

Allison Albert Guercio Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 20, 2026)

Benita Albert brings us a most significant Historically Speaking series. She tells the story of her daughter! I am so proud to bring you this series as Benita has brought us many amazing insights into Oak Ridge school graduates. Now she has included her own daughter in those amazing graduates. Enjoy learning about someone very special to Benita.

Allison (Albert) Guercio, an Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) Class of 2000 graduate, is a passionate environmentalist. From her Oak Ridge childhood to the present, she has loved being outdoors, observing Mother Nature, and advocating for the protection of all of God's creatures. In the spirit of full disclosure, I am very much aware of her passion as her proud mother.

Reviewing the almost fifty stories I have been privileged to write for 'Historically Speaking' about significant careers of ORHS alumni, it recently occurred to me that environmental science has not been featured. Allison's work is but one example of numerous career applications in the field of environmental science. I would love to hear of other ORHS alumni who are 'saving our planet' through their specialized work.

Allison's current work involves leading marketing, communications, and fundraising efforts for the Oyster Recovery Partnership (ORP) of the Chesapeake Bay, headquartered in Annapolis, Maryland. In this role, she helps build the partnerships, public awareness, and financial support that makes large-scale oyster restoration possible.

ORP was established in 1994 by a group of sailing enthusiasts concerned for the Bay's health, at a time when Maryland recorded its lowest oyster harvest, just 4.7 million oysters. What began as a response to a crisis has evolved into one of the most ambitious and successful environmental restoration efforts in the world.

Today, oyster restoration is recognized as essential not only to the seafood industry, but also to the Bay's overall health. As natural water filters, oysters improve water quality, support marine life, and help mitigate the effects of climate change. ORP's work, made possible through partnerships with scientists, watermen, government agencies, and community supporters, is helping to restore this critical ecosystem.

Much more will follow on the successful work of ORP and Allison's involvement in a subsequent, Part Two of this feature.

Little could Allison have guessed that her landlocked, Tennessee upbringing would lead to an appreciation and advocacy for bivalve mollusks, in particular eastern oysters, or *Crassostrea virginica*.

Allison said, "I graduated from ORHS with no idea of what career I wanted to pursue. I knew I liked Environmental Science, and was greatly inspired by my ORHS Advanced Placement teacher, Dr. Nita Ganguly. I now appreciate my roots and my home town even more for the school and community resources that gave me a rich background of experiences and options for the future."

Born at Oak Ridge Methodist Medical Center in late 1981, Allison was welcomed by older sister Amanda. We, Allison's parents, had prepared Amanda for her new baby sister's arrival by sharing early-on what her name would be. We were quite surprised and charmed to later hear Amanda tell a friend about her new sister "Alice in Wonderland," perhaps a logical conclusion for a two-year old's interpretation of the name Allis-on, and another well-known last name from a favorite storybook. The fanciful name stuck throughout the years as Allison embraced meeting her namesake character in Disneyworld, performing the role of a Playing Card in the Oak Ridge Junior Playhouse production of "Alice in Wonderland," and collecting various Alice-themed memorabilia.

Mark and Benita Albert wanted to raise their daughters in the Oak Ridge community where Benita worked as a math teacher at Oak Ridge High School. Benita knew that the academic programming for Oak Ridge public school students was exceptionally strong and diverse. Benita retired in 2013 after forty-four years in the Oak Ridge Schools. Mark worked as an electrical engineer over thirty-six years at Oak Ridge and Paducah, KY government plants. Older daughter, Amanda, graduated from ORHS in 1997 and now resides with her husband and two boys in Asheville, NC.

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Allison's memories from Linden Elementary School include first grade teacher McCord Carter. She said, "He figured out an ingenious way to encourage the class to count *high*, all the way to 100, while he was standing on his head. It definitely worked!" In physical education class she loved the group games with the parachute and seeing how high a ball, placed in the center of the chute, could be flipped. She praised the strong arts program: from such as clay sculpturing and painting, to special choral performances, to beginning orchestra (violin) in the fourth grade. And she still smiles when recalling the honor of being 'student of the week' and having a large banner in the classroom with her name on it.

At Robertsville Junior High School she loved learning the French language, a subject that ultimately became her undergraduate, collegiate minor. As a member of the Robertsville Dance Team and a morning announcer on the school's station WRAM, Allison learned implicit lessons in public presentations and entertainment.

Allison's ORHS years were filled with challenging coursework. Among her favorite classes were: Combined Studies in her sophomore year, teacher Sylvia Woods' Junior AP English, and French classes with teachers Leah Bailey and Sylvia Countess. Of the latter, Allison recalled, "We read books in French, watched French films, befriended French exchange students at ORHS, and even had summer opportunities to visit France with our teachers as chaperones."

"AP Environmental Science at ORHS changed my life. I loved every lesson, every day." She listed several examples of class studies she still remembers: endangered species, population growth, tipping points, and holes in the ozone and how human ingenuity solved it. She loved hands-on activities, citing one experiment where they used socks, placed on car mufflers, to perform toxicity analyses and identify harmful emissions. Later, in undergraduate studies at the University of South Carolina, Allison's favorite class was Environmental Ethics, and this further piqued her interest and enthusiasm for a future career path. It was a course addressing the moral relationship of human beings to the environment.

In addition to school opportunities, Allison engaged in various community activities. She attended Campfire Girls in her early years. She participated in dance classes at the Oak Ridge Academy of Dance from age three through high school. She performed as an Oak Ridge Showkid from grades 2-9, and she enjoyed acting in plays with the Oak Ridge Playhouse. She played in various community sports leagues before finding her passion for rowing as a member of the competitive high school crew team through the Oak Ridge Rowing Association.

All her life, Allison has had a soft heart for animals. She was enamored of a raccoon her babysitter rescued and nursed to health. She pet-sat for neighbors' dogs, and she wanted to rescue every stray cat she encountered. Our family can thank Allison for at least four homeless felines who lived long and happy lives in our abode, well beyond Allison's time in Oak Ridge.

Her love of animals ran deep and the drive to achieve her ultimate prize, a dog of her own, motivated her to some very creative problem solving. It was in the news that First Lady Barbara Bush's beloved cocker spaniel, Millie, was expecting puppies. At the same time, Allison learned that her mother would be honored at the White House by President George H. W. Bush as the 1991 Presidential Award Mathematics Teacher from Tennessee. She was most upset that children were not invited to the ceremony. With the help of her co-conspiring grandmother, also a dog-lover and cocker spaniel mom, Allison saw the ultimate two-for-one opportunity, a trip to Washington, D.C. and the chance to come home with a puppy. She took matters into her own hands.

She wrote directly to the First Lady, offering to dog sit while George and Barbara were attending to the ceremony for the awardees. Her parents had no idea she had done so... When Mrs. Bush's private secretary called her father at work to follow up, he assumed it was a prank call from coworkers and hung up. It took a second call, and some convincing, to sort things out. While the White House held firm on the no-child policy, Allison received a gracious response: a personally signed photo of Mrs. Bush and Millie, sent in an official White House envelope.

The real goal, of course, was always a puppy. Achieving it took a little longer. Allison finally got her first dog as a young adult; a beloved rescue she named Sydney Joplin and who lived the best possible dog's life for 18 years.

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I tell this story, as her mother, to make the point that Allison has never taken 'no' for an answer. She's naturally inclined to build relationships and draw others in to achieve her goals, and she will take action in the interest of a cause she cares about... excellent qualities for a fundraiser!

Allison chose the University of South Carolina (USC) for undergraduate studies. She said, "My placement in the USC Honors College provided me with the opportunity to create a special academic path where I found increasing curiosity for, and interest in, environmental issues. It was my chance to grow an appreciation for the outside world. Environmental Science gave me perspective on how precious our natural world is and how deserving of our care."

The Honors College required students to complete a research study, a thesis paper, for graduation. "I lived in off-campus student housing near a beautiful new greenway built by the City of Columbia, SC. I learned of further plans to extend the greenway throughout the city. I proposed to my thesis professor that a greenway following a pre-existing stream within the campus and connecting to the larger city greenway would be ideal. Thus, my professor and I did a water quality study of the stream in supporting the feasibility of our proposal."

Allison was hooked, she knew environmental science work was her dream, but she was unsure as to job opportunities in the field. She chose to meet with various environmentalists on campus. She especially valued the input of a professor in the Department of Geography who spoke of the need for advocacy in environmental policy matters. She researched what such an advanced degree would involve, finding the list daunting and yet intellectually stimulating: law studies, statistics, government, scientific method, appropriations, finance, and more...

Allison chose the University of Maryland to pursue a master's degree in Environmental Policy. She was only two Metro stops away from Capitol Hill, close to government action, and yet also accessible for the new-to-her, alluring environs of the Eastern Coast and the Chesapeake Bay.

She left immediately after her USC graduation for a University of Maryland summer internship. That summer of 2004, spent on Maryland's Eastern Shore, could be described using 'Wonderland' terms as "Curiouser and Curiouser" for Allison. She was introduced to farm life on the Wye Research & Education Center: living with other student interns in an old, creaky farmhouse; tending strawberry beds, grape vines, and pumpkin patches; picking peaches and itching from all the fuzz while also warding off stings from jealous bees; and learning to drive a tractor. It was hard work but in a beautiful setting where Allison's passion for conservation grew alongside her increased appreciation for the state of harmony between humans and the land.

Part Two of Allison's story will follow next week.

Thank you, Benita for another great review of an Oak Ridge School graduate. I know we are all looking forward to part two.

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Allison Albert ORHS Class of 2000 yearbook picture



Allison Albert "Sweet 16" photo with her first cat rescue