

Pat Postma – Oak Ridge pillar for years – part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 17, 2025)

Carolyn Krause presents the second article in a three-part series on Pat Postma, a well-known Oak Ridger who has had a home in this town for 83 years. She will be moving away after having grown up and lived here since 1943. This article is based on her own interview with Pat and one by Keith McDaniel in 2011.

In early 2004, Pat Postma and Dr. Gene Caldwell, local pediatrician and state legislator, and his wife had decided to take a trip together to Hawaii in the fall. Dr. Caldwell's wife was in poor health and died before that planned trip, but Dr. Caldwell "still wanted to do the trip in honor and memory of his wife," said Pat in an interview with me. Herman himself had been suffering from a rare form of muscular dystrophy for several years, but he too wanted to go.

In late 2004 Pat and Herman were persuaded by Pete Craven to help raise the millions of dollars needed for the planned renovation of Oak Ridge High School. Long before that request, Pat had noticed Herman was "walking funny" and would black out temporarily while reading. She had to help him put on and take off a coat. He couldn't hang up his clothes with hangers in closets, so she had hooks installed on walls.

The most well-known of what she called "work arounds" was his use of a 2001 innovation to help him stay mobile – a Segway PT. This electric-powered personal transportation device drew attention to him when this former director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory steered it through the Hart Senate Office Building on his way to testifying before a Senate committee on national laboratory reform.

When the Postmas and Dr. Caldwell arrived on Nov. 3, 2004, in Hawaii and settled in the house they had rented, Herman "went off to take a nap," Pat said. "That's when Gene told me, 'I've watched children who have muscular dystrophy, and I've seen how Herman has changed in the last few years. I want you to realize that he may die within a year. I was shocked to hear that, and at the same time, I understood it was going to be much less than a year. And four days later in Hawaii, on Nov. 7, Herman died at age 71."

Back in Oak Ridge after Herman died, Pat would drive to the International Friendship Bell in its original location in A.K. Bissell Park and "ring it and think about Herman. He had raised money in the 1990s for the wooden structure that was failing. "He inspired my leadership for the second incarnation of that bell, for raising money for a new pavilion" to hold the bell that symbolizes the peace and friendship shared by Japan and Oak Ridge.

Pat, who became co-chair of the International Friendship Bell Citizens Advisory Board, led the effort that raised \$850,000 for the new pavilion. She also established the Contemplation Garden at the bell site and formed a rakers group to maintain it.

At that time, according to Pat in her 2011 interview with Keith McDaniel, she continued to carry out the task she and Herman had agreed to do: raise \$3 million from Oak Ridge organizations and individuals for the planned renovation of the high school from which she and her children had graduated.

As a member of the board of directors of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF), Pat also served as a design committee member who listened to teachers who had good ideas for equipment and other means to better educate their students. She also was named the ORPSEF chair of fundraising for the high school renovation.

In 2001, UT-Battelle management at ORNL had pushed for big improvements at ORHS to help attract scientists to the lab. The school had physics and chemistry labs "wildly out of date," Pat said, adding that the foundation had cracks and teachers complained that the students couldn't hear them when the noisy air conditioners had to be turned on.

Large entities such as ORNL, Y-12, and Oak Ridge Associated Universities had contributed \$5 million each to the ORHS renovation project, and 73% of Oak Ridge voters agreed to raise the sales tax to the

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maximum amount allowed provided three-quarters of a percent supported the school improvements. However, to win federal funding for the project, \$3 million in private money had to be obtained.

Pat obtained advice on fundraising from a woman friend at the University of Tennessee College of Business where Pat had worked until 2003 as an administrator and assistant dean.

Through talks, letters to all Oak Ridge households and many ORHS alumni, and publicity in The Oak Ridger, Pat asked individuals to pledge to the school project whatever they were willing to donate in the next five years. She made sure her message reached members of the Oak Ridge City Council, the Oak Ridge Board of Education and ORPSEF.

In the end, through the collaborative effort that Pat's leadership inspired, \$8 million was raised to match the federal fund and provide more later as an endowment for ORSEF so it could continue its work supporting teachers by meeting their requests for better classroom equipment.

Pat was asked to join the East Tennessee Foundation board by the dean of the UT School of Business, where she had been working when the board was first formed. ETF manages charitable resources, receives assets, invests the money it receives and awards grants to support a wide range of charitable purposes in 25 counties.

An ETF board member, the dean told her that ETF wanted many of the board members to represent cities and counties outside of Knox County. Pat was asked to be the Oak Ridge representative and served on the ETF board twice.

Ten years ago, Pat decided to update her will and leave money for Oak Ridge through ETF. "I have always loved Oak Ridge and want Oak Ridge to be the best that it can possibly be," she said, adding that her more recent volunteer projects are to help develop a newly designed urban downtown for Oak Ridge and provide advice and support as a member of the Scarborough 85 Monument Committee. By transferring a substantial amount of money to ETF, she started an endowment that is now called The Oak Ridge Fund for Achieving Community Excellence, or ORFACE.

ORFACE is an ETF affiliate fund that has a board of Oak Ridge directors selected every three years by Pat as the board chair until recently. This permanent endowment annually awards grants to projects believed by the board to improve the quality of life and future of Oak Ridge. In 2025, \$40,000 was awarded to five arts groups with innovative projects. Next year, the grants may go to recreation or science or education groups that have future-oriented projects, she said.

It is no wonder that Pat was honored in 2011 with a Muddy Boot award from the Oak Ridge-based East Tennessee Economic Council. The award recognizes individuals or groups who have helped build the community's economic base as did the Manhattan Project founders of Oak Ridge when Pat was growing up here and trying to avoid falling in the mud.

SIDEBAR: When it was determined a few years ago that the International Friendship Bell would need a new home due to deterioration of the original structure, Pat Postma was already out in front on the issue and working toward a solution.

She organized an International Friendship Bell Citizens Advisory Committee, and it was my great honor to be able to co-chair that committee and lead a multi-year project with her. I had not worked with Pat directly prior to that time, but I quickly understood what a force for good she is.

The Friendship Bell Project was extremely challenging, requiring close coordination with stakeholders and international partners, raising funds quickly, building consensus for the project and design, and working closely with architects and construction contractors. I learned much about our wonderful community from Pat, and we worked seamlessly together and became lifelong friends. The new pavilion symbolizes the best of our city, and Pat never let any of us lose

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sight of its purpose and significance as a gathering place to promote and celebrate friendship and peace around the world.

Pat has incredible vision, passion, energy, and work ethic that we should all aspire to match. She cares deeply about the community and people. Pat has always looked for ways to make a deep, and lasting, impact, and her vision to establish the Oak Ridge Fund for Achieving Community Excellence is a prime example. I was also fortunate to serve on the initial Board with her.

Pat is an optimist and a difference maker, never satisfied with the status quo, and always believing in the future of her beloved hometown. There has been no greater friend and advocate for the City of Oak Ridge than Pat Postma. She will be greatly missed in the community, but I am confident she will remain connected in some way. Her innumerable contributions and legacy of community service will continue in all of us that she has inspired.

Alan Tatum
Co-Chair, International Friendship Bell Citizens Advisory Committee
Former Chair, City of Oak Ridge Recreation and Parks Advisory Board

Thanks, Carolyn. The next column in this series of three will conclude the series featuring the impact Pat Postma has had on Oak Ridge. Included here is a video of Pat speaking about the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell: <https://youtu.be/xI2b6l85CR8?si=52lZlJuX9C-ByX6>



Pat Postma poses with the newly cast bell

Pat Postma shown in Kyoto, Japan, when the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell was cast (Courtesy Pat Postma)

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Pat Postma (Courtesy of Pat Postma)



Herman Postma (Courtesy of Pat Postma)