

Lauren Gray, Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 23, 2019)

Benita Albert continues her series on Lauren Gray. This is the second and final installment in the series. Enjoy:

Lauren Gray could not foresee her important future work when she began her collegiate studies. This Oak Ridge High School Class of 1996 alumna completed undergraduate studies in Comparative Literature with Italian as well as minors in art and psychology at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. She spent a semester abroad studying in Bologna, Italy during her junior year.

She said her academic choices were driven by her desire to work in the arts, not as an artist, but rather in art administration. Her graduate work, completed at the University of Wisconsin, was a Masters in Arts for Business which she described as basically a degree in non-profit management. She recalls, "I loved business school which spurred my interest in and work with corporate partnerships from the nonprofit side."

Lauren wanted an internship in New York City, and she secured this at The Museum of Modern Art, thus meeting a part of her graduate school requirements. She loved New York City so much that she focused her job search there. Her first job was in fundraising at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum (a Smithsonian affiliate), a job she held for three years before looking for other opportunities.

Ultimately, a former alumni mentor from her graduate school years recruited Lauren to join his team at the International Rescue Committee (IRC). This assignment, which she began in 2008, immersed Lauren in fundraising and recruitment of corporate partnerships for the various humanitarian projects the IRC implements all around the world. Beginning her work within a team of seven colleagues, Lauren now leads a team of thirty in her role as Senior Director of Institutional Philanthropy and Partnerships.

The International Rescue Committee is a global humanitarian aid, relief, and developmental non-profit organization. It was founded in 1933 per a request from Albert Einstein. Its work with emergency aid and resettlement of refugees for self-sufficiency currently spans approximately forty countries and twenty-six US cities, benefitting more than 26 million people.

Lauren said, "I have had the honor to visit IRC's work in Mali, Kenya, and Jordan as well as several U. S. cities where IRC has programs." Major emphasis is placed on missions which promote health, education, economic well-being, empowerment, and safety. More information on current programs is accessible online at www.rescue.org.

When I asked Lauren to describe a meaningful project on which she has worked, she mentioned the IRC's emergency response to escalating Venezuelan and El Salvadoran refugee crises. She further described IRC's evidence-based and outcomes-focused results, building on this to expand and to create new programs, programs that make a real difference. In her tenure at IRC, Lauren takes pride in the corporate and foundation partnerships formed.

She says, "We have worked with the private sector to develop and test new solutions to problems." An example she cites is a 100 & Change McArthur Foundation grant award which supports programming to educate young refugees in the Middle East. The IRC and Sesame Workshop are partners in the \$100 million award provided to solve a critical issue. Other corporations who have networked with IRC include: Google, Airbnb, Modelo, and TripAdvisor.

I also asked Lauren how the IRC deals with political opposition and/or suppression. She answered, "The IRC is a non-political organization. We work with all governments in service to our humanitarian-based outcomes. One of our outcomes is 'power' which can include ensuring that our clients understand their rights and the legal systems they are operating within." Currently, the IRC is providing assistance to refugees seeking asylum crossing into the U.S. across the Mexican border. The IRC website says, "In the U.S., the IRC will continue to help most asylum seeker's basic needs, facilitate family reunifications, connect people to critical legal services, and help them access psychosocial support."

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Lauren's work is critical to humanity, providing hope and corrective solutions as well as understanding and compassion. Thus, I asked her to comment on the current needs and how concerned citizens could help. Her reply follows: "In communities across the country, we are seeing unprecedented hope and action. In the last year, the IRC has seen over 8,000 volunteers who have provided over 215,000 hours of service.

This represents a continued trend of people dedicating their time to support refugees in their communities. IRC volunteers help us enhance the services we provide to refugees and show those we serve that they are truly welcome. If folks want to get involved, they can go to [Rescue.org/Volunteer](https://www.rescue.org/volunteer) and enter their zip code to find out what opportunities exist near them."

Thank you, Lauren, for sharing your interesting work. I asked what qualities are important should one choose a career like hers, and she listed: good communicator, good listener, like working with people, and a passion for non-profit work/mission-based work. She further stated that her job provided her the opportunity to work with amazing people and organizations and contribute in a meaningful way. She also cautioned that fundraising is a high-pressure job where burn-out and turnover can be high.

Across the nine decades IRC has provided services, their presence has aided victims of natural disasters and political suppression and provided programs to address pressing health and educational issues worldwide. The vast scope of their outreach requires a committed, problem solving team of persistent and creative fundraisers to sustain and grow IRC programs.

To know that Lauren Gray, a native of Oak Ridge, is an essential leader in securing resources for worldwide humanitarian outreach should make all Oak Ridgers very proud.

Thanks Benita for yet another glimpse into the highly successful graduates of Oak Ridge schools!.

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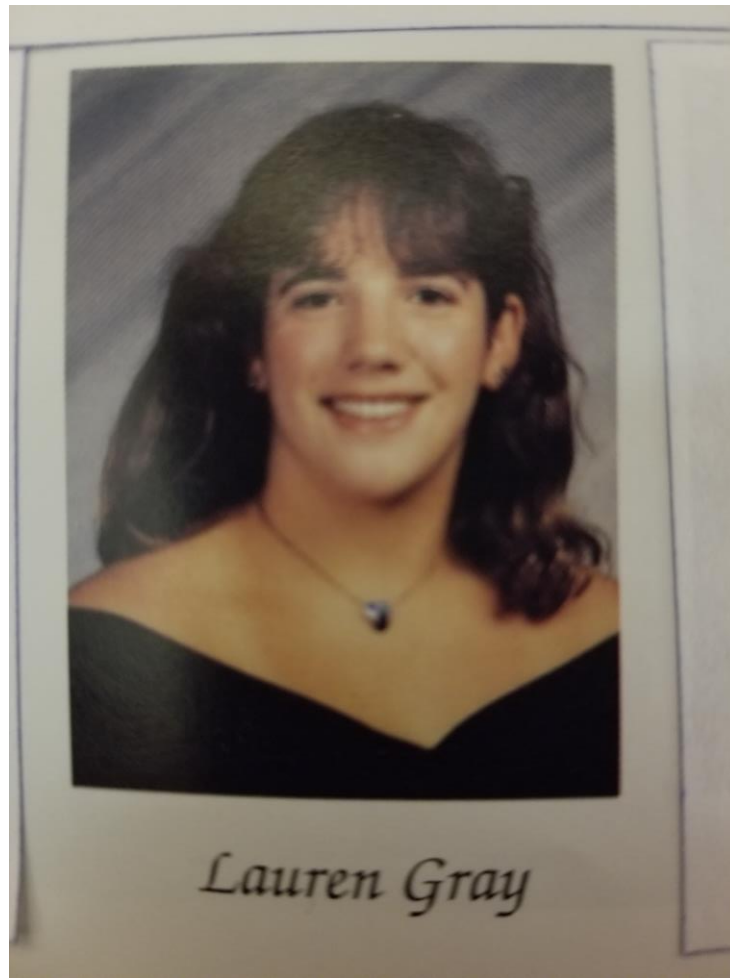
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Lauren Gray at work in Jordon

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Lauren Gray as a graduate of Oak Ridge High School

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Lauren Gray and her husband, Chad Kunkel