

The Oak Ridge Years of Chris Harris and his sister Lou Ann Harris Cristy, Continued:

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

The second and final segment of Lou Ann Christy's remembrances of her beloved brother. Go with her back to their Oak Ridge years together.

Until we resided in Oak Ridge, Chris had primarily been in the residence and influence of adult women, a same-aged female cousin and me. He had all the Jackson Square and Elm Grove Shopping Center area to explore upon the move. We were on our honor to stay connected to Mother the two hours after school that Mother was still at work.

This was in the era of only the house telephone or public pay phones. Our routine was to call mother when we arrived home for our "parental instructions" which we were to apply until she walked home from the "Castle on the Hill," the common term referencing the large workplace, now called the Federal Building, across the Turnpike from Jackson Square.

There being no cell phones, it was not immediately convenient for Chris to go home directly as he pursued his career of cleaning shops east and west of our home after school. Mother had to trust that we would be where we said we would be between 3:00 p.m. and 5: 15 p.m. on school and workdays.

Summers were from May through late August which required more familial trust since she still worked at least eight hours, and we were out of school. Since many children had stay-at-home mothers, he was able to meet young men his age and visit with them. When Mother was off from work, they could be at our house, but not if she were at work.

There were school activities organized, but not much for the summers. We did have the Blankenship Field, the Oak Ridge Public library, Kern Memorial Methodist Church's boy scout troop, the Rexall Corner Drug Store (where Big Ed's is now) and other stores to peruse plus the tennis courts which could fill the time with occasions to meet people and fill our days.

No one was at home in our four-apartment building during the workdays. In our late teens we could go to the Ridge theater. A few times we went to the Center Theater, now the Oak Ridge Playhouse. I went to several plays at the theater in Jefferson Junior High School (then it was above the present bleachers on the "home side").

Chris had his regular "sweep the shops" and newspaper routes all-year-round and eventually purchased a lawn mower for more "career development" within the range he could push his machine to the work sites which kept him motivated and physically fit.

There was also the empty lot on Tucker Road which had been converted to a sand lot ball field by some of the neighbors where he could meet and play with the "other" guys. Eventually there was a short-cut path worn from our campsite at 118 East Tennessee Avenue along and across the "creek" terminating at the "ball field." This was a safe zone he frequented, and he and I could share, which allowed him freedom while I was able to stay at home to do what I needed or wanted to do. I rarely went to the baseball field. I generally did household "chores" to help life be smoother for Mother so she could have "free time" to be with us when not working.

The significance of sharing these details is to explain how we both grew to protect and trust each other in our teens as well as appreciate the one parent who committed her entire life to see that we had what we needed at whatever sacrifice she had to bear. As I began to "date" and build relationships, he had a personal trait of keeping our home safe.

Years later I came to realize that he culled his friends to those whom he felt respectful enough to be in my space. From time to time, I noticed that some guys did not return to our home. Yet he associated with them himself. When I asked about them, he responded, "Yeah, they're busy."

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I learned that was code for "they use bad language" and he did not want them around me. He felt that they were not respectful persons. That remained true through my college years. When I visited home after that, I learned that he did know the "bad language" but he did not use it in my presence. That remained true for his whole life.

Mother had an Olan Mills photograph made of me before I went to college. When I was not in Oak Ridge she placed it above the dining table. It is 18 by 20 inches in size. I found it strange to walk in and see myself there above the table.

Chris told me, "I intend to place that picture of you in your honor in a college parlor when I earn enough to donate a dorm to a college!" He had seen that possible when he visited me at Tennessee Wesleyan College from 1959-63 in Athens, Tennessee.

He also expressed multiple thoughts which he would state in my presence to mother, for example: "Mom, I love you, but Lou Ann is number 1 and you are number 2." By the way, I inherited that large photograph, as well as the memory of his way of expressing the importance I played in his life.

After Hilary, his daughter, was born, he would state. "Lou Ann, Hilary is number 1 you're number 2."

One summer, I believe it was 1962, Walter Pierson, my former boyfriend who had moved with his family to Albuquerque, New Mexico, during our freshman year at Oak Ridge High School, asked if he could come visit with me. We had written letters to each other for three years. Mother agreed that he could come. There was no mention of how long his visit would be.

Walter came and stayed over a month. Chris shared his room with him and decided to return to the west with him. Mother agreed, I think reluctantly. Walter had ridden his motor scooter with the foot board the 1,400 miles.

That was before the Interstate was built. Chris rode double on the back. We did not hear from either of them. I came home with a date and found this shirtless man with long red curly hair and a full beard to match. I thought it was Jesus's twin sitting at our dining table. No one introduced him. After some conversation, I began to hear some familiarity in his voice. Then a little later I recognize familiar body movements. Then, "Oh, my gosh, Chris! I did not recognize you!" I jumped up to hug and kiss him. The room was full of laughter for a while. Then he told us the tales of his trip. I will share two events, that he nor I, ever did or will forget.

I still tear-up and cringe that anyone would have this experience: It seems he was hitchhiking on his way back from Albuquerque and was in or near Memphis, Tennessee. He was in a car with two other men up front, and he was sitting in the back seat with his few belongings in a knapsack beside him.

During the conversation he began to suspect he was in danger of being kidnapped. He calculated the point at which he quickly opened the door, the car moving or at a near pause, and jumped out. He left his knapsack in the car. He was able to find a job shoveling peas in a factory. Eventually he had enough money to purchase some overalls.

One Sunday he found a large church named after John the Baptist and having on clean overalls, he decided to go to church. When he approached one of the two sets of open double doors a deacon greeted him, "You may not enter wearing overalls!" and waved Chris, an 18-year-old "Jesus twin" away from the doors!

We had long discussions about that incident several times. He and I decided that the main event with God is that he is with us wherever we are. God is not concerned with what we wear as some humans are.

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He worked at the pea factory several weeks until he discovered that he could buy a car for \$25.00. Much less than the cost of a bus ticket. He bought the car, drove to the front of 118 East Tennessee Avenue, parked it, never, driving it again. It had made the trip and stopped.

Some months later the police stopped by. They came to the door with a summons for Mother and told her that it had to be removed. She paid \$25.00 to have it towed away! It was definitely worth getting him home safely.

A family story has been that Chris bought the only car our trio owned. Chris and I had taken drivers' training and earned our licenses in an ORHS class taught by Mr. Lawless. Mother did not own a car until she was 49 in 1966. Her son-in-law, Stephen Cristy taught her how to drive.

At times when we were asked where our father was, our response was, "He disappeared, and no one has been able to find him." Chris spent decades trying to see if he could locate him. When we were ten and twelve our Grandfather M. L. Harris came from Ringgold, Georgia to visit us. Again in 1955 after we were in Oak Ridge, he was ill and wanted to find our father, his son. We had a return visit to Ringgold, Georgia, for a week in the summer of 1956 with our Papa Harris.

Later we attended his funeral. Sometimes not having a father caused a curiosity among our friends. We both were staunch about our confidence in Mother: That she tried to relate to us as both our father and Mother. We knew "different" was not bad or negative. Chris and I decided that summer of 1956 we would honor Mother both on Mother's Days AND Father's Days!

Many of Chris' friends came to our home over those seven years. They became a part of the family and continued to visit Mother. Later in my life they found me and came to visit just to catch up with his and my life. Several found me until they died.

On his 60th birthday I was able to locate about nine of his friends to celebrate with him at my home. I observed that none of them sat down! They slowly circled the table and took food randomly as they visited among themselves for about three hours.

Mother retired from the Department of Energy. She built a retirement home on the lake in Langston, Alabama. She also owned a house in Woodland at the time of her death January 7, 1998, from pneumonia detected on Christmas Day while visiting Chris in Antioch, Tennessee.

On December 24, 2023, during the second leg of mine and Steve's Christmas family tour we stopped in Murfreesboro, Tennessee in route to Bloomington, Indiana. We had left Tucker, Georgia that morning.

Chris was in a new health facility. He was alert, bright-eyed and cheery. I took a toy for him to share with Joaquin when he would arrive later. Sounds of a Christmas service for other residents were audible. I stood looking out the window on the beautiful sunny afternoon.

He mentioned to me three things.

"I love that woman, Charlotte!"

"Have you noticed what a good mother Hilary is?"

"She certainly is!"

"Isn't 'my' baby beautiful?" (That was his reference to his year old grandson, Joaquin.)

"Yes, he's handsome!"

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"I think he is beautiful!" Chris restated. He was radiantly smiling through his white puffy beard. The sun was shining through the window as I looked out to the landscaped garden. I turned back looking at him glowing in the sunlight.

"You are 'purdy.' I am glad you came to see me. Give me a hug. I love you!"

He held out his arms to welcome me. That was OUR last hour and-one-half together.

Thank you, Lou Ann! It is good to recall the good times and special memories of a loved one.



Lou Ann Harris Cristy and Chris Harris (Courtesy of Lou Ann Harris Cristy)