

Sooner Nation

Forever Young: The life of organist, doctor, photographer and pilot Dorothy Young Riess

Long before her feet could reach the pedals, University of Oklahoma alumna Dorothy Young Riess would climb onto a piano bench in the music store below her family's apartment and beg her mother for lessons. Her parents, both professional musicians, were reluctant. Dorothy was too young. She could not yet read. Her hands were too small. But, the child persisted and, at age 4, became her mother's youngest pupil.

"There was no stopping me after that," says Riess. As if one could stop a force of nature.

The adamant 4-year-old would go on to become an international concert organist, composer, medical doctor, pilot and photographer. At 86, Riess says she's not as active as she was 10 years ago, yet her schedule would consume performers half her age. After concert dates in the U.S., including OU's Catlett Music Center in May, Riess took a Baltic Sea and Norwegian coastal cruise performing in cathedrals along the way. A month later, she packed her cameras and headed to Iceland. In the plans for 2018 is a return to Antarctica aboard a Russian icebreaker for a photo expedition.

An adventurer at heart, Riess' journey began with music, her small fingers dancing into the future along a path of black and white keys. She could sight read and transpose before she went to school, deciphering sheet music before she could read English. "Music was my first language," she says. At 14, she performed the Gershwin piano concerto with the Oklahoma City

University symphony. At 16, she became accompanist for the glee club at Oklahoma City's Classen High School, filling a vacancy left by graduating senior Bob Whitley, who was on his way to OU.

"I didn't know Bob then, but our paths would cross many times," she says.

From 1938 to 1976, music students were drawn to OU hoping for the magic touch of Professor Mildred Andrews Boggess. For her ability to coax every spark of potential into artistic flame, "Miss Andrews" was both feared and revered by her students. The American Guild of Organists (AGO) once named her the most outstanding organ teacher in the United States and Canada. Riess began studying with Andrews in 1949 as an OU freshman.

"I met Miss Andrews and she created an organist out of a pianist. She gave me two choices: Do your best or do better than your best. It was incredible work and I am forever grateful," says Riess. "I was again two years behind her student Bob Whitley. He became the first winner of the American Guild of Organists competition in 1950. I followed him as winner in 1952."

The winning of the AGO competition carried with it a scholarship to study in Fountainebleau, France, with organist and composer Marcel Dupré. During that time, Riess lived in a hotel with students

of voice, composition, architecture and painting. "All of our classes were in the Fountainebleau Palace and during breaks we could wander the gardens," she recalls.

continued



Photo provided

Dorothy Young Riess at the piano, age 6. The daughter of two professional musicians, Riess began taking piano lessons from her mother at age 4, and could read and transpose music before she went to school.



Dorothy Young Riess

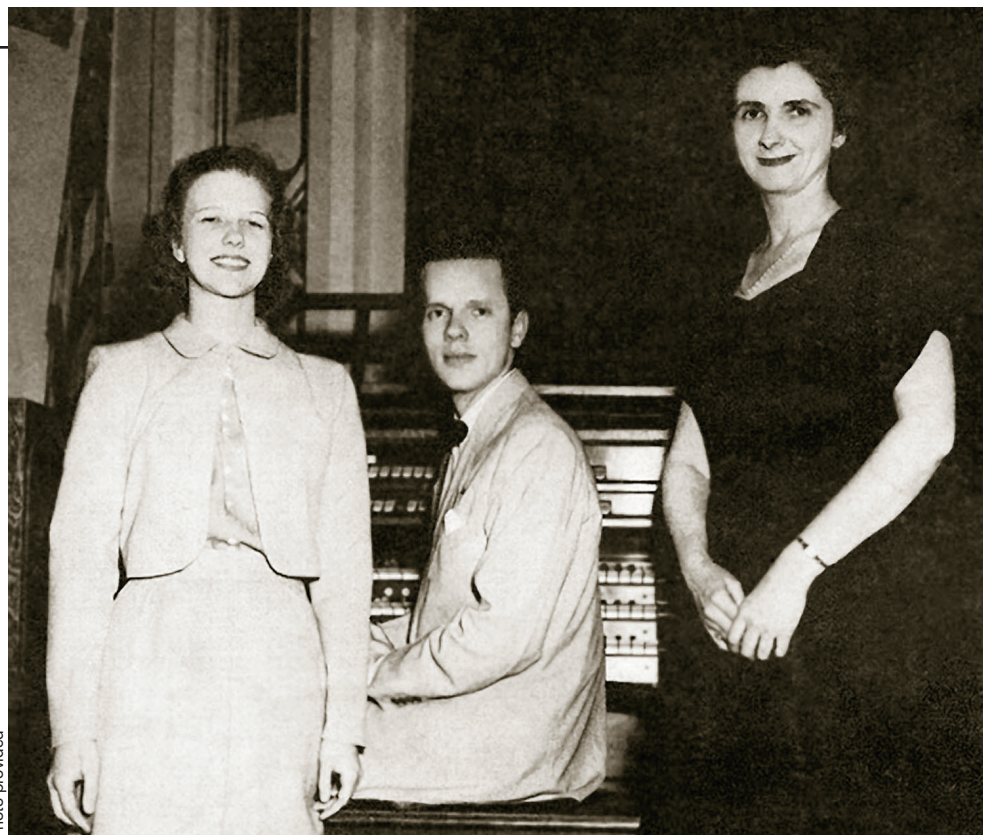
An avid photographer, Riess says the late afternoon sun “perfectly illuminated” the stained-glass windows when she took this self-portrait at Christ Church Episcopal in Las Vegas.

When she finished her studies, Riess accepted a job as interim cathedral organist in Paris, then as organist and choir director in Nice, France. “Eventually, the money ran out,” she says. “And I had a boyfriend back in the States.” The boyfriend became husband and the young couple traveled the globe, working their way to Hawaii, New York, British Columbia and Europe.

While working as the organist and choirmaster for St. Paul’s Within the Walls in Rome, Riess met a Yale music professor. He was impressed by her compositions and encouraged Riess to further her studies. She entered the master’s program at Yale in the fall of 1958. She excelled at her studies, but her marriage did not last. Then tragedy struck.

“Shortly after I played my masters recital at Yale my father died of complications from diabetes and my whole life changed,” she says. Her father had been her mentor, colleague and friend. “He never treated me like a child. He treated me as an equal and I would behave as an equal.

“He made me feel important and I think that empowered me more than many girls of my era. When he died I thought



From left: OU students Dorothy Young Riess and Bob Whitley, with music professor Mildred Andrews Boggess, pose for a newspaper photographer at the OU School of Music in 1951. Whitley won the first American Guild of Organists competition in 1950, and Riess followed him as winner in 1952.

Why don’t you think about medicine?”

For the first time since her father’s death, Riess says a light went on. Medicine could make good use of her inquisitive mind and nimble fingers.

“I went to Columbia University to enroll in chemistry. It was 1961 and I was a 27-year-old divorced female with a music background. My adviser said, ‘You want to be a doctor?’

“... I was a 27-year-old divorced female with a music background. My adviser said, ‘You want to be a doctor? You’ll never make it, sweetie.’ That twit doesn’t know it, but he gave me the determination for nine years of training.”

my old life was gone, that I would never play the organ professionally again.”

She borrowed a stenotype machine and taught herself how to use it. She worked for an Oklahoma City law office, scraping up enough money to move to New York, where she found employment with a Wall Street law firm.

“It was fine, but I was floating, trying to figure out what my life was all about,” she recalls. “One night a physician friend said, ‘Dot, you don’t belong on Wall Street the rest of your life.

You’ll never make it, sweetie.’ That twit doesn’t know it, but he gave me the determination for nine years of training.”

After completing her science credits at night, she was accepted by the OU College of Medicine in the fall of 1964.

“I got a cheap apartment and furnished it with cast-offs from friends,” she says. “I was 10 years older than my classmates, but I was still young and had energy, and I thought I could handle anything.”

She put herself through med school by working as a church

organist and taking student loans to fill the gaps. After graduation, Riess interned in San Francisco and completed her residency in internal medicine at Huntington Hospital in Pasadena.

One particular day at the hospital, she had volunteered to take a 36-hour shift in ER for a friend, but was not enthusiastic. Her first patient was a little boy who had cut his head. "I was grumbling," she says. "I hadn't had my coffee. I asked the nurse to set him up and I'd come suture him.

"I went into the room and the boy's father was there. He was handsome, he was magnetic and he was not leaving his son's side under any circumstances."

Riess sutured the cut and told the child to have his mother watch for signs of infection. "There is no mother," the man replied. "It sounds awful, but I wanted to dance," says Riess. "I finally got my cup of coffee when the phone rang. The hospital operator said, 'There's a Dr. Riess on the line for you.'"

"I was just in there with my son," the man said. "And I noticed three things: one, you're very attractive; two, you don't wear a wedding ring; and three, I would like to take you out."

"I said, 'I'm off at noon on Sunday. I'll need four hours of sleep and here's my address.'"

Dr. Louis Riess, a professor of anatomy at Pasadena City College, pulled up to her house on Sunday with two little boys, ages 4 and 6. "I thought you should meet all of us," he explained. Their first date was to the airfield, where Dorothy showed the boys the planes she had learned to fly when she had considered becoming a bush doctor in the Australian

Outback. All three Riess males were impressed.

The couple married two months later, on July 4, 1971. "It was my only day off," Riess recalls.

What followed were happy, hectic years of family life — school and social activities, soccer, baseball and football games, camping trips and holidays. "We were very active in each other's careers," says Riess. Louis, a retired brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve, became the first male member of the Los Angeles County Medical Women's Association and was responsible for getting the name changed to the Los Angeles County Medical Auxiliary.

"It wasn't always easy," says Riess. "We both had only-child syndrome. We both liked to give orders. He didn't enjoy organ music. It could have been disastrous, but we learned how to forgive each other and let go of the past."

Riess sold her Pasadena medical practice in 2000 and retired to Las Vegas, where Louis and their grown sons lived. While ice-skating in 2002, she fell and broke her knee. The surgery and eight-month rehab brought an unexpected opportunity. A doctor who knew her reputation as an organist asked if she would like to

substitute for him for a few months at the First Presbyterian Church in Las Vegas.

"I had not played for 40 years," she says. "We bought a used organ and I started practicing. It was wonderful. The hands came back quickly, as though no time had passed."

In 2004, Riess played for the American Guild of Organists spring concert in Las Vegas and, in 2005, returned to OU for a reunion of Mildred Andrews Boggess' former students. There, she met up with her old friend, Bob Whitley. At dinner on the Holmberg Hall stage, guests began telling their favorite sto-



Dorothy and Louis Riess were married 43 years before Louis' death in 2015.

Photo provided



Dorothy Young Riess

Riess captured this rainbow on a trip to Iceland in September. The octogenarian describes the country as “beautiful and serene, even in the wind and rain.” She is planning return trips to both Antarctica and Iceland later this year.

ries about “Miss Andrews,” who died in 1987.

“Bob and I got up and told stories about how severe she was, how hard she pushed us and how grueling it could be. Sometimes we had to practice at 5 a.m.,” say Riess. “The other students said nothing of the sort. They spoke of how kind and forgiving she was. Bob and I looked at each other, like, ‘Are we talking about the same person?’ She pushed the talent as far as it could go.”

After a four-decade hiatus, Riess began performing again with vigor. In addition to concert dates, she was featured on “Pipedreams Live,” an American Public Media event celebrating pipe organ music. In 2011, she again visited OU, where she met John Schwandt, professor of organ.

Schwandt says he had heard of Riess long before he met her. As director for OU’s American Organ Institute, he had wanted to feature alumni in concert and asked Riess to kick off the series.

“Her organ playing exemplifies everything good about Miss Andrews’ teaching style. It’s precise, it’s organized, but Dot has infused her own musicality into her playing,” says Schwandt. “You sense that she loves life and is living it to the fullest. She’s unstoppable.”

Riess faced one of her greatest challenges in 2015, when she lost her husband of 43 years. For the previous decade, Louis had struggled with Alzheimer’s disease and Dorothy served as his main caregiver.

“As a doctor, I knew what was going on, but as a wife, it was heartbreaking,” she says. “I read all the books — ways to relieve the caregiver, how to maintain your friendships — I just

couldn’t. Three years after his death, I’m beginning to look at life again as a possibility and not as a closed door.”

Now she is writing a book about the last year of her husband’s life and first years after his death. She is also preparing a collection of her father’s compositions, her own music, writings, recordings and memoirs that she plans to leave to the OU School of Music. And, as always, she will be traveling. This May, she will join fellow OU alumni on an organ tour of Paris. From September through December she will be on a quest to photograph opposite ends of the earth — from Iceland and Greenland to Patagonia and Antarctica.

“My passion for photography is a close second to playing music,” she says. “I am into nature. I am not interested in what man has done. Man has mostly ruined the planet. I am interested in what nature creates — the lyrical landscape — and that thrills me every time I go out.”

Riess will also keep a concert schedule, and hopes to return to OU later in the year. “I have to come back and touch the Mildred Andrews Boggess organ every now and then. It was not the organ I studied on, but it feels like home.”

If she tires of performing, she says she will return to composing. “The composer Elliott Carter lived to be 104 and had a major composition output between 90 and 100. So, I say to myself, ‘If he can do it ...’

“There are people my age who just sit in their houses and deteriorate. They’re not using their brains; they’re not alive. As long as I can do this, why not?”