

Lindsay Lee Part One

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 20, 2020)

Benita Albert brings us the story of another remarkable graduate of Oak Ridge Schools. This one will amaze you by Lindsay Lee's insights and observations. Enjoy Benita's conversation with Lindsay:

Whenever I hear Alicia Keys sing "Girl on Fire" I think of Lindsay Lee, ORHS Class of 2010 alumna. My interpretation of the song's lyrics as well as of others on the *iTalki* website include: being "on fire" means doing quite well, an unbeatable person, a dreamer yet also practical thinker, self-confident, one who attracts the attention of others for her uniqueness and her successes.

In her first three decades of life, Lindsay Lee has accomplished so much more than many others her age. She has lived her life with an insatiable curiosity and thirst for knowledge, a fearless approach to challenges, and a remarkable spirit of compassion and advocacy. The fact that she has been confined to a wheelchair since seventh grade further amplifies her life story.

Lindsay spoke to this when I mentioned her inspirational example by saying, "If I am an inspirational example for anything, I would want it to be for two things: 1. for the natural, mundane ability to just get on with things and 2. for indignation over all obstacles our world puts in the way of people who are physically or mentally different. Like everything in life, my disability has come with blessings. I am tough and stick up for myself, I demand what I deserve, I know my worth, and I don't waste time. Like anyone, I would be a completely different person if things had turned out differently."

So reader, do you see what I mean? Lindsay Lee is "on fire"!

Lindsay's Oak Ridge roots reach back to her grandparents, Joe and Ardyce Lee, who arrived in Oak Ridge in 1946. Ardyce Lee was a beloved Oak Ridge Schools music teacher who also served as the choir director for First United Methodist Church and who offered private music lessons to innumerable students. Lindsay's maternal grandparents, Bob and Pat Easterday, moved to Oak Ridge in the late 1950s.

Bob worked at Y-12 and K-25 in industrial engineering and later in computer programming. Pat was a secretary at Y-12 and later worked for the Oak Ridge Schools. Lindsay's parents, Joe and Julie (Easterday) Lee, were born in Oak Ridge and graduated from ORHS in 1970 and 1980 respectively. They met while both were employed by Downtown Management in Oak Ridge.

Joe is now a project superintendent with the Christman Company where he has worked on various, large construction projects at The University of Tennessee including Neyland Stadium and the University Center. Julie is currently a library assistant at Robertsville Middle School. She has worked in the Oak Ridge Schools a total of nineteen years.

Their daughters, Lindsay and Loren, matriculated through Willow Brook Elementary School, Robertsville Middle School, and Oak Ridge High School. Both girls chose to attend the University of Tennessee Knoxville as undergraduates. Younger sister Loren has taught high school and is currently a PhD candidate in French at the University of Virginia.

I asked Lindsay to share special memories from her Oak Ridge School days. She answered, "There are too many memories to count. I remember playing kickball and Power Rangers on the playground at Willow Brook, doing my first mathematical proofs in Mrs. Reid's geometry class (small, special class with nine other students) at Robertsville, and going to Model United Nations conferences in DC while at ORHS."

She also recalled extracurricular activities such as playing video games, going to concerts, and hanging out with friends at football games. If not a football game, then a favorite Friday night ritual was to go with friends to eat at El Cantorita, followed by a Tinseltown movie, and finally late-night gabfests at Starbucks.

Asking Lindsay about the future she saw for herself in her teen years evoked a candid response. "I was never sure, I imagined all different kinds of futures for myself: doctor, teacher, mathematician, meteorologist, even fashion designer...!"

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"Because I could never decide what I wanted to do, I was drawn to study subjects in school that were quite general and could be applied to anything, like math and Spanish. There was always a part of me who had these grand visions of where I would end up, and another part that was extremely fearful of what the future would bring.

"I did not have any examples of how someone like me could navigate in the world past childhood, so I had to completely rely on my own imagination for how everything would work out...and my imagination was often not too positive." As her high school teacher for two years of Calculus as well as the research course, Math Thesis, I wanted Lindsay to pursue mathematics. She was an exceptional student with natural math abilities and a gift for tutoring peers. I fondly remember many early, before-school study sessions with Lindsay in my classroom helping and encouraging fellow students. She was a favorite of many of my freshmen algebra students who valued her patience, attention, and encouragement.

I am especially touched that Lindsay wrote of a special Calculus class memory: "I had many teachers who shaped my view of the world and my future, but none more than Mrs. Albert. I remember on the last day of class before graduation, she drew a tree on the board, with the trunk labeled as 'mathematics' and all the branches and leaves labeled all the different fields where one could apply a mathematical education. This was her pitch to stick with math through college, and it ended up being absolutely the most practical advice I ever received.

"I did end up sticking with mathematics since day one, all through undergrad and through one of my master's degrees. It's 100% correct that mathematics applies to so many fields; in fact, I'd say it applies to every field, because what you get most out of a mathematical education is a way of thinking, a way of solving problems. It teaches you to not be fearful of problems whose answers you don't yet know, and it teaches you how, with confidence, to break them up into component parts to solve them. Beyond the practical advice, Mrs. Albert, as a person, demonstrated a model way of being: confident, compassionate, but demanding."

In the ORHS Math Thesis course, Lindsay was mentored by ORNL scientist Richard Ward. Her thesis research project began in the summer before her senior year and involved the use of fractals to model the branching of the bronchial tubes. She returned to ORNL the summer after her ORHS graduation for more research work under the Research Alliance in Math and Science summer program.

Lindsay's summer of 2011 involved more studious inquiry at Vanderbilt Medical Center with the Perioperative Data Systems Research Group. Her project assignment, event detection using natural language processing, helped develop a computer system that could detect adverse events from the free text doctor comments on patient records.

Lindsay was destined to pursue math and to find her own customized career in the field. More of her life journey will be told in the second installment of her story.

One last word from Lindsay that I found to be especially timely. It is not from a question I posed but rather an impromptu response she offered. I consider it so indicative of her thoughtfulness, her values, and also her activism. She wrote: "I would like to emphasize how important Oak Ridge Schools have been in shaping who I am and all that I have been able to achieve! I would be nowhere without this foundational, public school experience. The city and the state must prioritize our public schools and give them the financial and political support they need and deserve."

I end with a loud AMEN for Lindsay's wisdom and support.

Benita Albert does it once again, she has brought us a compelling story of courage beyond what most of us can imagine. Using Lindsay Lee's own words, she has opened a world to us that we can only imagine if we have not faced the challenges Lindsay has. I know you join me in looking forward to the conclusion of this amazing and wonderful story.

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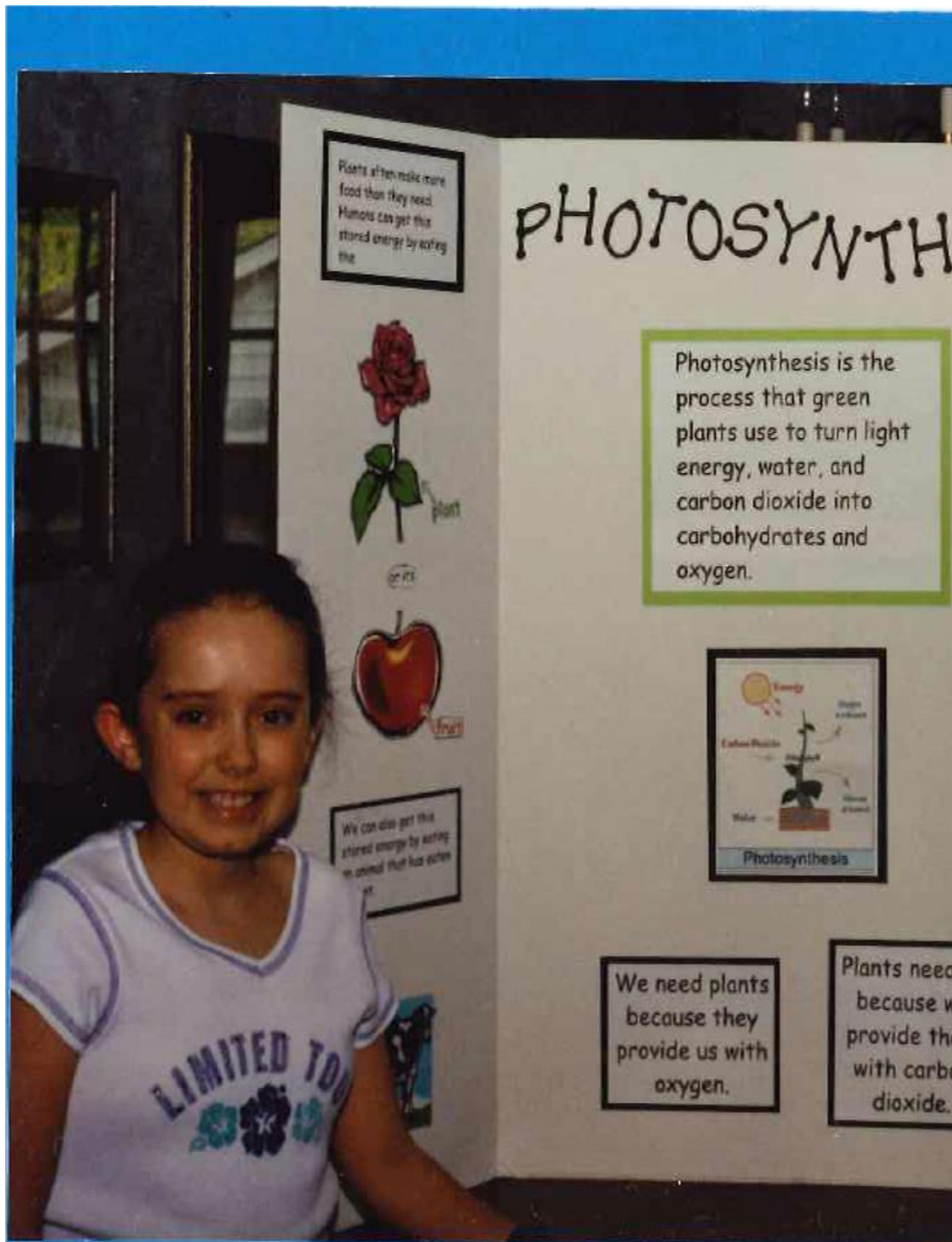
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Lindsay Lee in the third grade

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Lindsay and her science fair project

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Lindsay Lee in high school