

Mary Elizabeth Alexander story, Part one

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 9, 2020)

Another Oak Ridge School alumni story from Benita Albert. This one a local lady. Enjoy!

Sometimes the best stories are in your own backyard just waiting to be told. This alumna story is especially meaningful for me as I have known Mary Elizabeth Alexander since my first day of teaching. I clearly remember this enthusiastic and encouraging fellow educator as one of the first to welcome me to the Oak Ridge Schools and to advise me on all the wonderful students I would meet in my first year who were her former students.

Sometime later I would learn that Mary Elizabeth was an Oak Ridge Schools alumna (ORHS Class of 1953), that she played an important role in the final stages of desegregating the Oak Ridge Schools, and that she would ultimately devote herself to a career spanning thirty-nine years, from teacher to Director of Pupil Personnel in the Oak Ridge Schools. Many of the students I would teach profited from her caring ways and students-first dedication, and I, as a teacher, felt strongly supported as well as inspired by her leadership.

Fred Alexander, Mary Elizabeth's father, was a farmer, an L&N Railroad worker, and an Alcoa aluminum worker before arriving in Oak Ridge where he was trained as a chemical operator. Fred and his wife, Grace, were East Tennesseans who began married life on a farm and who later moved into the nearby town of Madisonville so their two girls could walk to public school. Neither Fred nor Grace had completed a high school education, and they wanted more for their daughters, Mary Elizabeth and her younger sister Barbaretta (Bobbie).

Accepting a job offer with the Manhattan Project in 1944, Fred had to come to Oak Ridge without his young family since housing was not available. One year later Fred jumped at the first opportunity to rent a house and bring his family to Oak Ridge. That house was a newly constructed flattop at 104 Regents Circle in a neighborhood that the young family watched grow rapidly and where the girls looked forward to greeting newly-arrived playmates weekly. The family qualified for only a two-bedroom house, since housing rules expected the two girls would share a bedroom. The flattop's 900 square feet of living space was to be their home until flattops were removed from their neighborhood in 1954.

The Alexander girls began fourth and fifth grades in the 1945-46 school year, walking to Linden Elementary School, a newly constructed building on Lasalle Road. Mary Elizabeth remembers this as a total change from her previous schooling. She made best friends with girls from Minnesota and Illinois, and she had teachers from Arkansas, New York, and West Virginia in her first three years.

She cited the many new facets of her Oak Ridge education: students from all across the U.S.; teachers from many different states with new teaching techniques, methods, and materials; enrichment courses and activities offered in music, art, physical education, and library; and student leadership opportunities in classes and student council.

Mary Elizabeth loved to read, and she considered the library a special place, full of so many more books than she had ever seen. Expanded opportunities to assist at school such as serving as a library assistant, helping in a kindergarten classroom, and serving as a student council officer all contributed to her increased passion for learning and for service.

Mary Elizabeth remembers her first school bus ride to Jefferson Junior High School (on the site of the present Robertsville Middle School) and the continued special class offerings plus an expanded after-school option in intramural sports. She said it was easy to stay after school for special activities since the public bus system served all Oak Ridgers.

She valued having school counselors and recalled, "They were there to guide us through pre- and early-teen years...how kind and helpful they were in responding to our 'critical' needs." It was her ninth-grade teacher, Mrs. Dempsey, who sealed her love for math and who shaped her early thoughts toward making math teaching a part of her future.

She enrolled in mathematics courses every year at ORHS. In this science-founded community, she still is amazed to recall that she was the only female student in the senior-year trigonometry and solid geometry course. Notably, all of her high school math teachers were females who continued to instill a passion for math and to provide a role model experience for her future career.

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As for her ORHS experience, Mary Elizabeth wrote, "ORHS opened up a whole new world for me." Her senior profile in *The Oak Log* described her as: "Future teacher, versatile, courteous, and a good athlete." Mary Elizabeth played all intramural sports throughout high school, and she and a group of friends approached ORHS Principal Roe for permission to form a varsity girls basketball team. (In the early years of Oak Ridge Schools, no girls' varsity sports were offered, though male students did have several varsity sports choices.)

Mary Elizabeth laughed when recalling that she and her friends were certain their appeal would be persuasive, especially since basketball was already an established sport in the area—they offered to play an exhibition game with the girls' varsity team at Oliver Springs High. The appellants anxiously awaited an administrative decision only to hear that the sport was "just TOO exhausting and TOO strenuous to play." It was not until 1972 that an ORHS girls' basketball team played the first varsity game, and one of the biggest supporters of the 'innovation' was Mary Elizabeth.

The 1953 *Oak Log* listed Mary Elizabeth's many school activities and honors: Latin Club, *Oak Log* associate editor, Leaders Club, class officer, National Honor Society, intramurals, student council, Most Courteous Girl Award, DAR Award, and Quill and Scroll. Mary Elizabeth cited Leader's Club as one of her favorite activities, a club that recruited students to serve as referees for the large, after-school intramurals program.

Having determined that she wanted a future in teaching, particularly math, Mary Elizabeth's ambitions were rewarded by being selected as the first Oak Ridge Education Association scholarship recipient. As a future teacher candidate, she was given a \$250 stipend which afforded her the opportunity to go to East Tennessee State University and major in Mathematics and Science while also receiving her teaching certificate.

Reflecting on her Oak Ridge childhood, Mary Elizabeth had much praise for the city's summer playground programs and for school library openings one or two days a week during the summers, thus keeping children's bodies and minds active and engaged. She remembered how grown up she felt when she was issued her official Oak Ridge resident security badge upon turning twelve years old. She mentioned how busy the city was, how often she had to stand on the crowded public buses, and how large the attendance was in Robertsville Baptist Church services, typically 500-700 worshippers.

Her family joined the church in 1949, attending Sunday services in her school, Jefferson Junior High (now Robertsville Middle School). It was her church that further supplemented her college finances by employing her as a church secretary for two summers. Mary Elizabeth continues to be active in Robertsville Baptist, and she smiles when stating she has known every pastor in the church history.

Her father retired from Y-12 shortly before his death in 1969. Her mother was a homemaker who also invested in Oak Ridge youth as a Girl Scout leader and a Sunday School teacher. Mary Elizabeth endearingly says that her parents were industrious, humble people who were thrilled to see the opportunities afforded their daughters in Oak Ridge and who were fully supportive of their teachers and their school and community activities.

Trying to tell the story of Mary Elizabeth Alexander is like trying to stuff an elephant into a grocery sack. Her stories are never ending, compelling, entertaining, and educational. I knew this before I took on this two-part article, because she was a major source of institutional knowledge in the writing of the Oak Ridge Schools history for the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation book, *Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1943-2018*.

The book has three major divisions: history, class stories, and teacher stories. Notably, Mary Elizabeth contributed to all three sections, offering an Oak Ridge Schools legacy of experiences from 1945-1995 as both a student and an educator. She was the anchor author for the Class of 1953 story, and her contributed teacher stories are enthralling—get a hankie before you read and prepare to both laugh and cry.

Part Two of her story will be devoted to her educational calling, highlighting a multi-level career dedicated to the children of Oak Ridge via her assignments from teacher, to Civil Rights Project Home-School Coordinator, to elementary counselor, to principal, to Director of Pupil Personnel.

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To write this second half of her story will be a daunting challenge in giving it the full credit she is due. Most certainly, Mary Elizabeth Alexander is an Oak Ridge treasure.

Thanks again, Benita. In part two of the story you will learn what Mary Elizabeth did regarding the integration of Oak Ridge Schools in 1955!



Student council at Linden School 1946 with Principal Hilary Parker who would later become Superintendent of Oak Ridge Schools and as Mary Elizabeth said, "He would shake my hand and hand me my ORHS diploma in '53." Mary Elizabeth Alexander is front row far right.



Mary Elizabeth (back) and good friend Judy Hillis in their Regents Circle neighborhood in late 1940's

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Mary Elizabeth (on right) and her sister Bobbie



Oak Ridge High School 1953 graduation picture in front of the family's flat top house