

Lunch for Literacy speaker recruited by the city manager

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of March 16, 2026)

Volunteer journalist Carolyn Krause has been asked to write about the history behind the selection of bestselling novelist Kristy Woodson Harvey as the keynote speaker for the 34th annual Lunch for Literacy event on Tuesday, March 24, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in the food court of Oak Ridge High School. The caterer is the Oak Ridge restaurant Fire and Salt.

The purpose of the Lunch for Literacy is to raise funds for grants that are given to nonprofits or other organizations that promote literacy in the Oak Ridge area.

Tickets cost \$60 each. They may be purchased from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday in the lobby of TNBank in Oak Ridge, 401 S. Illinois Ave. This year's goal is to raise \$50,000 for grants for organizations promoting literacy. The sponsors of the annual event are Altrusa International of Oak Ridge, the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club, and TNBank.

Enjoy Carolyn's insights gained from our City Manager.

As city manager for Oak Ridge, Randy Hemann is asked many questions. One unusual one came last year from Beth Hickman, city clerk for Oak Ridge, who reports to him.

"Since I worked as city manager for five North Carolina cities, Beth asked me if I knew of any North Carolina novelists or other authors," Hemann said. It turns out he knew of one bestselling author that he had first seen and heard about when she was growing up in Salisbury, N.C., where he was downtown development director for 16 years. Her name is bestselling novelist Kristy Woodson Harvey.

For three years, Hickman has been a member of a committee of the Literacy Board of Altrusa International of Oak Ridge. The committee has a challenging task: select a bestselling novelist who can speak well and engage an audience and then recruit that person to be the keynote speaker for the next annual Lunch for Literacy in Oak Ridge.

The committee's choice for this year is Kristy Woodson Harvey. She is the New York Times, USA Today and Publishers Weekly bestselling author of 13 novels, including "Beach House Rules" and "The Peachtree Bluff Series." "A Happier Life" is in development for film with MGM/Amazon, and "The Summer of Songbirds" is in development for television with Hulu, according to her website.

The Altrusa committee and a committee of the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club alternate each year in meeting the challenge of selecting an author-speaker.

Hemann, Hickman, Jan Melcher (Lunch for Literacy publicity chair), and Carolyn Krause recently gathered in the Municipal Building to talk about the Lunch for Literacy and the upcoming speaker.

In answer to Hickman's question, Hemann recalled that "I told Beth that when I worked in downtown development in Salisbury for 16 years, one of the downtown businesses I knew about was the dry cleaners' business run by Paul and Beth Woodson. I remember their daughter.

"I remember seeing her in the dry cleaners when she was young. I remember hearing that she was leaving to study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and that she wanted to be an author."

So, Hemann was able to obtain her contact information from the Woodson family. He reached out to Woodson Harvey through Hickman when she attended a Literary Conference in Salisbury to hear Woodson Harvey speak and gave the author a handwritten note from Hemann asking her whether she might be interested in giving a talk for Lunch for Literacy in Oak Ridge after explaining its purpose. "We found out she is going to be here and that's awesome," he said.

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Hemann also found it remarkable that when he was a young city manager of Kinston, N.C., he had met the parents of the man Kristy Woodson eventually married.

"It's really interesting because I was living 16 years in Salisbury, where she grew up, and obviously knew her mom and dad really well," Hemann said. "But prior to that, I spent 10 years serving as downtown development director in Kinston, which is where her husband's family came from. So, when I saw that her married name is Harvey, I honestly really had never put all that together until I started looking into asking her if she would speak in Oak Ridge."

Kristy Woodson Harvey often credits her family for her storytelling roots. Both her father, Paul Woodson, and her late father-in-law, C. Felix Harvey, left significant legacies in North Carolina through public service, business, and philanthropy.

Paul Woodson was elected mayor of Salisbury shortly after Hemann left for another position as city manager. He served as a member of the Salisbury City Council for 14 years. A chemist, he owned and operated Vogue Cleaners in Salisbury for over 25 years.

He was a leader of the Salisbury-Rowan Economic Development Commission and the Woodson Foundation, which provides charitable grants for arts, childcare and education in the areas of Rowan and Davie counties.

In essays, Kristy has described her father as a master storyteller. Despite his busy career, she said he often traveled with her during her early book tours to provide support.

Kristy's father-in-law, the late C. Felix Harvey (1920-2014), was considered a titan of industry, economic development, and philanthropy in Kinston. He was the chairman of Harvey Enterprises & Affiliates, a family-owned conglomerate founded in 1871. Under his leadership, the company expanded into sales of fertilizers, John Deere equipment, and insurance. He also founded a bank in Kinston.

He was the driving force behind the North Carolina Global TransPark, an industrial and air-cargo hub in eastern North Carolina. In recognition of his impact, the C.F. Harvey Parkway (NC 148) in Lenoir County was named in his honor.

A dedicated alumnus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, from which Kristy Woodson graduated, he and his family endowed the C. Felix Harvey Award to Advance Institutional Priorities, a significant grant awarded to faculty for projects that address real-world challenges.

Hemann recalls meeting Felix Harvey after he got his job as a young city manager of Kinston. "I remember first meeting the patriarch of the Harvey family," he said. "He scared me to death because he was a highly successful businessman, and I was just out of college."

Now, Hemann is looking forward to getting to know Kristy Woodson Harvey even better when she arrives in Oak Ridge. He will introduce her at the Lunch for Literacy event on Mar. 24. After the event, she will sign the novels she sells to the attendees.

"Her 14th novel, 'Summer State of Mind,' is coming out May 5, so we're taking pre-orders for that," Hickman said. "The first 100 people to pre-order the book will be among the first 100 that will get that book when it comes out and arrives in a shipment to our library."

"We will also host a tour of the Oak Ridge Public Library that City Manager Hemann will facilitate so Kristy Woodson Harvey can see our award-winning library and what it does to promote literacy."

From reading two of Harvey's books, Hemann said he recognizes familiar features of North Carolina living such as house tours, dinner parties, social graces and people he has known.

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Kristy Woodson Harvey's work has received numerous accolades, including Good Morning America's Buzz Pick, Southern Living's Most Anticipated Reads, Katie Couric's Featured Books and Joanna Garcia Swisher's The Happy Place Reads. She is the winner of the Lucy Bramlette Patterson Award for Excellence in Creative Writing and a finalist for the Southern Book Prize.

A Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude graduate with honors from the school of journalism of UNC at Chapel Hill, her writing has appeared in numerous publications, including Southern Living, Parade, Traditional Home and USA Today (the owner of which owns The Oak Ridger) She also holds a master's degree in English from East Carolina University, with a concentration in multicultural and transnational literature.

Kristy is the co-creator and co-host of the hit weekly web show and podcast Friends & Fiction with fellow New York Times Bestselling authors Mary Kay Andrews, Kristin Harmel, and Patti Callahan Henry. It boasts more than 300,000 members. She is also the co-founder of the award-winning interiors site Design Chic, with her mom, Beth Woodson.

She lives on the North Carolina coast with her husband, son, and dog Salt, where she says she is always working on her next novel.

When people see how young and attractive Kristy is in photos and videos, they are amazed that she has written 13 novels that have all become bestsellers. Even her parents had doubts initially that she could make a good living as an author.

When Hickman and a friend traveled to hear Kristy talk at Catawba College in Salisbury to assess whether she was an engaging speaker, they heard her talk about "how she told her dad she was going to write books, and he asked her, 'Are you going to make a career out of it? What are you going to do in your real life?'"

Hickman said that Kristy's parents were present at her talk, which Hickman liked. "I think her parents were apprehensive about whether she could make a living as a novelist. And obviously she has. After working for a newspaper, she followed her dream, and she's become a successful, bestselling novelist."

When Hemann gladly allowed Hickman to take a day off from work and travel to hear Kristy deliver her talk in Salisbury, he asked her to take a sealed handwritten note to Kristy that officially invited her to speak in Oak Ridge. As she signed books after the talk, Hickman said, Kristy read the note, smiled, and showed it to her parents. Hickman heard Paul Woodson say that he "definitely remembered Randy Hemann from his days as downtown development director in Salisbury."

Noting that Hemann has worked as a downtown development director or city manager in six cities, Melcher asked him, "How important is it for a community to create a culture towards literacy?" Hemann said that reading allows people to grow, to learn about places they will never have time to travel to, and to be reminded of places, experiences, and people they have known.

"I feel fortunate to have lived in two places where some experiences I had match up with experiences described in the two books by Kristy that I read," he said.

Hemann was interested to hear about the origins of the Lunch for Literacy, which Melcher described for him. Krause added some details here.

It all began in 1986 when Alex Haley, author of the famous novel "Roots: The Saga of an American Family" that became the basis of a popular TV miniseries, moved to Anderson County. His move was influenced by a friendship with John Rice Irwin, the founder of the Museum of Appalachia. After visiting

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the museum and the surrounding area, Haley purchased a 157-acre farm, now known as the Alex Haley Farm. It is located between Clinton and Andersonville.

In 1992, the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club wished to choose and launch its first major community service project. Frank Jamison, then the club's community services director, was aware that local literacy councils were struggling to receive funding.

One day, Jamison (who later became chairman of TNBank until he retired and established a TNBank scholarship in his name for an ORHS senior) spotted Haley at Regas Restaurant in Knoxville and asked if he would speak at a fundraiser for literacy. Haley graciously agreed to serve as the inaugural speaker for what became the first Lunch for Literacy 34 years ago. His participation established the tradition of hosting acclaimed authors as keynote speakers to raise funds for adult literacy programs.

Famous authors who have been keynote speakers at the Lunch for Literacy have included the second speaker, Wilma Dykeman, the Tennessee state historian, and Denise Kiernan, author of the 2014 New York Times bestseller "The Girls of Atomic City."

The conversation in the Municipal Building closed amicably with a pun by Hemann: "So, those are the Lunch for Literacy's roots!"

Thanks, Carolyn, for your usual excellent capture of a most interesting conversation. Our City Manager has brought us an exceptional speaker for the Lunch for Literacy luncheon this year. Much appreciated! And you conveyed that well.



City Manager Randy Hemann is being interviewed by Jan Melcher, with Carolyn Krause (not pictured) recording the interview, and Beth Hickman, who arranged the interview (Courtesy of Lauren Gray)

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Join us for the

34th Annual Lunch for Literacy

Tuesday, March 24, 2026

Oak Ridge High School
11:30 am - 1:00 pm

Featuring
Kristy Woodson Harvey

New York Times bestselling author of 12 novels, including *The Wedding Veil*, *Under the Southern Sky*, and *The Peachtree Bluff* series.

Tickets \$60

Includes the program, lunch by Fire and Salt, book sales by Union Avenue Books of Knoxville and an opportunity to preorder *Summer State of Mind*, (release date May 2026).

Tickets can be purchased at
TNBANK
401 S. Illinois Ave. Oak Ridge
Mon-Thur 9-4 pm

Books will be available for purchase at the luncheon.

Questions?
Contact: Sue Byrne
SueByrne33@gmail.com

We are proud to announce **TNBANK** as our presenting sponsor for 2026.

Event jointly hosted by
Altrusa International of Oak Ridge and Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club



Lunch for Literacy is a partnership between Altrusa of Oak Ridge and Breakfast Rotary of Oak Ridge. Altrusa and Breakfast Rotary are dedicated to improving literacy in Anderson and Roane Counties.

New York Times Best Selling Author, Kristy Woodson Harvey (Courtesy of Pat Vanek)