

# Stephen Buchanan and memories of Oak Ridge Schools

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 14, 2022)

Benita Albert brings us a series of two articles on Steve Buchanan, son of Joel and Jane Buchanan, long-time Oak Ridger's and good friends of mine. I was pleased to write a three-part series on them for Historically Speaking in 2012:

Part one: <http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2012/3-20-12%20Jane%20and%20Joel%20Buchanan.pdf>

Part two: <http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2012/3-27-12%20Jane%20and%20Joel%20Buchanan.pdf>

Part three: <http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2012/4-3-12%20Jane%20and%20Joel%20Buchanan%20part%203.pdf>

Now, enjoy learning about their son, Steve, and his memories of Oak Ridge Schools as well as his amazing career which will be included in part two of this series.

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Stephen Buchanan, an Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) graduate in 1975, could not have foreseen the future career awaiting him, but the world of country music, Nashville, and the entertainment business have profited greatly from his visionary genius. It was a pleasure to reconnect with my former student, Steve, and his mother, Jane, in writing this story.

It is an amazing journey from an Oak Ridge childhood to an innovative and successful business executive. As his mother warned me, Steve is understated about his accomplishments, but an online search clearly shows that he is considered one of Nashville's and country music's greatest assets. This first part of his story will focus on his early years, education, and Oak Ridge memories.

Steve's parents arrived in Oak Ridge in 1951 as freshly minted Vanderbilt graduates: Joel, trained in chemical engineering, and Jane in chemistry. Jane said it was a blind date some three weeks after arriving in Oak Ridge that first introduced them to each other. She explained, "We graduated in two separate colleges, Engineering versus Arts and Sciences, without ever meeting on campus. My first impression was that Joel Buchanan was terribly reserved. You couldn't have told me then that we would be married in a year."

Joel's career at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) would span forty years and include many interesting assignments. He completed graduate work through the Oak Ridge School of Reactor Technology (MIT) that retooled him as a nuclear engineer. His professional resume' included being a co-founder of ORNL's Nuclear Safety Information Center and Director of the Nuclear Operations Analysis Center as well as editor of the internationally respected journal, "Nuclear Safety."

He consulted nationally and internationally on matters of nuclear safety, and his expertise was key in his role as Chairman of the United Nations committee investigation of the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident. For years after his ORNL retirement Joel continued to serve as chairman of the Publications Committee of the American Nuclear Society.

Jane's career began in the Spectrographic Analytical Chemistry Department at Y-12 where she worked for four years. She married Joel in 1952 and left her job before the birth of their first child, Joel (Joey), in 1955 soon followed by Stephen in 1957. The offer of a part-time position drew her back to work at the Technical Information Center (TIC) in 1965. She said, "The job was created to encourage professional women in the sciences to return to the workforce."

She was one of three women hired, her job to read current chemical research papers and summarize findings for the TIC publication, "Nuclear Science Abstract." She added, "I read state-of-art papers from all over the world, including many papers in German and Russian."

Jane described her job as perfect for her children's school and activities schedules including hosting an American Field Service (AFS) exchange student, now a lifetime family friend. That Turkish student, Zafer Malazgirt, spent his senior year living with the Buchanan family and graduating from ORHS with Joey in 1973.

Jane loved her TIC work, but she was unwilling to assume a full-time position when it was required of her during a government-mandated reduction in force in 1986. She said, "The job allowed me to renew my German and French

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language skills and motivated me to take coursework in Russian, even though we had access to language experts on the job."

She chose educational and volunteer options in her retirement including coursework in advanced photography and serving as an editor for the East Tennessee Historical Society's Bicentennial Book published in 1995. Joel and she traveled throughout East Tennessee taking photographs featured in the book.

Joel retired from ORNL in 1991. He served as president of the Oak Ridge Camera Club as well as chairman of the Photography Division of the Knoxville Dogwood Arts Festival. The couple enjoyed worldwide travels which they dubbed "our photography safaris." The family was active in the United Church, Chapel on the Hill, for more than fifty years. Joel and Jane moved to Nashville in 2012 to be nearer their son, Steve.

At Joel's funeral in 2017, one of their new Nashville friends observed that he had shared the dinner table many times with Joel without learning of his distinguished scientific career. When Jane told me this story she said, "It was true of Joel all his life...it took me a year of dating to realize what a deep thinker he was. His humility and demeanor became an example for his sons and a lasting impression for others."

Jane wished me well while interviewing her sons saying, "I think you will find that they are as unassuming and humble as their dad." I began my research for this story with an online search on Steve's name. I found that several postings included mention of his "unusual childhood environment," marveling that he is the son of scientists and was raised and educated in a science-focused town.

Steve is very proud of his parents' work, but most certainly, he is also proud of their encouragement and interest in his very different and exciting career. His brother, Joey, chose a career in medicine and serves on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin Medical School. They both attended Woodland Elementary School, Jefferson Junior High School, and Oak Ridge High School. Joey chose Duke University for undergraduate studies while Steve chose his parents' alma mater of Vanderbilt University.

I asked Steve to share some of his Oak Ridge memories. He recalled that he was in the fifth grade at Woodland School when the Oak Ridge Schools completed the integration of all grades, K-6, in school year 1967-68. In the year prior to the transition, students were encouraged to get together in various ways to become acquainted with each other.

Steve remembers an organized exchange program (now, what might be called playdates) where he went to visit a future classmate for an afternoon, and that Scarboro student in turn, visited him. Steve said, "For me as a child at the time, it was hard to understand the historical significance of this event." This was the beginning of a broader and more inclusive environment for all children of Oak Ridge.

He fondly remembered his ORHS Combined Studies teachers, Catherine Ledgerwood and Gene Pickel, and a marvelous summer trip he took under their sponsorship to Italy, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Israel. His AFS brother, Zafer, recently returned home after graduating from ORHS in June, came to meet the group in Istanbul. In that same sophomore summer, Steve traveled with the ORHS band to Venezuela under legendary band leader Doc Combs.

Having had an AFS student in the home during his sophomore year, Steve became actively interested in the AFS program and signed up for a domestic exchange during his senior year. ORHS sponsored visitations with Syosset High School on Long Island in New York, each student group spending a week with the other in their home environments. It was Steve's first visit to New York City where he enthusiastically recalled seeing his first Broadway play, "Grease." He knew then that he would return. He was hooked!

His band career began at Jefferson Junior High School under the tutelage of fabled musician Alice Lyman. Steve chose the trombone, and some fifty years later Steve still remembers Ms. Lyman's method of getting one's attention. "She would correct your musical timing by tapping on your leg with her hand, in rhythmic measure." After his ORHS sophomore year in band Steve moved on to other interests forgoing a future career as an instrumental artist.

I could not resist asking Steve if he listened to country music as a teen. Answering that he did not, he did recall seeing the "Cas Walker Show," "Hee Haw," and "The Porter Wagoner Show" on local television. Little did this ORHS teen know that

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his future career promised associations with many of the stars from those shows and that he would oversee the preservation of much of their legacy. Steve listed rock and roll as his go-to music genre in the '70s, but he added that many of the sounds he liked had a country music influence, citing the Eagles and Buffalo Springfield as two favorites.

He was a photographer for the ORHS newspaper, "The Oak Leaf," working numerous sporting events including the Friday night highlights on Blankenship Field. Many of his personal photos included concert artists who visited the area, some great names in music: James Taylor (Steve's first concert), Jeff Beck, and Lynyrd Skynyrd to name a few. The concert culture would soon become a big part of his extracurricular life in college and a precursor to his future career path. Nashville was a perfect venue for the opportunities awaiting him.

Steve admitted that he had no clear idea of what he wanted to pursue as a college major, but he did have an interest in environmental issues, perhaps even a career in forestry. He said, "It was a Vanderbilt academic advisor who observed my high SAT math scores and encouraged my enrollment in the College of Engineering, namely environmental engineering." And it was a new Vandy friend who convinced him to sign up with him for the Vanderbilt Concert Committee. That friendship with fellow freshman and New Yorker, Ken Levitan, has been a lasting one via their complimentary paths in the music industry. Ken is now a well-known manager of artists and a powerful influencer on Music Row and the Nashville music scene.

Steve described his involvement in the Concert Committee as his "vocational school," an opportunity to see the inside of the music/concert business. He added, "I let it become my obsession to the detriment of my academic studies at Vanderbilt." He described the multi-layered committee tasks: "Scheduling, budgeting, ticket sales, promotion, security, coffeehouse events, film selections, and varied performing art selections from jazz shows to blues festivals, to dance troupes, and of course, country music as well as rock and roll concerts. Through this experience, I broadened my musical tastes and developed a deep interest in the entertainment industry."

Steve had big decisions to make as he reset his academic course and future career path. Nashville's music industry was ripe for his energy and creativity. In Part Two, to follow, you will read of his journey, a career encompassing great challenges and success in updating the Grand Ole Opry, renovating, and reviving the Ryman Auditorium, preserving the legacy of country music, growing the Nashville music scene, and much more.

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Thank you Benita and you will want to watch for part two of this series where we will learn about Steve's involvement in the country music industry.

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Steve Buchanan's Oak Ridge High School photo



The Buchanan family, from left, Joey, Joel, Jane, and Steve