her quiet yet active life in Oak Ridge. Charlie had built a dark room for her use in the basement of their East End home.

They were both avid photographers, competing for many years in the Tennessee Eastman and Carbide camera clubs, now known as the Camera Club of Oak Ridge. They even took their infant son Frank and his playpen with them to the club's darkroom, located at Y12's East Portal to print pictures. That was in 1954. They also composed pictures of their walkabouts on the Oak Ridge greenways, on their travels and in the nearby Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

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For 25 years, Virginia and Charlie made their Christmas cards, until Charlie died in 2006. One year, the prints soaked for days in the bath tub, as they took care of Art, Nancy, and Frank who all had red measles. Meanwhile, the dishwasher had ingested and melted a red crayon from some unknown source.

Last October, Virginia and three others from Oak Ridge were honored to be the first Manhattan Project Veterans celebrated with a trip provided by HonorAir Knoxville. This nonprofit organization brings World War II, Korea and Vietnam veterans to visit the World War II Memorial and other national memorials in Washington, D.C.

On this trip, the veterans were taken to see the United States Air Force Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the National World War II Memorial, the Marine Corps Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery. This was the first trip to include Manhattan Project workers

Oak Ridge's special Manhattan workers, Virginia Coleman, Ed Westcott, Christine Higgenbotham and Peggy Stuart were met by the Atomic Heritage Foundation President Cindy Kelly, Program Director Alexandra Levy and Program Manager Nathaniel Weisenberg, who spoke with them about their Manhattan Project work. This trip was a larger treat for Virginia as she was surprised when her two sons, Art and Frank, met her at the World War II Memorial.

Often seen attending many of the varied classes offered at the Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning, she is known to park her hiking poles just inside the classroom door. She is often known to pass her personal hearing microphone to the lecturers.

Virginia continues to be an active outdoorswoman, taking regular walks with these dual hiking poles. She is an active Oak Ridge citizen and a 50-year member of the League of Women Voters.

She also belongs to both a classic and non-fiction book club. She listens to these books on audio as she has macular degeneration and is legally blind. Yet, at 94, she is independent and has a strong sense of presence. She is a joy to talk with.

Virginia continues to think positively and is looking forward to a cruise following Lewis and Clark's expedition on the Columbia River, and an annual family get-together, this year to watch the eclipse.

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Wow, how about that! Virginia Spivey Coleman is a tremendous Oak Ridger! What a story she has to tell, but even now, she continues to downplay her experiences and her life. What a wonderful lady. I am so pleased to know her.

And, of course, I cannot close this series without again mentioning the extraordinary relationship Ginny has developed with Denise Kiernan, author of "Girls of Atomic City" and her husband Joe D'Agnese. They sing her praises and look forward to seeing her each time they visit Oak Ridge.

Finally, a heads up for a forthcoming 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Oak Ridge event you won't want to miss! Denise is going to be the featured speaker of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association on September 15, 2017, at the historic Grove Theater! Make you plans now to attend and help us celebrate the September 19, 1942, decision by General Groves that led to the creation of Oak Ridge!

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Virginia Coleman with two of her strongest admirers, Joe D'Agnese and Denise Kiernan, obviously having a great time visiting with Ginny in her home