

# Mary Elizabeth Alexander story, Part two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 16, 2020)

The conclusion of Benita Albert's story about local educator Mary Elizabeth Alexander, learn more about her amazing career.

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When Mary Elizabeth graduated from East Tennessee State University, little did she expect to come back to her hometown to teach. She had several offers, and a job offer in California was her original first choice. However, she knew this would require that she first save some money, buy a car, and begin work toward the California tenure requirement of a master's degree.

The California school system agreed to keep her application active while she accomplished some of the above goals. She was subsequently offered a math teaching position at Robertsville Junior High School (RJHS) which she readily accepted knowing that this would allow her to live with her parents and save money faster.

She would soon find herself deeply involved in the implementation of exciting new reforms in the Oak Ridge Schools (ORS). To tell her story is to realize that change is a function of historical events, of social advancements, and of an educator fearless in taking on challenging new assignments. Thankfully, her creative energies and educational expertise have been dedicated to this community and to decades of Oak Ridge students and educators.

Mary Elizabeth still attends the class reunion of some of her first classes at RJHS. ORHS Class of '62 alumnus, Jack Bailey recalls Miss Alexander, his seventh-grade teacher.

He wrote, "I had the good fortune to be in her very first class. Back then, students had the same teacher for all classes, and we did not start to rotate classes until the next year. She had to deal with thirteen unruly boys, and she did a magnificent job of keeping our focus on the blackboard and not as much (of our attention) on the girls. She earned the respect of the whole class. She was so conscientious and so enthusiastic that the class wanted to do our best for her."

He further praised her influence saying, "Undoubtedly she has touched hundreds, even thousands of lives throughout her long career. We former students are better for it. She and I see each other occasionally now, especially at ORHS football games, and I consider her a real friend even though I still call her 'Miss Alexander'."

Only a few weeks into her first year of teaching at RJHS, Russia launched the first space satellite on Oct. 4, 1957. One local effect of this world changing event was the development of an Oak Ridge Schools math curriculum committee. She says, "I was privileged to serve on that committee...to explore and examine our curriculum for changes."

In the meantime, a national educational reform was initiated to address what was perceived as deficiencies in secondary math and science programs and to promote a new enriched and accelerated curriculum. The School Mathematics Study Group (SMSG) proposed vast, national curriculum changes, and they published teaching materials utilizing a 'new math' approach. The ORS math committee recommended that first year algebra be taught in the eighth grade to a selected group followed by geometry in the ninth grade.

This redesign provided for a fifth year of math, Calculus, to be taught in the twelfth grade. The SMSG curriculum was adopted by ORS, and newly released, government-issued SMSG textbooks were used in her eighth-grade Algebra 1 class as well as in seventh-grade prealgebra. She described the materials as: "Not just 'how to' but also 'why', giving students a logical thinking approach to math problems. It was good, but difficult material that students mastered."

Obviously, to be able to teach this new, innovative curriculum required numerous meetings, trainings, and committee reviews. Notably, the Oak Ridge School system was among the national leaders in this reform and was one of the first public schools in the south to offer a College Board Advanced Placement Calculus course by the early 1960s.

Given the overwhelming commitment of time to the SMSG implementation, Mary Elizabeth did not begin her work toward a graduate degree until the summer of 1961, eventually taking a leave of absence in the school year 1962-63 to earn a Master of Mathematics degree from the University of Tennessee. After only two more years in the RJHS classroom, Mary

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Elizabeth was tapped to join a Civil Rights Project Grant, the Curriculum Improvement Project, to create a plan for the complete desegregation of the ORS.

This project would finish what was started in 1955-56 when the ORS integrated Scarboro students from grades 7-12 into the student populations at RJHS and ORHS. (Note: Those eighty-five students are considered the pioneers, and now sixty-five years later, the community will celebrate and honor their transition in a series of planned events during 2020.)

The Civil Rights/ORS Curriculum Improvement Project, begun in 1965-66, addressed the national issue of 'separate but equal schools' and the court ruling that such programs were unconstitutional. Implementing the concept of neighborhood elementary schools in its first years of operation, ORS had established an all-black Scarboro School in the Scarboro community.

It was now apparent to ORS administrators that a grades K-12 desegregation plan for all its elementary schools and also Jefferson Junior High School had to be accomplished. The Project committee members, led by North Carolina A & I Professor Gene Watson who worked with a team of Oak Ridge educators, made the difficult decision to close Scarboro School in the redesign.

Mary Elizabeth's role was to serve as the Home-School Coordinator, a liaison between Scarboro parents and students and the ORS. To facilitate students' success at their new schools, she said, "Field trips, curriculum innovations, increased staff personnel, initiation of a preschool program, various schools' PTA involvement, and interaction via student pen pals and visitations were implemented."

In spring 1967 a visitation day was planned for all Scarboro students and interested parents to visit their assigned schools before the 1967-68 school year. Mary Elizabeth recalled accompanying the students: "The buses were met with pen pals and others greeting and welcoming the new students. On the buses leaving Scarboro the students were so quiet and sedate--the students appeared anxious of the unknown.

On the buses returning to Scarboro, the noise level was at a high decibel as they shared about their new friends and what had occurred during the visit." Mary Elizabeth's concerns were abated and her dreams for the future adjustment of her young charges and those of their new classmates were uplifted. Writing about this experience she said, "My involvement in this Project was one of the most meaningful experiences of my professional life. It broadened my perspective, my understanding, and my appreciation for other cultures and races."

Thinking that she would return to the classroom, and claiming that all she ever wanted was to be a "Little ole math teacher," she was asked instead to continue as the system-wide Home-School Coordinator with emphasis on follow-up with the former Scarboro students and their parents. Working under Sarah Ketron, the Director of Pupil Personnel, Mary Elizabeth was encouraged to earn her guidance counseling certification and to split her coordination job with a part-time elementary counseling assignment at Cedar Hill School.

During the 1978 school year, Mary Elizabeth accepted a substitute principal position at her school followed by an interim appointment as principal in 1979. This once again required her to add to her educational resume' the administrative certification such a position required. She subsequently served as the Principal of Cedar Hill School until its closing in 1985.

Of this assignment she effuses, "I could not have been a principal in a better school. The staff was so competent, caring, and congenial. The parents were so willing to do whatever was needed to make the school successful. The students were absolutely the best in town. I loved Cedar Hill and all that it included."

A former staff member at Cedar Hill, Flo Plemmons summoned a tale of Mary Elizabeth's fearlessness and relatability when she had to meet with a very angry parent whose student was facing disciplinary action. The staff was very concerned that their physically petite leader chose to meet with this imposing and agitated man.

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Thus, a few of the staff waited protectively outside her office. The meeting was short-lived and ended with the two exiting her office congenially laughing and thanking each other for a workable solution. The staff was agog, and the student issue was peaceably resolved.

The closing of Cedar Hill in 1985 would be Mary Elizabeth's second experience with a school closing. This time she organized staff, students, and parents to make it a smooth transition for students to their new schools of Willow Brook or Glenwood while also celebrating the ending of a special school.

Former student Leah (Moore) Thomas, an ORHS Class of 1995 alumna, wrote this poignant tale of the closing: "I remember at the end of my second-grade year, which was to be the final year of Cedar Hill School, marching up Kentucky Avenue with the entire school class-by-class, carrying signs that read, 'Going Out in Style!' It was emotional knowing that the school would be no more after that year, and our friends would be split up among the other elementary schools....In hindsight I learned that there is something to small towns, and that new friends would be made, and old friends would be reunited, if not in junior high at least in high school." (from *Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools 1944-2018*)

Oak Ridge Schools clearly understood that Mary Elizabeth was one of the best, an educator who had been willing to adjust, to grow, to loyally serve the school system, and to lead. Thus, she was appointed the Director of Pupil Personnel Services in 1985, a position she kept until her retirement in 1995.

She wrote of this time: "Once more I was in an entirely new setting and situation. Services in the PPS Dept. included all special education services, all guidance and counseling services, school health, testing and psychological services, attendance, implementing home-school policy, alternative school, and discipline hearings." In addition, she served on several systemwide and curriculum review committees where some of the results included: establishing the Wednesday in-service schedule, publishing a Discipline Handbook, initiating a systemwide gifted program, and developing AIDS guidelines for staff and students.

While all of the above duties surely consumed a 24-hour day, Mary Elizabeth found time for impressive community service. She has served on the boards of the Mental Health Association (president) and the Children's Museum; Child Abuse Review Team; Anderson County Youth Association; Robertsville Baptist Church Deacon, Trustee, Sunday School teacher, and numerous church committees to name only a few.

Her professional affiliations and honors could fill another column in this story. She continues to be active in the Oak Ridge Retired Teachers Association and in Delta Kappa Gamma, an honorary society for women educators. She loves to travel, and her trips have included Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and the Arctic Circle. She has completed numerous church mission trips in both the U.S. and abroad in Africa and Russia.

Her life is a story of exemplary service to education and to students and teachers who have so greatly benefited from the high standards and expectations she set for herself and for this community. She ended this interview with the following statement: "Oak Ridge Schools and the City of Oak Ridge have made such a difference in my life. I know that my life would have been so much different if my family had not moved to this unique and wonderful city. The Schools prepared me, challenged me, provided the opportunity to get an education and then encouraged me to seek additional education levels. To be the first in my family to go, complete, and seek an advanced college education is a wonderment to me. Of course, my family contributed to this, but I give primary credit to Oak Ridge Schools, its staff, and the unbelievable opportunities offered me. I shall always be grateful and appreciative."

Mary Elizabeth's investment in, and contributions to this community have made her one of my personal educational role models. Of all she has shared for this story, I love best the sagacity, inspiration, and humility expressed in the last sentence of her teacher stories submitted for the book, *Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools*. "As educators we think we teach, but in reality, we are learners because students teach us by blessing us with their wisdom and innocence."

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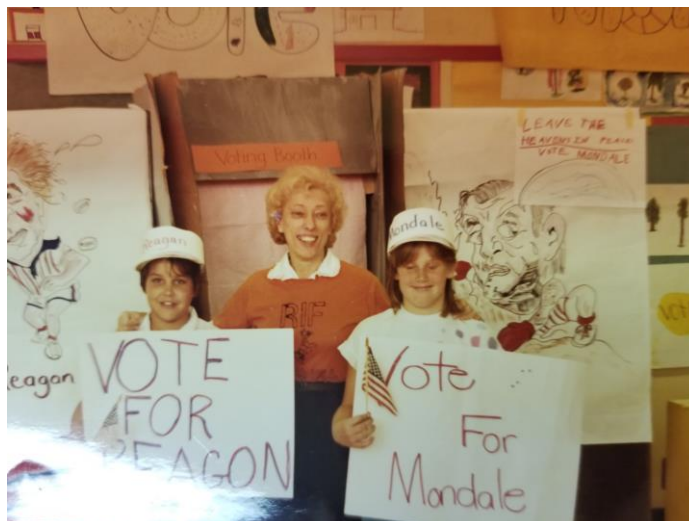
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Thank you, Benita, for yet another intriguing story of one of our own, this one right here in Oak Ridge!



Robertsville Junior High School faculty with Mary Elizabeth Alexander in the middle front



Mary Elizabeth Alexander and two students with political posters

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