Kathie Kertesz — An Oak Ridge girl

ORHS Class of '59 —

Francois Kertesz (my father who also wrote a column in The Oak Ridger) and me getting off of the plane in September 1959. We had spent two months in Geneva, Switzerland, while my father worked at the International "Atoms For Peace" Conference there.

By Kathie Kertesz

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third in a series of articles on the life and times of the ORHS Class of 1959.

I grew up in Oak Ridge, where the locked-gate secrecy of the government labs and the shadow of segregation contrasted sharply with the genuinely warm, small-town atmosphere. Due to the secret nature of much of the work, the U.S. government wanted Oak Ridge to keep a low profile, staying as invisible as possible by adapting to the customs of the surrounding area. When I arrived at age 8 -- fresh from Staten Island, N.Y. -- I was amazed at the friendliness of all of the people who had been born and brought up locally.

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Check-out clerks used to say, "Hurry back, honey," or, "Why, Kathie, it's so great to see yew," but the schools, restaurants, swimming pools, and all recreation spots were segregated. This was the South of the '50s, where African Americans still had to use different drinking fountains and sit in the balconies of movie theaters -- if they got to go to the movies at all. The norm at that time was to keep the races apart socially.

Mother was a New York liberal, whose first job had been as the only white social worker in Harlem, and my Hungarian father, a naturalized U.S. citizen, had lost both of his parents in a concentration camp in World War II. My parents were outraged at the segregation. They led me to understand that I was living in an ivory tower, a "bubble world," and that I had a social responsibility to aid in helping create better conditions for those less fortunate than I.

When I was 12 years old, I was invited by an adult friend of the family to help co-teach literacy classes for black adults in our town. (I use "black" instead of African-American, because in those days the color of one's skin absolutely defined one's chances to pass through barriers in the South.) I loved the work and gained an increased respect for the drive my students had to learn to read. They were willing to try hard, even appearing foolish at times in front of me, a child in their eyes.

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At the time, Oak Ridge High School was still segregated, and the black students had to be bussed to a vastly

inferior school 20 miles away. My father and other leading scientists, including the director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, formed a free, after-school tutoring program to help these kids prepare for college. Daddy could speak nine languages fluently, so he was picked to be the language tutor, as many of the private universities required a foreign language exam for admittance.

My father's first pupil was Ben, a shy, 17-year-old black student. Daddy had a very thick Hungarian accent and Ben's regional accent was also very strong. We lived in a small, government-built house that had very thin walls. My bedroom was right next to the living room where the tutoring took place. Mother and I would sit on my bed and listen through the walls to my father trying to teach Ben French phrases. At first neither one of them could understand what the other was saying, even in English. It took all of our control and our hands over our mouths, to keep from giggling out loud. Yet good will and strong desire eased the communication. Ben did so well that he was admitted to college and we became family friends. Our family was given the special honor of being the only white people invited to his great-great-grandmother's 102nd birthday party.

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That grandmother was a marvelous woman. She looked many years younger than her chronological age. Her eyes were clear and her mind alert. She thanked my father, telling him how grateful they were that he had helped Ben be the first person in their entire, very large family to go on to college. She inspired me so much that when I grew up and started my own career, I took a picture of her and placed it prominently wherever I was teaching.

The picture had the most powerful effect during the late 1960s, when I was running a Communications Center in Princeton High School, in Princeton, N.J. Many of my students were feeling alienated from the school and from society in general. Somehow, the photograph of Ben's great-great-grandmother made the room seem like a safe home. I told them the story of my father tutoring Ben, and of Ben's drive to succeed and help his family have a better quality of life. Those "sophisticated" teenagers often admitted that they really liked to see Ben's "grandma" smiling down at them. Her photo was a talisman, a reminder of how small actions can make great differences in a person's life, they did in both Ben's and in mine.

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In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled against segregation. Since Oak Ridge High School was government-run, it was selected to be the first desegregated public school in the South, to be implemented in September 1955. I was in eighth grade when the Supreme Court decision was passed. A number of Oak Ridgers who were native Southerners, and did not believe in racial integration, were furious over the ruling.

One of these was my eighth-grade teacher. Although a mild-mannered woman, she spent the first weeks of school preaching against integration to us, saying that it was forbidden in the Bible. As part of a captive audience who would be graded, I knew that I couldn't be openly defiant. Remember, this was also was the 50s, a far more docile decade. Yet I knew that she was wrong. My teacher was challenging all of my deepest moral and ethical beliefs about equality. I decided to fight fire with fire.

Each time she cited the Bible, I wrote it down and looked it up. When I had gathered all of my ammunition together I stayed after school one day. "Mrs. B.," (a pseudonym) I said in my most eager, positive voice, "I listened when you told us that God wants the races to stay separate. So I went home and read everything you mentioned to us from the Bible. But I couldn't find anything there about segregation."

"Oh, that's the version that we have in our specific (church)," she answered. To my surprise, she seemed pleased that I had taken the trouble to check her references and had mentioned this so politely to her. She actually got up in class and told the students about it, saying that maybe she had been wrong in just giving her own very personal religious point of view. For the rest of the year, she ceased her tirades against integration to our class. Maybe she feared that she would get into trouble with the administration.

That was my first taste of the power of protesting. I found out that sometimes individuals will change their minds if you don't back them against the wall and cause them to lose face.

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In 1955, on the first day of my freshman year at Oak Ridge High School, some of the parents stood outside our school with placards protesting integration -- until their own children walked out and told them to go home. A few months later, at a home basketball game, the first black athlete walked out on the floor to play with a white team. It's hard to believe now, but it had been almost impossible to find another Southern high school team to compete against us. When the game finally took place, the gym was packed and people were sitting in the aisles. I can still feel the thrill of excitement that shot down my spine as I watched that young black athlete march bravely out on the floor. At first, his eyes were downcast, but then he looked up and around at all of us and smiled. Everyone in the gym jumped to their feet and cheered. Our student body was united as we helped create a positive moment in history.

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A few years later, the high school in the neighboring town of Clinton was bombed to the ground, just because it

had integrated. Our town welcomed the Clinton High students, giving them the use of the then empty Linden Elementary School during the year that they were rebuilding. I was playing in the band to welcome them as they arrived. Our picture was run in Life magazine -- a huge honor in those days.

We Oak Ridge kids were really sad when we had to watch our first black classmate to be admitted into the school Honor Society busing tables in a local restaurant after he finished high school. He couldn't afford to go to college. It was a lesson for all of us. It's not enough just to open doors. People need to learn the tools that enable them to negotiate society's invisible barriers.

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That has been an underlying part of my life's work. I always was a fan of TV's "Star Trek: The Next Generation" series. In their world of the future, everyone has an equal chance. Who would have predicted that in my lifetime, our hope is now embodied in the highest office in our country.

It gives me great joy.

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