

Donald Johns Part One

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 2, 2023)

Benita Albert brings us another of her Oak Ridge Schools graduate's success stories. Don Johns has impacted the medical profession by creating numerous breakthrough drugs. He credits much of his initial success to the atmosphere of Oak Ridge and the schools.

Enjoy learning about Don in part one and even more of his amazing medical drug discoveries in part two.

Donald (Don) R. Johns, a 1975 graduate of Oak Ridge High School (ORHS), is a Board-certified clinical neurologist with four decades of experience in neurologic, immunologic, and rare disease practice and research. By the 2000s his work transitioned from academic medical centers to the start-up pharmaceuticals industry where he describes his leadership focus as "establishing and mentoring high performing teams." The latest result, of which he is justifiably proud, is a treatment breakthrough in a rare, inherited form of ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis). The injectable drug, Qalsody, received FDA approval for continued study in April 2023. The treatment will target people who carry the genetic mutation for, but who are not yet symptomatic for, ALS.

Qalsody is not his only breakthrough in pharmaceutical research, and he is not done yet. More on Don's professional career will be featured in a part two installment of his story.

Don considered it important to begin his story with his maternal grandfather, Andy Griffith, who was a World War I veteran from Morgan County. Andy was illiterate, but he worked hard to provide for his family tending his tobacco farm near Sunbright, TN. Don's grandmother, Gladys (aka Mamaw), was a homemaker who supplemented the family income selling fresh eggs, milk, and butter. Don said, "They successfully raised two great children, Lillian and Junior, in a home with no running water or plumbing."

Lillian sought work in Oak Ridge shortly after her 1944 graduation from Sunbright High School. She was assigned work as one of the now legendary Calutron Girls, a job she held through 1946. Lillian walked to a fairground, a centralized bus stop, to catch a government-provided bus that daily commuted workers from Morgan County over muddy roads into Oak Ridge. It was an arduous hour and a half journey each way.

Junior, who was four years younger than Lillian, joined the Army and served during the Korean War. He came home to work in the Metallurgy Division at X-10 and Y-12 for the remainder of his career.

It was during Lillian's Calutron work that she met Edward (Ed) Johns, an engineering aide who trouble shot problems and questions for the Calutron Project. She later confessed to "making up a few problems just to get to know Ed better." It worked! They married in 1947 and lived in Oak Ridge for the remainder of their lives.

Ed Johns enlisted in the Army after high school only to be medically discharged shortly after his basic training was completed. He returned home to Middlesboro, KY where he accepted a 30-cents-an-hour, millwork job. Ed soon learned of opportunities to support the war effort in East Tennessee. Quickly hired by Manhattan Project officials in 1943, Ed was sent to the University of Tennessee for engineering technician training. After certification and a security clearance, he moved to a specialized training program in what he called "a building behind the Castle-on-the-Hill" (the at-the-time, popular name for what is now the Department of Energy's Headquarters in Oak Ridge). Ed was provided dormitory housing, and his new, secret work paid him 70-cents an hour. His assignment was with the Engineering Technical Staff at Y-12. At age nineteen, Ed was one of the youngest employees to assume such a position. He continued working at Y-12 and the Oak Ridge National Lab (ORNL) for forty-two years.

Ed and Lillian were very proud of their war effort contributions as well as their status as two of the earliest Oak Ridgers, both members of the 1943 Club. The family was active in Central Baptist Church where Lillian enjoyed singing in the choir and volunteering at Oak Ridge Hospital. Over the years, Ed was active as a Boy Scout leader and as a member of the Lions Club.

Ed and Lillian welcomed two sons, Gary, and Don, in the 1950s. Gary (ORHS Class of '73) worked in law enforcement at both the Oak Ridge and Knoxville Police Departments and later as an Anderson County Court official. He is now retired. Gary was an important care giver for his mother in her later years. Don said, "The family called Mother 'Our Queen'

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because she admired Queen Elizabeth II so much. Mom loved to tell that she was born the month before the Queen of England in 1926. Touchingly, they both passed away on the same day, September 8, 2022."

Don attended Cedar Hill Elementary School where he said, "I felt very nurtured, and I was encouraged to excel. It was a place where it was great to be smart, and that feeling continued to be reinforced throughout my Oak Ridge Schools experiences at Jefferson Junior High and Oak Ridge High. I loved school. My fourth-grade teacher, Audrey Pippin, was also my father's fourth grade teacher in Middlesboro, KY. We concluded that he had her in the beginning of her teaching career while I had her at the end." Oak Ridge teachers were recruited from across the nation in 1943, and many of those teachers came from Kentucky.

Don continued, "ORHS provided me a great education. I took every AP course I could schedule and was as busy as I have ever been in my life until my clinical residency training. I participated in Key Club, Model United Nations, National Honor Society, and varsity baseball. My brother made fun of me when he found me doing my homework on a Friday afternoon given that I had a whole weekend to complete it. I was labelled an overachiever. I enjoyed a diversity of academic courses. The French I learned under teachers Sylvia Countess, and Lynn Shoemaker, has served me well in my professional and personal travels as an adult. They spawned my life-long interest in foreign language and cultures."

"My ORHS baseball coach, Buddy Pope, was a role model for discipline and teamwork." Don expanded his sports resume' by serving as a sportswriter for the ORHS newspaper, covering football, basketball, and baseball with his junior classmate and "Oak Leaf" Sports Editor Mike Blackerby. Earlier, Don covered community youth football as a "stringer" for "The Oak Ridger."

As a member of Boy Scout Troop 128 at St. Stephens Church, Don earned an Eagle Scout Award at the tender age of thirteen. His service project was the clearing and restoration of an overgrown lot adjoining St. Stephens. He described his young self as greatly influenced by the high expectations and multiple offerings in every sphere of the community from the arts to sports to academics. An intense competitive spirit was apparent throughout Oak Ridge from its very beginning, and it had a profound impact on Don.

Don added, "I held a half-time job beginning at age fourteen at Pine Valley Market. By sixteen, I became the Assistant Manager entrusted with the store keys and responsible for securing and closing the store. The store manager, John Buckner, taught me to respect customers and peers and anticipate their needs, lessons that have remained constant in all I have done. And almost three decades after my work experience with him, John attended my father's funeral in 2002. What an awesome, early-work role model!"

With his earnings, Don bought a used AMC Rambler to be replaced later by his purchase of a Fiat 850 Spider. The Fiat featured a rear engine, and that aspect set him up for a near-fatal accident when he hit a tree head-on during Christmas break of his senior year. Don was hospitalized for three weeks and in traction for two months with two broken legs, not counting a broken hand and other injuries. His parents rented a hospital bed with a trapeze/traction attachment to bring him home to a basement room where his therapy continued. It was a place where I, his AP Calculus BC teacher, as well as his classmates visited, tutored, and supported his efforts to stay on track with his demanding school courses.

Don was able to return to ORHS in a wheelchair in March of his senior year. He remembers that some of his classes had to be moved to the first floor of ORHS since access to second floor classes was problematic. The handicap accommodation of an elevator was not available to students until the extensive renovation of ORHS in 1985. Don was incredibly thankful to be able to stand and deliver one of the graduation speeches for the ORHS Class of 1975.

Remarkably, Don successfully completed all of his senior-year courses including taking AP exams in Calculus, Physics, and English. The many AP credits he earned over his high school years allowed him to complete a major in Mathematics and minors in Chemistry and English at Vanderbilt in 3.5 years. Via a generous financial aid package including loans, scholarships, and work study, Don was able to complete his Vanderbilt undergraduate studies and to pursue dreams of a career as a physician.

In reflection, Don mused that his advancement to a university degree was made much easier by the demanding collegiate atmosphere and expectations of ORHS where he felt his education was well-rounded and rich with what would later be called a STEM emphasis. He said, "It went well beyond STEM."

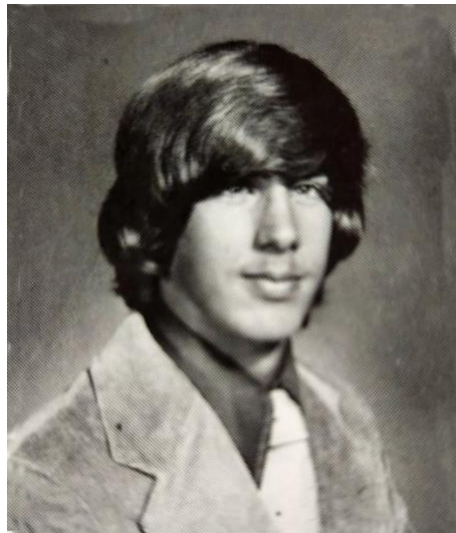
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He praised the Oak Ridge environment for its international and egalitarian atmosphere mentioning scientific role models everywhere, officially approved work visits with his dad at ORNL, The Museum of Atomic Energy, and scientists and schoolmates from around the world. Don mused, "My family had no history of people going to a university, and yet, when I got to Vanderbilt, I quickly saw how well-prepared and enriched my Oak Ridge education was. I was more than ready to compete."

Don compared his family roots to what Oak Ridge made possible for him. He said, "It is hard to imagine that only two generations ago my grandparents had very little education and lived a hardscrabble life made even more difficult by lean years of the Great Depression. I believe the great difference for me was being raised in an environment that valued education and offered me incredible opportunities for growth. I believe my grandparents would be proud to know that their grandson became a physician and a professor at Harvard Medical School; that through education and hard work I was able to become a lead physician/scientific researcher who contributed to major scientific and drug treatment breakthroughs."

Thank you, Benita. From a family of early Oak Ridger's we see Don becoming an excellent student excelling in AP courses and preparing for a career in medicine. Next, we will learn about the other amazing discoveries he has helped make possible to treat major medical problems that have proven difficult to treat in the past.



Donald (Don) Johns' 1975 Oak Ridge High School senior photograph