

Chris Jones, Part One

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 28, 2026)

Benita Albert brings us insight into a doctor whose career path includes nuclear engineering education and heart surgery. I am sure you will be delighted to learn about Chris Jones.

Robert Christopher Jones M.D. (Chris), a 1989 Oak Ridge High School (ORHS) graduate, has recently published a book, "The Disease of Me: How Modern Systems Are Changing What It Means to Be a Doctor." Chris wrote in the Foreword: "It (the book) is at its core, a reflection on what it means to be a physician in this moment in history, and what might still be possible for us if we are willing to look inward as courageously as we have been trained to look outward."

Chris, a highly respected physician whose specialty is Cardiac Electrophysiology, has practiced in Nashville for more than two decades. He currently serves as a staff cardiologist and the Chief Wellness Officer at TriStar Centennial Medical Center (CMC). His term as CMC's Chief of Staff (2018-2020) included the difficult transition into addressing COVID-19 challenges. His three-year Chief of Staff appointment required Chris to look beyond himself, to administratively view the broad issues facing the medical profession and to cultivate and encourage a greater inner clarity and purpose for beleaguered medical professionals.

Thus, it was a natural step for Chris to accept the newly created position of Chief Wellness Officer in 2021, a position that has rapidly expanded across medical communities nation-wide since the COVID pandemic. An online American Medical Association posting states, "Creating a Chief Wellness Officer position paves the way for organizations to improve not only care team well-being, but also patient experience, health outcomes, retention of key personnel, and a strong financial position."

Over the past four years, Chris has reflected, researched, and written a deeply thoughtful treatise on the practice of healing from an insider's perspective. A second part of his story, to follow next week, will provide more details on Chris's professional journey, including more from his book. In this Part One installment I have asked Chris to revisit his Oak Ridge roots and his educational path to medical practice. His memories follow below.

Bob and Ginny Jones, Chris's parents, arrived in Oak Ridge in 1966 immediately after their college graduation. Bob was an engineer at K-25 and Ginny a teacher. They both pursued advanced degrees at the University of Tennessee in their early married years. When Chris was five years old, the family moved to Maryland so that Bob could begin a new work assignment with the Department of Energy, a job he still maintains.

Chris, his mother, and his younger sister Catherine (ORHS Class of 1995) returned to Oak Ridge after his parents divorced in 1977. Ginny began teaching in the Special Education Department at ORHS, a job she held until retiring in 2000. Ginny is known in the Oak Ridge community as a creative artist of custom-made jewelry. Catherine lives in Oak Ridge with husband Bill Bohne and their daughter, Violet, a rising 8th grader.

A roll call of legendary teachers was remembered by Chris from the early years he spent at Linden and Willow Brook Elementary Schools. Those teachers' surnames included Burkowski, Wittenberg, Bowers, and Volk. Of Lou Volk, Chris wrote: "If I remember correctly, Mr. Volk was a Vietnam Veteran with an accurate throwing arm. Students who fell asleep in his class would be christened with a 'yellow stripe of stupidity' from a chalkboard eraser tossed from the front of the room. Probably frowned upon in 2026, his method was fairly efficient at keeping us attentive, and it makes me laugh to this day."

At Robertsville Junior High, Chris was enrolled in seventh-grade Algebra I with teacher Mary Jane Harned whom he remembers for: "My first taste of excitement in math and a teacher with a great laugh and a joyous presence." He added, "The most memorable class in junior high was Civics led by the teaching team of Keys Fillauer and Lynn Burkey." Forty years later, Chris still recalls a planned and staged, in-class altercation between two classmates, a lesson designed to test witness reliability, or certainly unreliability, in the later student witness testimonies.

Of ORHS memories, Chris wrote:

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"Teenagers rarely count their blessings, and it is only in retrospect that I realize how special many of my teachers were at ORHS. Mr. (Gene) Pickel made US History pertinent to high schoolers, a difficult task, by demonstrating how history gives us a preview to our future. Sandy Christen taught Algebra II and Trigonometry, setting me up for my favorite class to come. Miriam Wankerl planted a kernel of joy for English, as much as could be hoped for me at that time."

"And then there was Calculus, taught by the incomparable Benita Albert. I truly loved those two periods of the day. At various points in the year, we were simultaneously learning Calculus, Differential Equations, Matrix Algebra, and Non-Euclidean Geometry. I didn't realize how unusual this set-up was until reading the course list for my freshman year at The University of Tennessee (UTK) and selecting the next course, a senior-level Matrix Algebra class. My natural inclinations at that time were aligned with STEM courses, and I chose high school classes accordingly. I did not take Carol Yoakley's AP English class, but many of my peers did. I would hear about the books they were reading and always had a sense that I had let myself down."

"I have been honored to help care for the family members of prior teachers at ORHS since starting my medical practice. It has been so humbling to pay back, in some small way, all that was given to me by the teachers of ORHS."

Chris spoke to his early career planning, referencing his parents' and stepdad's values and expectations. "Advanced degrees were expected. However, not all education was seen as equal in my family: practicality and income-generating were key features of valuable higher knowledge. As my natural aptitudes were in STEM, I developed my math and science skills, largely ignoring the humanities. The upside of these two lessons was a drive to succeed in a competitive medical career path. The downside was a narrow-minded arrogance about what it means to be 'smart,' whatever that means." Later, his academic thoughts would be revisited and modified as an experienced physician choosing to write an introspective book on the health and welfare of medical professionals.

World War II hero, Five-Star General Omar Bradley, delivered a famous and oft-quoted speech on Armistice Day 1948, a speech emphasizing moral guidance in a time of advancing technology and conflict aversion. When Chris read it, the words resonated with him and his own internal conflict with professional success, clarity, and fulfillment. Bradley's admonition, in part, said, "We have many men of science, too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing, than we know about living." Chris cited Bradley's words and added, "I knew that I stood among the accused."

As for his Oak Ridge social life, Chris noted that Oak Ridge football was in its heyday in the late '80s, thus the thrill of Friday night games and hanging out at Big Ed's pizza was the rage. He joined friends to play on an intramural soccer team called 'School Bored.' Chris said, "We had a lot of fun, but we were irreverent (stating it nicely)."

His summers were spent visiting his dad in Maryland and eventually working a summer job at a community pool. He was first a desk clerk before he was old enough to lifeguard. Chris humorously mused, "Luckily, lifeguarding didn't have benefits, or I'd still be there."

Actually, Chris's career planning started early. His memories reach back into his childhood. "I started planning to be an engineer in elementary school. I remember taking some sort of self-assessment, as part of the third-grade curriculum, with questions like 'what are you good at?' Of course, I replied with 'kickball and running' while my mother gave the answers, 'methodical, logical', etc. My dad was an engineer and mom correctly thought that profession was a good match for my strengths, so I was pretty certain early on that I would follow in my dad's footsteps."

His early plans never wavered, and he received a full scholarship and a stipend to pursue an engineering degree at UTK. He wrote of his transition to nuclear engineering. "After starting my freshman year in the Industrial Engineering Department, I leaned into the heritage and mystique of Oak Ridge, selecting the nuclear engineering major because it sounded the most exotic and impressive. I enjoyed telling others that I was studying nuclear engineering and then waiting for the reaction. My self-worth at that time was completely tied up in achievement and the combination of 'nuclear' and 'engineering' covered the respective bases of 'smart' and 'lucrative'."

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Due to his high school advanced coursework, Chris earned accolades as Sophomore of the Year in Industrial Engineering during his UTK freshman year. Additionally, he served as president of the UTK student chapter of the American Nuclear Society as well as president of the UTK chapter of the Health Physics Society. After his freshman year of college, Chris garnered an internship in Oak Ridge at K-25 in environmental restoration work. He greatly admired his mentor, J. T. Grumski, who Chris said gave him meaningful work and who served as an excellent role model as an engineering executive.

Recalling his further decision making, Chris wrote: "The only occupations for nuclear engineers in the early 1990s were government, military, or academia. I briefly considered joining the nuclear Navy on a submarine commander track but decided I was more likely be jettisoned out a torpedo tube by the crew than to be made captain. A professor suggested I think about graduate work in health physics. He introduced me to Dr. Gary Smith at UT Medical Center in Knoxville. Dr. Smith, a nuclear medicine doctor, brilliant coder, and first-rate mathematician, was also a caring and compassionate physician. He was in need of a graduate student to help with a project validating a new scanning method detecting cancers. His blend of leadership, caring, and science—especially math- and physics-based science was very appealing. I almost immediately changed my plans from working in health physics to becoming a doctor."

"To pivot from a career in nuclear engineering to medicine required substantial extra work on top of the requirements for a MS degree—numerous extra courses (including organic chemistry), studying for the MCAT exam, and preparing medical school applications. And for some inexplicable reason, I placed a self-imposed timeline of one academic year plus two summers to get all this done. It was an incredibly busy year and was more preparatory for the time demands of medicine than any prior experience. Some of my favorite courses for this graduate degree were the health physics courses offered at Oak Ridge Associated Universities."

Chris received the above-mentioned Master of Science in Nuclear Engineering from UTK in 1994, only five years after his ORHS graduation, and in four more years, he would graduate from Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine. This was followed by a 3-year internship and residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital and a 3-year Fellowship in Cardiovascular Medicine with the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. In 2004-2005 he completed a Fellowship in Electrophysiology at St. Vincent Hospital in Indianapolis, IN, preceding his return to Tennessee as a staff cardiologist with St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville. He joined the Centennial Medical Center of Nashville in 2007 where he continues his career to the present day.

In response to sections of his book highlighting the pressures of medical school training, I wanted Chris to comment further on this matter. I asked how medical training programs might temper competitiveness while still prioritizing excellence. Chris answered:

"The philosopher Michael Sandel touches upon this topic in his book, "Meritocracy". The extreme competition we see to get into medical schools is a microcosm of the competition now present in the secondary school environment. It is too much hyperbole to say that high schoolers applying to Stanford now need to have cured cancer to gain admission, but it is not far off. Sandel proposes a lottery system for all applicants who have met a standard set of requirements. If a student has a threshold GPA, ACT score, and extra-curricular activities, they would then enter a lottery for admission."

"Sandel's lottery solution is but one of many that could work. I think medical schools need to rely on a combination of lottery and interviews and less on achievements. We also need to greatly expand the size of our medical schools. A system that prioritized interviews would be time intensive, but the end product of physicians who are not driven to "accomplish at all costs" would be a boon to society. Why is the student entering medicine? How does s/he interact with a variety of people? Can s/he look a person in the eye? Is s/he compassionate? Does s/he have life experiences? Does s/he realize the world is a complicated place? These are the types of queries that help distinguish truly great healers."

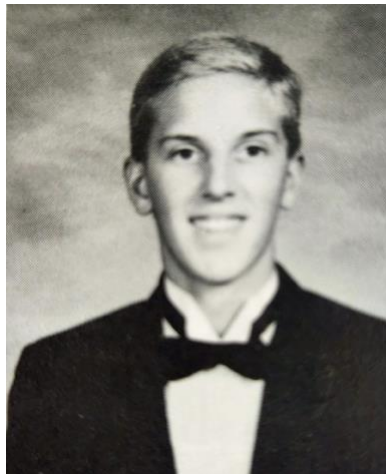
The introductory paragraph in Chapter 1 of "The Disease of Me" describes Chris's decision making as he advanced from academic training to employment. "When I attended medical school (1994-98), the expected career path after training was either private practice or academia (or, less commonly, military service). Attending a private medical school came with strong pressure to pursue academia, but for those of us saddled with hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt, private practice was often the only realistic option if we hoped to pay it off. The choice, in some respects, felt like a trade: autonomy and income in private practice versus political hierarchy and scholarly mastery in academia."

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As his professional responsibilities grew alongside his medical practice, Chris became privy to issues not only demanding of his own consideration but also for the broader healthcare community. Ultimately, he began writing "The Disease of Me" in 2022, a deeply contemplative and scholarly referenced work on the challenges facing modern medicine. Part Two will share much more about the book and the continuing professional journey Chris is on, a passionate pursuit that transcends mere professional obligations.

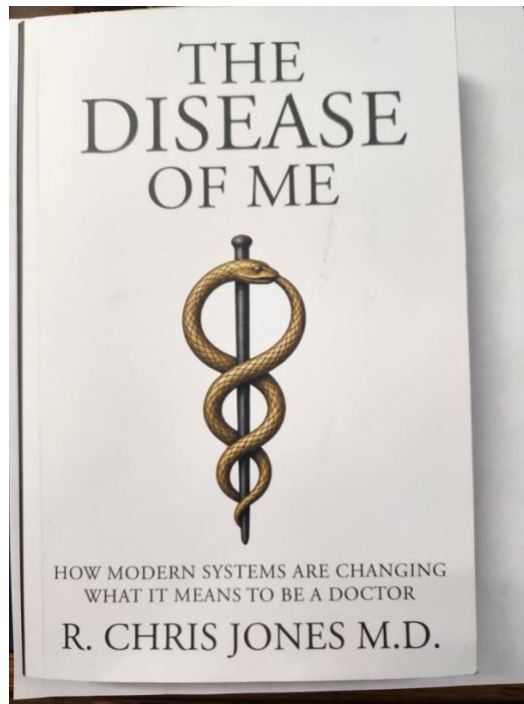
Thanks Benita, for yet another outstanding review of an Oak Ridge graduate. I am sure readers are anxious for part two.



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The Disease of Me by Chris Jones