

Alvin Weinberg Papers Project

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 19, 2018)

I am pleased to be included on the steering committee for the preservation of the Alvin Weinberg Papers at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. They are there because of the close friendship between Selma Shapiro and Alvin. Ronnie Bogard, Selma's daughter, is leading the effort because of her mother's promise to Alvin that she would be sure the papers were well taken care of...and we who knew Selma know that she meant every word of that!

One of the most important aspect of preserving Alvin's legacy is to properly handle the artifacts he left us. To that end the project has acquired the services of a professional archivist. It is her story that we want to share with you in Historically Speaking.

Kittie Crittenden is the archivist for the Alvin Weinberg Papers collection, which is housed at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. She is a 2017 graduate of the University of Tennessee School of Information Sciences Master's program. As part of her graduate studies, Kittie participated in a practicum in the Y-12 National Laboratory archives under Manager of Digital Assets and Digital Archivist Natalie Hansen. There, she was introduced to the legacy and culture of "Oak Ridgers" and their professions. Now, she continues her career in preserving and sharing Oak Ridge's colorful history through Alvin Weinberg's life's work.

Alvin Weinberg and His Legacy of Compassionate Technology

The word "archive" and the idea of dusty paper stacks can be romantic to some yet excruciatingly dull to others. As the principal archivist working on the Alvin Weinberg collection, my primary responsibilities revolve around physical preservation and the creation of digital resources that ensure the collection can be navigated efficiently.

However, I believe all archivists have a secondary responsibility, which is to express to those who spend their days outside the archive that the contents of their collections are not dull but full of ideas that are still alive and relevant. I have been spending hours with this collection for the past six months and have gotten to know its progenitor. I feel compelled to share some of Weinberg's ideas in hopes that it will help others understand why this man and his works are significant, not only to the history of the scientific community, but to historical memory and even the future of our country.

My father is an electrical engineer who designs products for industrial environments. Recently, he went to a large industry conference. After returning home, he was excited to update me on the latest in robotics, neural networks, autonomous vehicles, and more.

Despite his clear enthusiasm, he returned to one concern several times: he never heard anyone address the fact that robotics are replacing factory workers and/or creating harsh working conditions by monitoring every move an employee makes. Many of these developments focused on production and profit but never mentioned ethics. I am very lucky to have a father who is both technical and humane in his thinking. However, it appears the industry as a whole has not embraced the intersection of technological development with humane technology.

As we talked, I was reminded of a pair of documents I came across a few weeks ago in the collection. I handle hundreds if not thousands of documents in a work day and I do not have the luxury of reading all

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of them. However, the titles of two commencement speeches Alvin Weinberg delivered in 1970 and 1971 caught my eye: "Technology, Youth, and the Environment" and "Toward a Compassionate Technology."

I made copies and sat in my office reading the words of this man whose life's works I've been tasked with handling. After talking with my father, who has a foot in an industry I can usually only speculate about, I realized Weinberg's words read just as, if not even more, true today as in the early 1970s.

On June 6, 1971, Alvin Weinberg gave a commencement address to the graduating students of the Worcester Polytechnic Institute. Weinberg begins his speech with a tinge of self-deprecation and a characteristic dose of optimism and trust in the younger generations.

"As one who has been called king of the technological optimists, I continue to support the technological optimists. . . [W]e have no alternative but to resort to technological fixes – that is, technological inventions and techniques that do not solve social problems but that do provide additional options and thereby change the underlying constraints that cause social impasses. . . But even the most enthusiastic of the technological fixers – people like myself – are ready to concede that our technologies are faulted. The most obvious fault, and the most in the public mind today, is pollution caused by our many technologies of abundance."

From the materials I have already seen, it is clear Weinberg had a strong personal interest in education and graduate research. Weinberg's legacy is lasting because of his sincerity, and not in spite of his optimism. I think his optimism was never foolish, as he always kept his eyes on action-based efforts to create the future he imagined. It was not simply part of the job to deliver this address. The ideas he expressed to these graduates came from a deep sincerity that cannot be faked. In proof of his sincerity, he leaves them with a message that balances optimism with heavy realism.

"As one who claims to be a compassionate technologist, I should end my commencement address at this point with an exhortation to you who are about to embark on careers in technology to become compassionate technologists. But I would be saying only part of the truth if I ended here. . . [W]e technologists must remain modest: technology can do much, but it cannot do everything. Methadone converts law-breaking heroin addicts into socially acceptable methadone addicts. To deal fully with so difficult and sticky a problem as drug addiction, as for that matter with any social problem, we must go beyond technology. Fortunately, in the case of drug addiction, the therapeutic communities that have sprung up by the thousands throughout the United States seem to be having some effect."

As I write this, opiate addiction and opiate overdose deaths are hitting Appalachia and the greater United States with epidemic numbers. When I read these words, I can feel his compassion clutching my chest. Weinberg brings thoughtfulness to his work, which animates papers that could read as dry history but instead feel modern. As a society we are still working to merge ideas across disciplines as he urges us to do.

". . . I would hope that with other social problems that can be helped by technology, we technologists welcome non-technical as well as technical approaches. The note we must strike is one of cooperation, not antagonism. . . It ill behooves any of us to belittle the efforts of others who try to make progress. . . [May] you understand both the possibilities and the limitations of technology, as well as sharpen your taste for resolving both human and technological problems."

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I have graduated three times and have sat through more than three commencement addresses. Unfortunately, I cannot remember a single word that stayed with me from any of those speeches.

However, when I read these words I imagine being in the room with such a respected scientist and director. Alvin Weinberg was a diplomatic man who spoke with respect and compassion for others. To be met with respect and trust as a young student by a powerful and successful man is never guaranteed. I know these words hung in the air and stuck in the hearts and minds of these graduates. I hope we can come back to these ideas of intersection and compassion as a country. I believe the project I am working on is making steps toward that goal.

Kay Brookshire provides the following summary of the Alvin Weinberg Papers Project:

Alvin Weinberg donated his personal papers, filling more than 200 boxes, to the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge when Selma Shapiro was its executive director. Volunteers who have worked the past year on permanently preserving the papers are asking that those who knew him or were influenced by Weinberg contribute their memories in a short video.

Bonnie Carroll, founder, Chief Data Officer and former President and CEO of Information International Associates, Inc., is featured in the first video on the preservation project's web site <http://childrensmuseumofokridge.org/weinberg/>.

Carroll describes how the scientist influenced her career, beginning during her time in graduate school, with his thinking on scientific information. Her comments provide insight into the value of Weinberg as a mentor to many in this community and beyond.

"He was so influential, and the way he thought was so foundational to this community, that it would be great to have a couple of people talk about these kinds of influences," Carroll says on the video, explaining why she wanted to talk about Weinberg's influence. "And so here I am to tell you that preserving the memory and records of Alvin is just a terrific, terrific project." IIA is among contributors to the Weinberg papers preservation project.

If you would like to add your video memories, please contact Ronnie Bogard, who is leading the Weinberg Papers Archive Project, at (865) 482-7991, or weinbergpapers@gmail.com. See the project's web site, <http://childrensmuseumofokridge.org/weinberg/>, to learn more about the preservation of Weinberg's papers and for links to his oral history and articles of interest.

Thanks Kittie and Kay for such great insight into the treasure we have in our midst. I am anxious to see the material become available online!

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Kittie Crittenden, archivist for the Alvin Weinberg papers collection at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, is preserving Weinberg's papers and moving the collection from boxes and file cabinets into archival boxes and folders.