

# Ricky Jones, Part One (The accomplishments of a 1999 ORHS grad who copes with blindness)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 14, 2021)

Benita Albert brings us the story of Ricky Jones. You will find this one most unusual. Enjoy learning about the accomplishments while dealing with blindness.

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The full New York City Marathon, a 26.2-mile challenge was completed by 1999 Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) alumnus Ricky Jones twice, in 2014 and 2015. Perhaps there are other ORHS alumni who can claim a similar feat, but Ricky's achievement must include the fact that he was totally blind. He was able to run with the guided assistance of two running partners, volunteers from the Nashville chapter of Achilles International, an organization dedicated to providing support for disabled runners. More on Ricky's marathon experiences will be told in a part two installment of his amazing life story.

First, let's step back to the mid-1940s and Ricky's grandfather, Willard Boone, who worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to pave the streets of Oak Ridge. His grandparents lived in Oliver Springs in what Ricky was told (in the 1990s) was the second oldest, still standing structure in the town, their home on Kentucky Street. Ricky's mother, Debbie Boone, was born in the Oak Ridge Hospital in 1961. Born vision impaired, Ricky said that it was normal in those days to send blind children to a special state school.

Thus, Debbie attended the Tennessee School for the Blind in Nashville, riding a train back and forth for short monthly visits at home. When Debbie became pregnant in her senior year of high school, she dropped out of school, gave birth to Ricky at the old Nashville General Hospital, and within six months, moved back to her parents' home. Debbie lost all vision due to glaucoma at age 16, before Ricky was born. Ricky's father, an inconstant presence throughout his childhood, was also blind due to complications from glaucoma and diabetes. Ricky was born with 20/200 vision which deteriorated to 20/400 by his sophomore year at ORHS, he was considered legally blind from birth. Within the last six years, Ricky reports that he has lost all vision.

Ricky's mother, an educational advocate for both of her eyesight impaired sons, went back to school to earn her GED, high school equivalency diploma, in 2008-2009. Her second child, Dwaine, is ten years younger than Ricky. After the family moved to Nashville in 2000, Dwaine first attended public school where he struggled before transferring to the Tennessee School for the Blind as a day student. It was Debbie's strong desire that Ricky have a mainstreamed educational opportunity, and she did not want him to be separated from their family living in East Tennessee by sending him to Nashville to school.

Ricky's kindergarten year was spent at Linden Elementary School. He was retained for that grade, as Ricky remembers, because he had not learned to read. He was subsequently referred to a special program. Ricky said, "I was put on a bus to Clinton each morning where I joined other students on a second bus to our special needs school and a more intense, one-on-one instructional program." He came back to Willow Brook Elementary School for grades two through five, then Robertsville Middle School (RMS) for grades six through eight. And finally, ORHS.

School was never easy, but his mother made sure appropriate accommodations to his educational program were followed. He had an assigned vision teacher aide throughout his Oak Ridge years, was provided large-print texts, a slate board, lighted magnifiers, and even binocular glasses to see the chalkboard. Ricky viewed these vision-assistance objects as both a blessing and a curse. He said, "They pointed out my disability to my classmates." He wore thick, orange tinted glasses when he first began school. He poignantly remembered his first day at Linden School. "I asked an older boy to help me find my classroom to which he replied, 'I ain't going to help you, four-eyes'; and then he punched me." Ricky learned early to be as self-sufficient and invisible as he possibly could.

Other accommodations, to come later, included extra time allotments to complete assignments and also tests. Ricky still remembers the pain of the T-CAP, a state testing program which required a passing grade as a graduation requirement. Though he was granted time-and-a-half to complete his T-CAP tests, Ricky struggled to read passages then answer questions, often guessing at answers when he came up short on time. The test caused more than anxiety, there was

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always eyestrain/fatigue and the frustration of seeing and marking the tiny bubbles on the answer sheets. It took him several times to pass; although, by high school a change in the state guidelines permitted tests to be read to him as well as assistance provided in marking the bubbled answers.

The classroom often provided anxious moments, and Ricky tried hard to not stand out, to prevent being noticed and ridiculed by fellow students. He fondly remembers his RMS geography teacher, Coach David Scott, and his quiet accommodation for Ricky. Ricky recalled one class exercise, "He (Scott) lined us up in class for a geography oral drill on U.S. map locations, pointing to a pull-down map location and asking students to identify the state, or city, or whatever. I dreaded this, but whenever it was my turn, Coach Scott added audio descriptions/cues sufficient for me to correctly give my answer. The students didn't seem to notice, and I nailed it! I felt like every other student."

Ricky heaped tons of praise on his RMS and ORHS teacher and coach, Keys Fillauer. Keys chose Ricky to be a manager for his basketball teams. Ricky said, "He met with me, told me I had to keep my grades up, let me travel with the team, and allowed me to be a part of outside-of-school-day activities. This meant the world to me, it was a way for me to fit in, to be with 'the jocks,' and a way to get out of the house by attending the after-school practices. Coach treated me with respect, and though I couldn't shoot a basketball worth crap, I was even allowed to participate in certain team drills.

I did not know to bring money to buy food on the first away-game trip, but Coach helped out, quietly handing me two big cheeseburgers. Money was always tight for us at home, but mom made sure from then on that I had money for basketball trips. Coach would drive me home after games and practices, and he somehow(?) connected with a Secret Santa who gave me a starter jacket and athletic wear. I was cool. I was like the other kids. I loved to hear him call out, 'There's my assistant basketball coach' whenever I walked into his office."

Ricky remembered that whenever Coach Fillauer got frustrated during games, he was famous for yelling, 'Jiminy Cricket.' Ricky would laugh at this, but he would often admonish his beloved coach by saying, "You keep on like that, and you're going to be kicked out, then I'll have to coach." Little did Ricky know at that time, but in his senior year, he did coach a Boy's Club team of 12- through 14-year-olds. By then, Coach Fillauer had retired from teaching, but Ricky sought him out for advice. He said, "Coach gave me a binder with a notepad in it, showed me plays, how to draw them up, and how to explain them. He came and watched me coach. He told me I did a great job—I never felt better in my life!"

Near the end of his eighth-grade year, Ricky remembered that an ORHS freshman football coach came to meet the next year's football team prospects. Ricky was there, but when the coach approached him, he wanted to discuss his becoming a manager. Ricky was crushed! He wanted to play for the Wildcats. He showed up for the summer practice and gave it his all. He was the first hand up to volunteer at regular season practices to run the upcoming, opposing team's plays. He remembers, "I ended up getting beat up by the Wildcat first-string players. I played on both offense and defense. I didn't know how to play that well, but at the end of my freshman year, I was awarded the first-ever Ironman Award for my never-die attitude. Being a member of the team, an Oak Ridge Wildcat, was a big deal for me. I felt I gained a lot of respect from other players. I felt included!"

Ricky had to attend summer school after his junior year to complete a state-required credit in geometry. The longer classes each day caused stress, not only academically but also by straining his eyes so severely that migraines resulted. His headaches were often so bad that he missed critical summer football practices. This problem was terribly concerning to Ricky since he had worked hard to secure a spot on the second-string rotation as a defensive tackle. He was benched for the first game of his senior year due to missed practices, only to soon thereafter contract mononucleosis. Missing many days of school, and therefore more football practice, plus having the distraction of a new girlfriend, led him to leave the team at mid-season. It was an action Ricky says he still bitterly regrets and considers to be one of his biggest life mistakes.

In spite of his challenges, Ricky never shied away from sports and work opportunities. Wanting to enroll in Pee Wee football, his mother and grandmother had to champion his cause when Ricky's vision skills were questioned. He also

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played Boys Club basketball and baseball. However, he voluntarily ended his baseball career at age eleven when a hit ball flew close by his face, and though Ricky heard it whizzing by, he never saw it. But, Boys Club, ORHS football, student basketball manager, and coaching experience ingrained a love for sports that Ricky would later find again and make it his livelihood. As for work, Ricky was an *Oak Ridger* newspaper carrier in his freshman year, and he worked at various fast food places in Oak Ridge. He was building a work resume' that would give access to, and influence, his future ventures.

Ricky graduated from ORHS in early June 1999, and soon thereafter, underwent corneal surgery intended to correct the rapidly declining vision in his left eye. The experimental surgery failed, and as Ricky recalled, "In fact, the surgery made my vision worse. I was devastated, mad at the world! Though I had been a Bible School teacher and a religious person, I felt God was against me. I thought I couldn't do anything. I went through grieving stages. I didn't go to college, letting go of this, my previous dream. I sat around feeling like I had to prove myself somehow. Those were some of my darkest hours."

Ricky would eventually more than prove himself, he would become a shining example for overcoming despair, meeting extraordinary challenges, and becoming a leader for disability advocacy. In some respects, I believe Ricky would say that he had only begun to live and to succeed in spite of the harsh reality of coping with blindness. He became the Executive Director of the Tennessee Association of Blind Athletes within a decade of his ORHS graduation. He has further redefined his career to include specialized training and advocacy programs for people of varied disabilities. He is also a motivational speaker who has aptly named his presentations, "The Marathon of Life."

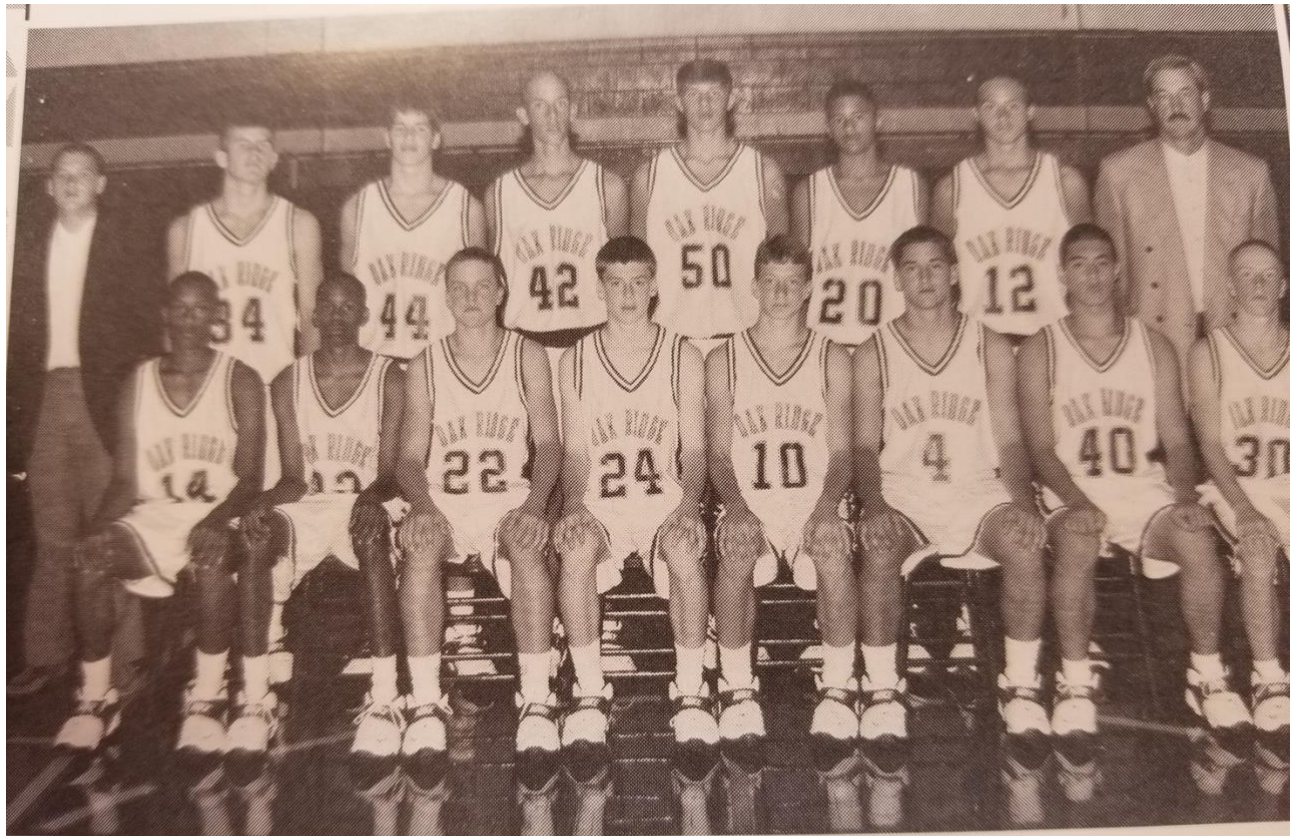
A second installment of Ricky's story will tell of his search for an independent life, further education, a fulfilling career, and a family. Ricky is so incredibly open, honest, and inspiring to interview. I am honored to be able to feature his life story.

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Looking forward to part two of Benita's amazing story of Ricky Jones.

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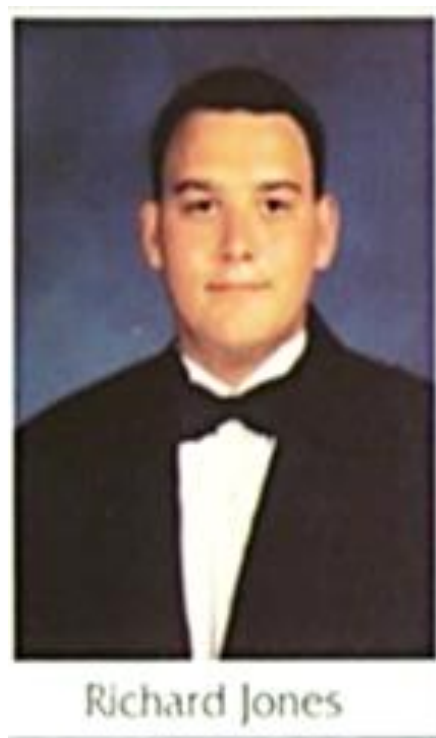
Freshman- (Front Row) Walter Wright, Shannon Wimes, Donnie Sharp, Tommy Strickler, Evan Smith, Drew Walker, Deion Manles, Dustin Wendt; (Back Row) Student Assistant Ricky Jones, Nath

Ricky Jones on the left back row and Keys Fillauer on the right back row



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