

Tom Spray story, Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 7, 2019)

Benita Albert brings us another story of one of Oak Ridge Schools' alumni. This story has implications far beyond Oak Ridge and includes medical breakthroughs unprecedented and with far reaching influence. You will be amazed to learn the details. My friend, Paul Spray recommended we consider including his son in our series and when I passed that suggestion on to Benita, she immediately agreed we should include Tom Spray. Dr. Paul Spray has been recognized for his medical career and his son, Tom, has followed in his footsteps. You will be inspired by what you read. Enjoy learning about yet another Oak Ridge original who has significantly impacted his world.

Tom Spray, son of Oak Ridge's beloved orthopedist Dr. Paul Spray, recently granted me an hour-long interview and also presented an impressive professional resume of his medical career. I reached out to this 1966 Oak Ridge High graduate having heard of his legendary work in cardiothoracic surgery.

Though previously I have written stories on former students, Tom preceded my ORHS teaching career by three years. I wish I could say that I taught this man who is now known for his groundbreaking work and his championship for children facing congenital heart and lung problems.

This Part One of his story will concentrate on his Oak Ridge origins and influences, while a subsequent story will focus on his professional career and leadership. To give him full credit for all he has accomplished would require a book. If such book should be forthcoming, I would be one of his first readers as a grandparent of a child who has benefited from the pediatric discoveries and practices his career has inspired.

Tom was born at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota where his father was completing a residency in orthopedic surgery. Paul and Louise Spray met while undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh. Louise's studies in social work at the graduate level were put aside when she chose to follow Paul to Minnesota. She soon found herself very busy as a wife and homemaker with three young children: David, Tom, and Lynn.

After Paul's residency was completed the Spray family moved to Oak Ridge in 1950. Tom said his dad chose to move south because there were very few orthopedic surgeons in practice (lucky for Oak Ridge that we got this great doctor and service-minded citizen). In Oak Ridge Louise did much volunteer work in her field of social services including a special interest and involvement in the YWCA as well as volunteer work at the hospital and in a nursery school.

Tom's schooling included Elm Grove Elementary, Jefferson Junior High (above Blankenship Field), and Oak Ridge High School. His siblings graduated in 1964 (David) and 1969 (Lynn). Tom said that David was the student scientist in high school who subsequently applied his talents to the study of neuroscience, advancing research in such as gap junctions, the connections between cells and information sharing. Tom speaks with pride for his brother's work which has achieved international acclaim. His sister Lynn followed her mother's interest in social work, recently retiring from a long career with the Minneapolis school system.

I asked Tom to reminisce about his early years in Oak Ridge. He recalled being very interested in art, as early as elementary school where he loved to draw. Those artistic leanings continued as he ultimately became the president of the Oak Ridge High School Thespians in his senior year. When asked about his favorite play, he chose the ORHS production of "The Mouse that Roared" in which he had the lead role. He also spoke fondly of the Oak Ridge Playhouse and his small roles in "Bye Bye Birdie" and "My Fair Lady" noting that the choral participation expanded and challenged his artistic training. Tom says he was undecided as to a future career, but he briefly considered future studies in architecture as a compromise between his art and science interests.

However, a trip with his dad during his junior high years left a lasting impression. Tom traveled with his dad and other doctors who volunteered for a medical mission to Algeria. Tom recalls that the trip came shortly after the brutal French Algerian War (1954-1962) in which Algeria won independence.

At the end of the war Algerian hospitals were virtually devoid of the French doctors who previously worked there. Thus, Dr. Paul Spray and several other doctors joined the Care-Medico mission to provide needed medical aid for an interim period, a stop-gap but important service to suffering Algerians.

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As a young student of French, Tom would improve his language skills in Algeria while also observing medical treatments provided to numerous, grateful war victims. Little did Tom know that this experience would shape his future, namely his decision to follow his dad's choice of a career in medicine.

Tom's high school summers included traveling with the American Friends Service Committee, a noted Quaker mission where charitable, restorative work projects were conducted across the United States. Studies in bacteriology at the selective Summer Science Institute sponsored by the University of Michigan further influenced his academic future.

Tom chose Haverford College, an all-male, small liberal arts school, and a Quaker school. Haverford was known for a progressive science curriculum. Most impressive for Tom was the discovery that they had an electron microscope, an instrument rarely seen outside of big research labs at the time. The microscope was the deciding factor, Tom chose a major in Molecular Biology graduating with high honors from what he described as the "hardest challenge," an undergraduate degree from Haverford.

Completing all of his major coursework in three years, his senior year involved lab work and completion of a thesis. His research resulted in a published paper in the *Journal of Immunology*, 1972, entitled "Radio-immunoassay of Paramecian Surface Antigens," a study of the basic science of interferon and treatment applications. His choice of a medical school led him back south to Duke University where he would complete all requirements, including a military assignment, by 1983. More of his medical training and his inspiring career will follow in Part Two of Tom Spray's story.

Before ending, I want to share a final, reflective question I posed to Tom: "Do you feel a lasting impact/influence on your life from your original Oak Ridge community?" He answered that growing up in Oak Ridge in the '50s and '60s in a science town where neighbors were biologists, chemists, and physicists provided a remarkable intellectual environment.

And yet there were also rich opportunities provided for immersion in the arts, a culture atypical of most small towns. After retirement in July 2018, Tom has move to the mountains of western North Carolina and gone back to favorite pastimes of his youth such as hiking in the mountains and taking art classes.

He mentioned a retirement gift from friends, glass-blowing classes offered near Asheville, as his chance to return to an early interest in glass artistry. Having traveled the world training and lecturing, he now looks forward to exploring more of the United States.

To be continued...

See what I told you! Amazing is too mild a word. And what did you think about Tom's observations about growing up in Oak Ridge...did he hit the nail on the head or what! Oak Ridge is unique, we are most fortunate and those such as Tom who grew up here know it. Now, just you wait until you read the rest of the story of Tom Spray...Thanks to Benita Albert.

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Tom Spray formal.jpg: Dr. Tom Spray, an Oak Ridger who recalls much about growing up in Oak Ridge and who has gone on to do legendary work in cardiothoracic surgery