

# Deirdre Barrett story—part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 28, 2018)

Here is another of Benita Albert's series on highly successful Oak Ridge High School graduates. You will enjoy this unique story of a most intriguing and highly acclaimed lady who has a most unusual career - dreams.

I have enjoyed reading her book, "The Committee of Sleep" and surprisingly found much of what she describes there I can identify with in my personal experience with problem solving during sleep. However, what frustrates me most about my dreams is that in them I am often attempting to solve some problem and more and more roadblocks keep appearing in my path. What about you? Ever dream and recall them as frustrating experiences? Ever find upon waking that you have solved a problem during sleep? If you are intrigued by your dreams and want to better understand what is happening during sleep, I highly recommend Deirdre Barrett's work!

Now learn her story from Benita's recollections and research.

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Deirdre Barrett describes dreaming as "thinking in a different biochemical state." Her study of dreams has garnered international recognition for this Oak Ridge High School alumna.

I first learned of Deirdre's research via her cameo appearance as a dream expert on the "Dr. Phil Show." Her unique name (she was one of only two "Deirdres" I taught), and her easily recognizable, youthful appearance left little doubt in my mind that this "expert" was formerly my mathematics student at Oak Ridge High School. Her poised and engaging observations on this TV show compelled me to learn more of her journey to such a remarkable career.

In the spring of 2013, the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation invited Deirdre to be the keynote speaker for their annual Teacher Grant Awards ceremony. Deirdre spoke on the role of dreams in creative artistry and also in objective, scientific thought. It was at this event that I bought her book, "The Committee of Sleep."

I eagerly read her research on dreams as extended problem-solving experiences for certain individuals. I identified with this dream experience, having solved many a troublesome problem via overnight sleep sessions. I have been "hooked" on Deirdre's work ever since.

When D. Ray Smith and I proposed feature articles on Oak Ridge Schools' alumni who are now world changers, Deirdre Barrett immediately came to mind. This Part One of her story recounts her early years in Oak Ridge, memories I am privileged to share from a recent phone interview with Deirdre as well as ORHS yearbook research.

John and Barbara Barrett moved to Oak Ridge in the late 1950's where John accepted a job in the Solid State Physics Division of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Their daughter, five year-old Deirdre, enrolled in kindergarten at Willowbrook Elementary School, a place she described as "wonderfully stimulating."

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She touted the school's emphasis on creative writing exercises, not just grammar drills. She fondly recalled third-grade teacher Sandra Berg and her "Switcheroo" math game which cleverly presented set theory concepts—the "new/modern math" of the 1960's.

Deirdre's parents later moved to west Oak Ridge where she finished elementary school at Linden, then on to Robertsville Junior High and Oak Ridge High School. Deirdre chose an early graduation option, leaving ORHS at the end of her junior year in 1971. With the approval of ORHS officials and college-earned credits, she later received her ORHS Class of 1972 diploma.

During her childhood, Deirdre's parents were active in civic affairs. Her mother especially enjoyed working with The League of Women Voters, serving a term as president. Her father was appointed to the Human Relations Advisory Board in 1965. The HRAB charge (per city records) was "to advise and assist the Council by encouraging nondiscriminatory treatment, mutual understanding and respect among all racial and ethnic groups of the City."

The Board's proposed civil rights ordinances were persuasive in the desegregation of city restaurants, barber shops and other business establishments. John eventually served on City Council (1967-1975) where he continued to promote civil rights causes as well as being interested and involved in environmental issues, controlled planning and development, and educational advocacy.

Deirdre's parents were role model, citizen activists whose service and leadership examples surely gave Deirdre additional incentive to excel and to be socially conscious.

Deirdre describes her Oak Ridge childhood as happy. In later years, some of her friends reminded her that she was the mime of the Peanuts cartoon character "Lucy" whose recurring role is to serve as the resident psychiatrist for her peers.

Young Deirdre was also a novice psychiatrist honing her skills on the Linden playground. Friends recalled Deirdre sitting on a picnic table while they lay prone on same table, relating their dreams to her for interpretation.

Deirdre laughed when recalling this saying that she supposed her fanciful dream stories and those of her friends might have motivated her future career.

She also gratefully recalled that the Oak Ridge Schools' emphasis on writing, first at Willowbrook and later in journalism pursuits at ORHS, shaped another important part of her future career as an author and an editor. Deirdre served as the Feature-arts Editor for the school newspaper, *The Oak Leaf*, and the Editor-in-Chief for the school literary magazine, *The Equinox*. As a junior, she was inducted into Quill and Scroll, an honorary Society for outstanding journalism students.

In her teens, Deirdre became a movie buff. She regularly attended the Oak Ridge Art Center's film showings of

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recently released foreign films. She fell in love with classic film directors: Bergman, Fellini and Truffant on those Friday and Saturday evenings that provided a rare film experience in East Tennessee.

Later, her critique of the dream-themed movie “Inception,” released in 2010, brought her broad public exposure via national television interviews and newspaper stories. Other media appearances such as Today and Good Morning America interviews and National Public Radio segments have focused on her research: techniques for having more problem-solving dreams, interventions in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder nightmares and discussions on differences in sleep talking content and dream reporting.

Her creative expression has recently expanded to include dream artistry. Her personal website includes computer-generated pictures of her “dream moments,” a colorful techno-view of what Deirdre calls her “vivid dreams.” Her digital dream series has been entered in numerous juried art exhibitions over the past two years.

When I asked Deirdre why she chose early graduation from ORHS, she responded that she was eager for a big city experience with expanded cultural opportunities as well as personal freedom and independent living.

However, she credits the scientific environment and open mindedness of Oak Ridgers with her inculcation in evolutionary thought, an early foundation for her later research work in evolutionary psychology.

Deirdre would find her first big city experience and undergraduate education in Atlanta at Emory University. Her career track would ultimately lead to an appointment at Harvard Medical School only fifteen years after leaving Oak Ridge.

Her research in the fields of dreams, hypnosis and evolutionary psychology have resulted in four books which she has authored and four academic texts for which she has served as editor.

Her amazing career journey will be featured in the second part of this story. In the meantime, I wish you “sweet dreams,” or perhaps Deirdre would say “creative dreaming.”

To be continued.

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Thank you, Benita! How exciting to learn about Derdre’s amazing career. I’ll bet many of Historically Speaking readers are now thinking about their dreams and how they might learn to enjoy more exciting ones.

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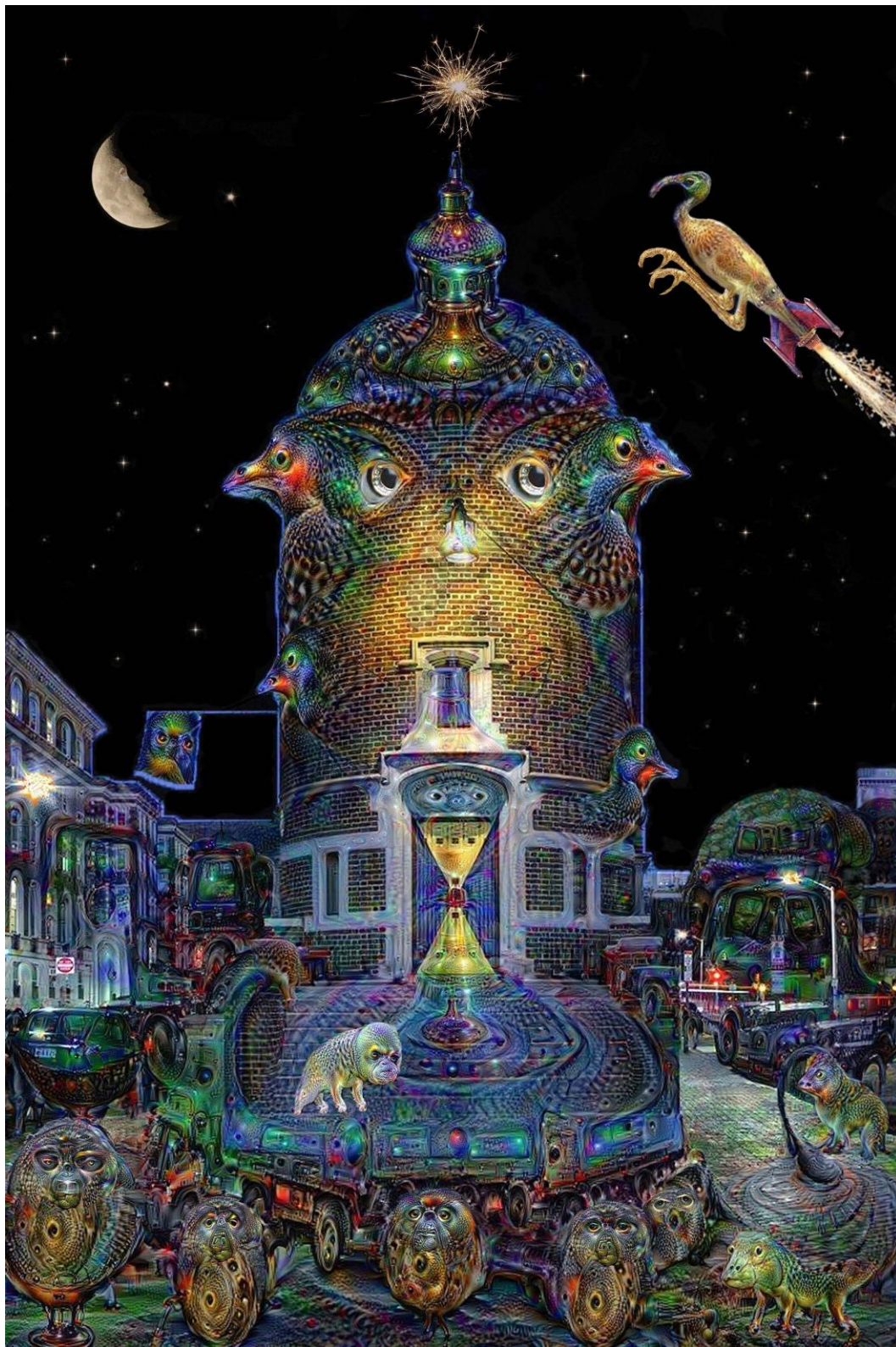
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Recent art "Harvard Lampoon" by Deirdre Barrett



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Deirdre Barrett and four student research assistants who worked with her on a study of dreams of World War II prisoners in Nazi Prisoner of War camps in front of Harvard's World War II memorial.



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An example of “Vivid Dream” Art by Deirdre Barrett