

Mike Taylor Part One

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 25, 2025)

Benita Albert welcomes the new Executive Director of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation.

Welcome Home Mike

Mike Taylor is a 1991 Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) graduate with deep family roots in Oak Ridge. After his ORHS and University of Tennessee Knoxville (UTK) graduations, Mike embarked on a variety of professional assignments in East Tennessee and Virginia before accepting the position of Executive Director for the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation (ORPSEF) in July 2025.

Mike brings an exceptional resume of more than 30 years of nonprofit leadership, with 17 of those years in education foundation work. He also serves as the interim CEO of the National Association of Education Foundations. More of his career journey, his leadership in education foundation initiatives, and his dreams for ORPSEF and his Oak Ridge hometown will be featured in a Part Two installment of his story.

Let's first explore his multi-generational Oak Ridge roots in this Part One feature.

Mike's paternal grandparents, Hobert and Virginia Taylor, moved from Kingsport, TN, in 1944, telling their relatives that Hobert would be working "somewhere near Clinton, TN." Hobert was told by military recruiters that he was being assigned to his new job due to his experience in construction with Tennessee Eastman Corporation. Hobert later spent his career at K-25. Their son, Ron, was enrolled in third grade at Pine Valley School when they arrived. He matriculated through Robertsville Jr. High and ORHS, and graduated with the Class of 1953. Ron made a name for himself in ORHS track and subsequently signed a scholarship at UTK that offered \$52 per quarter to support his undergraduate studies and to participate in the Volunteer Track and Field program.

Mike's maternal grandparents, H. K. and Christina Blair, also came to Oak Ridge with the Manhattan Project in 1944. They moved from Etowah, TN, where H. K. had been employed with TVA clearing rights of way for power lines. Their daughter Carol later spoke of her great fear for all their household furnishings and the family's safety when they had to take a small ferry across a river to arrive in Oak Ridge. But she bragged about the fine accommodations at the Guest House (later known as the Alexander Inn) where the family resided while their home was still being built. Carol was amazed that their room had its own shower, a luxury both she and her younger sister, Marlene, had never dreamed of. Carol remembered her father taking her to see a new school, still under construction, Cedar Hill Elementary.

The Blairs chose to make Oak Ridge their lifetime home. H. K. ultimately became a purchasing agent for government projects. Christina worked as a nurse for several years in the birthing wing and nursery, caring for and helping with delivering new babies at Oak Ridge Hospital. Their daughter Carol, like Ron Taylor, attended Pine Valley, Robertsville Junior High, and ORHS and graduated in 1954. Carol had no way of knowing that the Cedar Hill School she first saw under construction as a child would become her first teaching assignment with the Oak Ridge Schools after her graduation from UTK in 1958.

Carol and Ron met for the first time in the summer of 1956 at the Oak Ridge pool where Carol worked. Son Mike said his dad still loves to tell the story of his proposal to Carol which coincided with another special event highly valued by his dad. Mike said, "My dad proposed to my mother after the state track meet in 1958. He was helping to coach the ORHS team at the state tournament and told the boys that if they won, he would propose to my mother. In fact, they did win the state championship in 1958. At the end of the meet, dad had his good friend Bob McNeese (who later became a long-term Oak Ridge City judge) escort my mother from the stands to the field. All the track boys circled around them, and dad got down on one knee and proposed."

Mike laughed when telling this and related that his dad often wryly observes that he felt certain Carol would not turn him down in front of that winning group and super-charged moment. Mike added, "The team included Oak Ridge legends such as Jackie Pope and Winston Russell."

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Ron and Carol were married at First Baptist Church of Oak Ridge in June of 1959, and they later raised their children, Cathy and Mike, in the Oak Ridge Schools. Importantly, Carol and Ron served as exceptional role models for their children in their civic service and strong support for education. After graduation from UTK in 1958, Carol taught in the Oak Ridge Schools at Cedar Hill, Willow Brook, and Linden Elementary.

Ron worked at Y-12 and K-25, before accepting leadership for an advanced computing program for DOE/Martin Marietta in the first half of the 1990s. He subsequently worked with government subcontractors until 2000, retiring one year before Carol's retirement from the Oak Ridge Schools. Ron served on the Oak Ridge School Board including serving as the Chairman of the Board from 1973-77. He kept his fond regard for the ORHS Wildcat track program alive by volunteering as a sideline coach for many years.

After his UTK graduation, Ron served on active duty in the U. S. Army for a year at Ft. Knox. He followed that by serving in the Army Reserve for 40 years, retiring with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Mike's sister Cathy, ORHS Class of 1979, worked at K-25 and for several defense contractors in Oak Ridge until her untimely death in 2015. Mike's parents still retain his childhood home, and Mike is thrilled to be nearby to assist with their needs and to have their assistance in telling a part of this, his family's Oak Ridge story.

Additional ORHS alumni in Mike's family lineage include his maternal aunt, Marlene (Blair) Streetman, ORHS Class of 1956, a beloved art teacher at Willow Brook Elementary. Also, Mike's paternal aunt, Norma Sue (Taylor) Ketola, graduated from ORHS in 1957 and now lives in Oklahoma City.

Mike smiled when recalling his school years and many favorite teachers: Linden School teacher McCord Carter's energetic spirit in first grade, Keys Fillauer's unforgettable Civics Community course, and Jane Grossbeck's 8th-grade English class at Robertsville Junior High. At ORHS, Mike praised his U. S. History teacher, Cassandra Osborne, and ORHS Band Director Tom Wade. They were only a few of the cadre of excellent teachers from whom he felt privileged to have learned.

In the ORHS band, Mike played in the percussion section, mainly the bass and snare drums. For his first two years at UTK, he played in the Pride of the Southland Band. He became a section leader in his sophomore year, which allowed him to travel to away games. He fondly remembered trips to Notre Dame, LSU, Univ. of Florida, and University of South Carolina as well as the final appearance of legendary UT Band Director W. J. Julian, for whom the band arranged a special, surprise halftime performance. Much later, both Mike and his son were thrilled to be back on Neyland Field to play in an annual appearance of the Pride of the Southland alumni band.

Like his dad, Mike ran track at ORHS, his main events being the mile and two-mile runs. And he remembers limited theatre work: volunteering as a stagehand striker of sets for Masquers plays, playing pit music, and joining orchestra concerts requiring percussion instruments.

His favorite Oak Ridge community activity was being a member of Camp Fire Boys and Girls under the creative leadership of Mairzy Truex. He loved attending summer camp at Camp Tayani in Oak Ridge. He became a camp counselor, and while in college, a summer camp director. Camp Fire would also become a part of his early career work in 1996 when he accepted the Chattanooga-area District Director for Camp Fire Boys and Girls.

Mike met Julie Mills from Signal Mountain, TN, at UTK. They first bonded over their UTK student jobs as ID workers at the front desk of Andy Holt Apartments. The job was an eight-hour (10 p.m.- 6 a.m.), overnight watch with responsibilities for monitoring visitors, taking telephone calls, and responding to urgent needs. Mike said, "It paid \$5.02 an hour for every Thursday night I worked, after which I would grab a nap and head to class at 8 a.m. on Friday mornings. Julie worked the same job on Wednesday night, and she would often drop by to help me stay awake on my night." Those visits began a lifetime partnership, now almost three decades since their marriage in 1996.

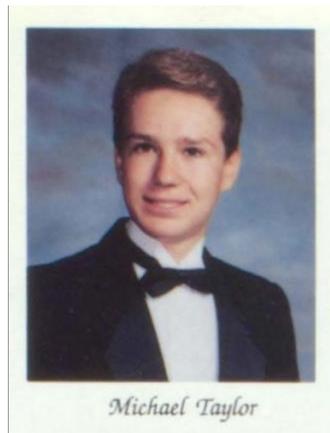
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I asked Mike what he thought as a teen that his future might be. He replied, "I thought I would end up working for the Lab in Oak Ridge." But life had a different plan for Mike when he graduated from UTK with a Business degree in 1995. As their marriage rewarded Julie and Mike with three young children, Mike became increasingly invested in their children's educational opportunities. That would become a major motivating factor in Mike's transition to education foundation work, a field begging for his innovative leadership.

Oak Ridge is fortunate to have Mike return to his hometown and to continue to promote the Oak Ridge Schools' mission of 'Excellence in Education' via his leadership as Executive Director of the Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation. Mike commented, "I feel blessed to return to the Oak Ridge community, a place that I know values public education."

Thank you, Benita, for introducing readers to Mike Taylor. Next, we will learn more about Mike's career journey, his leadership in education foundation initiatives, and his dreams for Oak Ridge Public Schools Education Foundation and Oak Ridge.



Mike Taylor as a senior at Oak Ridge High School (courtesy of Mike Stallo)