

Lindsay Lee Part Two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 10, 2020)

Benita Albert continues the compelling story of courage of Lindsay Lee, an Oak Ridge Schools graduate. Benita's conversation with Lindsay will amaze you. Enjoy the story of a wonderful young lady.

Lindsay Lee, 2010 Oak Ridge High School graduate, has made the most of her nine years since leaving Oak Ridge.

Choosing the University of Tennessee Knoxville over other very attractive collegiate options was aided by her much-deserved selection as a Haslam Scholar and also by the practicality of having friends and family close by. Haslam Scholarships, established in 2008 for exceptional UT undergraduate applicants, are awarded to at most fifteen students annually.

Lindsay majored in mathematics and Spanish with a minor in Portuguese. She said, "I loved UT, and I dove in to every activity I could fit into the day." She founded a student organization for disability advocacy, hosting events to make the campus more accessible. She proudly mentions her work in student government and bringing speakers to campus like Angela Davis, Tom Brokaw, and Noam Chomsky. She worked as a math tutor for the University and completed research internships at Oak Ridge National Lab and Vanderbilt University.

She credits her decisions for graduate studies to a UT advisor, Adam Cureton. Dr. Cureton is a former Rhodes Scholar, an associate professor of philosophy, and founder and president of The Society for Philosophy and Disability. She recalled, "In my junior and senior year at UT, I was encouraged to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship. I did not have any notion that I would ever get it, which in fact is a realistic notion, the odds just aren't on anyone's side." (Note: Each year only thirty-two American students are accepted for this highly competitive international program.)

Lindsay continued, "But still, Dr. Cureton and my other professors convinced me that even going through the application exercise is useful in and of itself. It forces you to take the time to analyze what you think about the world and make plans for an ambitious path for yourself. Through hard work and plenty of luck, I was one of the lucky ones selected. I still can't really believe it." (If my research of ORHS alumni is correct, Lindsay is only the second ORHS student to be awarded a Rhodes Scholarship.)

In the fall of 2014 Lindsay began two years of study, completing two master's degrees: one in Applied Statistics and the other in Public Policy at Oxford University in England. She wrote: "Oxford is a magical place, but really because of the people it attracts more than anything else. I met some truly incredible people there from all over the world—incredible but still (for the most part) totally down to earth and so much fun to be with. I made many extremely close friends extremely quickly there, which was only possible because of the uniqueness and intensity of the Rhodes and Oxford communities."

As a part of her Public Policy requirements, Lindsay began an internship with the World Health Organization (WHO). After leaving Oxford in 2016, Lindsay continued her internship with WHO, eventually accepting a staff appointment as a Technical Director in the Disability Programme. The main goals of the Disability Programme include working with countries to implement a general population survey about disability, to assist with data analysis, and to summarize and report on conclusions. She says, "The survey helps countries determine what kind of policies they need to implement to help improve the lives of people with different levels of disability."

Working from the headquarters of WHO in Geneva, Switzerland, Lindsay has enjoyed work-related travels. She highlights her experiences saying, "I have traveled several times to countries to conduct trainings about how to analyze data from our disability survey. For example, I have been to Dubai, the Phillipines, and Costa Rica to perform trainings with people from the national statistics offices to teach them how to analyze data. It's been fascinating to meet people from all over and learn about the workplace culture of different communities. I have to tailor my trainings to meet the necessities of any given place I travel to. I have even conducted some trainings in Spanish—luckily able to draw on the language skills I was taught since Robertsville through UT."

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Lindsay has been confined to a wheelchair since seventh grade because of complications from a rare form of Muscular Dystrophy and subsequent other health conditions. Her curiosity, brilliance and grit are characteristics evident to all who meet her.

I asked her the question, "You have done so much in your first three decades, what motivates you?"

She answered: "All through school, I think I was primarily motivated by curiosity and by excitement about the future. I could not wait to learn the next thing that could bring me closer to truly understanding how the world works. These days, now that I have more knowledge and a bit more experience, and understand more deeply how the world works, I have to be honest and say I am often motivated by anger. Nothing makes me more furious than to see systems put in place that don't work, or only for some people, or actively harm people, and to have no one do anything about it. I try to be the person who cares enough to take the time to figure out how to fix something. My mathematical background always comes in to play here: fixing problems requires an analysis of your assumptions, of the tools you have at hand, and of the ways that the tools could be used. I have tried to figure out how to have this passion for fixing things while letting go of anger, but that is one thing I have not figured out yet. I'm not fully convinced it's possible."

I mentioned to Lindsay that describing her personal journey could provide needed encouragement, especially for people who face handicapping conditions as well as for general public awareness and support. Her thoughtful comments follow: "I use a wheelchair, and have now for most of my life. It is impossible to say that it is not a constant frustration, because it is. But it is frustrating for reasons that I think most people do not understand. My frustration is not directed at myself; I have hardly ever in my life wished for a body that could walk. My frustration is directed at the existence of obstacles themselves. I should not have to call ahead before I go out anywhere to find out if the place is accessible. I shouldn't have to deal with airlines breaking my wheelchair. I shouldn't have to deal with people's insensitive questions. I shouldn't have to plan out every moment of my day so that my wheelchair's battery doesn't run out before I get home. All of these obstacles are external to me—they are not my doing nor my fault. They're the fault of a world that does not yet fully consider the needs of people who are even slightly outside 'normal.' They are exhausting and come at an unjust, massive daily cost in time, energy, and money."

Lindsay continues her personal experience, saying: "I always cringe when I hear someone say about me—or anyone else like me—things like 'I don't let my disability stop me' or 'I rose above it,' because it's just patently false. It does stop me. There are plenty of things I have had to let go of or learn to adapt because I had no other choice. What I have learned is to be extremely skillful at adaptation and to be genuinely happy with the paths that life takes me, because the only other option is not to live a full life. There is no real choice."

Finally, I asked Lindsay to summarize some of what she sees as the biggest challenges in world health. She answered: "The main global health challenge the world faces—and is especially acute in the US—is access to health care. WHO's main strategic goal that the whole organization is working towards is Universal Health Coverage, which simply means that all people can get the quality health services they need without suffering financial hardship. There are many different ways that a country could achieve universal health coverage, through public systems or private systems. But the goal is clear: no one should **not** get health services they need, especially because they cannot afford them. All around the world countries are making progress towards this being a reality, but the US lags behind. If we don't figure out a way to get people all the services they need—even the most basic services—people will continue to die or get diseases unnecessarily. Beyond being morally reprehensible, this is not a sustainable system for a global power."

Lindsay Lee is a remarkable, former child of Oak Ridge, one who is gifted with the drive, compassion, and leadership skills to make society better. She is my personal 'student hero,' a young woman constantly looking outside herself while she lives her life.

I saved, as a closing comment from Lindsay, the last paragraph of her answer to my question concerning her inspirational example to others. She wrote: "It has to be said that my joyous and lucky life, and all that I have been able to achieve, has only been possible because of the unbelievable amount of support around me—my family, friends, teachers, colleagues,

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neighbors, and many of the strangers I encounter daily. I have many other privileges that so many other disabled people do not have. I'm not so much a unique person as a uniquely blessed person with all the love around me that I have been able to draw on."

My thanks to Lindsay for her candor, her tireless advocacy, and her willingness to share her beautiful story.

Readers, you have just finished a most unique and unusual experience. You have come to know a very special person through Benita Albert's excellent ability to draw out the details that convey to us accurately the amazing people about whom she writes. This particular time has been extraordinary as through Lindsay's life story to date we have been provided a glimpse into a most unusual personality. One who is facing difficulties head on and winning battles in which others might never even engage. Thanks Benita, and especially thanks to Lindsay for her heartfelt desire for helping others and for her creative way of doing so.



During a working trip to Doha, Qatar, Lindsay was able visit to the Museum of Islamic Art

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Lindsay in front of the Burj Khalifa, which is the tallest building in the world

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Lindsay conducting training in Dubai

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At Oxford after final exam for the Master of Public Policy course

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Lindsay in front of the large World Health Organization backdrop