

Ken Mayes and the American Museum of Science and Energy

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 30, 2018)

The transition of the American Museum of Science and Energy from its 44-year location at 300 South Tulane Avenue to a new location in Main Street Oak Ridge has been drawn out over several months and thus has been a mixture of ups and downs and filled with new opportunities. One of the key individuals who has contributed immensely during this time of transition and new beginnings has been Ken Mayes.

This Historically Speaking column features my personal appreciation for Ken, my impressions of his humble yet most effective leadership in a time of personal conflicting emotions. I hope to show how he converted a personal frustration at the turn of events into a dedicated constant positive supportive initiative unparalleled by anything I have seen. Ken is both my friend and a valued colleague in the preservation of Oak Ridge history.

Ken began his career at the American Museum of Science and Energy in November, 2004, as a part-time science educator. He was also in business for himself designing websites at the time. In the spring of 2005 Ken was hired as a part-time employee by Enterprise Advisory Services, Inc, the operating contractor for the museum at the time.

By the fall of 2006, Ken's business was growing and he wanted to devote all his time to developing the company, so he indicated his intent to resign. The director at the time, realizing the value Ken brought to the museum, countered with an offer to promote Ken to Deputy Director. Enjoying what he was doing working with the museum, Ken decided to focus on that and to scale back his business designing websites. He has never looked back and has served faithfully as Deputy Director for the past 12 years.

Being a quick learner and having an intense interest in museum operations, Ken has learned a lot about museum operations. Unless you have experience there, you cannot begin to understand the complexities associated with effectively operating a museum, even a small one such as ours.

During this time Ken also became involved in the Tennessee Association of Museums and has served on its board for almost 10 years. Amazing when you think of that! Ken is currently the president of that state level organization!

Ken says that coming from a science background and working at a science museum did not readily bring to his mind the importance of history and that it was always hard to balance the two considering the limited resources of the museum. Yet, balance it he has. He admits to "warming up" to the importance of our history over time.

I personally think the museum has done an outstanding job of promoting Oak Ridge history while also fulfilling its primary role as an "American" science museum. As I am sure you know, the original name of the museum was the American Museum of Atomic Energy. And even with the change in the name brought about to broaden the scope of the museum in the 1970's, nuclear has continued to be an important element in the museum's programing and exhibits.

Over time, Ken became involved in developing content for temporary exhibits and perhaps one of his favorites was "The Story of Wheat." Wheat was the community located at what became the K-25 site during the Manhattan Project. Ken worked with the Partnership for K-25 Preservation of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association and the former Wheat residents to borrow artifacts to tell the story of the history of Wheat.

This helped to ingrain in Ken a deep appreciation for the history of the Oak Ridge area both before the Manhattan Project and since the major cultural changes brought about by relocating by August 1945, 75,000 residents where 3,000 had been. Ours is a tremendous history and Ken has creatively contributed to the advancement of methods to tell that story most effectively.

Another challenge Ken enjoyed was hosting the Tennessee State Museum's collection of former Marine photographer Joe O'Donnell as a vitally important yet small temporary exhibit. He takes pride in this because at the outset he was apprehensive of what the response might be to the exhibit because of the

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content which focused on the aftermath of the U. S. bombings of Japan. He said he was pleasantly surprised at the community's positive response to showing that side of World War II's history.

I am more optimistic regarding Oak Ridge's reaction to a full telling of ALL the story of our history and believe I am joined in that idea by the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. It was my good fortune to be asked to participate in the Scholars' Forum to help determine the primary focus areas and themes for the park. There were two Japanese individuals who were among the 20 participants. That study showed me the value of telling the many multidimensional aspects of our history.

Ken is a wonderful asset to our community and has grown more central to that role over the 12 years he as functioned as the Deputy Director of the American Museum of Science and Energy. He enjoys that. He has served on several boards of directors and committees such as Keep Anderson County Beautiful, Earth Day in Oak Ridge, the Secret City Festival, and Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association. I have served on some of these with Ken and can vouch for his added value to each of them.

Other highlights Ken cites are: the Knoxville Symphony's "Science in the sounds symphony education" and organizing the East Tennessee Middle School Science Bowl for six years. Bet you did not know that about Ken! He is both multi-talented and hard working.

Ken also cited winning a Tennessee Association of Museums award for The Photography of Ed Westcott on tumblr as a highlight. As was meeting so many people both locally (such celebrities as Bill Wilcox, Ed Westcott and Denise Kiernan). All too often we take these local folks like Bill and Ed for granted, but they truly are special and Ken realizes that. As a final comment on highlights of his time at the museum, Ken said, "None of these highlight experiences could happen without the staff and volunteers!"

Ken realizes and is proud to point out that since its inception in 1949, on the same date, March 19, 1949, as the gate opening to allow the public to enter the main part of Oak Ridge, the museum has always been the focal point for tourism in Oak Ridge. NOTICE that! The KEY to tourism in Oak Ridge has been the American Museum of Science and Energy and I must hasten to add the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project National Historical Park are also strong contributors to our heritage tourism.

Ken feels the museum itself is as much a part of Oak Ridge's history and the town is itself or the three major government installations. The museum's success is vital to the community! Ken also believes that its untapped potential has been burdened with politics on all levels from federal to local.

I concur with Ken here and we are attempting to work through those roadblocks with the American Museum of Science and Energy Foundation. I will provide much more information about that in upcoming Historically Speaking columns. I firmly believe we have the answer to taking science and heritage tourism to a new and much more productive level. The combination of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park (and the facilities located at the government sites), the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and the American Museum of Science and Energy, has a powerful potential.

I am convinced the community is beginning to see the need to come together and assure ALL our history is told. The Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association is planning to open the Midtown Community Center as an Oak Ridge History Museum. The K-25 History Center is on the verge of being available. The Y-12 History Center is here now. The DOE Public Bus Tours are all essentially full!

All this synergy contributes to us being able to create a more robust science and heritage tourism approach. Explore Oak Ridge has just launched a joint website with the other two Manhattan Project National Historical Park cities of Los Alamos, NM, and Hanford, WA. All these things will contribute to a growing tourism trade for Oak Ridge.

As you know, Ken determined early in the transition process that he did not think it best for him to continue with the transition to the new location. His desire was altruistic and he firmly desired the very best opportunity for the American Museum of Science and Energy to function most effectively in the new

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Main Street Oak Ridge location. He announced that and put his shoulder to the task of doing all he possibly could to assure the best possible transition.

I have worked alongside Ken in the numerous meeting, reviews, design consulting, image selection processes required to create the displays and exhibits in the new location. I can say unequivocally that I have never seen a more dedicated individual than Ken Mayes. He has, on every single occasion where I have observed him, been the epitome of dedicated service to a common goal. He has brought his experience to bear and has contributed ideas and suggestions that have helped the new design be a better product.

Ken had this to say about the new director and new museum location, "I believe the new director will be key in the success of the museum in its new location and that Julia Bussinger is the right person for the job. In the week that I have known her, she is already full of ideas that I believe the community will love. And she brings experience to the position that I would not. I stepped away to give the museum a fresh start with new leadership."

Ken continued, "The past couple of years at the museum have been difficult personally and professionally. I did not want my personal experience to burden the future of the museum in its new location. The museum needs someone who can advocate for it starting now."

What a bold admission and unselfish dedication! We can be proud of Ken Mayes. He has placed the future of the American Museum of Science and Energy at the highest level of his thinking and we owe him a huge debt of gratitude for that! And we also need to thank Ken for the hard work and long hours he had dedicated to the transition.

At a surprise reception for Ken on Wednesday, 7/25/18, there were many complimentary remarks including the following; "Ken has been an extremely important part of the AMSE for many years," said Department of Energy - Oak Ridge Office Manager Ken Tarcza. "His knowledge and contributions to the Museum have played a vital role in its success. I've only had the pleasure of working with him for the last year but have come to know him as a remarkable individual. I hold Ken in the highest regard, and wish him, his wife Lauren and their family the very best in their future endeavors."

Please take the time to show Ken your appreciation and know that he continues to help us tell the Oak Ridge story through his participation in the local historical society and by living in Oak Ridge. I am convinced we will see Ken engaged in many aspects of Oak Ridge life and history in the future.

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Ken Mayes, my friend and associate in the preservation of Oak Ridge history

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Speaking for the American Museum of Science and Energy Foundation, Ray Smith thanks Ken for his help to the Foundation over the years (photo by Lynn Freeny)