

**Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning – Oak Ridge’s “Best Kept Secret”**  
**(As published in *The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking* column on August 30, 2011)**

Continuing with Murray Rosenthal’s history of ORICL talk given at the organization’s 10 anniversary.

“We had considered skipping the summer but gave in to demand. So with little time for rest, the Curriculum Committee started on the summer semester. Reeva Abraham joined the committee and initiated the very popular trips that we all enjoy. She was soon joined by Bill Arnold, who must have known about every environmental and historical site in East Tennessee.

“George Jasny signed on to handle the history courses, and when Marion retired after an arduous two years, George became chairman and expanded the committee to handle the growing number of courses and trips that we were offering.

“Soon George came to know Marty Adler, who was on the Board, and that led to a courtship and marriage. I did notice some reduction in the time they were spending on ORICL and came to understand why companies worry about office romances.

“We thought things were going well when we heard of two families who were planning to move from Oak Ridge but decided to stay because they would miss ORICL. And our optimism was really confirmed when we heard that a couple who had recently retired to Crossville decided to move on to Oak Ridge when they learned of ORICL.

“About that time, our PR chair suggested that I write the Oak Ridger and name and thank the teachers and other volunteers who were contributing to ORICL’s success. I thought that was a good idea and began making a list of people to thank, ranging from the teachers to the Gheesling team that still assembles the catalogs for mailing each semester. When my list reached 150, I gave up on the letter, but it made me aware for the first time just how many people it took to make ORICL work.

“But in spite of all of the volunteers, we came to realize that ORICL had grown to the point that we needed a professional manager. So the Board created the paid position of Administrator, and we have been extremely fortunate in having Linda Wright and then Sheila Dodson and now Laura Bowles and Sandy Pfeiler take care of the multitude of things that they do, unseen by most of us.

“In a few years the membership reached 600 and we were offering about 150 courses a year and 15 or more trips. Fortunately, the building we are in today opened in the summer of 1999, and we were able to move into the fine facilities we now use.

“We again owe thanks to Loretta, who began to look out for our needs as soon as the building plans were completed. In particular, she put our office and classroom over by the side door and allotted us nearby parking space so we wouldn’t have too far to walk. She also let us pick out those soft chairs in our classroom, for which I am regularly grateful.

“With the large enrollment, the registration process became increasingly difficult, even with Paul Evan’s excellent computer program. So Gilbert Cremese, a man of many talents, spent a number of months creating a fully integrated registration program that does everything, including writing the letters that tell us what courses we get into.

“The teachers are, of course, the heart of ORICL, and we have been blessed with having outstanding lecturers, many of whom have taught courses again and again. Fortunately, they do seem to enjoy lecturing to our unusual student body. I imagine that most of you have heard teachers say, “Where else do you find students who get to class early, ask stimulating questions, and applaud when you finish!”

“There are many programs similar to ORICL around the country, but I doubt that there is another that receives more support from its members and the teachers. And of course from Roane State, without which ORICL couldn’t exist.

“ORICL has continued to grow and the fall registration is the largest it has ever been. People often ask me if I am surprised at ORICL’s success. I truthfully answer “no,” since it was clear from the beginning

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that this is a community of people who have a strong interest in continuing to learn and who also are accustomed to actively working on things they support.

“So with that interest and support, I am sure that ORICL will continue to prosper and serve its members as it does today.

MWR, 10/14/07

Thank you Murray, “Mr. ORICL,” who began it all with that birthday dinner in 1995. As you have noticed, I have chosen to let Murray tell the history of ORICL in his words. I could not have improved upon that narrative had I tried and you would have been cheated out of the richness and personal flavor his material contained.

Of course, there is even more to say about the astoundingly successful ORICL program. I have been pleased to have been requested to present a class on two occasions telling the “Stories from the Secret City” story I so love telling to others. I often give this talk to schools, civic organizations and have presented it to Vanderbilt University and the University of Tennessee. However, by far the MOST challenging yet for sure the most fun audiences were the two ORICL classes.

I knew they all knew the stories as well or better than I, so I took the approach of making the event as much fun as possible. I poked fun at myself and used their recollections to add detail to the stories of Oak Ridge history (after all they LIVED the stories!). The classes were both filled and I believe they were both well received by the class members. I know I had a wonderful time with each interaction.

That “enjoying the classes” is part of what makes ORICL such a success. The class members do not just sit back and wait to be entertained or educated, they pitch in and help the experience be the very best it can possibly be for all involved.

Here is what Jay Searcy said on September 2, 2010, about ORICL in Stephany Beene’s Blog, *TN Platespinner* when he wrote the article, *Oak Ridge’s Best Kept Secret*, “There is a captivating place in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where one can learn almost anything, from almost anyone, for almost nothing. It is a little-known enclave of intelligence and creativity that squeezes itself into a few small classrooms at Roane State Community College.”

“Its members, mostly retirees and other seniors, are hardly visible in the hallways. They slip in and out of their classrooms with barely a sound, clinging to their notebooks like children. There are up to 600 of them from time to time, some in their 90s, and they go to class year-round, two or three times a week for three semesters. They study Homer, Hemingway, atoms, the cosmos, the Bible, the brain, languages. A beginning guitar class recently attracted 12, including a 80-year-old engineer retiree and two teen-age exchange students from Egypt. A 94-year-old widow composed her memoir in a writing class. An retired chemist, 89, learned Facebook along with a roomful of colleagues who amusingly called themselves geezers. Next up for the geezers? Twitter.

“This is ORICL, an acronym for the Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning, one of about 250 such programs across America and one of the most successful. Its purpose is to provide a continuing education in as many areas as possible for its membership, which is open to mature people of any age, from any background, from any educational level. No tests. No grades. No credit. Come as you are.

“Roane State, a spunky little two-year school that is bursting at the seams with its growing enrollment, sponsors ORICL, donates classroom and office space and offers administrative help. Instructors and lecturers, including some of the world’s brightest people, volunteer their services — authors, engineers, poets, surgeons, judges, ministers, scientists, accountants, musicians. No pay. Nobody even asks. ORICL has only two paid employees, an administrator and an assistant, both part-time.

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“For a once-a-year fee of \$95 (now \$100 - Ray), ORICL members are entitled to take up to five courses in each of three semesters, more if space is available. They choose from a highly varied curriculum of more than 60 subjects that change every semester. History, religion, computers, and philosophy are always among them. At least one ambitious member often assures himself of 10 courses by registering once for himself, and once for his wife.

“It’s the best bargain in the world,” said Dr. Murray Rosenthal, an MIT-trained chemical engineer who founded ORICL in his retirement 13 years ago. “I’m surprised that so few seem to know about it in Oak Ridge, but we don’t publicize much. I have said something to the (ORICL) committee about it and the last answer I got was: ‘We don’t have enough room for more students.’

“Some are not real anxious to have it grow,” he said. “I feel like we are denying some people who don’t know about it. But Roane State is trying to expand and when they do, we will have more space.”

So, thanks to Murray Rosenthal and Jay Searcy for their personal perspective on ORICL. It has been a pleasure to bring you the history of this exceptional organization. It has steadily and consistently provided a tremendous service to individuals from Oak Ridge and surrounding communities for the past 14 years and shows no sign of slowing down, rather is poised for even more expanded opportunities.

I hope to see ORICL grow even more over the coming years as I am convinced there are people from surrounding communities who would and should be enrolled as well as many more in Oak Ridge. I also see a growing retirement population and think ORICL can be a blessing to that growing number of individuals who have time and interest in learning.

To learn more about ORICL, go to: <http://www.discoveret.org/oricl/>

Joe McGrory is President and Louise Dunlap is Vice-President along with Bob Rutkowski, Treasurer and Murray Martin, Curriculum Chair. The rest of the board is made up of Jim Basford, Dick Engel, Ron Fowler, David Hobson, Robert Moss, Becky Rushton, Margie Skipper and Ron Stelhorn. Any of them would be glad to answer questions you might have.

Finally, Laura Bowles, Administrator and Jennifer Bultman, Assistant Administrator, would be glad to hear from you and provide you with all the needed information, forms, etc. Just give them a call at 481-8222, or drop by their office at Roane state Community College from 9:00 AM to 12:00 noon, Monday – Friday.

Nearly 600 people have already or will enjoy ORICL classes this year...you don’t want to miss this wonderful and unique opportunity. Sign up now for these classes. You will be glad you did.

Remember, one is never too old to learn, we may be too lazy or too stubborn, but those character flaws can be corrected with only one class at ORICL. Try one and see.

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Hal Schmitt, Charles Collins and Murray Rosenthal standing atop Buffalo Mountain at the TVA windmills, one of many such tours ORICL regularly includes



Members of ORICL's founding board of directors - from left, Ray Adams (Curriculum Committee member), Marion Alexander (Curriculum Committee chair), Dot Hightower (Secretary), Murray Rosenthal (President), Janet Evans (Curriculum Committee member), and Dick Smyser, the Curriculum Committee developed the first 19 courses of study that began in February, 1998

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Joe McGrory presenting a check from ORICL to the campaign for the expansion of the RSCC facility. Joe is shown presenting the check to Melinda Hillman, director of the Oak Ridge campus of Roane State Community College. The others in the picture are some of the founding members of the organization-Ray Adams, Marian Alexander, Martha Hobson, and Murray Rosenthal. In all, over \$67,000 was given by ORICL and ORICL members to the campaign