

WE DID IT!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of 11-23-2020)

Jessica Steed, Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation Executive Director has provided an update on one of the most amazing accomplishments of the past several years, the renovation of Oak Ridge High School. Enjoy learning about the historic milestone the foundation has met.

November, 2020, marks the successful completion of an extraordinary community achievement. The Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF) fulfilled their commitment to support the \$55 million Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) renovation completed in 2008.

It began in August 2004, when 73% of Oak Ridge voters approved a one-half-cent sales tax increase designated for the renovation. Over a two-year period ORPSEF raised \$8 million in private funds from local families, businesses, and alumni of ORHS which, in turn, qualified the town for a matching \$8 million in Tennessee Qualified Zone Academy Bonds (QZAB) for the ORHS renovation. The Foundation's vision extended beyond the ORHS project, though. The campaign also started an endowment to ensure excellence in education will continue in Oak Ridge.

The renovation of the high school was focused on better outcomes for students. Goals included expansion of the Advanced Placement Program; providing for career academies; upgrading science classrooms; upgrading technological access; improving athletic facilities; and providing enhanced facilities for use by Oak Ridge's civic and cultural organizations

Pat Postma, ORHS Class of 1956 alumna and daughter of long-term ORHS Principal Tom Dunigan, worked on the design committee that envisioned the new ORHS. She was so inspired and excited by the creative re-thinking from teachers sharing their visions of what their best teaching environment could be, and the interaction with the architects, that she understood this was an opportunity to do something extraordinary. When she was asked to Chair the fundraising committee, she knew it simply must happen, and she agreed.

She spent the next two years immersed in the work with her co-chairs and a large team of other Oak Ridgers. Yet she said, "No matter how many architects' drawings I exulted over, no matter how many areas I had seen in varying dusty stages of construction, when I walked for the first time through this entire, finished place, the light, the space, the labs, the arena, the orchestra pit, far exceeded my most optimistic imaginings." "You have done something extraordinary" she said to the community.

ORPSEF's role did not stop with the renovation. Benita Albert, ORHS mathematics teacher from 1968-2013 and now a current ORPSEF board member, reminds us that the Foundation also provided seed money to establish an Advanced Placement Summer Institute initiated by ORHS faculty. For sixteen years that program trained Oak Ridge High School teachers as well as visiting teachers and helped build or expand school AP courses in math, science, English, and social studies across America.

In 2005 ORPSEF launched a new Classroom Grants campaign for our dedicated teachers in the community to create innovations in classroom instruction. In the last 15 years, through continued fundraising drives, the grants program has awarded more than \$1.1 million across all Oak Ridge schools, grades, and academic disciplines. The grants have provided funds for special education assistive learning technologies, robotics projects, summer enrichment camps, musical instruments, drone technology, NASA space probe mission, interactive technology panels, intervention learning resource materials, teacher training programs, support to establish a Naval ROTC program, and outdoor-learning laboratories, to name only a few.

The public school system, developed in Oak Ridge in 1942, was as radical for its time as the science conducted here. Consistently, our community chooses to go the extra mile rising to the occasion to ensure an excellent rather than adequate school system. Over and over ORPSEF has established its role as a critical and trusted force in keeping our public school system among the top in the country. To share the story of our unique approach ORPSEF published the book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1944-2018."

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When ORPSEF was seeking community support for the renovation it was guided by one goal: a truly 21st Century academic program that will continue to be our community's greatest asset. *To be, quite simply, the best.* Transforming Oak Ridge High School was the first part. The second part of the plan was to establish a \$4 million endowment that would grow into the future and ensure education's continued vital role in the community. We have made great progress through generous donors and currently hold over \$2 million towards this goal.

Benita Albert adds, "As a former teacher, I was privileged to observe the promise of the future in my ORHS classroom for forty-three years. Now, in retirement, I celebrate the many success stories of our Oak Ridge Schools' alumni. As ORPSEF looks forward to the future of education for Oak Ridge students, it is my sincere hope that the Foundation can continue to support and expand programs which enhance ever-present needs and encourage innovative practices. I consider the endowment fund a promise for the future well-being of our students' education, and our way to affirm and continue the Oak Ridge Schools' mission of "Excellence in Education."

The Oak Ridge Blueprint Plan identifies education as one of four core values of Oak Ridge. Two decades into this 21st Century, educational challenges are being met by educators transitioning their instruction to a virtual-world delivery. Social challenges have been acknowledged not just as obstacles to the personal opportunities of many individuals, but as dampers on our national economic development.

Fulfilling our debt obligation is a tremendous milestone. As we celebrate this milestone, ORPSEF remains committed to fully funding the endowment so that Oak Ridge Schools continue to build on our legacy of excellence and make the critical difference in the lives of our students. Our original funding appeal is as urgent and critical as ever, "Help us keep the legacy of a town that has done so much for the nation, the lives of its families, and the future of its children. If your family has been enriched by life in this community, if you benefited from Advanced Placement courses that saved thousands in college tuition, if your professional career got its start with an outstanding education in Oak Ridge, please help."

Information for contributions or book purchases:

Contributions for the Classroom Grants and/or endowment fund should be made to the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization. Contributions are tax deductible and may be made online via our website: <http://www.orpsef.org/home> or by check made payable to ORPSEF and mailed to PO Box 117, MS-117, Oak Ridge, TN 37830.

Copies of the paperback book and a hardback collector's edition are available locally at the Ferrell Shop and Jefferson Drug Store as well as by order on the ORPSEF website: <http://www.orpsef.org/purchaseBook> . All proceeds from book sales are dedicated to the teacher grants program.

The accomplishment of the renovation of the Oak Ridge High School and the fulfillment of its debt obligation demonstrates the successful efforts of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation, a truly unique Oak Ridge organization. We can all be proud of our schools and ORPSEF helps assure that can be the case for the foreseeable future. Thanks Jessica!

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Oak Ridge High School after renovations