

Ellen Reid Story, Part 1 (The early life of a Pulitzer Prize winner who grew up in Oak Ridge)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 22, 2019)

Benita Albert brings us another of her stories from Oak Ridge Schools alumni. She continues to seek those individuals who have achieved tremendously in their chosen fields. This one is a first in that recently she was recognized with a Pulitzer Prize! Enjoy learning more from Benita about another of Oak Ridge School's distinguished former students.

Ellen Reid set her goals in early childhood to attend Columbia University. This 2001 Oak Ridge High School graduate has become a noted musical composer and sound artist. She may now add the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Music to her resume, having just received this prestigious award for *p r i s m*, her new operatic theater piece.

Ellen describes herself as an independent artist working with assignments on both the east and west coasts of the United States. As a female in a gender-challenged profession, she is definitely making a name for herself. Her *dreams of the new world*, choral piece, premiered May 2018 in Los Angeles at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. It was the longest commission ever awarded a composer by the LA Master Chorale.

Thus, I was intrigued to learn more of her life story and honored to gain an interview with Ellen, a former Advanced Placement Calculus student of mine. She was a high school student who pursued a rigorous academic program while also being very involved in extracurricular school and community activities. Oak Ridge years are fondly recalled by Ellen in this first part of her story.

Ellen's parents, Francis and Karen Reid, moved to Oak Ridge in 1979 practicing in the medical fields of ophthalmology and pharmacology, respectively. Though busy young professionals, the couple immersed themselves in church activities at First United Methodist Church and later in the numerous school and community activities of their three children born in the 1980s. Scott Reid, an ORHS 1999 alumnus, is now a lawyer in Houston, TX. Austin Reid, an ORHS 2003 alumnus, has recently completed a PhD in nuclear physics from North Carolina State University. All three Reid children attended Woodland Elementary School, Jefferson Middle School and Oak Ridge High School.

When asked about her favorite Oak Ridge Schools' memories, Ellen recalled her kindergarten teacher, Aileen McConkey. She remembered her class making a trip to the McConkey farm and walking among field pumpkins and muscadine vines. Ellen continued to make this special fall trip with her family for all of her Woodland school years.

She also remembered a demanding, but inspiring third grade teacher, Inger Scudder, who gave author teas where students would read their original stories. Ellen recalled that Mrs. Scudder inspired her to be the first student in the class to learn her multiplication tables by motivating learning with a rocket ship, travel-to-the-planets, progress chart posted on the classroom wall. Mrs. Scudder reflected on her student, saying that Ellen was always eager to learn and that she displayed a contagious, bubbly enthusiasm for every new challenge which helped enliven class activities for all.

Special memories from middle school include the environmental awareness camping trip to Tremont in the Great Smoky Mountains and her eighth-grade history field trip to Williamsburg, VA. Oak Ridge High School was a blur of heavy academic coursework, leadership responsibilities as president of both the civics community and the junior class, and performances in the percussion section of the ORHS band. Ellen fondly remembers her dad's support with junior year prom decorating and her mom's numerous projects and leadership in PTA, not to forget her mom's creative talents including sewing many costumes and Ellen's prom dress.

Ellen's first acting gig, at age five, was in *Peter Pan* presented by the Oak Ridge Junior Playhouse. Ellen was one of the Indians, brother Scott was a lost boy, and her mother played the role of Mrs. Darling. At age six, Ellen was selected to play the role of Gretl in the *Sound of Music* with the Oak Ridge High School Masquers. In her role as the youngest of the von Trapp family singing group, Ellen loved being around high school teens as it made her feel "So grown up."

Her starring role at age seven was *The Littlest Angel* in the Oak Ridge Junior Playhouse Christmas play by the same name. Ellen laughed while reflecting on this role, saying, "It was the peak of my acting career." However, the Oak Ridge community would continue to enjoy her stage talents in numerous Showkids choir concerts.

Meanwhile, her musical training was further advanced by singing with the youth choir of First United Methodist Church. Ellen said that Tim Ward, her church choir director, gave her opportunities to conduct, solicited her ideas, and encouraged

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her leadership. Ellen also praised the kind and caring Rudolph Nemeth whose private piano lessons provided her with her first instrumental music training.

Before her junior and senior ORHS years, Ellen organized a racial reconciliation art camp for children in Oak Ridge called, "Youngsters in Unison." The program, which ran for two separate summers, received broad community support of donated food, camp facilities, and transportation services. It brought together children from various communities and backgrounds to forge relationships through art. Ellen's motivation was to encourage broader social connections in the community as well as greater exposure to artistic expression. Her leadership earned her a prestigious national recognition, the Horatio Alger Improving America Award.

Ellen did achieve her childhood dream of admission to Columbia University. She was a classmate of Kate McKinnon who later achieved Saturday Night Live fame, and she fell in love with New York City and the artistic opportunities she could pursue there. Her fascinating and creative collegiate and professional journey will follow in a later, part two, installment of her story.

The next installment in this series will continue the story of an amazing career and successful accomplishments of Ellen Reid. Benita Albert continues to identify Oak Ridge Schools alumni to feature here, so if you have knowledge of a high achieving former student, please let us know. Readers may contact me at draysmith@comcast.net and I will pass the information on to Benita.

You can view the trailer to the *p r i s m* opera here:

<https://www.knoxnews.com/story/entertainment/music/2019/04/16/tennessee-native-ellen-reids-prism-wins-pulitzer-prize-music/3485324002/>

To learn more about Ellen as a composer, see: <https://ellenreidmusic.com/> There you can see a video *BEYOND* by Ellen Reid and *Project 19* of the New Harmonic Philharmonic coming in 2020. You will be amazed by her projects!

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Ellen with Kyle Hotchkiss performing in the play *Oliver* at Oak Ridge Playhouse in 2000

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Ellen, Christopher Broyles and Isabelle Angelini as Masquers in the play *Sound of Music* in 1090

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Ellen Reid screenshot from video *BEYOND* by Ellen Reid