Allison Albert Guercio Part 2

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Benita Albert brings us part two of the Historically Speaking series on Allison Albert Guercio, her daughter. I am sure you are anxious to read this conclusion to the series. You will learn about her introduction to oysters and how she is now personally involved in the restoration of oysters in Chesapeake Bay! Enjoy yet another Oak Ridge School's graduate's amazing career and contribution to our world.

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It was her grandmother's famous oyster dressing served at Thanksgiving that was Allison Albert's first taste of the shellfish.

Allison, an Oak Ridge High School Class of 2000 graduate, could not have dreamed that decades after leaving Oak Ridge her career would focus on oyster restoration efforts in the Chesapeake Bay. As Director of Marketing and Fundraising for the Oyster Recovery Partnership (ORP), a nonprofit dedicated to revitalizing the Bay through oyster restoration, Allison leads efforts to raise awareness, build partnerships, and secure funding to support oyster recovery throughout Maryland's portion of the Chesapeake Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay, the nation's largest estuary, stretches across a 64,000 square-mile watershed touching six states and Washington, D.C. More than 18 million people live within its watershed; and its rivers, marshes, and tidal waters support one of the country's most significant seafood economies as well as tourism, recreation, and countless species of wildlife.

Early explorer Captain John Smith famously described oyster reefs so abundant that they posed navigation hazards, a stark contrast to the environmental decline the Bay would later experience. Over time, pollution, habitat destruction, overharvesting, and rapid development severely damaged the Bay's ecosystem, contributing to dramatic declines in species such as the native oyster.

In response, state and federal agencies, scientists, nonprofits, and local communities launched one of the largest environmental restoration efforts in the United States through coordinated goals advanced by the Chesapeake Bay Program and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. Today, organizations such as ORP play a major role in that long-term effort, combining science, public policy, environmental restoration, and community engagement to restore both the oyster population and the health of the Bay itself.

Allison enrolled in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy where she specialized in Environmental Policy. During her graduate tenure she completed a teaching assistantship and an intern appointment. Allison graduated in 2006 with a master's degree.

Her internship was with the Crownsville (MD) Conservancy where she helped write grants seeking to preserve and restore waterfront land to its natural state. Such conservation work plays an important role in protecting the Chesapeake Bay, as forests, wetlands, and natural shorelines help filter pollution, reduce erosion, and improve water quality before runoff reaches nearby rivers and streams. This work deepened Allison's understanding of watershed conservation and led to an opportunity with the Severn Riverkeeper Program, where she began connecting environmental science with public outreach and nonprofit advocacy.

Rapid population growth along the Severn River, Maryland's capital river and home to the U.S. Naval Academy, brought increasing environmental strain, including shoreline erosion, polluted runoff, and declining water quality. The Severn, once an active oyster harvesting and seafood-producing waterway connected to the larger Chesapeake economy, reflected many of the same challenges facing Bay tributaries.

Working with the Severn Riverkeeper Program, Allison stepped into a role that blended communication, fundraising, and environmental advocacy. She managed the organization's website, secured donations and sponsorships, and used emerging social media tools to engage the public and expand awareness of local water quality issues affecting both the Severn and, ultimately, the Chesapeake Bay itself.

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At the same time, she gained hands-on, scientific experience through a water quality monitoring initiative aimed at understanding conditions within the river. Partnering with a retired scientist, she helped collect and analyze data on dissolved oxygen levels, an important indicator of ecosystem health. In particular, they identified seasonal "dead zones," areas where low oxygen can stress or kill aquatic life. Through weekly sampling trips and fieldwork, Allison said, "I developed a deeper understanding of how local waterways function, and how the health of tributaries directly affects the health of the Chesapeake Bay."

She continued, "This experience proved formative, combining science, communication, and public engagement in a way that would come to define my career. It also revealed a critical truth: protecting natural resources requires not only sound science, but also the ability to connect people to the issue and build the support needed to drive meaningful change." Those early experiences along the Severn River helped shape the interdisciplinary approach Allison now brings to oyster restoration work in the Chesapeake Bay.

The Great Recession of 2008 heavily impacted environmental funding, so much so that it became necessary for Allison to launch a job search. She was hired by the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations (MANO), the state's nonprofit trade association, and spent a decade supporting many worthy organizations in multiple membership and marketing roles. The experience broadened her understanding of nonprofit management, fundraising, and relationship-building, skills that would later prove invaluable in her work with ORP.

The broad network of nonprofit organizations Allison encountered through MANO ultimately led her back to her passion for environmental work. In 2019 she joined ORP, accepting position that combined her experience in nonprofit management, communications, fundraising, and public engagement with her longstanding interest in environmental conservation. Allison said, "This job introduced me, a previously landlocked Tennessean, to the nuanced culture, economy, and ecology of the Chesapeake Bay and to one of its most iconic inhabitants, the eastern oyster."

Allison describes her role at ORP as both strategic and hands-on, leading the organization's marketing, communications, public education, and fundraising efforts. She develops and oversees individual and corporate giving strategies; manages a full calendar of more than 60 annual events; directs digital outreach across web, social media platforms, and email; and represents ORP in media appearances and public forums. In each of these roles, she helps translate science into action, connecting communities, restaurants, donors, volunteers, and partners to the restoration effort while building the visibility and financial support necessary to sustain oyster restoration at scale.

I asked Allison to educate her hometown of Oak Ridge readers on the restoration process. She wrote, "ORP's restoration work is a highly coordinated, industrial-scale effort involving scientists, watermen, nonprofit organizations, and state and federal agencies. Shells are collected through a regional recycling network of restaurants and public drop sites, then transported to the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science's Horn Point Laboratory where the shells are cleaned and set with hatchery-produced oyster larvae.

Once attached and growing, the 'spat-on-shell' is transported by ORP and planted onto carefully selected reef sites throughout the Chesapeake Bay in coordination with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and NOAA-supported restoration efforts. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also plays a critical role by constructing and restoring reef bases, providing the stable foundation oysters need to survive and grow. The process requires precise timing, technical expertise, and long-term collaboration across many partners."

The results are increasingly evident. Since its inception, ORP and its partners have helped restore more than 3,000 acres of oyster reefs and planted over 14 billion oysters in the Bay. This includes the successful completion of five oyster sanctuaries outlined in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. The decade-long project is one of the most widely celebrated restoration achievements under the Agreement.

Recent data from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources show oyster reproduction at nearly six times the long-term average, with the 2025 population reaching one of the highest levels recorded in more than four decades. A statewide assessment estimates there are more than 12 billion oysters in Maryland waters, with continued growth, low disease rates, and improving habitat conditions. A key driver for the state's fishing industry, oysters are second only to

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crabbing in dockside value. Oyster harvesting has brought in an average of more than $18 million annually over the past five years.

As reefs are restored, their benefits extend beyond oyster populations alone. They provide habitat for hundreds of species, improve water quality through natural filtration, help protect shorelines from erosion, and support the region's seafood industry and working waterfront communities. Together, these indicators point to a meaningful and measurable recovery of a species once thought to be in irreversible decline, and to the power of sustained collaboration, public support, and science-based restoration.

In Allison's spare time, she loves hiking and camping with her husband, Jesse Guercio, who is a health services administrator. They share a love of the outdoors and have enjoyed numerous national and state park visits across the USA. She aspires to becoming a thru-hiker and tackling many of the country's most challenging trails. Of course, Allison continues her passion for rescued animals, rearing two cats and a dog of her own, plus fostering and personally placing many other animals in forever homes.

As I always do in my ORHS alumni interviews, I asked Allison what advice she would give to students considering an environmental science career. She answered, "My inspiration is Jane Goodall who said, 'You have it in your power to make a difference.' Follow your passion; pursue your natural talents; and most importantly, don't lose hope, and give it your best. This shaped my path."

In many ways, that mindset has guided Allison from the beginning, from a determined child willing to write to the White House in pursuit of a goal, to a professional helping to restore one of the nation's most important ecosystems. Her work reflects not only a deep care for the natural world, but also a willingness to take initiative, build relationships, and persist in the face of complex challenges, qualities that continue to define her path today.

For more information about ORP's restoration work, visit www.oysterrecovery.org

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Thank you, Benita, for the amazing story of your daughter. I am so proud you chose to include her in the series of significant accomplishments of Oak Ridge Schools' graduates.

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Boat planting oysters. Caption: "ORP has restored more than 3,000 acres of oyster reefs and planted over 14 billion oysters in the Chesapeake Bay."

Underwater photo of oyster reef. Caption: "Oyster reefs provide habitat for hundreds of species, improve water quality through natural filtration, and support the region's seafood industry and working waterfront communities."

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Allison & Jesse Guercio