

Bob Eby Part Two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 17, 2023)

I was proud to learn that approximately 60 people attended the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association's April membership and public meeting to see Benita's *Tales from the Oak Ridge Schools* presentation. If you did not get to see the presentation all is not lost. Keith McDaniel and I are recording her presentation on our *Hidden History: Stories from the Secret City* videocast. Here is the link to the first one of three we plan to do: https://youtu.be/Ns7eOVw_GdU

Now for the second part of her story about Bob Eby.

John Dewey, an educational leader of the early Twentieth Century proffered, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." Dewey believed that educators should be conscious of the need to prepare students for the inevitable changes their futures would entail. I asked Bob Eby, an Oak Ridge High School Class of 1970 graduate, who is now the Chairman of the Tennessee State Board of Education (SBE), what he thought of such a premise and how his personal and professional life experiences might or might not agree. His thoughtful answer follows.

"I would probably not agree that education is life itself. I would say that 'Education is a very critical part of life's journey that opens doors not possible without it.' Certainly, without it you cannot fully enjoy the infinite opportunities that are created within God's wonderful universe; however, there is so much more than just education that is part of life: primarily faith, love, and relationships." Bob continued, expressing great appreciation for the opportunities he has been offered via the efforts of educators and his educational resume.' His concluding remarks were, "I owe so much to my education throughout life that I want to be able to open similar doors to others."

Bob's professional achievements, his commitment to public service, and his impassioned advocacy for education are worthy of praise and gratitude. A short list of his accolades includes the Robert E. Wilson Award for lifetime contributions in nuclear engineering from the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, 1990 Manager of the Year Award from the Martin Marietta Corp., and the 2021 Muddy Boot Award for "Leadership and passion in education" from the East Tennessee Economic Council.

His professional career launched early as a University of Tennessee K-25 engineering co-op student to a full-time, K-25 employee beginning in 1974. This was followed by a series of unique assignments within the fields of engineering and management. Bob is a prime example of a continual learner, someone who has accepted many growth opportunities. Knowing that my question of Bob to "briefly" describe his specialized work was presumptuous at best, he obliged: "I have worked, and now consult, in various uranium enrichment technologies including gaseous diffusion, gas centrifuge, atomic vapor laser isotopes, and molecular laser isotope processes."

His resume' includes extensive work in leadership development and management. He gives much credit to former bosses who influenced his leadership/management education. Bob Merriman whom he describes as "my mentor over forty-five years... gave me this Lao Tzu quote early in my career. I still remember and try to live by it: 'A leader is best when neither seen or heard; not so good when glorified and adored; worst when hated and despised; fail to honor your people, they will fail to honor you; but at the end of the day, the aim fulfilled, the people will say we did this ourselves'."

Bob credits other role models such as his first boss at K-25, Mike Stephenson, whose wisdom included: "If you work for your people, they will work for you." Bob added: "Linc Hall, a former Army Ranger, was my boss when I was plant manager at K-25 (1992-1995). He taught me ownership of my people, meaning that I should own their actions and never forget that. Linc might chew me out in his office, but when we went to the public, he never blamed me. He took the blame himself."

The above mentors' teachings were further supplemented with advanced training opportunities. Bob wrote of one of these: "I was chosen by corporate to teach a course, Kepner-Tregoe Problem Solving and Decision Making. I taught this process to more than 300 people over four years including company vice-presidents and shop floor people."

In 1986, Bob was dispatched as one of 28 Martin Marietta employees to the Lawrence Livermore Lab in California for a joint development project, the Atomic Vapor Laser Isotope Separation Process. This move required his family's absence from Oak Ridge for three-and-a-half years. Martin Marietta invited him to return home in 1990 and to accept a job assignment that the company described as "a new, growing program in environmental management." It became a

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thirteen-year career focus until Bob returned to uranium enrichment and his appointment as the Technology Director for the United States Enrichment Corporation (2006-2016).

Bob then joined Navarro Research and Engineering as an Executive Vice-President. However, upon his appointment to the State Board of Education in 2018, he chose part time work as a senior technical consultant primarily serving on technical review committees for the National Nuclear Security Administration. Bob said, "I am pleased to work for a strong technical company like Navarro. It keeps my skills honed."

Bob's skills are respected in the field of nuclear science. He has presented over fifty papers worldwide and has travelled on business to numerous European countries, to Japan and Korea, and four trips to Russia.

Bob wrote, "On one of my trips, I got to visit the closed city of Novouralsk, Siberia. I visited their uranium enrichment facilities. I suspect that not many Americans have had such an opportunity. The Russian town is what I envisioned Oak Ridge was like during World War II. Novouralsk is a town of approximately 90,000 people that is totally enclosed, and I had to go through security to enter—much like the early, gated Oak Ridge."

Bob is especially proud of the opportunity he was granted to lead the first decommissioning of a research nuclear reactor in the United States. He said, "The Georgia Tech reactor we decommissioned was built in the 1970's. We learned so much during this process, and the experience spun out many papers. One clear finding was that when future reactors are designed, it is imperative that the design accommodate safer, future decommissioning." This Georgia Tech assignment won the State of Georgia Engineering Project of the Year Award in 2002, and the lessons learned were later employed in reactor decommissioning projects at the University of Virginia and the University of Michigan, both projects which Bob led.

Several like projects sought Bob's expertise including a year-long project in Winfrith, England developing a decommissioning plan for a 300 MW reactor. Bob said, "It was the first nuclear power reactor in the UK to be decommissioned."

Bob is thankful for his wife, Jean, who assumed many home and family duties alongside teaching third and fourth graders at Linden School during his many business travels. He is grateful that his children received an Oak Ridge Schools education. Elizabeth (ORHS Class of 1998) earned a veterinary degree from UT and is now involved in fulltime work for Christian Veterinary Missions. She will travel to Nicaragua this summer with a group of college veterinary students on a mission trip. William (ORHS Class of 2001) completed an Industrial Engineering undergraduate degree from Clemson followed by an MBA from Vanderbilt. He is the Director for Business Excellence for Nationwide Financial in Columbus, Ohio.

Jean, now retired after 30 years of teaching, and Bob delight in their five young grandchildren and special family getaways to their Keystone, Colorado vacation home. It was Bob's dad, raised in Colorado, who instilled in Bob a love for its mountains and fly-fishing streams. Now the Eby grandchildren are becoming accomplished snow skiers like their granddad.

At a time in his life when Bob could choose to fully retire, he continues to devote his talents to charitable causes such as fundraising for the Ronald McDonald House and membership on the Global Fellowship Board supporting missionary work to the Mayan's in the Yucatan Peninsula. Bob and Jean have traveled there the past twelve years to assist the work. In addition, Bob mentors young adults whom he says, "keep me young."

He mentioned his bucket list and the plans to check off the next-to-last item this May when he and Jean will make a two-week tour of the Greek Isles. The last item is a trip to Wisconsin, completing his 50-state itinerary of visits. And speaking of "fifty," the entire Eby family will travel to Mexico next year to celebrate the fiftieth wedding anniversary of Jean and Bob. Bob understatedly added, "I like to stay active!"

Wow, what an amazing career! Next Benita will ask Bob some probing questions about his involvement in Boards of Education.

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Bob and Jean in front of the Tennessee Capital building