

# Larry Lunsford Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 12, 2026)

Benita Albert brings us another insightful series on a person who graduated from Oak Ridge schools.

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Fifty-five years after Oak Ridge High School Class of 1970 graduate Larry Lunsford was first featured in an *Oak Ridger* article written by Ruth Carey, it is time we follow up on Larry's life story. Ruth Carey, a long-time community activist, journalist, and photographer, chose Larry as one of five Oak Ridge teens whom she described as "deeply involved in a constructive way."

Carey's five-part series spotlighting exceptional teens was her way of responding to community and school concerns for local youth and the potential threat of drugs. The articles led with the question: "Is there not enough in Oak Ridge community life to keep local young people constructively involved?" Larry Lunsford's story was of an enterprising young man who secured the position of sportswriter for *The Oak Ridger*, a job that entailed two hours of work in the news office before he reported for classes at ORHS each day. And that was not all, there was more work time after school and on weekends, not to forget Larry's attendance at all school games.

Larry was a Renaissance teen with strong interests in the arts, sports, and music. He was in several plays at the Oak Ridge Playhouse as well as holding many more backstage and tech crew assignments. He played sports and ran track. A fun reward from his sports writing job was working halftime broadcasts of ORHS games with the legendary Joe Vann of WATO radio. His musical interests included writing folk songs, performing some guitar improvisation, and later serving on the University of Tennessee's All-Sing Advisory Board.

The year 1970 is memorable for such events as the Apollo-13 near-fatal mission, the National Guard shootings of four Kent State student protestors of the Vietnam War, the breakup of the Beatles, and the number one hit song, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," by Simon and Garfunkel. The first Vietnam War draft lottery was held on December 1, 1969 with subsequent yearly lotteries through 1972. The baby boomer generation of 1970 high school graduates were facing an American society marked by significant social and political change.

Other memorable events from Larry's childhood in Oak Ridge helped shape his future professional life and avocational pursuits. I was privileged to meet Larry during the ORHS Class of 1970 reunion in August of 2025. I was struck by his warm personality, by the gift of a book, *Brad*, that he had recently authored, and by a brief conversation with him regarding his unique professional career in higher education. After reading *Brad*, a semi-biographical and Oak-Ridge-inspired coming-of-age novel set in 1960s America, I was convinced that I wanted to know more about Larry, that I wanted to share his story.

Larry recalls his Oak Ridge upbringing in this part one of a two-part feature. Part two will delve into his professional journey as an educator, college administrator, and writer.

Larry's parents, A.B. and Edna Lunsford, arrived in Oak Ridge in 1944. A.B. was a guard at the security gates on the edge of town. When the town opened, A.B. helped start the original Oak Ridge Police Department, a job he held until retiring in the late 1970s. He was active in the Fraternal Order of Police and related police activities. Edna worked as a cafeteria cook at Oak Ridge elementary schools and was active in church projects, the Police Women's Auxiliary, and Eastern Star.

Larry had one older brother, Gary, an ORHS Class of 1962 alum, who became an educator and college administrator. Gary took great pride in being a member of the 1962 State Championship track team, where he won the pole vault. Both Larry's parents and Gary have predeceased him.

Larry attended Highland View Elementary School for grades K-6, followed by Robertsville Junior High School for grades 7-9. Larry wrote, "I loved my third-grade teacher, Estelle Hendrix Joyce. I attended her wedding and wrote a short story which I gave to her...I still have the napkin from her wedding with her and her husband's names and date on it."

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This young writer was prolific and ambitious. By age ten, he was appealing to Dick Smyser, the editor of *The Oak Ridger*, to consider giving him the chance to write an advice column for the paper. Larry suggested, "My idea is for people who have troubles in their home—someone writes me and asks, 'Our family doesn't get along, how can we get along? I would answer and tell them how to get along.'" Smyser's response was artfully proffered on the editorial page: "Larry is ten and will be in the fifth-grade next school term. He certainly exhibits a lot of ingenuity and confidence in suggesting the idea, and we wish we could take him up on it. However, we fear we'll have to wait until he's a bit older." Larry brought a copy of the editorial to share with Smyser when he was hired as the sports editor in his senior year. He said, "We had a good laugh out of it."

Larry has published a collection of his writings across the years, including many of his early writings. *Reflections: An Anthology of the Early Works of Larry Lunsford* includes poetry, playwriting, short stories, and personal memoirs. His books are available on Amazon.

An especially poignant memory from Highland View was recalled by Larry in our interview. "I was a member of the Safety Patrol and raised the flag each morning. I was also a Junior Fire Marshall. On November 22, 1963, Principal Gordon Crouch came to our room shortly before the day's end and informed us that President Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas. I remember people crying, and my dad picked me up from school. I usually walked home. I was taught how to raise the flag entirely to the top and then lower it to half-staff for the next 30 days."

At Robertsville, Larry was on the track team all three years. He fondly remembered having a solo in the school chorus Christmas show and becoming active in the Oak Ridge Playhouse.

ORHS was an opportunity for new and greater challenges. Larry joined the track and cross-country teams for his first two years. He won the Oak Ridge Optimist Club's Oratorical Contest with his speech entitled "Patriotic Citizenship Needs Optimism." (Included in *Reflections*). As a junior he was tapped for Key Club. He fondly remembers the trips to the East Tennessee Psychiatric Hospital in Knoxville where Key Club members played games and football with the children. Larry mused, "It made me appreciate my life."

In his senior year, Larry was elected the class treasurer. He went on his first airplane trip to the Model United Nations Conference in Washington, DC where he was a member of an ORHS delegation representing The Gambia. Larry was chosen to speak to the entire assembly of delegates. His speech, representing Gambian citizens, and thus using the pronouns *we and our*, follows: "The Gambia is the smallest country on the African continent and was part of the British Empire until *we* gained independence in 1965. *We* are almost surrounded by Senegal, and *our* economy is supported by farming, fishing, and tourism. The population is less than two million. As an independent country, *we* are proud to be here with this esteemed body." (As recalled in *Brad*.)

He loved the chance to sightsee in the national capital: monuments, museums, and one special visit to the graves of John and Robert Kennedy evoked poignant memories of the half-staff flag duties he performed in sixth grade. Larry's high school years included other difficult realities, the death of a friend in Vietnam in 1968 and the tragic death of a fellow classmate during his senior year. Larry registered for the draft, agonized over the Vietnam War, and saw firsthand the antiwar protests at a Billy Graham Crusade event held on the UT campus in Neyland Stadium on May 28, 1970. He recalled that President Nixon was the special guest that evening, and his brief speech to the audience provoked taunts and jeers. Walking into the stadium through the crowd of antiwar protestors, Larry remembered a sign reading, "Thou shalt not kill."

There was no doubt in Larry's mind that he would go to college. He had worked various jobs to help finance this goal including as a theater usher, as a stock and bag boy in a Gatlinburg grocery store the summer before his senior year, and with his work for *The Oak Ridger*. The latter assignment continued through his college years as he chose admission nearby at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK).

Larry praised many mentors, local educators and others who supported, inspired, and encouraged his dreams. English teachers, Alice Hughes in eighth grade and Christine Lenihan at ORHS, nurtured his interest in literature and writing. His track coach Bill Lewis and ORHS Principal Tom Dunigan were strong role models. He cited Oak Ridge Playhouse

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Directors Paul and Marguerite Ebert as having a great influence on his life and future interests. Finally, though his newspaper job in his senior year forced him to limit many other favorite activities such as the track team and playhouse work, Larry greatly appreciated the rare opportunity afforded him to be mentored by Editor Dick Smyser and Publisher Tom Hill at *The Oak Ridger*.

Larry wrote of his transition to UTK: "Surprisingly, majoring in journalism in college was not my first choice when I entered UT in the fall of 1970. I decided to major in political science in hopes of attending law school. While working for *The Oak Ridger*, I became acquainted with Bill Lantrip, Oak Ridge City Attorney. He ignited my interest in becoming an attorney. I was a first-generation college student. I did poorly in political science classes my freshman year and decided to switch to my first love of journalism." Reporting that it was a long and difficult slog to overcome the grade point disadvantage, Larry prevailed and earned one of the highest honors at UT, induction into Omicron Delta Kappa Honor Society. The Society recognizes students who have distinguished themselves in academics and in leadership roles.

Larry thrived in the plethora of opportunities available on the UT campus including Greek life in the Pi Kappa Alpha social fraternity where he has established a lifelong resume' of leadership activities. In his senior year, Larry served as the Vice President of the chapter and was voted the UT Chapter's Brother of the Year. Later, Larry held the position of International Vice-President of Pi Kappa Alpha (1988-92) and broader duties as President of The Association of Fraternity Advisors. He is currently a board member of the Order of Omega Honor Society and of the Pi Kappa Alpha Historical Society.

Larry's social life in high school included membership in a selective male social club, a fraught experience from his sophomore and junior years that he historically fictionalized in *Brad*. It was 'fraught' due to the secrecy from his peers, ORHS officials, and family--and for the menacing initiation activities. As a busy ORHS senior with regrets for continuing the stressful induction activities, Larry spoke against such harassment. His unsuccessful campaign for change ultimately led to his resignation from the club. This experience stayed with him as he chose to reenter the world of social fraternizing in college. Later in his career as a higher education ombudsman and a leader in campus student affairs, Larry brought valuable, experiential wisdom to the complexities of policing, advising, and encouraging college students.

Life offers many lessons through experiences, both failures and successes. Larry learned at an early age to be resilient, to define his own moral credo, embrace challenges, and to persevere. For over five decades since his graduation from UT in 1974, Larry has passionately pursued a professional career combining collegiate administrative work, classroom teaching, student advisement, and writing. More on this follows in a part two installment.

But finally, let us return to the question posed in 1970 by the Ruth Carey article cited at the beginning of this feature. "Is there not enough in Oak Ridge to keep local young people constructively involved?" In retrospect, my answer most certainly would be "yes" for Larry Lunsford. In fact, I feel it was a prescient question for what Larry's professional and personal life became.

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Thank you, Benita, for telling us about Larry Lunsford. The next part of his story will tell about his later experiences and bring the story up to the present in his life.

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Larry Lunsford, when he was in Oak Ridge High School (Courtesy of Benita Albert)



Larry Lunsford featured in a newspaper article written by Ruth Carey (Courtesy of The Oak Ridger)