

ORHS Class of 2024 Story

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 13, 2024)

Benita Albert brings us her annual story of the graduating class of Oak Ridge High School.

The Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) Class of 2024 is in the last month of their high school career and looking forward to being present on Blankenship Field (weather permitting) to receive their diplomas on May 17th. Three ORHS seniors, Sophie Sluss, Nathan Shippy, and Olivia Webb, agreed to share memories of their school and community experiences as a part of the continuing class stories collected by the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF). The Foundation's book, "Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence in Education in the Oak Ridge Schools: 1943-2018," contained class stories written by members of the first 75 years of ORHS classes. Class memories since 2018 have been collected and are virtually archived on the ORPSEF website www.orpsef.org.

Sophie Sluss is the daughter of Stephanie and Clifton Sluss. Stephanie is a teacher at Robertsville Middle School and Clifton is a scientist at Y-12. Sophie has two siblings, Kaleb (ORHS Class of 2023), now completing his first year at The Citadel, and Audrey, a rising freshman at ORHS next year. Sophie was home schooled by her mother for her kindergarten and first-grade years.

Sophie's grades 2-12 were completed at Linden Elementary School, Robertsville Middle School (RMS) and ORHS. I asked her to share special memories from her school years. She enthused over her educational journey, citing numerous examples of special teachers, classes, and projects. In Lisa Buckner's third grade classroom she loved the emphasis on public speaking and giving class presentations. She delighted in Linden School's family art nights with parent and student participants. She continued to attend the art nights beyond her Linden student years, including volunteering as an assistant in her ORHS sophomore year. At RMS she loved being a part of the NASA cube satellite project, RamSat, under teacher Todd Livesay. Her public speaking skills were further honed via team presentations on RamSat to scientists at the Marshall Space Center. She once again enjoyed Todd Livesay's mentorship in a STEM class at ORHS, and she praised the excellent teachers who guided her through the "hard, scary class" of Combined Studies. Many former ORHS Combined Studies students can identify with her sentiment, a course described by many as their introduction to collegiate standards.

Sophie has completed a project with classmate Randy Moore through the ORHS Math Thesis research program. Working at the Hardin Valley Manufacturing Demonstration Facility under mentors, Dr. Zachary Snow and Dr. Luke Scime, their project involved using data visualization methods to optimize resources in additive manufacturing. Sophie's experience in public speaking was put to further test in juried presentations of the project at the Tennessee Junior Science and Humanities Symposium and the Southern Appalachian Science and Engineering Fair (SASEF). Their research earned a 2024 Certificate of Excellence in the category of Materials and Bioengineering at SASEF.

Sophie fondly remembered the "Give Club" at RMS under the sponsorship of teacher David Scott. She described the experience as "where everything started for me, where I learned the importance of service. We sewed dresses for girls in Africa, and we wove plastic grocery bags into mats for the homeless." Her service passion continued through projects in the ORHS Interact Club. She recently received recognition for her approximately 1,000 hours of service, The Governor's Star Anderson County Youth Volunteer.

Sophie began dance classes at age four. She eventually enrolled in all the different dance classes at Oak Ridge Academy of Dance (ORAD) before focusing her interests in jazz and lyrical dance. She is a member of the ORAD competitive dance team that recently won top honors in the jazz competition at a national competition, a first in this category for ORAD. Sophie teaches two classes of young ballet dancers as well as assists in two other ORAD classes weekly. And, as if she does not get enough exercise, Sophie and friend Daniel Vogt led the chartering of a Pickle Ball Club at ORHS in their senior year.

Sophie will enter the chemical engineering program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in the fall. She hopes to follow her undergraduate program with medical school. Saying her future is still uncertain and full of choices, she named medical research as a career dream. In addition, she hopes to audition for the UTK group, Boss Dance Company.

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Nathan Shippy's parents, Lee and Holly Shippy, arrived in Oak Ridge in 2019 with their three children: twins Griffin and Megan (ORHS 2022) and Nathan. Nathan's family moved from northern Georgia when his father accepted work at Y-12.

Nathan enrolled in the eighth grade at Jefferson Middle School (JMS) in the Fall of 2019. It was an inauspicious beginning as he found it hard to adjust to a new school, to establish friendships, and to deal with an early-spring school closure due to COVID-19 concerns and precautions. It was with his parents' encouragement to find a sports activity of interest that he found his niche. He said, "After seeing the giant atomic symbol on the boat house on Melton Lake Drive and expressing interest, my parents pushed me to apply. I began rowing in the eighth grade. I loved it."

At ORHS, Nathan said, "I found it easy to make friends. All freshmen were new to ORHS, we were on a hybrid schedule for a major part of the year (in-person instruction only two days a week and with smaller class sizes), and my classes were easy." Sophomore year proved his biggest challenge, namely the change to full weekday attendance and more rigorous coursework. He mentioned Combined Studies as a special challenge to his GPA, but he said that he stayed with it and persevered. He added that his later coursework, which heavily concentrated on math and science studies--including Advanced Placement credits, redeemed his GPA. Nathan praised his Algebra II and Trigonometry teacher, Tom Froning, and his teaching style saying, "He teaches like a dad. Also, Honors Physics teacher Betsy Fairfax displayed a fun and engaging attitude in her teaching."

As a member of the National Honor Society, Nathan has met the requirements of extracurricular service by volunteering at the Oak Ridge Marina where, among other duties, he has learned to set up race course lanes. He also devotes many hours to rowing practice in preparation for competitive events. He has rowed in double and quad boats, but he is now concentrating on single boat competitions. This summer he will travel to Sarasota, Florida for regionals with hopes of qualifying for the national, single sculling competition. He also plans to further pursue a new interest in spartan racing, a combination trail race and obstacle course competition.

Nathan submitted his senior anthology for the ORPSEF virtual archive focusing on the special friendships he has made. He wrote, "Most rowers at Atomic Rowing attend Oak Ridge High School, so the number of memories we have shared both in school and on the team is unsurpassable." Some of those bonding memories included: pulling ahead of a collegiate boat competitor, winning gold, and fun-filled bus trips to and from regional competitions. His witty writing style mimics the energetic, fun-loving conversationalist I found him to be.

Nathan has been accepted to the University of Alabama where he hopes to join the men's rowing club. He will major in mechanical engineering with tentative aspirations to specialize in aerodynamic engineering. He laughed when telling me that he has created a real family issue, "a house divided by his collegiate choice." Nathan said his dad, who has an undergraduate engineering degree from Auburn, will not be joining him on any 'Roll Tide' cheer.

Olivia Webb is the daughter of Natasha Webb-Lewis and stepfather James Lewis. Natasha is the Manager of the Sleep Center of Methodist Medical Center. Sophie has three step-siblings, Isaac Lewis (ORHS 2016), Jamie Lewis (ORHS 2021), and Sadie Lewis who is a rising seventh grader at Oliver Springs Middle School.

Olivia attended The Thackston School in Knoxville through the fourth grade when the school was closed. She began fifth grade at Jefferson Middle School in the school year 2016-17. Her memories from JMS include the spirited pep rallies held for the whole student body and her STEM class individual project to build a wooden car. The cars were judged for their speed and design, and she proudly noted that she won the design category. She painted her car to resemble corn on the cob. She also praised eighth grade history teacher, Scott Linn, for his engaging, fun style. She said, "He turned what was not one of my favorite subjects into a class to enjoy and remember."

Olivia enrolled in teacher Dave Kolodney's broadcasting courses all four of her ORHS years. She credits Kolodney's classes with expanding her love of creative expression in an environment where filmmaking and editing have freedom from too many rules, yet where equipment utilization and collaboration require disciplined effort. She has enjoyed the opportunity to serve as a teacher's aide this year and to: "Further develop planning, scheduling, and communication skills."

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AP Environmental Science with teacher John Alexander focused Olivia's interests on a future career, beginning with her plans for an undergraduate major in Environmental Science. Her passion for the subject influenced her to organize and lead a school recycling program. As Vice President in her junior year followed by senior-year President of the ORHS Environmental Club, she led the effort to establish a school recycling program. She worked with student volunteers to make recycling boxes for classrooms and to collect and sort reusable materials. As a member of the National Honor Society, Olivia has met her NHS service requirements by volunteering at the Oak Ridge Children's Museum.

Olivia spent the summer of '23 as an intern at the Clinch River Environmental Studies Organization, a position she will return to once again this summer. She describes her work as: testing the water quality in wetlands, studying the health of aquatic macroinvertebrates, and observing the nesting habits of birds as well as reporting any invasive bird species.

She follows her busy summer with a fall enrollment at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga (UTC). A big part of her college choice was motivated by the promise of housing in the UTC Sustainable MOCs Community with a group of like-minded peers, all Earth Science majors. She also prefers the smaller campus size and the concentration options offered in her Environmental Science major, namely Biology and Natural Resources. Asked about a future career, Olivia replied, "I hope to work in conservation and perhaps also teach. I hope to share the passion for environmental science I experienced under my inspiring ORHS teacher, John Alexander."

One of the questions I asked of Sophie, Nathan, and Olivia was how COVID-19 affected their school life. Coincidentally, Olivia wrote her ORHS memory for the Class of 2024 ORPSEF virtual archives on this very issue. I share an excerpt of her thoughts below.

"Throughout my freshman year of high school, classes were on a hybrid schedule. The Gray Team and Cardinal Team would attend classes on alternating days with the goal of avoiding unnecessary exposure to COVID-19. As a result, I only interacted with a fraction of my peers and knew what very few of my classmates' and teachers' faces truly looked like, as they all wore masks to prevent the spread of COVID. This situation left me feeling isolated and disconnected while at school. However, throughout my sophomore year, more and more people began to discard their face masks once it became safe to do so. Seeing my teachers and classmates for the first time without a face mask was very exciting and strange... Each one of us felt relief as the pandemic waned and life could revert to normal."

Both Nathan and Sophie commented on the hybrid schedule. They both felt that it was harder to be disciplined in their studies with only two days of in-person instruction. Sophie noted that her close friends attended the other team day schedule, that she struggled with social issues, and that she missed opportunities for greater interactions with her teachers. Nathan felt that it was difficult to move from hybrid to a full week, block schedule in his junior year. He said, "It was a huge change from the off-days of hybrid. I found it hard to have my own time."

I asked these about-to-be alumni what advice they could offer to future ORHS Wildcats.

Sophie: "Get involved in various activities, try something different, and don't be afraid to ask for help."

Nathan: "Remember that everyone is new to ORHS in the freshman year. Make friends. Take it seriously. Manage your time. These are some words I could have used when I started ORHS."

Olivia: "It is important to get involved and to contribute, you will feel less lonely. Attend sporting events, get involved in Student Council, dress up for Spirit Week, and so much more."

Each year, as I write these class stories, I am uplifted by the candor, optimism, energy, and thoughtfulness of ORHS graduates. No doubt Sophie, Nathan, and Olivia will represent ORHS well in their future accomplishments at the university level and in subsequent careers. I thank them for sharing their stories.

In less than two decades of life that the ORHS Class of '24 students have known:

They have been immersed in a digital world.

They have persevered through the challenges of a global pandemic.

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And they will be eligible to vote in their first national election this year.

Best wishes as you begin your new life adventures. Today is the first day of forever. **Roar Wildcats, roar!**

Thank you again, Benita, for a wonderful insightful look at these marvelous young people who are graduating from Oak Ridge High School and starting their journey into the world to make a difference.



Nathan Shippy. *Courtesy of Benita Albert*

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Olivia Webb. Courtesy of Benita Albert

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Sophie Sluss. *Courtesy of Benita Albert*