

ORHS Class of '59 makes its mark on the world



Sandra Whitten Plant at the New Bridge in Ronda, Spain.

By Sandra Whitten Plant

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OAK RIDGE, Tenn. —

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

Fifty years have passed since some 350 members of the Oak Ridge High School Class of 1959 graduated and went out to make our mark on the world. Where did we go, what did we do?

All of us deeply cherish our days at Oak Ridge High School. On the weekend of June 12, several hundred graduates of the Class of 1959, spouses and friends will gather in Oak Ridge to celebrate this past half century.

Elaine DeSimone Brabson, a retired social worker who now lives on a farm in Sevierville, spoke for all of us when she wrote in the class memory book, "What I remember most is that ORHS was a phenomenal high school in so many ways, but I did not fully appreciate that until many years later. I guess I thought all high schools sent dozens of students to the top universities, won football championships, swept all the awards in science fairs and math contests, had the top teachers and excelled at just about everything."

Covering the lives and careers of all 350 classmates would be virtually impossible. Perhaps the following brief items will provide a better idea of the lives we have lived and the places we have been.

For starters, we are all amazed that at least a dozen of our classmates earned doctorate degrees and have become college and university professors. Their careers and affiliations would fill a book, so here is just a summary of what these outstanding members of the Class of 1959 have accomplished.

Eleanor Groeniger Rogan, biochemistry/cancer research, University of Nebraska Medical Center; Barbara Mann, mathematics and statistics, Wright State University; Ross Clark, botany and biology, Eastern Kentucky University; Paul Huray, engineering physics, University of Tennessee/Oak Ridge National Laboratory; Carl Helrich, physics, Goshen College; the late Lewis Lanter, architecture, Georgia Institute of Technology; Mike Brady, geologist, University of Kansas; Bill Coulter, naval science, University of Missouri; Ronnie Helms, biostatistics, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Gary Love, physics, University of Georgia; Suellen Alfred, Tennessee Tech; and Steve Thornton, physics, University of Virginia.

A number of our classmates earned one or more degrees in education and enjoyed satisfying careers as classroom teachers and coaches. Many recall Winston Russell, the teacher and coach at Robertsville Middle School; Mary Beal Davis Fell, classroom teacher and librarian at several Oak Ridge elementary schools; Bobby Mitchell, teacher and coach, East Ridge High School in Chattanooga; Brenda Kelly Simpson, teacher, Oak Ridge schools; Burton Berry, 12th grade English, Rutledge; Patsy Robinson Lanter, teacher, Atlanta public schools; Sandra Walker Kuykendall, public school music teacher, Knoxville; Sylvia Bowles Brinkman, teacher and coach, Oak Ridge schools; Ginny Miller Cook, elementary, high school and college, Hixson; Rena Jo Hall Johnson, special education teacher, High Point, N.C.; and Ernie Fuller, teacher and coach for 40 years, Roane County.

Woody Barwick, with a doctorate in education, was a school administrator for 43 years in Kentucky and Indiana and has served as superintendent of schools.

The first stop for at least 15 of our classmates was the military. Several stayed in and made careers in the military. We owe a salute to Bill Sidner, 33 years, U.S. Navy submarine service; Danny Arms, 23 years, U.S. Air Force; Bob Eshelman, 30 years, U.S. Air Force; and Everett Cantrell, U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force for a total of 40 years.

We are all proud that ORHS was the first high school in the South to be integrated. That was in 1955, the

year we were freshmen. The integration of our school was peaceful and virtually uneventful. Much progress was made in racial understanding in our four years in high school.

At least two of us went away to college to experience integration again, this time very much in the public eye and not always so peaceful.

Sam Owens attended the University of Mississippi during the time that James Meredith became the first African American to enroll at Ole Miss. Meredith graduated in August 1963 and became a leading figure in the civil rights struggle.

There will be more about Sam Owens in a future article about the life and times of the young men who led ORHS to the state and national football championships in 1958.

Sandra Whitten Plant was a sophomore in the School of Journalism at the University of Georgia when Charlayne Hunter Gault enrolled in the journalism program and was accompanied to class for several weeks by state police because of riots and unrest on campus. Gault, who was graduated in 1963, has enjoyed a long career in journalism, including chief national correspondent for the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour on Public Broadcasting System.

Several classmates married their high school sweethearts and are still married after all these years.

These include Jolene Rains and Larry Richards, Branson West, Mo.; Ann McCarty and Jerry Derryberry, Kingston; Sylvia Bowles and Skip Brinkman, Oak Ridge; Mary Allison and Howard Dunneback, Oak Ridge; Lou Ann Harris and Steve Cristy, Oak Ridge; and Ginny Miller and Jim Cook, Hixson.

Is there a doctor in the Class of 1959? We had at least three, Carolyn Ragan Jaffee, Bay Shore, N.Y.; the late John Murray, Albemarle, N.C.; and Eddie Sipe, Charlotte, N.C. Diane Kostal Dodson is a registered nurse in Palm Coast, Fla.

The class also had three lawyers, Tom Parsons, Manchester; Bob McNees, Oak Ridge; and Keith Bissell, Nashville. McNees is also Oak Ridge city judge.

Our class has several members in public office. Jerry Nicely is currently serving as Tennessee commissioner of transportation. Keith Bissell was elected to the Tennessee House of Representatives for several terms and also served as a Tennessee Public Service commissioner. Sylvia Bowles Brinkman served on the Anderson County Board of Education.

Our class banker is Johnny Pinkston, who worked in banking in the Cincinnati market for 34 years. Several of our classmates had careers in the insurance business such as Larry Gragg with Prudential Insurance, and Philip Rounsaville whose career includes 30-plus years in insurance and risk management.

Susan Compton Carpenter and husband, Joe, live on a houseboat in the Potomac River near Washington, D.C., And Jean Phillips Hattabaugh and her husband, Joe, live year round in a 40-foot motor home. When not traveling the United States, the Hattabaughs settle for short stays at the Escapees RV Park near Heiskell.

Quite a cluster of our classmates live in Oak Ridge and surrounding areas. We have many more in Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. At least a half dozen live in Kentucky. Some have made it all the way to California, including Patsy Mayes Bouvion in Palm Springs, and Kathie Kertesz in Mill Valley.

Anita de Laguna Haviland and her husband, Bill, live on Deer Isle on the coast of Maine. Wilma Dean Street Gullett and her husband, Carnell, have just retired after 36 years of living on the grounds of a Boy Scout camp in Clayton, Ga., where he was the camp ranger.

Katherine Mills Horne lives on the Outer Banks of North Carolina at Kitty Hawk, but she also keeps her parents' house in Oak Ridge for an escape during hurricane season.

Sadly, 49 of our classmates have died. On Friday evening, June 12, at the opening mixer for the reunion, Kristen Jones, youngest daughter of the late Buddy Jones, will honor the memory of her father by bringing two of Buddy's "babies" to the reunion. Thanks to Kristen, Buddy's classmates will enjoy seeing our old friend's 1955 and 1957 Bel Air Chevrolets, classic cars that were very much a part of our lives in the 1950s.

Sandra Whitten Plant wrote the Teen Talk Topics column for the OakRidger during her senior year at Oak Ridge High School in 1958-59. Retired from public relations since 2007, she writes for newspapers and magazines and is active in the Episcopal Church.