

## Pat Postma – Oak Ridge pillar for years – part 3

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 24, 2025)

Carolyn Krause presents the last article in a three-part series on Pat Postma, a well-known Oak Ridger who has contributed. 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.

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Like her husband, Pat has helped form a bridge between Oak Ridge and Knoxville-based organizations, especially through the East Tennessee Foundation and the University of Tennessee. Here's how that accomplishment started.

In the early 1970s she had been working at Oak Ridge National Laboratory part-time while raising their young children, Peter and Pamela. One of her jobs was dealing with census data as a member of an urban studies group. Then, in 1973, as Herman Postma was moving from his position as a division director to become the ORNL director, he suggested that it would be politically unwise in this situation for her to stay at the lab with the hope of getting a full-time job she desired.

Pat had already been accepted to enter graduate school in economics at UT. "To be an expert at something so I could solve the world's problems was really appealing to me," she said. "Going back to work at ORNL was part of that plan." I was shocked at his decision.

During that year, their house, which had burned down in 1972, was being rebuilt and slightly expanded. Peter was nine and Pam was six during the rebuild when the Postmas were living with Pat's parents. The fire, she said, was due to a ballast for fluorescent lights in one of the rooms; it lacked the safety technology required later. "It was hard to get somebody who would take down the remains of the house and clean all the bricks so we could use them again," she said. But she told Keith McDaniel, the kids were amazed that their fellow students responded to their loss by giving them nickels and dimes the family didn't need.

In 1981, halfway through Herman's 14-year directorship, Pat earned her Ph.D. in economics from UT. She obtained employment there, conducting research in the Tennessee Economic Policy Office. She worked with census data and published UT's statistical abstract, which she later revised.

One of the achievements Herman was known for was the establishment of a technology transfer program at ORNL to help researchers license their innovations to companies, believing they had the potential to become marketable. Pat set up a consulting practice aimed at encouraging lab innovators to launch technology spinoffs and startups.

She tried to connect future entrepreneurs with venture capitalists outside of Knoxville while a group in the city made a failed effort to start a venture capital fund for Tennessee-related businesses. She and others gained valuable experience as they learned what works and what doesn't work in attempts to make startups successful.

The management of the UT School of Business, where students can earn master-of-business-administration (M.B.A.) degrees, decided in the late 1980s to "start a concentration at the M.B.A. level in entrepreneurship, and I volunteered to set up a class that would teach the financial issues faced by startups," Pat said. As a new professor, she noted, she had "fun writing business cases for the class to analyze, an activity that became popular.

"Because I had consulted with companies, I was able to write several case studies for my finance class in entrepreneurship to analyze," Pat said. "Then I invited the people who started the businesses my students were analyzing to be guests in the classroom." The business executives listened to and reacted to the students' analyses. The opportunity for her students to "talk to people who had started companies was a great inspiration to them," she added.

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A business case is a formal document that seeks to justify starting a company because predicted customer demands for its new product or services would give venture capitalists a desirable return on investment. Pat's case studies were like what the Harvard Business School instructs its M.B.A. students to analyze, she said. The M.B.A. entrepreneurship track is now part of the Anderson Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation in UT's Haslam College of Business.

Pat said that her most innovative contribution to the UT School of Business was to lead in the design of and to direct a unique program for working managers throughout the United States. The managers attended classes at UT for two weeks and then returned to their companies for six weeks where their "homework" was to investigate how those principles were being applied in their own companies.

The two-week/six-week integrated curriculum allowed working managers to earn their M.B.A. degree in one year. UT was immediately asked to replicate that program in Taiwan. Within five years, two additional such programs, specialized for particular industries, were initiated. It brought the Business School international recognition and ranking.

Pat received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Haslam School of Business at UT for starting this series of revolutionary one-year Executive M.B.A. programs for managers across the country. She became an assistant dean of executive education in the business school and retired in 2003.

In 2006-2007, her first year as a member of the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club, she was named Rotarian of the Year. In the past 10 years she became a founder and member of the executive committee of the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival, which she said is one of the best such festivals in the region because of the top-notch storytellers that perform here every June.

Sidebar: "Pat Postma and I were inducted into the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club on May 11, 2005. Soon, Rotary and friendship became family-ship. Together with Charlie Jernigan, we've woven a tapestry of community service, laughter, travel, cooking, and countless shared meals and ideas. Whether cheering for the Vols, planning the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival, or simply relaxing together, we've built a bond that feels like home.

Pat's passion for Oak Ridge, vision for excellence, and determination to make things happen inspire everyone around her. Pat enriches our lives, and we are grateful for the more than 20 years of work, play, and adventures still unfolding." —Emily Jernigan

Shortly after Herman died in 2004, the East Tennessee Economic Council established The Postma Young Professional Medal to honor both him and Pat, who had worked together in community service, including successful fundraising. It has been awarded annually since 2005 to young professionals who have positively affected the Oak Ridge community culture.

When asked how she managed to get through crises such as the destruction of her family house by fire and Herman's death, she said, "I think I have not been defeated by crises. I just always have a stubborn belief that we can get through this and that it'll get better, and it does. I learned to like feeling my independence and discovering that I can do things that I thought I could never do or have to do."

Pat and Herman's children and grandchildren have been successful in their careers. Both graduates of Duke University like their parents, Peter worked in information technology security for a federal government contractor before retiring, and Pam, who started out as a Morgan Stanley employee, later earned an M.B.A. degree from the University of North Carolina and became a certified financial advisor. Her two sons, both residents of New York City where she once worked, are newly married; one is an urban planner, and the other is a researcher for a hedge fund company.

One of the observations Pat made about Herman in speaking with McDaniel is that "he championed the women's cause very early. He would say, 'Pound for pound, you get a lot more out of a woman than you do out of a man.'" Herman would have been proud of Pat's lifetime achievements as she is of his.

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Thanks, Carolyn. This series has been an exceptional look at Pat Postma's contributions to Oak Ridge over her long career, living, working, and volunteering, in ways that always brought substantial improvements and encouragement in whichever endeavor she chose to undertake.

An additional award given Pat is the Aid to Distressed Families of Appalachian Counties Bow Tie Award presented to her in 2022. This award is special to me as Bill Wilcox created it and designated me as the first recipient in 2013 just before he passed away. Pat epitomizes the criteria for this award as she does all the others she has received.

I have been privileged to work alongside Pat on several initiatives, and without fail, I have been amazed by her dedication, initiative, and steadfast love for the city she has helped to advance. The most recent opportunity has been the Scarboro 85 Monument Committee that is now a Foundation. Her insights assisted in fundraising for that initiative.

The icon of Oak Ridge, the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, is prominently located in the center of our city primarily because of her vision and efforts. I am proud each time I take a group of tourists there and see the amazement with which they always react to the experience of ringing the bell. In my mind, I thank Pat each time a visitor expresses admiration for the concept of peace and friendship conveyed by that simple yet elegant symbol of the relationship between Japan and Oak Ridge.

It is also with great pride that I feel fortunate to have known Pat Postma and been allowed to learn from her unfailing efforts to encourage young professionals through the East Tennessee Economic Council's Postma Young Professional Medal. She demonstrated her foresight by creating the Oak Ridge Fund for Achieving Community Excellence. I admire Pat and consider her an excellent role model of dedicated community support. We will miss her but hope to see her return frequently for visits. She is certainly a welcome visitor.

A few weeks ago, a special event was held at Dr. John Rather's home honoring Pat. At that event John had the foresight to ask Robert Fowler to create a video oral history of Pat being honored. Here is the link to that video: <https://www.rciginc.com/videos/images/patpostma.mp4>

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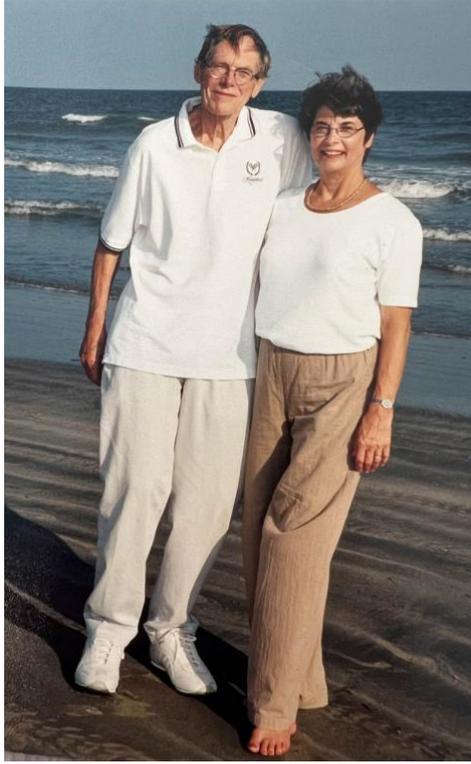
Pat Postma and Ray Smith when Pat was awarded the Bill Wilcox Bow Tie Award by the Aid to Distressed Families of Appalachian Counties in 2022. Photo by Jamie LaRose (Courtesy of Ray Smith)



Jim Rushton and Pat Postma at the home of John Rather for an evening honoring Pat and producing the video linked above (Courtesy of Carolyn Krause)

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Herman and Pat Postma on Kiawah Island in 2003 where they vacationed frequently (Courtesy of Pat Postma)