

Ron Garret's Reflections on His Early Oak Ridge Life

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 30, 2025)

Benita Albert brings us another of her excellently researched stories of Oak Ridge School's graduates. This one tells the story of a person who chose to change his name. I am sure you will enjoy learning about him.

Ron Garret is an adventurer in his personal and professional life. His ever-curious mind and creative problem-solving talents have led him to a broad range of experiences. He has pursued research in robotics and artificial intelligence, has written code software for outer space projects as well as developed one of the first online crowdsourcing applications, has studied filmmaking and produced a feature-length documentary film, has created blogs on topics from quantum mechanics to coding in Common Lisp, and has sought cultural enrichment via eclectic world travels. Ron's resume' includes work across government and corporate projects as well as an entrepreneur for, and/or angel investor in, several startup companies.

Helen Keller wrote, "Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing at all." Pablo Picasso observed, "I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it." These quotes from two 20th Century notables combine to offer a better description of Ron Garret than my own verbiage allows. Ron is fearless, incessantly curious, and eager for new challenges.

I first knew Ron as Erann Gat, my Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) Calculus student for two years in the early 1980s. In 2004, Erann changed his name to Ron Garret, a decision made to circumvent the many mispronunciations of his birth name. Erann recalled that his dad had also changed his surname, thus Gat was not a multi-generational family name. His parents, Ruth and Uri Gat, moved to Oak Ridge in the summer of 1974. Uri accepted an appointment at Oak Ridge National Lab in nuclear engineering. Erann enrolled in fifth grade at Linden School in the fall of 1974 and later matriculated through Robertsville Junior High School, ultimately graduating with the ORHS Class of 1982.

His parents' heritage and their devoted support of Erann and his younger sister, Irit, were instrumental in shaping their values and inspiring their dreams. Uri was born in Jerusalem and Ruth in Haifa, both a part of Palestine at the time. They would later meet upon Uri's move to Haifa, but their interest in each other grew during the time they served in the Israeli Air Force from 1954-56. Uri was a fighter pilot who flew combat missions in the 1956 Sinai Campaign. Uri attended the renowned Technion University, the Israel Institute of Technology. Uri and Ruth married in 1961 and moved to Juelich, Germany, in 1963 for furtherance of Uri's postdoctoral studies in nuclear engineering. Erann was born in 1964, followed by Irit's birth in 1966. The family immigrated to the United States in 1969 when Uri accepted a teaching position in the University of Kentucky's Engineering School.

Ruth Gat completed both a bachelor's and a master's degree in marriage and family counseling from the University of Kentucky by 1974, just before the family moved to Oak Ridge. Ruth and fellow therapist, Sandy Smith, co-founded Area Counseling Services, an Oak Ridge based organization where she worked until her retirement in 2015.

Irit Gat graduated from ORHS in 1984 and later completed doctoral studies that certified her as a clinical psychologist. She spent the most of her career in academic teaching and administration. Her last assignment, before her untimely death in 2020, was as the Dean of Psychology and Social Sciences at Antelope Valley College in Lancaster, CA.

Reflecting on his Oak Ridge childhood, Erann recalled long bus rides to and from school and of being an after-school, latch-key kid since both parents worked. In those afternoons he remembers watching TV reruns and game shows. His introduction to American pop culture was shaped by such as: "Bat Man," "Gilligan's Island," "The Brady Bunch," "The Match Game," and "The Price is Right." He said, "I was a C

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student for my first few years until I realized that getting A's wasn't really that hard, and it made my parents happy. I started putting in some effort." His efforts paid off as he completed the most rigorous academic coursework at ORHS and subsequently earned admission to a half-dozen top-tier universities.

Erann described his young self as lacking motivation, opining that "laziness was my super power." However, as his math teacher, I never observed this. I remember a young man full of enthusiasm for learning, one constantly in search of challenges beyond the curricular constraints of his coursework, an incredible wit, and a student with a natural talent and infectious zeal for science and math.

It was during his junior high years that a whole new world of exploration opened-up and shaped his future. I learned this when I asked Ron who (or what) inspired his beyond-Oak Ridge educational and career choices. His response follows.

"There was an easily-definable inflection point. Around 1978, the American Museum of Science and Energy (AMSE) hired a fellow named Jim Dunion to develop exhibits using these newfangled 8-bit computers. The Oak Ridger published a story about him where he said that anyone in the community was welcome to drop in and use the machines, because he had a dozen of them but could only use one at a time himself. My mom saw the story and suggested that I pay him a visit. She had to lean on me pretty hard (lazy remember?), but eventually I went and introduced myself and started hanging out at the museum.

Jim set me up with a computer of my own on a table in the hallway. I would walk there after school and teach myself programming, staying until my dad picked me up after his workday. The main benefit for me was that it let me avoid riding the bus which I had grown to detest. I didn't really get into programming at first, but after a while I started figuring it out. It grew on me, and after one year, the museum hired me. It was my first job, and it started a pattern that has pretty much held true throughout my career of having extraordinary opportunities just fall into my lap."

His job largely involved writing code in BASIC and keeping the computer-based exhibits running. The latter involved loading programs from cassette tapes.

Erann's memories from ORHS included a student trip to Mexico sponsored by ORHS teacher Lloyd Wattenbarger. Recalling this more than four decades later, Ron marveled at the freedom to sightsee and experience the local culture with minimal supervision, something that he feels might no longer be a liberty afforded current student groups. He bought a huge sombrero, so large that he had to suffer the embarrassment of wearing it, rather than packing it, for the plane trip home. That sombrero hung in his parents' home thereafter, a reminder of what he called one of his "idiotic purchases," the other being two switchblade knives that surprisingly made it through customs.

He also remembers the freedom offered students to pursue their own interests and projects in computer programming class at ORHS. There were others of his peers who had become proficient in coding prior to enrollment in the course. At AMSE, Erann worked on a Sol-20 computer where he taught himself to code in BASIC, thus a transition to the Fortran language at ORHS was an easy transfer. At home, his first computer was a Commodore PET (1978) followed later by an Apple 2+ where he wrote his first program using Lisp, now one of the oldest programming languages, along with Fortran, that are still in use. Ron observed that he still uses Lisp code in the chip design work he currently performs.

As for ORHS extracurricular activities, Erann participated in the Model United Nations, Computer Club, Science Club, and the National Honor Society. He worked with the Computer Club and Student Council to design a unique fundraising venture. He developed a computer dating system where participating students submitted answers to a common multiple-choice questionnaire. Answers were then compared across all other ORHS survey responders for best matches. It was an immediate hit and a successful

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fund raiser. The day students received the names of their top data matches was eagerly anticipated. The computer printouts each participating student received often revealed surprising pairings, and some results even sparked new relationships. The dating match program continued as a wildly popular student activity for many years beyond Erann's tenure at ORHS.

Another of Erann's computer projects earned him the Grand Prize at the Southern Appalachian Science and Engineering Fair. The title of his research was "The Twenty-five Cent Apple II Real-time Clock." A real-time clock is a device that provides the computer with time information without disrupting the computer's normal functions. Erann's research provided an alternative to the more expensive options offered commercially, by designing his own interrupt counter at a total cost of 25 cents or less. Erann's research produced his first scientific publication. If you are a computer science historian or perhaps a former Apple II user, you might find his paper to be an interesting read. You may access it online at: https://www.atarimagazines.com/compute/issue9/030_1_THE_25C_APPLE_II_REAL_TIME_CLOCK.php

With his science fair research, Erann earned a first publication credit while still in high school. This accomplishment, plus so many more to come in his professional career, provoked me to chide him re his statement that "laziness was his super power." Ron defended his claim and the benefits it brings.

"It's not intended to be ironic. Laziness has turned out to be a super power, because it has motivated me to seek out ways to make hard things easier. That (making things easy) actually turns out itself to be pretty hard, but the payoff is that I then don't have to work so hard to do the other hard things."

As mentioned earlier, Erann's ORHS coursework challenged the highest offerings available, a schedule heavy with Advanced Placement classes. Resultant strong performances on AP exams earned him many college credits. He was accepted to several prestigious universities, and his final choice was Virginia Tech. He summarized his decision saying, "They offered me a full scholarship; thus, it was less of a financial burden for my parents. It was far enough away from home to feel like I was getting away, but close enough to make it fairly easy to come home... And finally, when I visited, I just really liked the vibe."

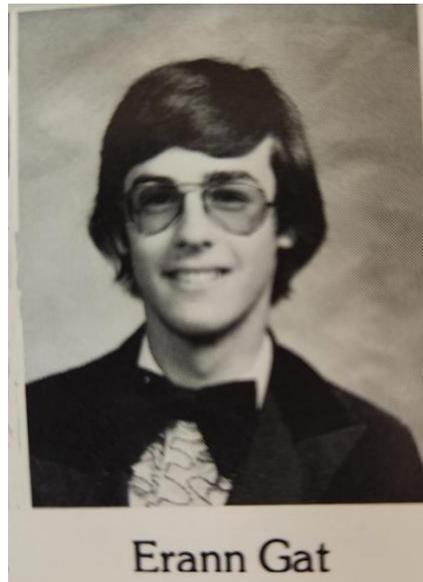
He added, "Because of all the AP credit I got at ORHS, I entered Virginia Tech as a sophomore, and after one quarter I was a junior. I finished my undergraduate degree in eight quarters, which were interrupted by two six-months-long co-op jobs at IBM in San Jose, CA. I finished my undergraduate degree in Electrical Engineering in the fall quarter of 1985."

Erann completed a PhD in Computer Science in 1991 while also making a name for himself as a NASA research scientist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. His career was only beginning, a nonlinear journey across varied work projects and ventures, such as noted in the first paragraph of this Part One of his story. A subsequent Part Two feature story will highlight the impact Erann Gat, now known as Ron Garret, has had in pursuing his passion for learning, problem solving, and futuristic thinking.

Thanks, Benita, for an excellent insight into the early life of Erann, later Ron. The second column will be interesting as we see him mature and fashion an amazing career.

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Erann Gat in Oak Ridge High School (Photo courtesy of Benita Albert)