

CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee, an Oak Ridge icon of trained listeners, part 1

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on December 30, 2013)

This past November (2013) marked the 40th anniversary of CONTACT Care Line, a most effective group of caring individuals who are well trained volunteers and a two-person staff. These volunteer telephone responders are expert at listening, gaining quick understanding of situations and providing key crisis intervention assistance.

Here is the link to their web page: <http://www.contactcarelinetn.org/>
The CONTACT Care Line phone number is 865-584-4424

These tireless volunteers routinely respond to a wide range of personal issues ranging from suicide prevention to assisting lonely seniors by making them realize they are still important to the community. Even small children call to ask for help. CONTACT Care Line volunteers are there for all these hurting people or for people who just need someone to listen. Some callers confide that the first time they felt someone really listened to them was when they made the call to CONTACT Care Line.

Having been formed on November 1, 1973, as the 57th center of the national organization CONTACT Teleministries USA, Inc., forty years later the original intent of CONTACT remains the mainstay of this local organization. They responded to almost 10,000 calls in 2012 alone.

What is now CONTACT organizations had its beginning on March 16, 1963, the Rev. Dr. Alan Walker, minister in the Methodist Church, Sydney, Australia founded Life Line. This was a unique program that was designed to train volunteers to be available by telephone to callers 24 hours a day. The impetus for Dr. Walker was a suicide where a man named Roy had called him twice and after agreeing to meet with him, killed himself and left a letter to Dr. Walker by his side.

Two years later, Rev. John Brand, a minister in Dallas, Texas took the initiative to begin such a program in the United States. Rev. Brand was chosen to lead the new initiative and to use his church as the location for the first center.

Since the name of Life Line was already being used in Texas, CONTACT was chosen as the name of this new ministry.

On March 27, 1967, CONTACT Dallas, Texas became the first center in the United States. It was conceived in 1967 as a response to the growing social issues of a changing nation.

On March 1st, 1968 in Nashville, TN the Council for Telephone Ministries was formed to develop CONTACT centers throughout the US. During the next three years, under the leadership of Rev. Ross Whetstone and the support of the United Methodist Church through a startup budget of \$250,000, many communities began the process of starting a center.

In addition to Dallas, five other centers were now in operation: High Point and Charlotte in NC; Little Rock, AK; Chattanooga, TN and Newport News, VA.

On April 15, 1971, CONTACT Teleministries USA was incorporated in Tennessee to promote the Development of CONTACT. A day later, the first national conference of CONTACT was held in Newport News, VA. The Rev. Robert Larson established the first national office in Harrisburg, PA.

There were 18 centers by this time. In October 1985, the name of the national organization was changed to its current form: CONTACT USA, Inc. Today, CONTACT USA has expanded to over 40 centers in 20 states, with volunteers responding annually to over 900,000 callers per year.

CONTACT USA is committed to a vision of reaching all who seek someone to listen, someone who cares. Today, CONTACT USA, operates a virtual office from the home of the current Executive Director and a Board comprised of Center directors from across the country.

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According to Lee Morris, who was there in the very beginning, in the spring of 1972, Ben St. Clair, Pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Oak Ridge happened to know Curtis Schofield, another Methodist pastor, who was the Director of CONTACT in Chattanooga, TN. Being community minded and a visionary, St. Clair brought Schofield to Oak Ridge and had him speak at a midweek gathering at First Methodist. This led to a planning or steering committee being formed and ultimately in the formation of a local organization of CONTACT here in Oak Ridge that went active by taking phone calls on November 1, 1973.

Forty years later, CONTACT Oak Ridge formed to serve Anderson County has evolved into CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee and serves nine counties. For 31 years this service was provided 24 hours a day seven days a week. In 2004, the hours were cut back.

In East Tennessee, there is substantial change taking place over the past several years in the area of telephone care responders as well as in many other service organizations. In the last 10 years four call centers in East Tennessee have succumbed to the economic pressures and have closed, according to Deborah Patterson, Executive Director of CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee, as she was quoted in a Knoxzine article on CONTACT Care Line, by author, Barbara S. F. Davis.

So, the Oak Ridge based organization, after providing exceptional service to Oak Ridge and Anderson County in January 2008, expanded coverage to include Blount, Grainger, Jefferson, Knox, Loudon, Roane, Sevier, and Union Counties. Yet another example of the reach of Oak Ridge into surrounding communities and counties. Remember, this unique community called Oak Ridge was plopped down in the midst of Appalachia in 1942 and examples of outreach such as this abound.

CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee, located in Oak Ridge, is the sole remaining service provider in the nine counties of the 865 area code. This places added burden on the volunteers in Oak Ridge. While they are happy to serve, there are necessary limitations in coverage because of the smaller number of volunteers caused by the centers closing. At present, coverage is provided from 8 AM to 11 PM.

In that same Knoxzine article, Deborah also says, "Tennessee ranks higher than the national averages for untreated mental illness and suicide," This is a disturbing statistic to me. It may mean that those people in our community who may need help the most are those who are falling through the existing support system. Personal contact and listening to concerns are helpful alternatives to loneliness and despair. Having someone who truly cares listen to the hurting makes a world of difference.

Patterson is also quoted by Davis as saying, "CONTACT aims to strengthen its donor and volunteer base across the nine counties within the 865 area code. The additional resources will be used to expand to 24/7 coverage, open a Knoxville satellite office, and launch text and chat features for young people." If you want to be a part of this resurgence, contact Deborah Patterson at (865) 312-7450 or email her at office@contactcarelinetn.org.

Want to know more?

Find them on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/CONTACTCareLine>

In this first of the series of *Historically Speaking* articles featuring the history of CONTACT Care Line of East Tennessee in Oak Ridge, I am pleased to have been provided excellent first person accounts of its early formation by Betty Anne Domm (who coordinated the input from others), Linda Doyle and Lee Morris who also provided a most favorite quote of mine, "Find the good, and praise it." - Alex Haley.

I hope you can see why that quote is so special to me...I truly love to find the good in Oak Ridge history and praise it to you in *Historically Speaking*.

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