

John Penniman, ORHS Class of 2001 – part one

(Published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 15, 2021)

Benita Albert brings us a great story of yet another amazing Oak Ridge schools graduate. John Penniman's story is one Benita selected because of his contribution to the 75th anniversary book on Oak Ridge schools. It is a two-part story and rich in detail exploring John's intriguing life since leaving Oak Ridge. You will be drawn into the story and enjoy reading in part one of his first-person account of his time in Oak Ridge.

John David Penniman arrived in Oak Ridge with his family in the summer of 1995. He began seventh grade at Jefferson Middle School (JMS) soon thereafter, and he graduated from Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) in 2001. His post-secondary studies led to a Master of Theological Studies from Emory University followed by a PhD from Fordham University in the History of Christianity.

Now an assistant professor of Religious Studies at Bucknell University and an author, John says of his current work: "From my (undergraduate) years at Elon College, I had always wanted to teach at a small liberal arts-style college. I really value the close relationships with students, small classes, and a strong campus community culture."

I was drawn to John's story by the moving account he wrote of losing ORHS friends during his last two years of high school, in his submitted story for the ORHS Class of 2001 in the book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools, 1943-2018." His words evoked the pain, empathy, confusion, and questioning in his attempts to deal with such loss. His writing greatly moved me and led me to seek out his subsequent life story—an evolutionary tale of historical research, travels, writing, teaching and innovative course design, and spiritual growth.

Part One of John's story will focus on his Oak Ridge memories, while a subsequent Part Two will further detail his professional interests and accomplishments, concluding with his thoughtful answer to spirituality during this time of great societal crises in America.

Of his Oak Ridge beginnings, John recalls: "In '95, when we arrived, I was about to start seventh grade, probably the worst grade to be the new kid. I was at Jefferson (JMS) for the first two years. It was rough at first, having just moved from a suburb of Washington D.C. I wore all black. Wore earrings. Did not fit in. During homeroom attendance on my first day, I told a teacher (in front of the class) that I was in the witness protection program and that I should be called 'Sam'. The joke worked a little too well: by the end of the year, a few folks still called me Sam... I was a mediocre student during my time in Oak Ridge. This is not self-deprecating. I graduated with a B-average. I suspect most of my former teachers would be surprised to find out that I earned a PhD and am now a college professor."

John was the youngest of three children. His sister, Kara, finished her final two years of college at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio during the family's first years in Oak Ridge while sister, Rachel, completed her junior and senior years at ORHS, graduating with the Class of 1997. His parents came to Tennessee where his father, William David Penniman, accepted an interim dean appointment at the University of Tennessee (UTK). John said, "My parents chose Oak Ridge primarily because of the school system, but I think they'd heard lots about the intellectual culture of the small town and that appealed to them, too."

John said his father's career in information science, then academia (UTK), transitioned to independent consultant work while they lived in Oak Ridge. This change, as John described, gave his father more time for a favorite hobby: restoring old cars. He said his father finished a 1927 Chevrolet and a 1965 Ford Mustang.

John's mother, Charlotte Penniman, found many venues for career and service work in Oak Ridge. He wrote, "In her first year, she volunteered at the nearby arboretum and was told by the staff that she was the first person ever to volunteer there! She then got involved working as a librarian in the school system. That suited her well, since she loved books, and also, working in the school meant that she got to eat lunch with my sister Rachel during her final two years of high school. During this time, she also worked for Judi Gray, a local interior designer, helping her with clients. Later, mom became the area director of Habitat for Humanity of Anderson County, which was run out of Chapel on the Hill. This was a perfect position for her, being a highly organized, empathetic, and people-oriented person. Outside of work, she could usually be found with a gaggle of her lady friends getting coffee at the Daily Grind or lunch at the Soup Kitchen."

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Inquiring further about his parents, John answered: "After I graduated from ORHS, my dad accepted a new academic position as founding dean of a graduate program at the University of Buffalo. They moved to upstate New York the week they dropped me off at college. A few years later, they moved to Albany where dad oversaw the SUNY library system. When it came time to retire after a long, rich, and eclectic career, they chose to return to Columbus, Ohio in 2011—my mom's hometown and the place where they first met. Dad is back to restoring old cars, and mom is very active in the local Democratic Party, and they regularly participate in lifelong learning courses through Columbus-area university programming."

Returning to his Oak Ridge Schools memories, John recalled several teachers and courses that influenced his future choices. "I always liked English classes the most, at JMS with Alpa Scarborough and Sisse Parker. In high school I had Carol Yoakley for Senior AP English and Ann Johnson for advanced junior English. I distinctly remember asking Mrs. Johnson for her endorsement to take Senior AP the following year, even though I probably didn't demonstrate the qualities of an AP student. She graciously and enthusiastically agreed, which remains one of my earliest memories of a teacher seeing potential in my intellectual abilities."

John continued, "I also really enjoyed my history courses. I had Dennis Rush for World History. One of my first (and only!) grade of A in high school. It is possible that my love for learning about Ancient Roman history started in his classroom...Beyond these two subjects, which formed me the most intellectually, I have wonderful memories of Senor Lloyd Wattenbarger's Spanish class—especially the trip to Spain after my tenth grade year...His 'progressive dinners' were an absolute highlight of the year, even though I am sure he has years of horror stories about the student-prepared food he was required to eat! I loved my Psychology AP course with Vondle Shipley and enjoyed her teaching so much that I considered majoring in the subject in college...I must also mention Nita Ganguly, whom I had freshman year for Biology and then again in my junior year for AP Environmental Science. Recall that I was a mediocre student. This was especially true for all my math and science courses. But Dr. Ganguly had no patience for this kind of defeated attitude. She approached me and lab mates—Avalon Mansfield and Allison Albert—and asked us if we'd be interested in attending lectures on environmental issues at UTK. She asked us to get involved in local community organizing around environmentalism. My lab mates, having aced every lab and class assignment, were far more deserving of these extra-curricular honors. But I benefitted by sheer proximity, and it was one of my first tastes of how intellectual curiosity necessarily bleeds out of the classroom and into the world."

I am impressed by John's vivid memories of his Oak Ridge Schools, grades 7-12, education, and by the gratitude he shows in his remembrances. I also knew that John immersed himself in many interesting and diversified school and community activities, during his Oak Ridge years. Thus, I asked him to reflect on events and influences of significance within the Oak Ridge community. Those memories follow as he wrote them:

"I participated in Mock Trial with George Davis...He remained an informal mentor to me, even after I dropped out of his AP Economics course because I couldn't keep up. His room was covered in college pennants from former students, and I eagerly returned after graduating to bring him one. I was involved in yearbook for nearly my entire career at ORHS—working closely with Jennifer York (Oak Log sponsor). I was assistant editor my junior year, and editor during my senior year... It was because of Ms. York that I intended to major in Journalism at college. Because I was not at all forward thinking about the increasingly digital future of the world, I had planned to focus on print journalism of all things! I was often in student government and served as student council president during my senior year. Kelly Parker, a guidance counselor, got me involved in a peer mentorship program. I remember how attentive she was to the emotional well-being of students.

I was most involved in the baseball team, playing freshman ball, JV, and then varsity my junior and senior year. Coach Mark Garrison and Coach Tom Froning were mainstays in my life for three years, and I looked to them for mentorship on and off the field. Coach Garrison (known as 'Mad Dog' by those who loved him) somehow convinced a group of players—maybe four or five—to show up at the weight room at 5:30 am during the preseason for an hour every day. We did this for two hours, and it was the most rigorous workout regimen I have ever successfully implemented in my life. I'd be hard pressed to commit to thirty minutes of yoga a couple times a week now.

Coach Froning was my primary mentor at the high school. I sought him for academic and personal advice. He was particularly important for the baseball guys who endured the sudden and tragic death of our friend and teammate Kevin

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Calia in the summer of 1999. It is hard for me to overstate the impact of this event on my life, and I suspect many of the guys on the team would say the same thing. For me, the event started a long journey of seeking and questioning about religion that would ultimately lead to my career as a professor of religious studies and a historian of Christianity. But in 1999/2000, it was all trauma and pain, and Coach Froning sat with me and my teammates through a lot of it. He and his wife had me over for meals or took me to church whenever I wanted to attend. Everyone was doing their best in those days, with a group of young guys who were grieving. Many adults jumped too quickly to answers, or to altar calls. But Coach was patient and listened more than he spoke. I've tried to embody that in my own teaching and mentorship with students."

In the Oak Ridge community, John reminisces across a variety of experiences:

"This is a strange memory, but I always enjoy recalling the fact that the local United Methodist Church would hire a DJ and host a dance for students in the eighth and ninth grades following the Friday night football games. It says something about a congregation's care for local teens that they would turn their auditorium into a mosh pit every Friday, and that the adult volunteers would dutifully make the rounds, flashlight in hand, during slow songs to ensure that there was 'room for the Holy Spirit.'

In my final two years (of high school) I got really involved in Young Life. At this time Bill Reazer was the area director...A classmate, and friend of many, committed suicide in the fall of 2000. Around the same time, another friend's parents were killed in a terrible car accident. These events happened in close succession, and, combined with Kevin's death a year prior, it felt like death was sort of always haunting us. But adults, like Bill, showed up to grieve with students and were available as support to young folks.

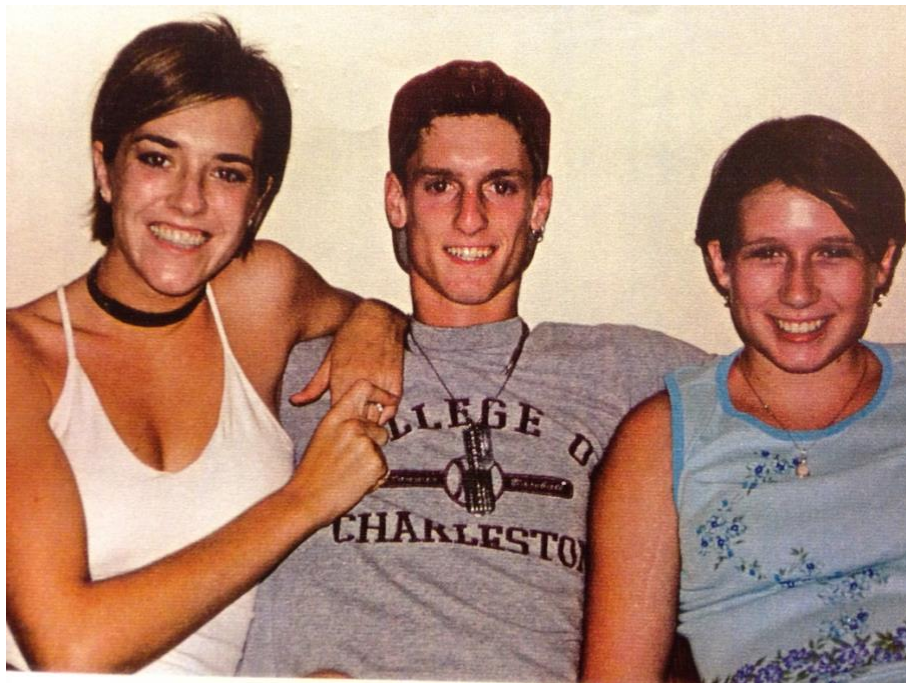
In the fall of 1999/winter of 2000, David Clary invited me to help him out with broadcasting the play-by-play for the ORHS varsity basketball teams. I really enjoyed working with him on the broadcasts, and this, combined with work on the yearbook, sort of prompted my interest in journalism for college...As it turns out, I never set foot in the communications building at college and didn't take a single course in the subject! Following the death of my friend Kevin, I had become intensely curious about religion. So, I suppose in a big way, adult mentors of mine, like Tom Froning, Bill Reazor, Nell Ann Hochanadel, Kelly Parker, and Pastor Tom Job, all contributed to my dedicating my life to the study of Christianity. Though perhaps not in the way they might have anticipated at the time. It took another three or four years after high school—amplified by the events of September 11, 2001 and aftermath—for that personal exploration to sharpen into an academic interest in religion."

John's collegiate and professional journey will continue in Part Two of his story. But, before I conclude this first part, I want to thank all of the people who were so very important to John and his peers in finding their way through challenges and unspeakable tragedies. I know many of the mentors John mentioned, either by name or through community mentorship programs. We are most fortunate in Oak Ridge to have such caring, involved, and committed mentors for our community's children. John Penniman, an incredibly active young student and citizen of Oak Ridge during his six years here, has gone on to make us all proud with his gratefulness for the time he spent here and for the amazing professional and spiritual journey he is now pursuing. You don't want to miss Part Two of his story!

Thank you, Benita, for providing such an insightful account of John's experiences while in Oak Ridge Schools. I know you readers are anxious to read the part two of John's story where Benita will bring us the story of his life after Oak Ridge. You will be especially interested in his personal observations of the turmoil in our nation today.

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Allison Albert Guercio, John Penniman, Avalon (Mansfield) Gourlay, Lab partners in AP Environmental Science, Spring 2000, Before they went to a lecture at UT Knoxville



Adam Walker, Scott Fischer, John Penniman, Ross Nesbit, Todd Wilson, Kyle Sherman (photo by Barbara Younkin)

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David Clary and John Penniman doing the broadcast for the Oak Ridge High School varsity basketball in 2000