

Julia Watson McClanahan Part One

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 4, 2021)

Benita Albert brings us a poignant story of chronic illness, Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis. It is also a story of tremendous faith in the face of adversity hard to imagine in a young child.

If you never met Julia Watson McClanahan you missed knowing a special person who was a profile in courage, faith, and passion. Julia was a 1979 Oak Ridge High School graduate and a lifetime Oak Ridge resident, except for her college years. I was privileged to have her as my student during her junior and senior years in Math Analysis and AP Calculus.

She was an eager student who was disciplined in her studies. The personal characteristics aforementioned could be applied to so many ORHS students, but Julia's educational journey was rife with interruptions due to her battle with a chronic disease, Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA), an infirmity that first struck her at age seven. Julia was able to attend school in person only one-half of her K-12 years, but she continued to push forward, to advance her studies and stay on track with her peers through homebound lessons and special services.

I was deeply touched to observe her drive and honored to support her desire for classroom inclusion and growth. She walked into my classroom each day with a big, contagious smile and a profound appreciation for each moment she spent with friends in collaborating and learning. Though her traverse to classes was more tedious for her than her peers, she was never late. Her sheer joy at being a part of the student body and participating in student activities and social life was an inspiration.

Telling her incredible story has been made easier by the written legacy she has left, a manuscript of her personal memories, of her advocacy for those dealing with chronic illness, and of her musings on the importance of faith. These papers were found shortly after her death, in late 2019, by her husband Steven McClanahan.

Though her writings tapered off after 2010, Steven was moved to complete her story and to publish the book: "My Life with Chronic Illness and God's Grace," by Julia and Steven McClanahan, WestBow Press, 2021. The subtitle: "Julia's Journey of Faith," highlights her recognition of "the team" she valued in dealing with her disease, a "team" she said was led by Jesus alongside her family, friends, and medical staff. Her story is bigger than just her affliction, she became a wife, mother, and leading advocate at the local, state, and national levels through the Arthritis Foundation

Julia was born in the Oak Ridge Hospital in 1961, the first child of Lewis and Geraldine Watson followed two years later by the birth of a brother, Tommy (ORHS Class of 1981). Julia's grandparents, Samuel and Julia Bryant, were Oak Ridge pioneers, arriving in this "Secret City" in 1943 where Samuel was a rigger by trade at K-25, and Julia was employed as a Calutron Girl.

They arrived when Geraldine was three years old, moving with their six children into a three-bedroom H house and a neighborhood they loved in East Village. Geraldine graduated from ORHS in 1957, and after attending business school, she secured a position at the Y-12 complex where she met her future husband, Lewis Watson. Lewis was a welder, and later a welding engineer, at the Y-12 plant from 1952 until his retirement in 1989. After Julia's birth, Geraldine chose not to work until Julia began elementary school. Geraldine served as a substitute teacher in the Oak Ridge Schools and later worked with the Basic Educational Skills Program for the school system.

In her memoirs, Julia listed some early childhood milestones: learning to ride a bike, climbing the tree house her dad built, active play times with friends, and being in love with school. She recalled that it was during her first grade at Glenwood Elementary School when she began feeling recurring episodes of pain in her knees, pains that grew progressively worse over time. Though her parents thought it was normal growing pains, it was after fever set in that a pediatrician diagnosed a viral infection. However, her continued illness prompted her parents to have her admitted to the East Tennessee Children's Hospital in Knoxville.

Julia remembered, "The pain was so bad that I could not even stand the weight of sheets on my body. If someone leaned on my hospital bed, it felt like I was being stabbed." Julia gave much credit to her parents for their advocacy for her diagnosis and for their prayers and faith that her well-being rested in God's and caring medical experts' hands. It was a

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doctor, an internist with a specialty in arthritic symptoms, who would make the Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA) diagnosis.

Though JRA was relatively unknown at the time, Dr. James Turner's insight and concern for his young patient was spot on. Julia's relationship with Dr. Turner continued over the next twenty years. Julia noted that there were no rheumatologists in Knoxville at that time, but Julia remembers Dr. Turner's explanation well.

She wrote, "He sat down next to my bed and talked to a seven-year-old about her disease as my parents listened. He explained that JRA is not common, but it does occur more often than people realize. He explained that the painful rash (she experienced) was caused by inflammation of the arteries known as rheumatoid vasculitis. He explained that arthritis is an autoimmune disease where the immune system mistakes the body's own cells for foreign invaders. In my case, my body was attacking the synovium around my joints, causing them to be inflamed, painful, and tender. The synovium is the lining around your joints that helps keep them lubricated so they can move smoothly. After he explained all of this, he concluded by saying my case was the worse he had ever seen."

What follows of Julia's medical story includes numerous hospitalizations, including extended treatments at Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) in Nashville. The Watson family lifestyle drastically changed as mom Geraldine chose to stay with Julia while hospitalized, and Lewis worked and cared for Tommy at home in Oak Ridge. Geraldine encouraged Julia to stay on pace with her school lessons while also being the ever-present emotional and medical support for her daughter.

When VUMC staff suggested an extended stay to teach Julia skills to deal with her illness, including the hint that parents were not needed during such time, Geraldine balked. Julia says, "My mother informed them that no one was going to take care of her child but her. Between her, my family, and the Lord, her little girl was going to thrive despite JRA." Subsequently, the medical staff taught Julia's parents stretching and motion exercises to continue to keep her joints flexible, a labor of love that would become regimen throughout Julia's life.

Julia happily returned home where early morning therapy, via a whirlpool device placed in the family bath tub, started her days. Julia was assisted by her busy mother who first had to get Tommy off to school. Though Julia said the pain never subsided, such spa-like treatments, and later an outdoor, heated pool her parents installed in the backyard, took the edge off her pain. The outdoor pool would prove to be more than arthritic therapy, it was also social therapy as it became a favorite gathering spot for many neighborhood and school friends.

Julia has certain fond memories of return visits to East Tennessee Children's Hospital over her young years. She wrote, "Between the rarity and severity of the disease and my numerous hospitalizations, I became somewhat of a celebrity at Children's Hospital. During this time, they were building a new Children's Hospital (the current hospital) across the street. The President of Children's Hospital, Dr. Brown, would come see me often. To get me out of the hospital room, he would pick me up out of my bed, place me in a wheelchair, and take me on a tour of the new children's hospital. He was a truly kind man who answered all my questions. Sometimes he would take me to physical therapy rather than have an orderly do it." Julia's relationship with many medical professionals would spark her interest in a future in biology and medicine, and many of her doctors became personal friends and supporters of her advocacy for Arthritis Foundation causes.

During her second through fourth grades, Julia was unable to attend school and most of her junior high school years required homebound instruction. Of her Oak Ridge education, Julia said, "I realize how blessed I was to live in Oak Ridge, where the teachers were so accommodating and helpful. I have met so many families over the years that faced tremendous obstacles in their fight to get an education for their children with arthritis and other disabilities. My teachers, principals and administrators were extremely helpful and eager to make sure I received the best education possible."

During fifth grade at Glenwood, Julia refused to use a wheelchair which posed difficulties since in the early '70s, many places did not provide handicap accessibility. She recalled her mother getting her to Roger Toler's classroom where she would be, in her terms, "stuck for the day," with no outside recess and few lunchroom visits. However, she was never alone since many peers chose to stay with her.

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Though now it might be considered unwise, she relished those times friends rolled her on an audio-visual cart to music class, the office, and even the lunchroom. She mused, "We would go careening down the hallway giggling and laughing hysterically. It was a sight to behold! But for a few minutes, the pain moved into the back of my mind, and I was free from it. Thank you, Lord for teachers and friends who cared." In another book passage, Julia advised, "If you know someone with an illness who is homebound and wonder what you can do to help, be a friend to them! It is medicine that can relieve the pain of loneliness. I thank my Lord for the blessing of each one of those who were true friends to me."

During sixth grade Julia delighted in the gift of total remission. Even though at age eleven she already suffered from deformities of her fingers, knees, and hips, she found relief from swelling in her joints and suffered much less severe pain. She celebrated being able to pitch on a slow-pitch softball team, ride her bike, and even with some difficulty, earn a physical fitness patch in gym class. She managed with her misshapen fingers to learn to play the guitar well enough that she and classmate Keith Childs played and sang "Delta Dawn" at the Glenwood talent show.

Unfortunately, at the end of her seventh-grade year at Jefferson Junior High School (JJHS), Julia's pain returned requiring another Children's Hospital visit. Thus began her introduction to a lifelong friend and doctor, Dr. Joseph Defiore of the Knoxville Orthopedic Clinic, a place that would become her mainstay for her next forty-five years.

She left the hospital in a wheelchair shortly after her thirteenth birthday, and she was homebound during the eighth grade. She praised her homebound instructor, Anna Marie Smith, who came one hour a day, three days a week, to keep her abreast of all her studies while offering abundant praise and compassion.

In August before her ninth-grade year, Julia underwent what would become the first of many surgeries during her lifetime, a procedure to reduce swelling in her knee joint by removing the synovium. Later she would face a total hip replacement in 1976 before her ORHS sophomore year. Because of her intense interest in science and the inability to experience laboratory work on homebound, Julia was approved to take biology at JJHS under the helpful encouragement of teacher Lanny Moore.

With doctors' permissions, Julia was approved to attend a half day of classes at ORHS in her sophomore year where she took chemistry, advanced English, and history. Friends were once again key to her assimilation as they carried books and opened doors for their friend who was on crutches. She described a feeling of "normalcy," for being back in school and meeting such challenges as timed testing. Later in her sophomore year, she was able to walk with only a cane.

Julia returned to school fulltime during her junior and senior years. She challenged the highest course offerings in math, science, and English. She immersed herself into a variety of school activities from a Stat Cat for ORHS football, to a representative at the Superintendent's Advisory Council, to Science Aide, National Honor Society member, and a participant in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes founded and led by Coach Emory Hale.

Julia's social life expanded with membership in the Penguins, a girls' social club with many outside-of-school activities from dances to charitable and civic-work projects. She had high school "crushes," and she dated even though a pillow was an added accouterment to ease the pain of sitting at a movie.

Throughout her early Oak Ridge years, Julia participated in the youth activities of her family's church at Central Baptist as often as was possible. Her parents' deep and abiding faith became the North Star for Julia as she witnessed her family struggle with not only the financial burden of her illness, but the stress and uncertainty for her future, all the while maintaining a loving and hopeful spirit.

Generous community people supported the family including one unexpected, anonymous gift from a church member which allowed Julia's parents to purchase a car for her transition to college. Julia dubbed it "God's Rod", a brown 1974 Buick Century. Thus, she was on her way to Vanderbilt University in the Fall of 1979 armed with the courage, academic desire, and the tenacity to pursue further studies in science and perhaps a medical career.

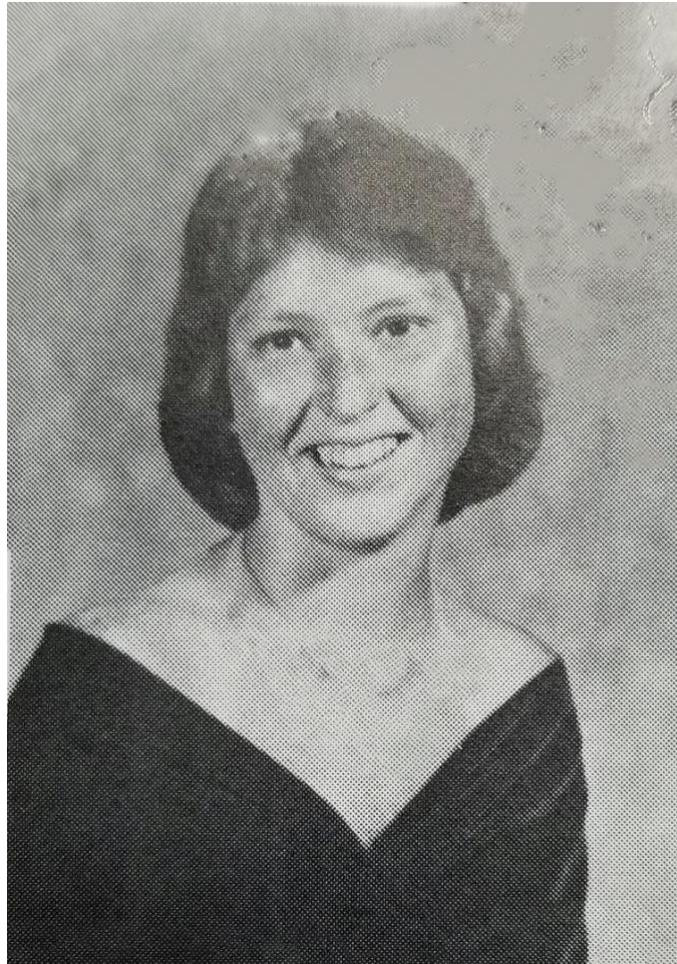
More of the inspiring story of her life will follow in a Part Two installment.

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Julia's indomitable approach to life is a lesson to us all. She recalled her mother's attempts to address her doubts when Julia rued the burden her illness brought both physically and emotionally. That advice became what Julia eventually called her life story: *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13.*

What a tremendous example of a strong and courageous young lady we have with the story of Julia and her battle at such a young age with a debilitating illness. Benita will conclude her story in the next column of this series.



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Left to right, front row: Sharon Baker, Lisa Webber and second row: Kathy Spisak, Kim O'Hara, and Julia Watson