

Why teachers and the battle against illiteracy are so important!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the 4 week of March 25, 2024)

The featured speaker at the 32nd annual Lunch for Literacy talk on March 19, 2024, was Brendan Slocumb, celebrated author of *The-26-2024 Violin Conspiracy* and *Symphony of Secrets*. *The Violin Conspiracy* is a story of Ray McMillan, a fictional young Black musician who discovers that his old family fiddle is a priceless Stradivarius violin.

He learns to play classical music on it, practices hard and performs with orchestras. While dealing with the pressure and prejudice of the classical music world, he is shocked when his Stradivarius violin is stolen on the eve of the world's most prestigious classical music competition. In this thriller of a novel, he risks everything to get it back.

This first successful book was largely based on his life story, which he related to the 350 people present at the fundraiser for literacy presented by Altrusa International of Oak Ridge and the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club. Carolyn Krause provides a summary of his talk and other happenings at the annual event at Oak Ridge High School cafeteria.

Sporting a "Thank you" tattoo on his arm, author Brendan Slocumb opened his talk thanking teachers and librarians. "When I was a kid, I asked my mom, was it me or did we go to the library all the time? She said it was the best free thing that we could do as a family. She was instilling a love of reading in me and my siblings without us even knowing it. Every other weekend, I would come home with a stack of books."

The "thank you's" didn't stop there because the theme of Slocumb's talk was gratitude and its importance to him. "I'm grateful to you all for having me here today," he said. "I'm also extremely grateful for everyone who has helped me get to where I am."

When he was nine years old, he joined a public-school music program to learn how to play the violin. His motivation for taking up the instrument was to get out of his math class twice a week. He expressed gratitude for his music teacher who recognized his talent and encouraged him.

Slocumb said that later he was "extremely grateful" for the hours he spent practicing and playing the violin, "because I realized it kept me out of trouble. When I was younger, I used to run with some really bad kids who were into vandalism, graffiti, breaking stuff. They would break into houses. I was the lookout.

"But learning the violin gave me something to do other than being a bad kid. When my friends were running in the streets and messing with people, I was practicing or making a school trip for an orchestra performance or attending a concert."

Thanks to his budding violin career, he took his first airline flight, got to go overseas, and attended and graduated from college. "It was because of my violin," he said, noting that the instrument is "one of the big themes" of his first successful novel, "The Violin Conspiracy."

In the book, Ray's violin was stolen early on. "That really happened to me," Slocumb said.

"My violin that I saved up money to buy my senior year of high school was stolen right before I was about to leave for college. That was my opportunity to go to school" at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

He was about to give up on getting a college education when one of his teachers revealed his unfortunate situation to "a patron who had an old family fiddle in an alligator skin case. That person who had never met me allowed me to use that instrument for four years while I was working my way through college. And once I graduated, all I had to do was give it back and I did. And I was incredibly grateful for that opportunity."

He then spoke about a college experience. "My very first violin teacher was Sir Trevor Williams. He was the concertmaster for the BBC Symphony in London. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth. He told me my hands were too big to ever play violin in tune and he could not teach me."

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So, Slocumb quit violin briefly but took it up again because Sir Williams “did not last very long as our teacher there.” He was replaced by Rachel Vetter Huang, a Harvard graduate and renowned violin soloist who became Slocumb’s violin teacher.

“She taught me every single thing that I know,” he said. “Not only did she teach me how to play the violin, she taught me how to teach music and how to love. I am extremely grateful for that.”

Slocumb talked about how he almost died seven years ago from a serious illness, how he ended up in a hospital’s intensive care unit and how friends and family helped him during a long recovery. Before his illness, he had been training for a bodybuilding competition. The illness caused him to lose considerable weight and muscle mass.

Slocumb then traced his journey to becoming a successful author. “I am grateful to my teachers for instilling a love of literacy in me,” he said. “I was very fortunate to have the same English teacher for both 11th and 12th grade. After everything I wrote she would encourage me to keep going. That’s where my love of writing came from.

“I know what it’s like, not only to need help, but to receive the help that you need. All it takes is one person. to make the biggest difference. Had I not had my teachers, I would be a completely different person today. I doubt that I would be successful. I doubt that I would have gone to school. I doubt that I would be the nice guy that I am today. I am incredibly grateful for everyone who has given time and energy to help me to succeed.”

Slocumb called himself a “working musician” when the pandemic started in 2020. All his gigs stopped, and his income for paying rent dropped. While snacking too much on Doritos, he saw an ad encouraging writers to submit their books to publishers because books were in high demand during the lockdown. “So, I submitted a science fiction book I had written 20 years ago,” he said.

A man who later became his agent read it and emailed him that “this book is absolutely terrible, but you’ve got a good voice, so you should write what you know.” Slocumb knew about violins and had experienced theft of his violin, so he wrote *The Violin Conspiracy* in two-and-a-half months.

As he explained it, “Well, it was COVID, and there was nothing else going on, so I just wrote every day. As a violinist I would practice every day for three hours. So, it was no big deal for me to have the discipline to write daily.” Then he submitted his novel to a noted publisher.

Simon & Schuster passed on it. But the next week after a meeting via Zoom with Penguin Random House’s president, vice president, head of marketing and head of publicity, Slocumb learned from his agent that “they absolutely loved ‘The Violin Conspiracy,’ which he thought odd because he noted that even as a violinist, he wasn’t interested in reading a book about violins.

“My agent took a chance on me and worked with me to make *The Violin Conspiracy* a success,” he said. It became a book club favorite. His agent then told him that Penguin Random House had decided to make his novel the flagship book for their new imprint, Anchor Books. What that means, his agent added, is “you just got a two-book deal!”

“And my initial reaction wasn’t hurrah,” Slocumb said. “It was, damn, I got to write another book. So, I started writing the *Symphony of Secrets* novel. Published in 2023, it’s about a university professor who is shocked to discover that the songs of one of America’s most beloved composers might well have been written by an autistic Black woman early in the last century.

“My goal is to become the Stephen King of musical thrillers,” he said. Throughout his talk he reiterated that he owed his life and successful career as a musician and author “to the kindness and generosity of strangers and nice people that I’ve met. I am so incredibly grateful for everyone who has given their time and energy to help me to succeed.”

Symphony of Secrets has enabled him to “pay it forward” because his work of historical fiction positively portrays Josephine Reed, a main character who was considered crazy in the 1920s but was autistic. People living with autism who

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have read his book have expressed their gratitude to him. "It is truly a privilege to be able to help people," he said. "I want everyone to have a sliver of happiness."

After Ray Smith, Oak Ridge city historian, gifted Slocumb with a 1950 book, *The Oak Ridge Story*, by George Robinson and Oak Ridge Mayor Warren Gooch gave him a city proclamation of thanks, Tom Tuck was called to the stage. As chairman of TNBank, Oak Ridge's hometown bank, Tuck spoke about the Lunch for Literacy fundraiser, the man who originated it and the ways that this man, Frank Jamison, the founding chairman of TNBank, embodies "leadership, integrity, action, and opportunity."

To honor Jamison's almost three decades of service as chairman of TNBank and his other contributions, Tuck said that the bank's board of directors has established the Frank Jamison Scholarship for Literacy, which is fully funded by the bank. He awarded the first scholarship to Olivia Land, a senior at Oak Ridge High School who told the audience she plans to attend Tennessee Tech, major in biology and psychology and eventually attend medical school. A committee consisting of members of Altrusa International of Oak Ridge and the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club is charged with selecting the literacy scholarship winner each year.

Jamison, he said, is a Tennessee native with a graduate degree in mathematics who worked for Union Carbide Nuclear Division in Oak Ridge. Then he took a risk and founded an independent telephone company. His son Scott operates the successful firm in Oak Ridge.

Besides being an entrepreneur, Tuck said, Jamison has been an outstanding leader in the community. He served as chairman of the Oak Ridge Board of Education, and he founded and became president of the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club. More than 25 years ago, he became the founding chairman of TNBank and served the bank as chairman until his recent retirement to enjoy his home on a lake.

The Lunch for Literacy attendees were interested to hear that more than 30 years ago, Jamison originated the idea to fight illiteracy in the area by holding annual Lunch for Literacy fundraisers to purchase books and fund programs that teach and encourage reading. He proposed that the event's keynote speaker be an author of a popular book.

He also recruited the first Lunch for Literacy speaker. It was Alex Haley, the renowned author of the 1976 book "Roots: The Saga of an American Family" and a new resident of Anderson County. His book was adapted into a 1977 television miniseries that had a record-breaking audience of 130 million viewers. Both the book and TV miniseries raised the public awareness of black American history and inspired a broad interest in genealogy and family history research.

Since 2012, the Lunch for Literacy annual event has raised over \$250,000 for literacy grants. This past year some \$27,000 was raised, and some of the benefits of that funding for children were shown to event attendees in a video.

Bonnie Carroll, who has been involved in the annual Lunch for Literacy fundraising events for almost three decades and verified that Frank Jamison started the event, gave some sobering statistics about illiteracy. She said that 21.7% of the Tennessee population is illiterate and that Tennessee ranks 16th in the United States in illiteracy.

"Illiteracy is a terrible cycle," Carroll continued. "It starts with parents who can't read. Their children don't get the opportunity to learn to read at home. By the time you're in third grade, if you don't know how to read, you're four times more likely to drop out of school.

"If you drop out of school, low literacy can hinder your ability to find stable employment and increases the likelihood of incarceration. In our jails, between 70 and 75 percent of those incarcerated cannot read."

Carroll said that the grants that the Lunch for Literacy sponsors and attendees made possible "help to promote literacy and combat this terrible scourge that we have in our state and in our country." She urged literacy supporters in Oak Ridge to give even more to meet new challenges such as teaching the increasing number of non-English speaking people in the community to read and speak English.

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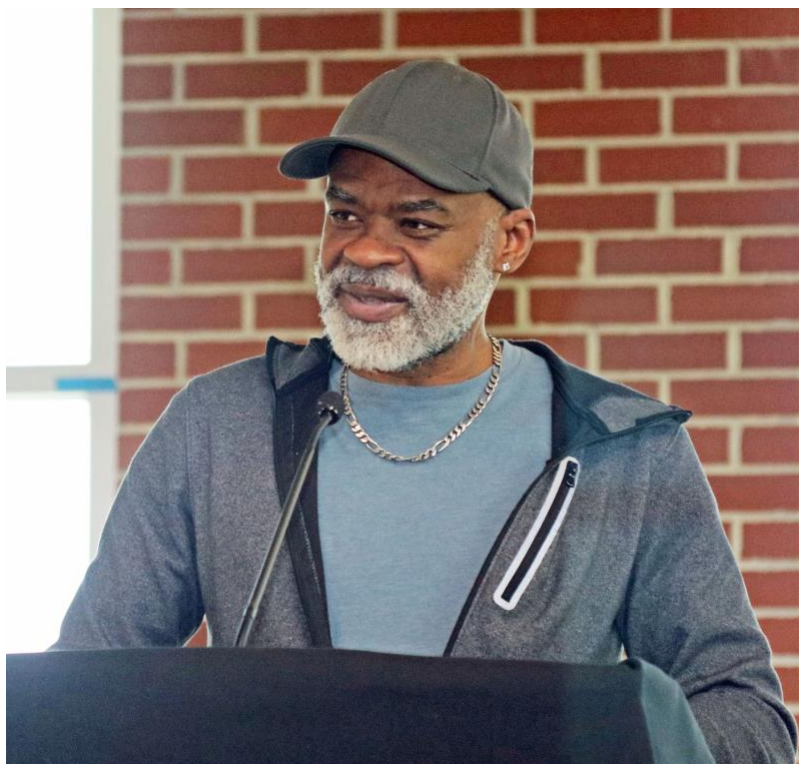
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In our community, there is a lot to be grateful for, and the Lunch for Literacy's commitment to reducing illiteracy and promoting reading in our community should be near the top of the list.

Thank you, Carolyn for this review of what many agreed was an excellent program with an exceptional keynote speaker. I enjoyed getting to spend just a bit of time with Brendan. His first question to me was, "Did The Oak Ridge Boys get their name from here?"

Of course, I told him about Wally Fowler and The Georgia Clodhoppers with their quartet, The Harmony Quartet, whose name Wally changed to The Oak Ridge Quartet after the war ended and they were on their way to the Grand Ole Opry. The quartet's name later became The Oak Ridge Boys. I also told him of our latest visit by them when we installed the Tennessee Music Pathways marker at the Historic Grove Theater.

He also indicated that he did not know how much history was here until coming for this event and he would very much like to return and spend more time here. I believe the folks at the Oak Ridge Public Library may consider if he might return and, of course, I will certainly give him a history tour.



Brendan Slocumb

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Tom Tuck presents the Frank Jamison Scholarship for Literacy to Olivia Land



Bonnie Carroll closing the event with reminders that Literacy is an important issue