

Larry Lunsford Part Two: *He Has Ink, Instead of Blood, in His Veins*

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 19, 2025)

Benita Albert brings us the second and final part of the series on Larry Lunsford.

Larry Lunsford, a 1970 Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) graduate, was an opportunist from an early age. He sought chances to enrich his world in the arts, sports, academics, and even in journalistic work while growing up in Oak Ridge. In *Reflections: An Anthology of the Early Works of Larry Lunsford*, he wrote this introductory paragraph explaining some of his first writings that are included in the book.

"I always wanted to be a writer. I'm not sure how I developed the interest. I started writing short 'books' when I was nine. I designed a cover for each small story and included a title page. I drew illustrations for some of them."

Larry's career has been heavily involved in writing, and since retirement from university work in 2019, Larry has written two novels, *Brad*, and *The Hollow*. He is currently writing a sequel, *Steve*, based on a character in *Brad*. Notably, his novels have strong undertones from his Oak Ridge youth.

Larry left Oak Ridge to pursue an undergraduate degree in journalism at the University of Tennessee (UTK), but he continued to work at *The Oak Ridger* during breaks from school. Having proved his skills with his senior-year sports writing responsibilities, he was then assigned a variety of stories. He recalled, "I handled any assignment I was given. I covered the police, fire, and hospital beats and wrote many obituaries."

On the UTK campus, Larry wrote for the campus newspaper, *The Daily Beacon*. He said, "Since I was heavily involved in fraternity affairs, I had a column about what was happening with Greeks on campus."

Later, on summer break from graduate school at Indiana University, Larry recalled a special *Oak Ridger* task. "During the summer of 1976, Editor Dick Smyser assigned me to write a series called 'Bicentennial Keepsakes.' That involved writing a series of many articles about local collections and archives. I was amazed at what folks had from 1776—old letters, newspaper articles, etc. It was a popular series that kept me busy for the summer."

What led Larry to Indiana University (IU) was a turn in his professional aspirations. Upon his graduation from UTK in 1974, Larry accepted a position with his fraternity, Pi Kappa Alpha, to serve as a chapter consultant for 25 colleges and universities. He also worked as a production assistant for all national fraternity publications. Larry wrote, "I attended Indiana University from 1975 to 1977. While working at the fraternity, IU was one of the schools I visited. I loved the campus. They had one of the top-rated student personnel administration programs in the nation. I applied and was accepted." His final year at IU included an internship as an Assistant Dean of Students at the University of Evansville and the completion of a master's degree.

He accepted the position of Assistant Director of Student Activities at the University of Pittsburgh where he served from 1977-1983. A trusted mentor asked Larry what his career aspirations were. He replied that he desired to be a dean of students or a vice president for student affairs. The mentor advised that either position would require a PhD. Larry heeded the advice by earning a Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Administration from Pitt in 1983.

Larry recalled his tenure at Pitt. "One of my major accomplishments was getting FCC approval for a campus FM radio station. One of the best hidden, unknown facts about me is that I have an FCC disc jockey license!" Further assignments included utilizing his journalistic skills as: advisor to the student newspaper, school yearbook, and literary magazine; editor of the *Student Handbook*; and Co-director of the Annual Writer's Conference.

The newly minted 'Dr. Lunsford spent the next six years (1983-89) as the Assistant Dean of Students at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh. His final academic move to Florida International University (FIU) came in 1989, initially serving as the Director of Student Activities and rising to the title of Vice President for Student Affairs in the last six years of his tenure. Larry mentioned that, because FIU was a relatively new institution (established in 1972), there were many new programs and activities he initiated, some of which he described as borrowed successes from his previous institutional

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work. His job assignments were many and varied at FIU: Adjunct Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences, Assistant Professor of graduate-level courses in the Higher Education Program, Associate Dean for Student Life, and University Ombudsman.

I posed the following interview question to Larry:

Your professional journey is unique, from Instructor to Asst. Professor in Journalism and in graduate-level studies in Student Affairs, plus Instructor for “First Year Experience,” a freshman course. This makes me think that you are an “educator for all seasons”—a teacher who adapts to students and their changing needs. Speak to your passion for teaching. Speak to your passion for journalism.

Larry wrote, “My favorite part of my professional career was always teaching students and not being an administrator. So many people made a difference in my life, and I wanted to do the same for others. I wanted to pay it forward. I became close to my first boss at FIU. She was also a writer. She recommended that we design a class for new freshman students that introduced them to the university and the academic regimen. The class had to be approved by the Faculty Senate. It failed the first time, but a faculty member we knew offered to present it again on our behalf. It passed. It became a part of the core curriculum and a required course for all new freshmen.”

“After two years, my colleague noticed that class evaluations showed that the text we used received low marks. (It was designed for a three-credit course. Our course was one credit.) Being writers, we decided to write an FIU-specific text for the class. We found a publisher and began using the text in class after it was published. It received much better evaluations. Other institutions also adopted the text. We donated the royalties to FIU for teacher education programs. My colleague and I presented programs on the first-year experience at conferences in England, Ireland, Scotland, Canada, and Hawaii.”

“I advised the student newspapers at Pitt and Robert Morris, and I taught a journalism course and advised the student newspaper at Penn State Beaver Campus. I’ve had the best of both worlds—higher education and journalism. I’ve written hundreds of articles for magazines, journals, and newspapers. I’ve authored chapters in several books. I have ink in my veins instead of blood!”

“The Vice President for Student Affairs and I started a master’s program in higher education at FIU. I still hear from dozens of students I taught, many of whom have become vice presidents and deans.”

Among many accolades Larry has earned, perhaps a most meaningful tribute is a student scholarship that is endowed and named in Larry’s honor at FIU. Upon his retirement in 2019, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators named him a “Pillar of the Profession” for Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. And in 2025, he received the University of Pittsburgh School of Education Distinguished Alumni Award.

Focusing on the administrative side of Larry’s professional career, I asked Larry to reflect on the challenges he has experienced.

“I was the University Ombudsman at FIU for several years. It was challenging. I believed that discipline should be educational and not always punitive. Surprisingly, I sometimes had more difficulty with parents than students. They fit the role of ‘helicopter parents.’ I learned in many cases that students were not honest with their parents about offenses. The hardest sell is to convince students that they are responsible for themselves. They need to rely less on parents.” He reported handling an average 500 cases annually, providing a forum for students to address and resolve issues with faculty, staff, departments, or programs and advocating for fair and equitable administrative processes for students in problem solving or conflict resolution.

“Every place I worked, politics and red tape were the biggest obstacles. It seemed like insecurity dominated the senior administration. Sometimes it took compromise and a ‘just go ahead and do it and hope-it-works attitude.’ My role changed over the years in that the higher I rose, I had less contact with students (which I missed—that’s why I continued to teach)

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and more accountability to senior administrators and even trustees. I had a boss confiscate the student newspapers because of an article he didn't like. His action caused more controversy than the article would have created."

In his role as Vice President for Student Affairs, Larry provided leadership and oversight for 22 departments within the Division of Student Affairs operating with an annual budget of approximately \$60 million. He directed an integrated portfolio of programs with concentrated emphasis on student activities and support systems to enhance students' engagement and development, retention, and graduation.

I asked Larry to address current-day challenges for college administrators as well as for journalists. He was fervent in reply.

"The major challenge is the same for both—government interference. Free speech is under attack for both. Book banning is a major issue, particularly in Florida. (All my books would be banned in Florida if they were in school libraries.) DEI has been thrown out at colleges and universities. College administrators and faculty can be dismissed without cause. Journalist's investigative reporting is called fake news. These are scary times!"

In retirement, Larry enjoys having more time for family, travel, exercising, and writing. He said, "When I was working, I was on call 24-7. An emergency was always a possibility. I was an avid racquetball player and tried to play at least once a week. I've been a runner my entire life and exercise regularly. I ran the Pittsburgh Marathon in 1989 and did well. I wrote periodically during my working years, but the majority of my critical writing has occurred after retiring."

As for travel, Larry noted that he and his wife, Joan, have journeyed to Europe several times with friends, and they loved it. He added, "Our favorite destination is Paris." He also cited many trips to visit family and friends in the northern U. S.

Larry and Joan have been married for 40 years. Joan, a native of Pittsburgh, retired as a Program Coordinator for Baptist Health in South Florida. Their daughter, Megan, emulated her dad's career path and now serves as the Program Manager for Student Experience and Assistant Campus Director of the Miami campus of the University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences. Son Sean is Head of Sales Development for Crowded: Financial Management and Banking for Nonprofits in Ft. Lauderdale.

An aspiring writer from an early age, Larry now enjoys the time he can set aside for writing. He will soon publish his fourth book, *Steve*, and though he has not disclosed this, I feel certain that more tales are fermenting. Remember his observation that 'he has ink in his veins instead of blood'?

He shared some of his literary preferences. "My favorite authors are John Steinbeck, Leon Uris, James Michener, and Stephen King. My favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*--I have a signed copy! It is also my favorite movie. At the University of Pittsburgh, I was the student activities advisor for Michael Chabon, who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2001 for *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*."

There is an energy to Larry Lunsford that is contagious. His influence as a college administrator is now widely spread across the next generation of collegiate leaders, former students who still value and seek his counsel. I know I would have loved to sit in his classroom if for nothing else than to feel the vibe, to watch an inspirer and motivator work his magic. It seems he never misses an opportunity to find the golden egg in whatever he pursues and to share the joy with others. I end this tale with evidence of Larry's mantra and the way he has most assuredly lived his life.

"On the last day of class in the graduate classes I taught, I left the students with the following message from Lee Ann Womack: 'And when you get the chance to sit it out or dance. Dance! I hope you dance! I hope you dance!'"

Editorial note: Larry Lunsford's publications are available through Amazon Marketplace.

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Thank you, Benita, for concluding the story of Larry Lunsford. He has led an amazing career and is still going strong.



Here are books Larry has published that are available on Amazon.com (Courtesy of Benita Albert)

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Larry Lunsford (Courtesy of Larry Lunsford)