

2020 Oak Ridge High School Graduates Write Their Memories

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 15, 2020)

Benita Albert brings us memories of three Oak Ridge High School seniors as they have successfully navigated through this most unusual end of their high school experience because of COVID-19. You will be amazed at the manner in which each of these individuals have succeeded in spite of the obstacles they faced. Enjoy learning about three special people as Benita introduces each of them to us.

Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) 2020 graduates, Julia Steed, Tom (Ty) Dahl, and Muskaan Vohra recently submitted memories of their Oak Ridge Schools education. They wrote of "chunch," "slogs," praise for their teachers, and the startling end of their senior year. Their complete stories are now available on the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF) website within the virtual archive of Oak Ridge High School Class stories here <http://www.orpsef.org/archives>.

The ORPSEF sponsored book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools, 1943-2018," featured stories submitted by members from each of the first 75 classes. However, there were many more stories than book space could permit; thus, ORPSEF created an online repository, a space for many more alumni class memories to be shared.

The Foundation encourages ORHS alumni to continue to tell their stories, and that invitation has been extended to include classes beyond the first 75 years. The Class of 2020, now the 77th ORHS alumni group, certainly has a unique story to tell. ORPSEF hopes the 2020 grads will add more to the collected special memories of their Oak Ridge educational experience.

Julia Steed, daughter of Chad and Jessica Steed, first entered Oak Ridge Schools in the third grade when her family moved here from Mississippi. Julia praised her fourth-grade teacher, Maria Gall, at Woodland Elementary School. In a subsequent interview, Julia described Mrs. Gall as a caring person and an interesting story teller including many tales of her Cuban heritage that made a lasting impression on her students.

Julia wrote of her Combined Studies, sophomore year labors--"slaving away over sonnets," as well as teacher Ken Senter's AP US History "slogs." Students in his class were required to keep analytical notebooks which she says, "He absolutely loved to hear students call 'slogs'—short for Senter logs." When I first read her comments, I mentally formed a dictionary definition of slog, that is, "To plod as through mire." I am sure this double entendre for the student moniker of "slog" did not escape the humorous side of her respected teacher.

Julia's high school memories of her math teachers, Jessica Williams and Deanna Pickel, effusively honor their enthusiastic classroom demeanor, their dedication, and their accessibility. She wrote, "Teachers like these are what makes the Oak Ridge Schools outstanding...They have spent a great amount of time during the COVID-19 pandemic finding new ways to teach us and making themselves available in a virtual world. Their unceasing support and encouragement have kept us motivated during these uncertain times."

Julia will attend the University of Tennessee Knoxville, majoring in Computer Science. Though final decisions are still being made by the UTK administration, she expects to start in mid-August with the fall term on campus ending at Thanksgiving and final exams to be taken online during the first week of December.

Ty Dahl, son of Tom and Hannah Dahl, also moved to Oak Ridge at the beginning of his third-grade year at Woodland. Ty recalled favorite Jefferson Middle School teachers, Kevin Webb and Jason Nussbaum, for their humor and energetic teaching styles. In his class story, Ty recounted memories of favorite things he missed in the last weeks of high school: prom, senior tea, graduation, classmates, open campus lunch adventures, and band performances to name a few. He heaped overall praise on his teachers saying, "Their examples have made me want to become a teacher and help students as they have helped me." Ty rued the lack of an opportunity to thank his senior year teachers in person.

Ty plans to attend Brigham Young University next fall and major in history education with a minor in film. This interesting academic combination, Ty feels, could offer him the capability to write and produce historically based films, citing that

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there are so many important past events that have had little or no coverage. Ty has been informed that he should be able to move into campus housing in late August with classes due to begin in early September. Class formats are still to be determined.

Muskaan Vohra, daughter of Rakish and Tulika Vohra, moved to Oak Ridge where she began in fifth grade at Jefferson Middle School. She had especially kind words for her eighth-grade geometry teacher, Kathy Strunk, whom she said kept her classroom open and inviting to students needing help as well as a group study space before school or during lunch. Muskaan's 2020 Class story recalled her junior year and the many lunch hours she spent in the classroom of Jessica Williams, her AP Calculus BC teacher.

However, she also fretted about missing off-campus lunch privileges, that is, except for Thursday "chunch," also known as lunch, at First United Methodist Church. Muskaan added, "We were so passionate about Thursday 'chunch' that we (a group of her friends) formed a Chicken Pasta Fan Club."

In her senior year, Muskaan had teacher Tom Froning for AP Statistics, someone she described as her all-time favorite teacher. She described him as incredibly patient, innovative in personalizing the subject matter for them, and someone who got to know each student and their interests and activities outside of his classroom.

Muskaan will attend Emory University to pursue studies in neuroscience and behavioral biology. Emory is scheduled to begin August 21st with decisions on class formats to be communicated by June 15th. Muskaan commented that, "Emory, sitting nearby the headquarters of the Center for Disease Control, has proceeded with great precaution in developing their 2020-21 academic plan."

Interviewing these grads, the first-ever virtual graduation celebrants, I wanted to know more about their final weeks of high school. I asked them to go back to their last in-building day on Friday, March 13th. The following two-weeks of spring break brought ominous news and uncertainty before the last quarter of their senior year was to resume on March 23rd. Specifically, I asked: **What were your plans for Spring Break, and did you have any idea of what was to come?**

Julia was greatly disappointed that along with a family trip which was planned to New Orleans, the ORHS orchestra trip to New York and Washington D.C. was cancelled in the week before spring break—a foreboding sign. Of her two-week break, she described staying home and working on the Literary Period Group (LPG) assignment, the legendary, culminating project for all AP English Literature students across many decades of ORHS students.

For relief, she would go running or ride her bike whenever the weather allowed; this during a break she described as filled with too many rainy days and too much uncertainty. Much later, after spring break, she would learn the LPG projects, student-team collaborative presentations, would be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and state-mandated school closures.

Ty expressed disappointment that the spring break, ORHS band trip to New York City had to be cancelled. Instead, he traveled with his family to the Outer Banks of North Carolina where they stayed on Ocracoke Island. Their family learned, on the second day of their stay, that the Island was being placed on quarantine, meaning that no one could gain access to the Island, and if anyone left, they were not allowed to return. His family chose to stay for the week. Ty declared this quiet time with family a restful and fun respite.

Muskaan had plans to visit her older sister in San Francisco, but that was cancelled and she went into quarantine on March 15th at home. She said her father, a cardiologist, had expressed concern about the coronavirus contagion spread in family conversations in the week before spring break.

She also noted that schools were beginning to close across the country before the Oak Ridge Schools were due to reconvene after spring break, another omen for what was to come. The last quarter of her senior year reshaped instructional delivery and studies via online learning opportunities for completion of required coursework.

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By the end of spring break, it was obvious that a return to in-school classrooms was problematic. Oak Ridge Schools first delayed opening until a proposed start in April, later changed to May, and finally, in line with Tennessee mandates, to be terminated for the year.

However, online learning was already underway in certain ORHS courses. Any new work was not required unless the student opted for grade recovery/improvement of a final grade average determined from the first three quarters of work. However, for students still facing College Board administered, online tests for their AP courses, important test review and preparation loomed before the May AP exam dates.

Julia, Ty, and Muskaan all wanted the benefit offered of college course placement with AP test credits—their work was not done. **I asked them to describe their end-of-year virtual learning experiences.**

Julia was not one bit surprised to receive early contact from Deanna Pickel concerning the need for their Beyond Calculus BC class to complete a nine-week unit on Differential Equations. A curriculum of study was posted immediately after spring break, and Julia watched video class lectures online, delivered by her teacher.

She said, "We kept working, completed five tests, and finished the full course as prescribed by the curriculum." She continued, "In AP Calculus BC we were given an AP exam review packet the week before spring break, and that became our study guide and review for the remainder of the course along with our teacher's (Jessica Williams') online guidance and encouragement. I took AP exams in May for AP Calculus BC and AP Economics."

Ty said, "My parents and I wanted to keep up with the work. The fact that there was no grade pressure helped. My AP courses in English Literature, Statistics, and European History were my focus in preparation for the May exams."

Muskaan commented, "I was satisfied with my grade averages from the first three terms, and thus, I did not feel pressure to do any grade recovery work. I could concentrate my studies on the AP exams in Statistics and French that I took. I had a wall of AP Statistics notes, and given official permission to use notes on the exam, I felt confident with my preparation and ultimate test performance. An interesting component of my French exam was a conversation in French conducted over my I-Phone. I cancelled other potential AP exams after reviewing my university's policies for AP credits."

All three students reported that they had no difficulties submitting their AP test answers online within the timeline required. Their experience was certainly different from too many other students nationwide who will now face a June retake exam. Having completed the May exams, Julia, Ty, and Muskaan felt they had jumped the final hurdle for graduation and transition to college. They were ready for the future challenges at the end of the summer. I asked them, **"What are your summer plans?"**

Julia had planned to work a summer internship at ORNL before all such programs were cancelled due to the pandemic. She will now work a part time job at a software quality assurance company, and she hopes to have plenty of time for rock climbing, hiking, and doing things outdoors. Ty plans to stay home and enjoy more family time and perhaps find a summer job. Muskaan faces knee surgery and a recovery regimen to follow as well as preparing/packing for college and completing a couple of required Emory University placement tests online.

These ORHS students, from the most recent graduation Class of 2020, summarized their feelings of now being ORHS Wildcat alumni as follows.

Julia: "It feels so good to be done." Julia's brother, Blake, is a rising ORHS sophomore who is surely wondering what the next school year at ORHS promises; although, he has begun Wildcat football practice, a welcome return to team sports and camaraderie.

Ty: "The end was hard, but I am grateful for what I went through and learned." Ty is a second-generation Wildcat; his father, Tom, graduated from ORHS in 1993. His seven younger siblings are on course to be Oak Ridge Wildcat alumni of the future.

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Muskaan: "It is incredible to be an ORHS graduate. I feel extremely well prepared, thanks to my Oak Ridge Schools' strong academic program, to advance to college studies." Muskaan and her two older sisters are all ORHS graduates.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to get to know these amazing students. They represent their class very well. They are now the youngest ORHS alumni I have had the privilege to feature, not to forget the distinction of being members of the ORHS class with the most extraordinary conclusion to their education.

They, along with their peers, have met the challenge of completing an educational program in a time of great uncertainty and stress. Congratulations to all members of the ORHS Class of 2020! We would love to hear all your stories, to include them in the virtual archive of 2020 alumni memories with those of Julia, Ty, and Muskaan.

Should you be an ORHS alumnus wishing to share a special story in the archives from your Oak Ridge Schools' educational experience, you may email your story for submission and review to: jessica.steed@orpsef.org or mail by postal service to Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation, Jessica Steed, PO Box 117 MS-22, Oak Ridge, TN 37831. We would love to hear from any and all Wildcats across the seventy-seven years of ORHS classes.

Thank you, Benita, Julia, Ty and Muskaan! In this pandemic we have each had our share of burdens and have had to adapt. These three young people have demonstrated their dedication and expertise in dealing with circumstances beyond their control and still succeeding. It is good to see such excellence and be reassured that the future is going to be in good hands...

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Julia Steed

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Ty Dahl

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Muskaan Vohra