

Celebrating 75 Years: Excellence in Education, Oak Ridge Schools (1944-2018)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 4, 2018)

I am excited to bring you readers of Historically Speaking the announcement of the availability of a NEW Oak Ridge 75th ANNIVERSARY BOOK!!! I have known about the book being prepared since Bob Smallridge called me to ask permission to use materials from an earlier Historically Speaking series on the history of Oak Ridge schools.

Of course, I quickly told Bob that he was welcome to use any of the material he found helpful. Some of Bob's history, cowritten with Julie Dodd, is included below.

Benita Albert and Jessica Steed provided the below information on the new book you will surely want to purchase right away. It will certainly become an instant collector's item! Enjoy some brief excerpts from the book brought to you by Benita and Jessica.

The Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF) is sponsoring a book to honor the Oak Ridge Schools. The book, *Celebrating 75 Years: Excellence in Education, Oak Ridge Schools (1944-2018)*, will be published by Iris Press and released in September 2018. It contains three major sections: a brief history of the Oak Ridge Schools, student stories from each of the seventy-five classes (1944-2018), and stories from fifty-five educators.

Information for ordering *Celebrating 75 Years: Excellence in Education, Oak Ridge Schools (1944-2018)* is on the Foundation website <http://www.orpsef.org/purchaseBook>. You may choose from two options: a deluxe hardback collector's edition (\$75) or a paperback edition (\$25).

Books may be pre-ordered for reduced prices through June 30, 2018. If you would like to pick up your book at the Midtown Community Center (dates to be announced in August), the total cost for each book including tax and discounts, is \$76.83 and \$21.95 for the hardback and paperback, respectively.

If you prefer to have your book delivered, total cost for each book including shipping, tax, and discounts, is \$84.51 and \$29.63 for the hardback and paperback, respectively. If you prefer to preorder by phone or mail contact Jessica Steed, ORPSEF Executive Director, at 865-241-3667 or mail to Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation, PO Box 117 MS-22, Oak Ridge, TN 37831.

The following excerpts are selected to preview the history, diversity, creativity and pride alumni and educators value in their ORS experiences. From the history section, authored by Robert Smallridge and Julie Dodd:

"The beginning for the Oak Ridge Schools came in July 1943 when an Army captain arrived at Columbia University in New York City to meet and interview Dr. Alden H. Blankenship for the position of Superintendent of Schools in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The officer made it clear at the outset that any information discussed during the meeting must be kept strictly confidential. He went on to tell of a new city in the making that was vital to the war effort. He pointed out that highly skilled craftsmen, scientists, and engineers would be enlisted for the work to be done there, and they would not come unless they could be assured an outstanding education system would be provided for their children. The captain said Army officials recognized the need for talented, well-prepared teachers, and the school superintendent would have the responsibility for planning the educational program and deciding the curriculum and organization. During the discussion Blankenship, a graduate of Columbia University, learned that although no school buildings existed, sites for several had been chosen. At the end of the meeting the captain asked him two pointed questions: 'Can you do the job? Will you give me an answer by four o'clock this afternoon?'"

Fortunately, Blankenship said yes, and miraculously, by October 1943 the first schools were opened to Oak Ridge students. Teachers came from across the nation, representing thirty-six states by the end of the second year. A 1949 *Tennessee Teacher* article on the Oak Ridge Schools observed, "How Superintendent Al Blankenship, in the face of a nationwide teacher shortage, the mystery and uncertainty of the Oak Ridge project, and all the handicaps of the period, was able in short time to build, equip and staff one of the finest schools in the nation is one of the miracles of the war."

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Section Two includes seventy-five class stories written from the student perspective. Selected quick peeks across the decades include:

The 1944 graduation speech by ORHS Principal Charles Oliver addressed the challenging times students faced. "Some of you boys, by choice or otherwise, will soon find yourself in some branch of the armed services. It is regrettable but true that we have a war to fight, a victory to win, and a peace to win. I dare you to make valiant soldiers, courageous sailors or fearless marines."

From the class of 1956, by anchor author Connie (Jordan) Green, the social/political story continues. "The smooth transition from segregation to integration may have disappointed the national news services. Dick Green, who served as Student Council Vice President, remembers receiving a phone call after the first day of school that September: 'The reporter, I think he was from the Associated Press, asked me what happened that day. I told him nothing happened, no problem—we gathered in assembly to be welcomed by Mr. Dunigan (Principal of ORHS) and then we all went to our classes. It was like any other first day of school. The reporter thanked me and hung up.'"

From the class of 1968 and story contributor, Rick Wallace: "In 1955 I entered Kindergarten at Cedar Hill Elementary. It was an incredible experience because of new kids and projects and cafeteria life. Ms. McSpadden was the teacher and Mr. Dodd was the Principal. I remember we would each be given one-half pint of cold Norris Creamery milk. During playtime indoors we were allowed to play with pieces of wood, nails, and hammers. Charles Rice wound up in the school nurse's office after I hit his hand with a hammer while we were building a wooden boat. Corporal punishment was in effect during the fifties, I can testify to that.

One more student story from the class of 1985 by Ivan Boatner: "One of the best examples of the inclusive and accepting nature of our group is how we embraced Akihiro Kubeto, the exchange student from Japan. Aki, as he was known, wanted to play football. Coming from Japan, he had never played the sport and knew nothing about the game. When he came out for the team everyone was supportive and helpful. The highlight of that season was when Aki got into the game and made a beautiful catch. The team went crazy. Later that week when we watched the film (before video tapes), the film cut off at the beginning of Aki's big play. The entire team let out a defining groan and then erupted into laughter. Although the evidence of his play was destroyed, the entire team, Aki in particular, will never forget."

And finally, in Section Three: "Teachers Get the Last Word," Oak Ridge educators write about memorable students, lessons, activities and peer role models. Mary Elizabeth Alexander's stories are legendary as was her thirty-eight year Oak Ridge Schools career as a teacher, Civil Rights Coordinator, elementary school counselor and elementary principal. Here is only one tale from her collection of amazing school stories:

"As elementary counselor, I was responsible for testing the children to secure information that would assist in planning their educational program. One time I was testing a first grade boy. When testing a very young child, it is necessary to do an oral test because of their lack of reading skills. One measure of reasoning is the young child's ability to determine likenesses and differences. As we proceeded through the test, I asked the child, 'How are milk and water alike?' He quickly responded, 'You can drink them.' I gave that child a check mark for an acceptable answer. Then I asked, 'How are they not alike?' He hesitated. He was what I call 'a well-er.' 'Well...Well...' Then his face lit up and he said, 'Well a cow gives milk and a bull gives water!' It was all I could do to stay composed. I couldn't wait to see Dr. Al Nipper, School Psychologist, to ask if I might give that child credit for his creative answer."

Overall, the book project received help from more than 250 contributors: storytellers, editors, consultants, and sponsors. All proceeds from the sale of the book go to the "Making a Critical Difference" campaign. This campaign raises money for Oak Ridge Schools' classroom partnerships, a program to encourage innovative projects for enhancing the classroom learning environment.

Examples of the grants awarded across all schools and academics are detailed at the Foundation website:

www.orpsef.org. The Foundation is grateful for the many volunteers who have contributed their memories and talents to make this book a living example of the ORS mission, 'Excellence in Education.'

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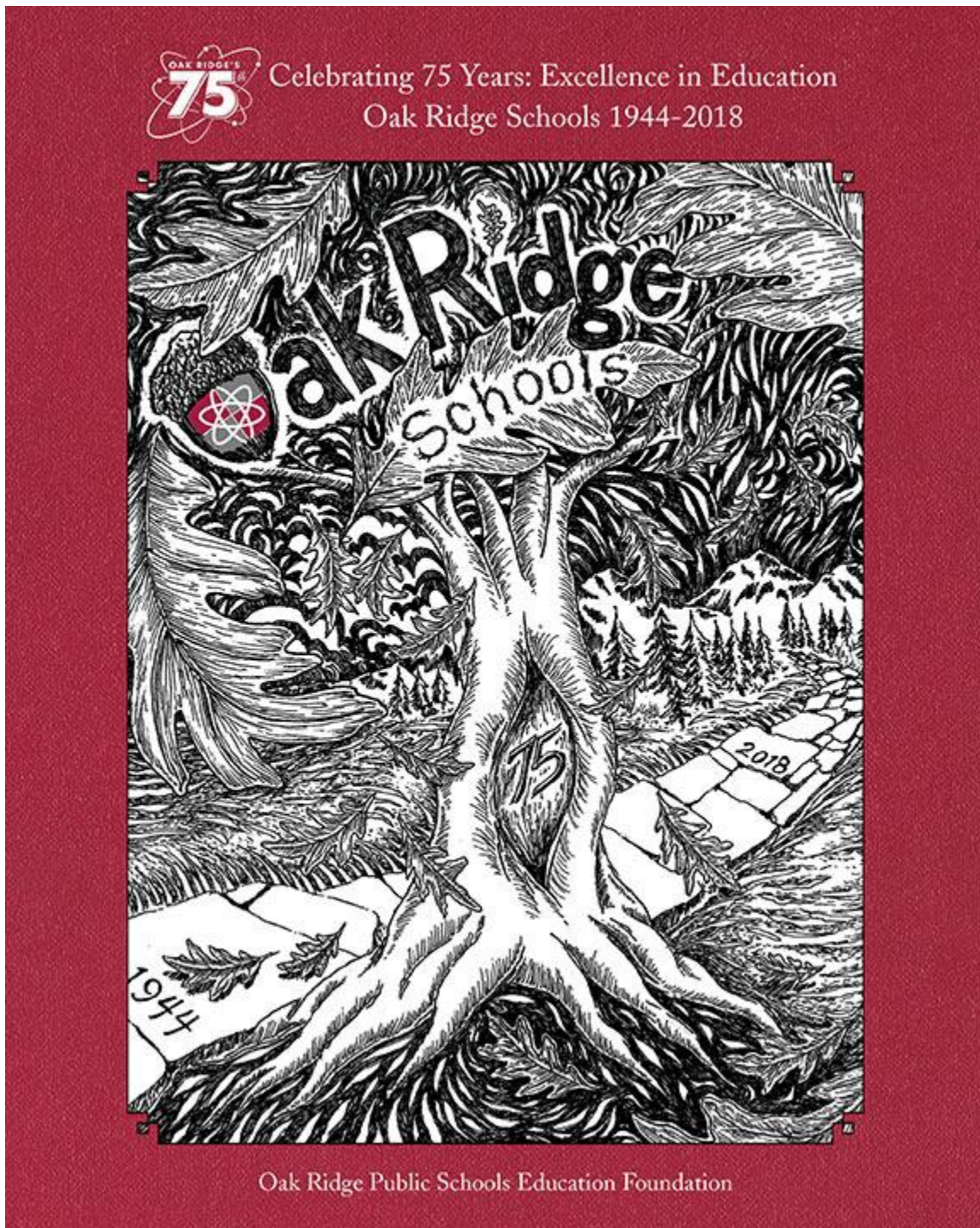
I have already purchased my books! Get yours right away!!! I am so proud of this 75th Anniversary project. Our city is celebrating the 75th Anniversary in a number of innovative ways throughout the entire year.

The history of our city is important and all of us working together can make sure our unique past is not taken for granted and that we make the most of every opportunity to celebrate the phenomenal technological advances coming from Oak Ridge, AND also that we never forget the amazing history of excellence we have in our Oak Ridge Schools!

After all, Oak Ridge School district is the first entire district in Tennessee (the second entire district in the world) to be STEM Certified by AdvancED!!! Let's be PROUD!

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Cover of the paperback version of the new book, *Celebrating 75 Years: Excellence in Education, Oak Ridge Schools (1944-2018)*

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For more anniversary events and projects, see Oak Ridge's 75th Anniversary web page: <https://www.oakridge75th.com/>