

Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning to celebrate its 20th anniversary

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 30, 2017)

One of the most significant aspects of living in Oak Ridge is access to an exemplary education system. All the way from quality preschools through excellent middle schools and an outstanding high school to an extraordinary community college that includes a most unique retiree education program, undoubtedly one of the best such overall education systems in existence in our nation. This *Historically Speaking* column is dedicated to the history of the latter part of the Oak Ridge education system. Known to all simply as ORICL!

Carolyn Krause brings us another of her thoroughly researched and well written historical documents that will take its place alongside other such works as she continues to select really important information for the next generations to better understand Oak Ridge's place in history. Enjoy the read:

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The Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning is 20 years old this year, and a celebration will take place on September 7, 2017, at 2:00 p.m. at its home base, the Oak Ridge Branch Campus of Roane State Community College. The keynote speaker will be RSCC President Chris Whaley. ORICL founders will be recognized.

Bob Hatcher, professor of geology at the University of Tennessee and long-time ORICL geology instructor, who hosted memorable field trips in conjunction with his courses, will give a humorous recap of his years teaching ORICL classes. Inaugural annual awards will be presented to an instructor and a volunteer who have served ORICL well over the years.

Murray Rosenthal, who had retired as deputy director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory in 1994, conceived of ORICL for retirees and others who are lifelong learners. He got the idea when he and his wife Mimi visited friends in 1996 in Chapel Hill, N.C., and heard about the Duke Institute for Learning in Retirement, or DILR, which he later visited. He was sure many people would enjoy the convenience of taking inexpensive noncredit courses in Oak Ridge in many different subjects, including art, computers, finance, history, languages, literature, music, philosophy, religion and science.

In late 1996, he broached his idea in a phone call to RSCC's President Sherry Hoppe, who worked at the main campus in Harriman. He proposed that RSCC provide the courses to Oak Ridgers. Hoppe asked Dean Loretta Friend, who was based at RSCC's Emory Valley campus in Oak Ridge, to contact Rosenthal.

On June 26, 1997, Dean Friend met with Rosenthal and his invitees Howard Adler, Marion Alexander, Dot Hightower and Dick Smyser. Dean Friend proposed an alternative to the original plan of this organizing committee: Interested people should, themselves, create and manage the program with the assistance of RSCC. She convinced Janet Evans, an RSCC faculty member about to retire who was experienced in continuing education, to help Rosenthal and his colleagues launch the new program, which was originally called the Oak Ridge Institute for Learning in Retirement.

The first official meeting of the expanded organizing committee was held August 7, 1997. Two weeks later, Evans applied for "developmental status" in the Elderhostel Institute Network. DILR provided information.

RSCC agreed to supply classrooms, an office and administrative assistance. To determine if enough interest in a continued learning program existed, invitations to a September 17, 1997, meeting were sent to Elderhostel and Friends of ORNL mailing lists.

The Oak Ridger Editor, Dick Smyser, stirred additional interest with his column. An overflow crowd of 243 attended the meeting. Roane State committed \$800 to get the program started, and on November 13, 1997, Hoppe, Friend, Evans and Rosenthal signed a written letter of understanding.

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The organizing committee then became an interim board of directors, expanded its membership, changed the program's name to the Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning and selected officers and chairs: Rosenthal, president; Evans, vice president; Hightower, secretary; Harwell Smith, treasurer; Alexander, chair, curriculum committee; Ray Adams, computer curriculum; Marguerite Blake, activities; Martha Hobson, finance; Elizabeth Richardson, charter and bylaws; Smyser and Ulilla Witherspoon, publicity.

Roane State provided ORICL with an office on its Emory Valley campus that opened in November with Alexander of RSCC employed as a part-time secretary. With the help of Attorney David Flitcroft, bylaws were drafted and adopted on November 20. [On February 12, 1999, ORICL received its charter as a federal 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporation.]

By December 1997, the curriculum committee recruited instructors for 19 courses. Evans published the first catalog and convinced her husband Paul to write a computer program for an automated registration system.

Dues for the first term, which began in February 1998, were set at \$35, and members were allowed to take five courses "on a space available basis." ORICL started out with 262 members.

Annual dues were \$70 but about 10 years ago they rose to \$100. The faculty included active and retired college professors, high school teachers, scientists from Oak Ridge National Laboratory and professors from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

Among the first instructors and courses were: Ruth Cates Baird, "The Bible as Literature"; Mel Feldman, "Great Decisions"; Larry Beeman, "Investing and Financial Planning after Age 50"; Robert G. Jones, "Job," "Prometheus," "Dead Sea Scrolls"; Dick Smyser, "Media Issues through the Times"; Alex Zucker, "New Developments in Science"; Janna Datz, "Short Stories of William Faulkner"; Steve (Doc) Combs, "Touring the Music World"; Paul Ebert, "Things Theater"; Gene Pickel, "What Went on in Tennessee: 1700s to Present"; and Alvin Weinberg, "Philosophic Reflections on Administration of Science."

In the past six years, ORICL has had courses on the Civil War, espionage, computers and supercomputers, human-induced climate change, 3D printing and advanced manufacturing, the case for God and for atheism, the Holocaust, the meaning of life, classical music composers, European history and several American presidents. Members have enjoyed ORICL-sponsored overnight trips to Machu Picchu and the Galapagos Islands and to Charleston, S. C., and day trips to the Jack Daniels distillery, the President James Polk house, the Volkswagen manufacturing plant, American Revolution sites, the Titanic museum and the Columbia Mule Day Parade.

Perhaps the most dedicated instructor was the late Bob Jones, who taught an ORICL religion course every term for 13 years, holding a record that will not be broken anytime soon. The most famous instructor has been Johnny Majors, former UT football coach. Many instructors have been associated with ORNL, UTK and other universities, Tennessee Valley Authority, city of Oak Ridge, financial companies and various nonprofit organizations.

Special events have included the annual fall kickoff (past speakers have included Sam Venable, Knoxville News-Sentinel columnist, and Bill Landry, producer of WBIR's "Heartland" series) and a biennial fall retreat (often held at Fall Creek Falls State Park).

Four years ago, the estate of John G. Million, an enthusiastic ORICL member, bequeathed to ORICL almost \$180,000, as well as numerous books and lectures on CDs and DVDs. The bequest has been invested, and part of it has been spent on scholarships for Roane State students, equipment and furniture for ORICL classrooms and honoraria for lecturers in a three-year-old Roane State-ORICL Lecture Series, which has brought in excellent speakers on immigration issues, Islam, Cuba, human trafficking and genetically modified food crops.

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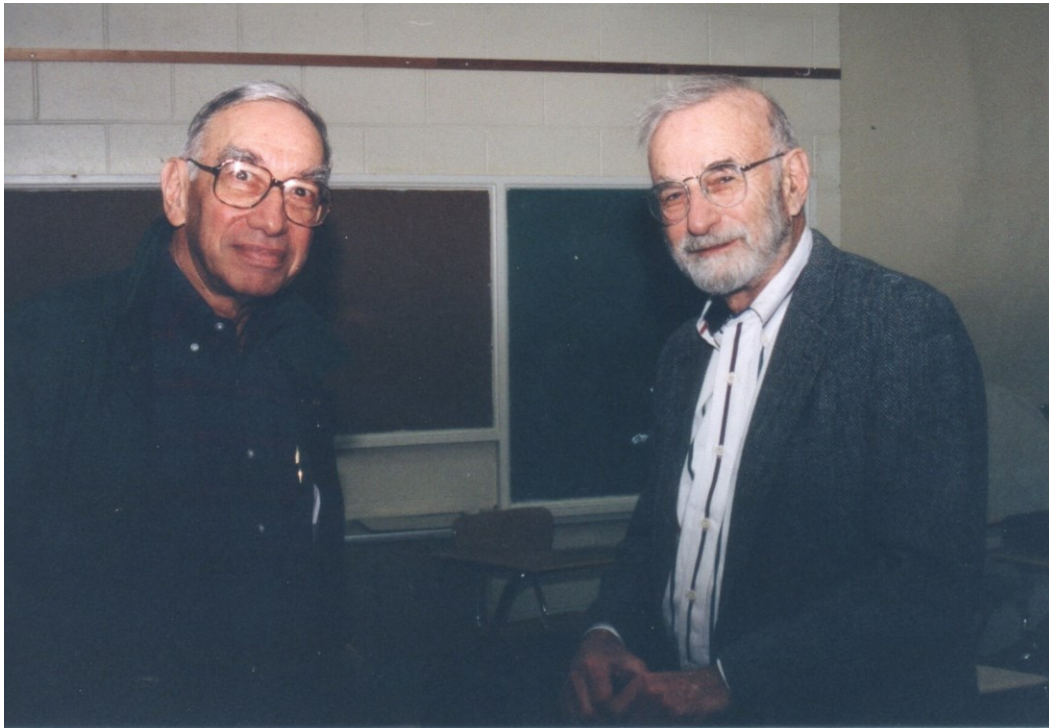
Paid executive directors in recent years have been Laura Bowles, Melanie Neal and Susan Perry. They have been involved with the board, budgets, catalogs, classroom assignments, members, instructors, curriculum committee, lecture series refreshments, trip transportation, etc. Recent board presidents have been Joe McGrory, Louise Dunlap, Dick Engel and Bob Olson. The president-elect is Priscilla McKenney.

Twenty years later, ORICL courses are still inexpensive but there are more of them (at least 50 in each of the fall and winter-spring terms) and also up to a half-dozen trips per term. The instructors are still volunteers. Because of ORICL, some retirees have moved to Oak Ridge and others who were planning to move away decided to stay here after all.

ORICL members, ranging in age from the 60s through the 90s, are enjoying high-quality classes with no homework, no tests and no grades. And one of the students is Murray Rosenthal, 91, who has taken more than 300 ORICL courses!

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Thanks to Carolyn Krause, who researched and wrote this history of ORICL. She is the chair of membership and publicity and a member of ORICL's board of directors.



Murray Rosenthal and Alex Zucker, early leaders and long-time supporters of ORICL