

Ricky Jones, Part Two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 24, 2021)

Did you ever read such an amazing story as part one of this series? Keys Fillauer was cited by Ricky as being a great help to him. If you know Keys, you are not surprised. Yet, I wager even he did not fully realize the full extent of his positive impact on Ricky. Benita Albert continues her remarkable interview with Ricky Jones and how he has, and is now, dealing with his blindness. Prepare to read the rest of his amazing journey to where he is now in his life. I am so proud to be able to share this with you through Historically Speaking!

Ricky Jones, a 1999 Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) graduate, has become a champion for the disabled, and his work has only just begun. Along with his wife, Christy Ray, he is currently establishing a nonprofit organization, STRIVE4You.

The mission statement for the organization reads, "To empower all individuals through training and recreation while educating professionals to better serve their clients." Ricky is now totally blind while Christy has very limited eyesight, yet this dynamic couple has been highly involved in adaptive sports and self-defense programs for people with disabilities over the last twelve years.

Within a month of his ORHS graduation, Ricky got married, underwent experimental corneal surgery, and was dealing with his father's hospitalization for kidney failure. His mother and brother moved to Nashville where his father's family could provide extra help and support. Ricky was devastated when the bandages were removed from his left eye, only to learn that the surgery made his eyesight worse. His remaining 20/400 right-eye vision would be gone by 2014.

Growing up, Ricky said he had dreams of being a math teacher in elementary school, changing to a criminal justice career by middle school, and plans to go to college. "Instead, I worked a series of fast-food jobs and even custodial work," Ricky remonstrated.

Working at the Oak Ridge Krystal restaurant, he set his goal to be assigned to the drive-thru window. The job required him to punch in code numbers for food items on the menu, a skill he likened to learning the plays in football. He took an order sheet home and memorized all the number codes. Ricky laughed when recalling that later, other employees would ask him for the correct number codes--faster for them than referencing the order sheet.

Saying, "I always had to prove myself," Ricky wanted more. He enrolled in the Tennessee Business Enterprise Program in 2002. Upon completion of his training, Ricky, newly divorced, moved to Nashville to be near his family. He managed vending cafeterias in two venues in Nashville over the years from 2003-2006.

One of those locations was the Andrew Johnson government offices building, a place where he reunited with Bobbie Lussier, one of his former Robertsville Middle School Principals. Their meeting allowed Ricky to reconnect to former ORHS Wildcat Coach Bruce Lussier. He enjoyed working with the public, and he relished meeting many former ORHS classmates over that time.

He returned to fast-food work in 2006, first as a crew member, but he later convinced management that he could handle the third-shift manager position. Ricky said that such a victory was hard won, but it was important in proving that his disability should not limit his opportunities.

In 2007, Ricky began work as a teacher's assistant at Tennessee School for the Blind (TSB), of which his mother was an alumna and his brother, Dwaine, was a current student. It was at the urging of Dwaine, a soon-to-be graduate of TSB, that they began to pursue sports programs for blind adults.

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The Tennessee Association of Blind Athletes (TNABA) was first established in 1979, but it was largely inactive when Ricky researched the program. At the time, Ricky had been idled by an accident where he was struck by a car while attempting to board a bus on a Nashville city street. While recuperating, Ricky reorganized the group and became the Executive Director of TNABA in 2009.

He would lead the group for the next seven years and meet his wife, Christy, through TNABA. Ricky and Christy became a dynamic duo in growing the Association both in sports offerings and competitions and, also in expansion to other places in Tennessee. They were both participants in sports from goalball to cycling to running and more. They would travel and compete at several regional and national tournaments, as well as organizing the same in Nashville.

It was during his tenure with TNABA that Ricky went back to school completing a six-month vocational program for low vision students through the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center in Smyrna, TN; beginning a degree program at Nashville State Community College which changed over time from specialization in exercise science to business to nonprofit management; and earning several certifications from the Center for Nonprofit Management.

Always looking for another challenge, Ricky decided, in early 2014, to seriously train for the New York City Marathon, a 26.2-mile race. As Ricky described it, "I began training sixteen weeks before the race..., fractured my foot and tore ligaments three weeks before the race..., was warned of further damage should I choose to run." Ricky did not want to miss the opportunity, so he took it easy the three weeks prior to the race.

Of the race, he recalled, "Around nine to ten miles in, my foot was killing me. My two running guides advised me to check in at the medical tent where they removed my shoe to reveal a horribly swollen foot. They offered me a Tylenol. I wondered if that was the best they could do, and I said, 'Never mind, I'll keep going.' Sometimes in tears, sometimes holding the hands of my guides, I said NO to quitting. I don't like giving up, and I never will." After more than seven hours, Ricky crossed the finish line. Christy also ran the complete race with the aid of guides. It was her first full marathon, but perhaps not her last, according to Ricky.

Ricky wasn't done; although, he clearly knew what he faced the second time. For the 2015 NYC marathon, he started training earlier and set a goal of a faster finishing time. He proudly reported, "I ran the first half of the marathon without stopping to rest or walk. My runner's wall came between fifteen and sixteen miles into the race. I was hurting really bad, but I finished in less time, around six hours."

Telling this, Ricky harkened back to Willow Brook Elementary School and the running test presented by the Presidential Fitness Program. Ricky remembered that twelve times around the bus loop approximated the mile challenge that students were urged to meet. Ricky said, "I struggled to make one loop without walking."

Of his second NYC race and his decision to run, Ricky observed, "I don't like going out without giving my best, I cut off an hour of time. My joints and feet told me I was through with full marathons." Christy and he have run numerous other, shorter races over the years.

Ricky reflected on his love of sports, saying, "Being an Oak Ridge Wildcat was so special, I learned so much about hard work, effort, and competitiveness being on the football team." That spirit continues in Ricky who has proven to be a successful athlete and coach in the adaptive sports programs he has fostered through TNABA and elsewhere.

Christy and he took on a new challenge in 2016, teaching self-defense through the '1 Touch Project,' a program in which they served as lead instructors doing workshops for people with disabilities, including

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work with veterans, across the nation. Ricky said the extensive travels he made beginning with TNABA and beyond were made easier with the assistance of his first guide dog, Pearson.

Though he had learned to be adept with walking with a cane, the car accident in 2008 made him less confident of his ability to move about safely. Ricky observed, "With a cane you pick up all sorts of clues around you, trash on the sidewalk, benches, curbs, etc., but with a guide dog, I pick up his harness and say 'forward.'"

Even though I don't find all the same markers I would have with a cane, my dog protects me while allowing me to walk faster and with increased confidence. The day I brought Pearson home after three weeks of training, I asked my driver to drop me off at the corner where I had suffered the car accident injuries. I had tried once before to go back to the same spot and cross with my cane, but I could not step down off the curb. I froze. This time, with Pearson in the lead, we crossed the street.

My athletic life might not have happened without my dog. I traveled, explored new places, and built my confidence to take on new adventures."

Now during this time of COVID-19 sheltering, and looking ever forward, Christy and Ricky have been hard at work developing their newest program STRIVE4You. They have carefully crafted their plans, writing for their organization: a mission statement, programs and services description, volunteer and Board of Directors profiles, and an evaluation plan. They are currently promoting their services to the general public and writing grant proposals. Their website provides more information at <https://strive4you.org/>. (You should read about Ricky at the "About Us" section of this web site: <https://strive4you.org/about-us/> his accomplishments are cited there and will amaze you! – Ray)

STRIVE stands for Strength through Training and Recreation, Increasing Vitality and Empowerment. A part of their general program statement reads: "Our programs provide life skills and advocacy classes for transition-age youth, adaptive physical activities for children of all ages, recreation and sports programs for people with disabilities, advocacy training, and peer-to-peer life coaching and mentoring from successful people of all abilities to assist our clients through their individual situations. We also provide consulting, professional development opportunities, and outreach services in communities across the United States, which provides the knowledge, resources, and tools to ensure every person has an equal opportunity to live a productive and fulfilling life."

Among the many training opportunities provided by the program, there is assistance for: "Parents, physical education teachers, community-based program directors, coaches, and other individuals to implement adaptive recreational or sports activities."

Citing an overview statement of the STRIVE4You program: "A disability should never define who you are, nor should it dictate how people approach and interact with you. However, each and every day, hundreds of thousands of people feel they are treated differently, and they feel isolated and frustrated because of the lack of equality and inclusion throughout society. Negative stereotypes, unequal opportunities, and the simple lack of awareness in our communities are major barriers for those of us who strive for acceptance."

A subset of the program offerings, BEREAL, offers education, resources, and support in addressing the above-stated issues. "We help children with disabilities learn essential life skills such as self-advocacy, communication, and others to prepare them for a productive life...We provide peer-to-peer support to adults who are born with a disability or developed one later in life. As they navigate challenges, we are here to make sure they know about all of the wonderful resources available to them, while providing much-needed encouragement and support from those who deal with similar challenges...We work within

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the community to provide professional development workshops...disability awareness training to ease the awkward interactions or lack of accommodations businesses are required to provide."

I am reminded of Ricky's memories told to me, memories that clearly resonate when I consider the previous paragraph. Ricky said he remembered taking his mother to the doctor and having the doctor address him first, asking, "How is Miss Debbie doing today?" Ricky, a teenager at the time with his own sensitivity to sight issues, would bristle and ask the doctor to ask his mother instead.

Ricky noted that it was not unusual to have the doctor repeat the question for his mother in a much louder voice and with markedly slowed-down speech pattern. Then Ricky recalled how many people would see him with his cane when he entered a room and grab him to seat him in a chair, perhaps a kind gesture, but not always what Ricky (or other vision impaired persons) would want.

It is hard to know what to do, but it is important that we listen, that opportunities to educate ourselves and to increase awareness be offered. I salute Ricky and Christy's leadership in advocacy for persons with disabilities and for their development of programs to increase public awareness and understanding.

Ricky and Christy are the proud parents of three children, two teenagers (a boy and a girl, each from previous marriages) and their six-year-old son. Their daughter and younger son have normal vision. Their household also includes two guide dogs, Aslan, and Ricky's new dog, Alice. Ricky loves to call them their storybook dogs—Aslan, the name of the lion in "The Chronicles of Narnia," and Alice for "Alice in Wonderland."

The whole family loves being active, including adaptive sports games and competitions. Ricky mentioned that fully sighted people can play in certain adaptive sports leagues, but they are required to wear a blindfold where sight would give an advantage. And he laughs when a fully sighted person tells him that their blind opponents have the advantage of being able to listen, to hear auditory cues they cannot. Perhaps all of us should try such sports, should try to adapt such as Ricky has learned to do, and should learn to truly *listen* to the manifold lessons we could learn?

My oh my! Ricky and Christy are certainly amazing people! Thanks to Benita for bringing us this beautiful and telling story. Did you find yourself being a bit uncomfortable when Ricky explained how those of us with normal vision may mistakenly and unknowingly tend to treat the blind? I did. People who are "different" than us may make us uncomfortable, but we should strive to overcome that and interact with them naturally. Hard to do, but so rewarding when accomplished. If you have ever experienced such a relationship, you know.

Thanks again, Benita...these are amazing stories you are capturing!

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From left: Jonathan, Ricky, Christy Ray, Nicolas and Evie Ray



Ricky and Brandon Bradford running in Nashville