

Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 20, 2020)

Benita Albert brings us a real treat as she focuses on one of our own who has shown tremendous success in her chosen career. Enjoy learning more about someone you likely thought you knew well.

Nikki Caldwell Fargas, head basketball coach of the Louisiana State University Lady Tigers, has deep family roots in Oak Ridge. Nikki was a standout basketball player for Oak Ridge High School and the University of Tennessee graduating from each in 1990 and 1994, respectively. She generously shared many fond memories of Oak Ridge in a recent phone interview. This part one installment of her inspiring story will feature her Oak Ridge origins, a rich family history beginning within the first decade of Oak Ridge.

Nikki's great grandfather, Robert Lee, came to Oak Ridge in 1944 to start a black baseball team, the Oak Ridge Bombers. As Nikki described it, "They were in an independent league named, 'the new colored league'." Though there was an all-white team formed in 1948 using the same team name, the original team of all-black players were not allowed to play with white members of other baseball teams.

Furthermore, in an article by D. Ray Smith, "The Team that Lasted," (*The Oak Ridger*, August 4, 2009), Smith wrote: "The black baseball players in Oak Ridge were excluded from playing in other leagues, could not be considered for professional teams, were not welcome on plant teams." Nikki said that the Oak Ridge Bombers gave a sports opportunity for talented black athletes such as her great grandfather. He served in various capacities over the years from being a founding member, to player and coach for this team that lasted from 1944 to the middle 1960s.

The next generation, her grandparents, Bobbie (Lee) and Isiah Caldwell, were employees at K-25 and ORNL, respectively. Their son, Mike Caldwell, would graduate from ORHS in 1989 as a three-star athlete in baseball, basketball, and football. Nikki laughed when recalling that since Mike graduated only one year ahead of her, most students assumed he was her brother instead of her uncle.

Mike would go on to play at Middle Tennessee State University and then professional football over eleven years, 1993-2003. He is now the linebacker coach for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Nikki's mother, Jean Caldwell, graduated from ORHS in 1970. She went to Tennessee State University on an athletic scholarship for basketball and track. Unfortunately, ORHS did not have a girls' varsity basketball program until 1973. Jean honed her skills in community sports programs.

Nikki was born in 1972 with younger sister Simone to follow three years later. Their mother had a career in modeling, a job requiring much travel. Thus, when it was time for Nikki to begin school, Jean chose for her to live in Oak Ridge with her great grandparents and to begin first grade at Glenwood Elementary School.

Nikki has fond memories of her grandfather walking her to and from their home on Tacoma Road to the school bus stop. Grades two and three were spent with her grandparents on Robertsville Road, and her schooling was at Linden Elementary.

Nikki's mom ultimately moved to Oak Ridge, after which Nikki finished her elementary school years at Woodland, then another move placed her in the Robertsville Junior High School district. Nikki mused about her "broad" experience in the Oak Ridge Schools, remarking that by the time she got to ORHS, she knew many more students than most of her peers.

During her fifth and sixth grade years, Nikki's mother coached her basketball team for the Girl's Club. In grades 7-9, Nikki's coach was Lynn Burkey, both at RJHS and for the Amateur Athletic Union where she played for the East Tennessee All Stars, a highly successful, two-time national championship team. Nikki's summers were filled with AAU basketball, including twice when her team did not win the state, but she was selected to join the state winners (as a legal, state-representative addition) and where she was a part of two more national championships.

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Nikki was a star, a nationally ranked athlete by the time she arrived at ORHS and played for the Wildcats under Coach Jill Prudden and Assistant Coach Lynn Burkey. She was a member of the TSSAA state championship team in 1988 during her first year at ORHS.

Every year of her high school career, her Wildcat team went to State. The 1989 team played power-house Shelbyville in the TSSAA final round, a team they had defeated the year before, but this time ORHS came in second place. In 1990 her team lost in the second round of the state tournament, but Nikki learned the pressure of tough competition, and it would serve her well.

In her freshman year with the UT Lady Vols, Nikki's overtime, tough defensive play against the University of Virginia was credited with the outcome, the Lady Vols were crowned the 1991 NCAA national champions! She signed with the UT Lady Vols on October 15, 1989, before her senior season began.

She was the first girl from ORHS to receive a basketball scholarship at UT. In the 1990 ORHS Oak Log, Coach Prudden commented on Nikki's choice of UT, "It was a great credit to her. Nikki will be playing in one of the top programs in the nation."

More on Nikki's collegiate and professional career will follow in the part two installment of her story while we continue with her Oak Ridge memories. Her sister, Simone, graduated from ORHS in 1993 and secured a scholarship to play basketball at Austin Peay State University.

Simone's daughter, Khayla Pointer, a rising LSU senior guard plays for the Lady Tigers. Khayla had a stellar career at Holy Innocents Episcopal School (Sandy Springs, Ga.) where her team won the Class AA Georgia state championship in her junior year and runner-up to state champion in her senior year. Simone is a registered nurse living in the Atlanta area.

Speaking with Nikki about her Oak Ridge memories, she replied, "It wasn't all sports." She said it was important to her mother that her children have a strong family connection and a great education, an Oak Ridge Schools education.

Her mother expected grades of A or B in all subjects, and she held firm that extra activities could be in jeopardy if they interfered with their grade performance, and as Nikki put it, "That included basketball." The sense of family was strong and ever-supportive as a retinue of her family--grandparents, mom, aunt, uncle, cousins--were cheerleaders at all ORHS Wildcat games.

Nikki remembered an ORHS Spanish class as a favorite, a class where conversing in Spanish was emphasized. She remembered they would learn short sentences or phrases which they would try to speak to each other outside of class. She said that as many as ten years after ORHS she would meet classmates who would still test those sentences and phrases with each other.

Her participation in the Southeastern Educational Consortium for Minorities in Engineering was an important chance for Nikki to see the future. A SECME-sponsored college visit to Duke University, a field trip with ORHS students and students from Knoxville area high schools, convinced her that, "There is a life beyond basketball." She described this field trip as one of her first, an important opportunity to meet and make new friends, and a chance to see a life beyond Oak Ridge.

In the community, Nikki loved YWCA programs, especially arts and crafts classes. She also chuckled over her memories of learning to clog, an East Tennessee dance she says she has not continued to practice though she claims to still remember certain steps.

Nikki had a junior high period when art, namely sketching/drawing, became her passion. She said, "I thought I might become an artist." This passion was further fueled by a school-sponsored trip to Italy and an immersion in the rich art heritage of the country. They visited many cities and museums, from Florence to Venice and Rome.

ORHS Coach Prudden would serve as a special role model for what Nikki's ultimate career would become. Nikki said, "She exposed us to so much: how to train, to compete, to be a great teammate, to create a bond of sisterhood from two

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strong rival junior high teams, and so much more... I carry her teachings with me, she allowed me to be right where I am today."

Of her Oak Ridge Schools education and community support, Nikki reflected: "I had so much support growing up from family and community. I had a commitment by my teachers to excel in the classroom. I felt it at every level, my journey was huge! Compared to my grandmother's generation, where students were bused to Knoxville for their education, my generation had more opportunities... To come from an ancestor who had to start his own (black) league to play baseball, I'm such a grateful recipient to be able to coach a college team."

Nikki is a passionate, disciplined, and inspirational role model—a wonderful ambassador for Oak Ridge Schools alumni and the Oak Ridge community. My conversation with her will continue to her collegiate and professional journey in the next installment.

That story will also address the challenges she is meeting in 2020 as she discussed COVID-19 concerns, interruptions and uncertainties of schedules, and current social unrest issues.

Now you know more than before about Nikki Caldwell Fargas. Benita has only just begun. Stay tuned for her next installment and learn more about her more recent achievements.



A young Nikki scores

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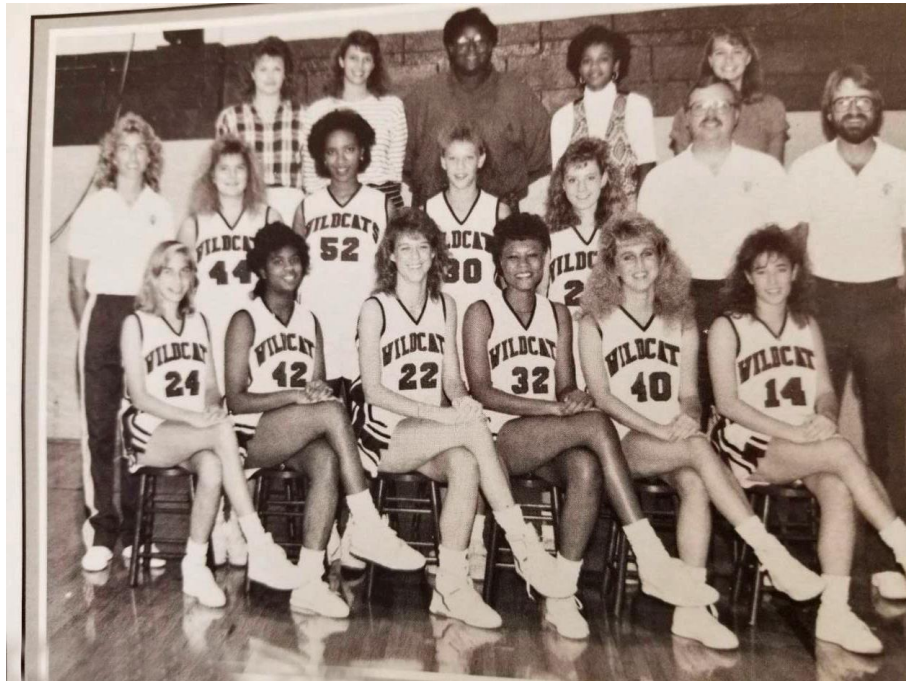
Nikki continues to lead



A strong play

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The Wildcat team



YES! Nikki Caldwell Fargas in her stride as a winning coach