

The Willow Brook Legacy of Herbert Dodd

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 3, 2025)

Benita Albert with help from Julie Dodd have provided a sensational account of Julie's dad, Herbert Dodd. Enjoy looking back at excellence in education in Oak Ridge schools.

The Willow Brook Bear, a gift from the estate of Herbert Dodd, who was the Willow Brook Principal from 1966-1981, has returned to its den. With a joyful hug, Principal Jenifer Laurendine and Assistant Principal Jason Nussbaum welcomed the stuffed mascot dressed in a red knit sweater with black, embossed lettering and thus fittingly sporting the school colors.

I was curious to know more about Herbert Dodd, a legendary educational leader in the Oak Ridge Schools from 1943 until his retirement in 1981. Thus, I reached out to the bear's donor, Julie Dodd, the daughter of Thelma and Herbert Dodd. I asked for her input on her parents' roots, their Oak Ridge lives, and especially, memories from her dad's Willow Brook years.

Julie was educated in the Oak Ridge Schools and graduated from Oak Ridge High School in 1968. She provided the following, interesting insights regarding her parents.

"Dad grew up in Martin, TN. He started college at the University of Tennessee Junior College (now University of Tennessee/Martin) and then transferred to UT/Knoxville, where he completed his undergraduate degree in English and Social Studies and sang in the UT Men's Glee Club. While a student, Dad was struck by a hit-and-run driver. The accident gave him a collapsed lung and broken ribs, which made him ineligible for medical reasons for military service during WWII.

"Mom (Thelma Henry Iles) grew up in Chattanooga. She earned her undergraduate degree at Maryville College in Latin. Her activities included Student Council, YWCA Cabinet, and stage manager for theater productions.

"My parents first met when they were English teachers at the Allen Grammar School in Cleveland, TN, in the 1930s. At that point they were colleagues but did not date.

"After five years at the Allen Grammar School, Dad became teaching principal of an elementary school in Humboldt, TN. He was selected for a two-week program to tour outstanding schools in Tennessee and surrounding states. The following year, he was appointed supervisor of Giles County elementary schools.

"He returned to UTK to work on his master's degree in administration and supervision. While attending graduate school in the summer of 1943, Dad's major professor arranged for Dad to have an interview with Oak Ridge Schools' Superintendent, Dr. Alden Blankenship.

"Dr. Blankenship hired Dad to be an elementary school principal in the newly starting Oak Ridge Schools, with a 10-month appointment and a salary of \$1,900. When Dad arrived in Oak Ridge to start work, he learned he was the first principal hired. As the school system was just getting started, Dad had no students, no teachers, and no building. Dr. Blankenship asked Dad to help each elementary school get set up and open. Dad helped hire the school district's teachers and conducted the first orientation for new teachers in Towne Center (now The Oak Ridge Playhouse).

"Meanwhile, Mom completed her master's degree at UTK. She served as the first president of the newly formed chapter of Pi Lambda Theta, an education honorary society. She worked in the UT Graduate School Office and then took a job with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as a secretary. Such a position was the employment option for women at that time, even though Mom had a master's degree.

"When WWII military service for men created more job opportunities for women, Mom became a member of TVA's Personnel Relations Branch. She worked with the 'cooperative program' -- an alliance between TVA and the Tennessee Valley Trades and Labor Council -- and edited the organizations' publications.

"My parents reconnected when they were both at UT and married in 1945. They lived in an apartment and then a "B" cements on West Outer Drive. Dad was principal of Cedar Hill Elementary School, and Mom commuted to Knoxville to continue working for TVA. When I was born, she worked for TVA in a part-time before leaving TVA to be a full-time mom

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and homemaker. She was active in church and civic organizations, including the American Association of University Women.

"Mom began substitute teaching when I started Jefferson Junior High School. She taught all grade levels and subjects. I knew how difficult substitute teaching could be as not all students were cooperative with subs.

"Mom moved into full-time teaching at Highland View and then Linden, teaching fourth, fifth and sixth grades. Mom was a great organizer and designed many interesting teaching units and assignments. I really enjoyed helping her create her bulletin boards before the start of the school year, and, sometimes, I helped with her class activities.

Mom and Dad were inspiring educators. They kept up on the latest curriculum advances and enjoyed finding better ways to accomplish educational goals. They promoted collaboration with their colleagues and with students."

Julie was a first-hand witness to the work ethic, innovation, and dedication of her parent educators. She followed their lead and joined the staff of Oak Ridge High School after first teaching in Lexington, Kentucky, and earning her doctorate from the University of Kentucky. Joining the staff of ORHS in school year 1982-83, she taught English and served as advisor for both the Oak Log (Yearbook) and Oak Leaf (newspaper) throughout her six-year tenure in Oak Ridge.

In 1988, Julie accepted a position in the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida (UF) where she served for 28 years. She estimated she taught more than 11,000 students from courses in introductory writing to graduate level coursework in "Mass Communication Teaching." For the first eleven years at UF, she served as Executive Director of the Florida Scholastic Press Association. When she retired, the college named the graduate student teaching award in her honor, and she was bestowed the title Professor Emerita.

Returning to the inspiration for this article, I asked Julie to discuss her father's special memories from his time as Willow Brook Principal and the reason for his move from his beloved Cedar Hill School position where he served as principal from 1944-1966.

Julie responded, "The Superintendent asked Dad to move to Willow Brook. The Willow Brook principal had resigned after serving part of the previous school year following the unexpected death of Willow Brook's previous principal. Dad told the Superintendent 'Yes'--with the request that his long-term Cedar Hill secretary, Mary Snyder, would make the move with him. Dad served as Cedar Hill Principal for 23 years, from the school opening in the winter of 1944, so leaving was difficult. He served as Willow Brook Principal for fifteen years and really loved his experience with the faculty and students."

I first learned of Herbert Dodd via the teacher grapevine, of his legendary, pioneering status in the Oak Ridge Schools and of his devoted teacher following. I heard him described as an encouraging leader, an innovative program advocate, and a teaching mentor. Julie shared some examples from his time at Willow Brook, of his effective leadership qualities and his pride in the exceptional educators he supported.

Promoting an Innovative Curriculum

"Dad provided students and teachers with new opportunities for creative and hands-on learning. He was active in the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools and gained teaching and curriculum ideas from attending SACS conventions and observing in other schools.

"He was proud when his teachers received grants or recognition. *The Willow Brook Gazette*, advised by sixth grade teacher Sue Elkins, won first place in 1980 in a national competition for elementary school newspapers. In 1982, Elkins was named Tennessee Teacher of the Year. Music teacher Eunetta McMahon received a state-administered federal grant to develop individualized instruction in piano, guitar, recorder and autoharp.

"An advocate of environmental education, Dad helped create the Tremont Experience for sixth graders. Through the program, many of the Willow Brook students visited the Great Smoky Mountains National Park for the first time.

"As another way of promoting creative opportunities for teachers and students, Dad served on the advisory board for the school system's new Teacher Center and worked with Teacher Center Director Jinx Bohstedt Watson."

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Creating a Team

"Dad cultivated and supported team spirit and camaraderie among the Willow Brook staff. He also promoted collaboration between different generations of teachers--from Willow Brook teachers like Lucille Stevens Brown, Polly Cloyd and Helen Lewis to new teachers, including Gordon Campbell, Mark Diemer, Alma Golden and Lou Volk.

"Throughout his career in the Oak Ridge Schools, Dad helped recruit new teachers for the Oak Ridge Schools. While principal at Willow Brook, he traveled with Personnel Director Gilbert Scarbrough to regional college campuses to interview graduating seniors.

"Pat Wilson recently told me about being one of the teachers Dad recruited when she was a senior at Murray State University. After the interview, Dad encouraged her to come to Oak Ridge for a follow-up interview. She did and was hired, starting at Willow Brook the fall Dad became the school's principal."

Encouraging Leadership

"Dad encouraged his teachers to attend workshops, pursue graduate degrees and seek leadership opportunities. Several of his faculty went on to take administrative roles, including Howie Irwin and Lana Seivers.

"Howie Irwin, who had been a student at Cedar Hill with Dad as his principal, started his teaching career at Willow Brook with Dad and then became the principal at Glenwood Elementary School.

"Lana Seivers started her teaching career at Willow Brook as a speech pathologist. She went on to be Linden's principal, the Superintendent of Clinton City Schools, and then Tennessee State Education Commissioner.

"Dad followed the careers of his students and teachers after they left Willow Brook."

Herbert Dodd made plans to retire at the end of the 1978 school year due to the government guideline of mandatory retirement at age 65. His faculty planned a retirement party, but they also made their wishes known for him to continue if it was at all possible. Julie recalled this special request: "In March 1978, The Willow Brook Principal Selection Committee and the Willow Brook PTA petitioned Superintendent Kenneth Loflin and the School Board to continue Dad's contract due to 'his expertise in his work, his good health, and the pending legislation before Congress to extend the mandatory retirement age to 70.'"

Julie continued, "With the active support of the Willow Brook PTA, staff, and parents, the School Board renewed Dad's contract. Dad was honored to be asked to continue, and he was touched by the enthusiastic support he received.

"Willow Brook teachers had been planning for Dad's retirement, not knowing what would be the outcome of the school district's decision. The women faculty created a beautiful cathedral quilt. Led by Tom Gentry, the male teachers made a hooked rug that matched the quilt's design. When the school district renewed Dad's contract, the teachers decided to hold a celebration party (instead of a retirement party) and presented their handcrafted gifts to Dad and Mom.

"Dad continued as Willow Brook Principal for three more years. A week before the end of the 1981 school year, Dad learned from the Tennessee teachers' retirement office that he had reached the maximum teaching/salary limit on its scale at 45 years. Dad and Mom had deferred travel and other activities as Dad continued as principal. So, Dad decided to retire at the end of the school year.

"Because the teachers had thrown a retirement party for him in 1978, Dad decided that he would not tell the faculty in advance so they would not host another retirement party. Instead, Dad, Mom, and I planned a party for the Willow Brook staff. He sent a letter to the faculty, asking them to return to Willow Brook for a short meeting after the end-of-year school system luncheon. They found the school library set up for a party, complete with the retirement quilt and rug on display. The teachers were surprised to hear Dad announce his immediate retirement."

Julie recalled, "*The Oak Ridger's* front-page story, the following day, ran with the headline, 'Premier Principal Retires.' Reporter Patricia Yaroch said of Dad's surprise announcement that 'It was one of the best kept secrets since the Manhattan Project.'"

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“Although Dad hadn’t wanted a retirement party, Willow Brook teachers and parents wanted to make sure he was recognized. Helen Catron, Betty Ann Domm, Tom Gentry, Faye Hale, Linda Hawthorne, Marie Lousteau and Twinkle Tindall planned a special Willow Brook assembly that was held the following November.

“At the assembly, the students presented Dad with an evergreen tree that later was planted on the school grounds. The planning committee presented Dad with an album of more than a hundred letters, cards and messages from appreciative faculty, administrators, students, and parents. Teacher Helen Catron wrote of the close bond Dodd created, a family atmosphere among the staff and of a caring principal who knew his students’ names. I recently re-read the contents of the album and the outpouring of enthusiasm for Dad’s role as Willow Brook Principal--educator, leader, mentor, and advocate. After his retirement, he and a group of retired Willow Brook teachers would meet monthly for lunch visits.”

During Willow Brook's 76th year, a piece of Herbert Dodd has been returned via the Willow Brook Bear. As I was the one privileged to return the bear to its 'forever den,' I also wanted a written memory of Herbert Dodd's legacy to be revisited for the public. It was the dedicated work of early educators like Herbert and Thelma Dodd that set the high standards and expectations in the Oak Ridge Schools. They coined the Oak Ridge Schools' logo, "Excellence in Education," and they lived it in their exemplary work.

Thank you, Benita and Julie! Herbert Dodd was certainly one of the exemplary educators in the Oak Ridge school system for years.



Thelma and Herbert Dodd stand in the yard behind their “B” cemesto on West Outer Drive. Photograph taken about 1949. (Courtesy of Julie Dodd)

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Herbert and Thelma (seated to his right) Dodd threw a surprise party for the Willow Brook faculty in the school library when he announced his retirement on June 11, 1981. (Courtesy of Julie Dodd) need names...



Willow Brook retired teachers met monthly for lunch visits. Around the table, from left to right: Stella Doyle, Mary Snyder, Pat Wilson, Helen Lewis, Katie Howell, Nancy Scarbrough, Polly Cloyd, obscured, Helen Ripley, Herbert Dodd, Lucille Stevens Brown, Faye Hale and Helen Catron. (Courtesy of Julie Dodd)

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Herbert Dodd in his office at Willow Brook Elementary School (Courtesy of Julie Dodd)



Attending an Oak Ridge Schools social event are (from left) Dr. Robert Smallridge (superintendent), Nick Orlando (Jefferson Junior High School coach), Wallace Spray (JJHS retired principal), Dr. William Burris (assistant superintendent) and Herbert Dodd. Dodd worked with 12 different superintendents during his 38 years as a principal in the Oak Ridge Schools (Courtesy of Julie Dodd)