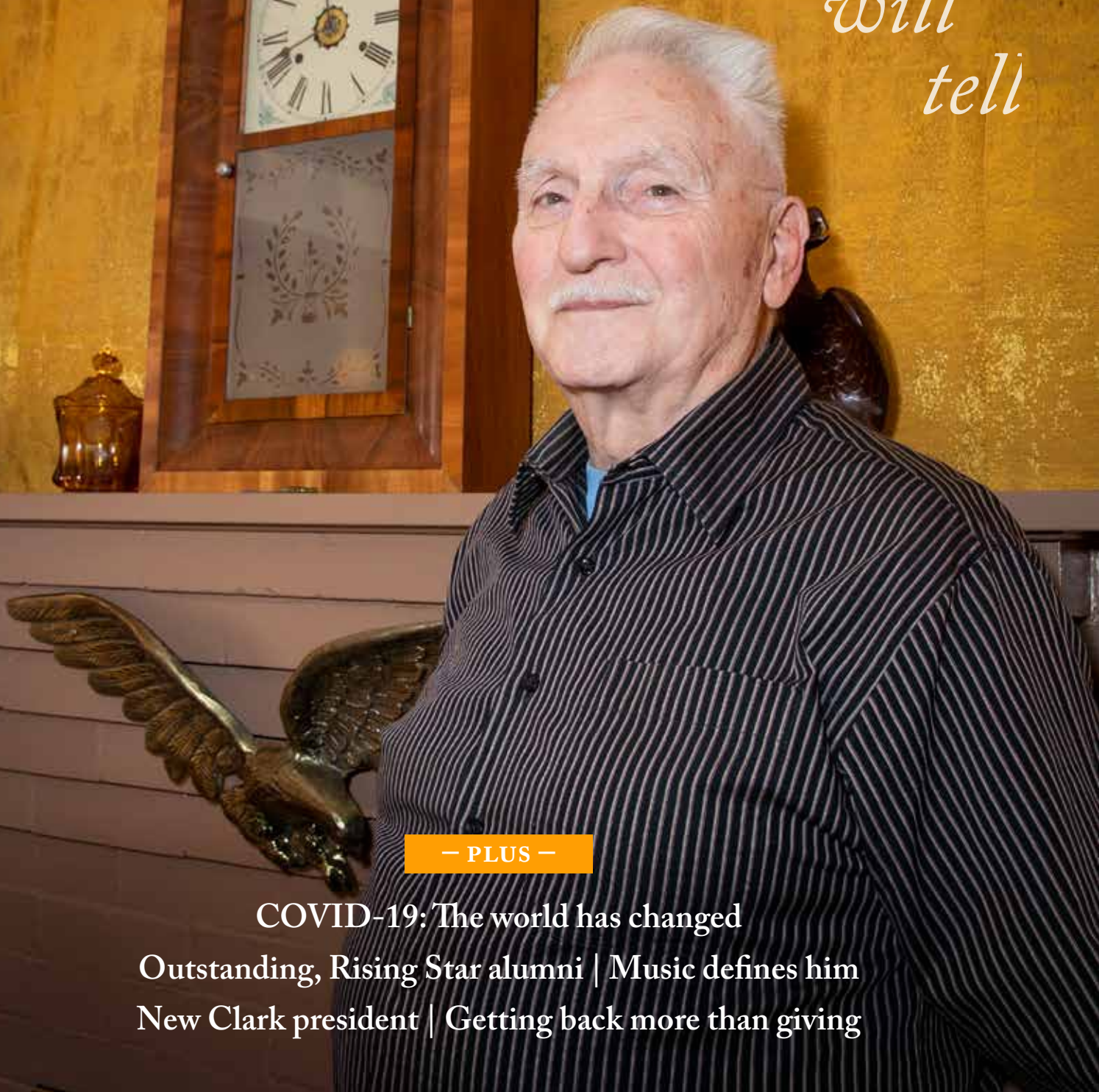


# CLARK

*Partners*

SPRING 2020

*Time  
will  
tell*



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COVER: George Oberg Jr. '58 in his Vancouver home. Oberg is a pioneer in the Northwest’s LGBTQIA+ movement.

# TIME WILL TELL

by JOEL B. MUNSON WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM DEON GILLESPIE  
 Photos by JENNY SHADLEY

▶▶ 50 YEARS OF ACTIVISM  
 BY A CLARK ALUMNUS  
 HELP SHAPE THE  
 NORTHWEST LGBTQIA+  
 MOVEMENT

## *Time.*

It's the first thing a visitor notices when entering the home of George Oberg Jr. '58 in historic downtown Vancouver, Wash. Partly because of the house itself—an elegant, if somewhat dated, 20th century, two-story structure that Oberg and his late partner lovingly restored more than 30 years ago.

The other reminder of time's fleeting nature is the cacophonous ticking of dozens of clocks throughout the house—clocks of all shapes and sizes collected over the years. To Oberg, these varied and intricate works of art are more than simply timepieces. They each represent a segment of his 82 years of living. And if you believe Oberg, each one has a story to tell about his remarkable life and accomplishments. It's a life many people believe has altered the course of history for thousands of people in the Portland-Vancouver metro area.





George Oberg as a boy and today in his Vancouver home.



“I don’t consider myself a Joan of Arc type of person,” Oberg says with something of a mischievous and slightly sardonic smile. “I don’t look back to see what wonderful things I did. But I have to say, I was very pleased that (those things) happened.”

Oberg is a true pioneer, and to many a hero who has helped bring about significant social and cultural change to the region. He also knows that to an increasingly small, fringe group he is a detractor, an enemy of so-called traditional values. A sinner.

“I try not to think about those people anymore,” Oberg says. “A long time ago, a group of people and I decided we didn’t want to live in fear anymore. We wanted to be free, and that’s what we set about doing.”

### COMING OUT ON RADIO

Oberg knew he was gay from the time he was a boy. A supportive mother and a distant, disappointed father showed Oberg early on that the world was made up of two kinds of people, and that it would be a difficult place for someone like him.

“My father had no encouragement for me whatsoever,” Oberg says. “He absolutely would not talk to me about it. Even to the day he died.”

Like many young men in the 1950s, Oberg entered the army and managed to get through that experience without too many struggles. Then it was on to Clark College where Oberg studied art, engaged in political discussions with his various instructors such as social science professor Homer P. Foster and started to form the friendships that would take on some weighty and transformative responsibilities in his future.

Throughout the 1960s, Oberg’s social life consisted mostly of hanging out at clandestine gay bars and drag shows. “It was a lot of fun,” recalls Oberg, “but we all wanted something more.” It was then that Oberg began thinking that it was only a matter of time before he would have to reconcile his true identity with the life he really wanted to lead. But in order to lead that life, his world would have to change.

In the wake of the 1969 New York City Stonewall riots, Oberg and his friends knew they needed to shake up the way people thought about people like them. By 1970, Oberg believed the time had come for him, and the close-knit

group of people he relied on for love and support in the Northwest, to take a stand.

“I hate to use the word radical, but I guess back then our thinking was pretty radical,” recalls Oberg. While there were not riots in the streets of Portland, Ore., for gay rights in the early 1970s as was happening in larger cities in United States, Oberg and his friends did things that were trendsetting at the time. The way he came out was one such action.

He did so on one of the popular radio programs in the Northwest: the Dick Klinger show on KPOJ AM.

“Thirteen steps to the gallows,” is how Oberg describes the flight of stairs leading up to Klinger’s cozy studio. He doesn’t remember too much of the conversation anymore; “a whirl of words and emotions” is the way Oberg describes it. By the time Oberg had finished the interview, his life had changed forever.

“When the show was over,” recalls Oberg, “those 13 steps that I dreaded going up, well, I floated back down them. All the fear I had ever had—the worries, the trepidation of what’s going to happen now—no longer existed. I just decided I was no longer afraid of anything.”

### SHAPING A MOVEMENT

Suffice to say Oberg had a touch of anxiety the next morning when he walked into work at the now-defunct Food Machinery Corporation in Vancouver. The company’s vice president had been waiting for the young lab technician to arrive and immediately informed Oberg he wanted to see him in his office. Oberg knew other gay people had lost their jobs for

**A trendsetter, George Oberg declared he was gay on the Dick Klinger show on KPOJ AM, a popular radio program in the Northwest in the 1960s and early 1970s.**

much less public demonstration of their sexual orientation.

To Oberg’s surprise, his supervisor said he personally was proud of him and assured Oberg the company would stand behind him—a promise his employer kept for more than 25 years. “We all figured you were going to come out someday,” Oberg recalls his boss saying. “We just never expected it would be on the radio.”

Oberg managed to do many unexpected things over the next decade, including accomplishing a number of firsts when it came to what are referred to today as LGBTQIA+ rights. He served as the founding president of a nonprofit, The Second Foundation of Oregon, establishing Portland’s first official gay support organization and community center. A donated space at Portland State University’s student union hall served as a replacement to back-alley rooms and nondescript basements that were gathering places for people who felt harassed and marginalized, including hundreds of gay and lesbian teens.

Word soon spread about The Second Foundation, and in 1971 the Oregon Department of Education asked Oberg to talk to a group of teachers and counselors about gay and lesbian students—another first. With no educational or psychological credentials, Oberg prepared for weeks, relying heavily on information gathered from San Francisco and other cities on the forefront of such issues.

Nothing, however, could prepare Oberg for the reception he received speaking to more than 350 Oregon educators and counselors who came to listen to him and learn how to help teens deal with their sexual identities. For his efforts, Oberg recalls receiving what to him seemed like a sincere and supportive ovation following the presentation. It’s a memory that to this day makes Oberg emotional.

“People can really surprise you,” Oberg says quietly, his voice cracking a bit.

It would never be easy, but there would be more pleasant and significant surprises along the



Some of the clocks that appear in George Oberg’s home. He has a affinity for antiques.

**GEORGE OBERG** was the founding president of The Second Foundation, Oregon's first official gay support organization and nonprofit community center.



way. In the early 1970s, Portland staged its first public gay gathering in the South Park blocks, and soon Portland itself was becoming something of a vanguard of gay activism, garnering attention from larger communities—some as far away as the East Coast. Activists from the city of Baltimore reached out to Oberg and his group to learn about the Rose City's best practices, the evolving LGBTQIA+ movement there, and to honor Oberg for his contributions.

After several years of intense work, Oberg decided to retreat from the forefront, concentrating on his job—and particularly on a young man he met along the way by the name of Gary Horn. The two quickly became inseparable, traveling the world, entertaining their Vancouver area friends and restoring their large home.

In the 1980s, the Portland-Vancouver gay community found itself swept up in a worldwide pandemic that slowly and tragically stole away the lives of many of Oberg's closest and dearest friends—what he calls his “real family.” One by one, Oberg watched many of those who had helped him accomplish a great deal in earlier years be reduced to shadows of their former strong, vibrant and colorful selves, before slipping into an ultimate darkness of death.

In the early 1990s, the AIDS epidemic took its most personal toll when one day Oberg saw his partner writing a letter.

“Who are you writing to?” Oberg asked almost dismissively.

“My mother,” Horn responded. “I have to tell her I have AIDS.”

Once again, Oberg reached inside himself to rediscover the fearlessness that had served others so well in the past. This time he focused his bravery on the person he cared about more than anyone else in the world. Oberg quickly realized that local hospitals still lacked the knowledge and expertise to work effectively and compassionately with AIDS patients, despite nearly a decade of crisis.

Once again he turned to his networks in San Francisco and other cities with large, active gay communities. Oberg converted the parlor of their home into a fully equipped hospital room for his long-time partner. It was there that Oberg and his circle of friends lovingly cared for Horn—sometimes laughing, sometimes swept up in pain and tears—until the day Horn died.

Instead of retreating into despair, Oberg quickly found the next patient to care for in his makeshift hospital room. Then another, and another. Over several years, Oberg's home served as a safe and comforting space for sick and dying people, many abandoned by their families, until advancements in medical treatments, finally, turned AIDS into a manageable condition.

In fact, the care that Oberg offered Horn and others caught the attention of medical experts as they visited patients at the house. Impressed with what they experienced, the experts incorporated some of Oberg's practices into hospitals and medical facilities throughout Clark County. Once again, Oberg had made a transformative difference in the lives of others.

Oberg doesn't talk much about this time since, like many gay men who lived through the ravages of the AIDS era, it left its mark on him. Soon after the epidemic retreated, he retired for the last time from activism. Settling into a more routine and quiet existence, Oberg turned to tending to his garden and chatting with neighbors on his large, welcoming front porch.

### ALL IN GOOD TIME

These days, the occasional award or recognition brings Oberg back into the spotlight, including receiving Clark College's most prestigious alumni honor in 2020, the Outstanding Alumni Award. Still, Oberg finds the need to reach out to others in his community for whom he has strived to move out of the shadows and away from persecution. Recently Oberg donated a backgammon game that his partner made to Clark's Diversity Center.

“I hope that the students who decide to play with it will think about the wonderful human being who made it and who fought so hard for the rights and acceptance they enjoy today,” says Oberg.

Like his clocks, Oberg sees the backgammon game as special moments in time. But don't expect Oberg to donate away his clocks any time soon. “I need them,” he says with that familiar wry smile. “I've still got a bit of time left.” 🕒

Joel B. Munson is the chief advancement officer at Clark College Foundation. Deon Gillespie is a freelance writer based in Denver, Colo.

by LISA GIBERT

# COVID-19: *The world has changed*

**A**s everyone works together to navigate the numerous and serious challenges resulting from the new coronavirus, Clark College and Clark College Foundation are working diligently to support our brave students as they continue to pursue their education goals. As we were going to press with this issue, Clark College announced a virtual commencement in June, with details still to come. On April 20, most students began the spring quarter exclusively online. Those who require hands-on training will have to wait until the state government's “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” emergency order ends. Federal stimulus money for short-term financial relief will help Clark and its students with immediate needs. However, the funds will not address long-term necessities for keeping students in class so that they complete their education.

This is where you are part of the solution. We need your help like never before to support and encourage our students.

### THREE WAYS YOU CAN HELP

Specifically, Clark College Foundation is asking our generous alumni, friends and donors to support three critically important areas:

**FLEXIBLE SCHOLARSHIPS.** These funds give Clark College the flexibility to provide tuition support to all kinds of students in numerous ways, including funds to make sure they complete their studies and not drop out due to financial challenges brought on by the pandemic.

**CLARK COLLEGE STUDENT EMERGENCY FUND.** When the unexpected—like the novel coronavirus—becomes the reality, even so-called incidental costs can make the difference between success and failure. Food insecurities, transportation, medical bills, child care, even a reliable computer and internet service can profoundly affect students

desperate to maintain themselves and their families while they study.

**GREATEST NEEDS FUND.** Few people could have forecast the tumult and economic impact of the novel coronavirus. It is almost impossible to anticipate what is coming around the corner right now. Clark College Foundation intends to respond as effectively and efficiently as possible as challenges and needs emerge in real-time. Support of the Greatest Needs Fund allows the foundation to address developing and future realities. The ability to be proactive in an unstable world can make all the difference to the foundation, the college and our students.

### NOW IS THE TIME

Please consider making a gift to one or more of these funds. The easiest way is to give online, any time at [www.clarkcollegefoundation.org/give](http://www.clarkcollegefoundation.org/give).

Or mail a check to Clark College Foundation, 1933 Fort Vancouver Way, Vancouver, WA. 98663-3598.

We'll continue to keep you posted about how your gift is making a difference. Watch our website, social media, Penguin Post newsletter and Penguin Chats, our popular podcast series.

Follow us on social media: Twitter @CCF\_Foundation and @alumniClark and on Facebook @clarkcollegealumni.

Also, please take the time to chat with someone from Clark College Foundation if they reach out to you. We know we can rely on you to support Clark's students during this difficult time. Thank you for everything you have done and continue to do for the Penguin Nation. 🐧

Lisa Gibert, CEO of Clark College Foundation.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Give to these funds to help students today and in the future:

- ▶ FLEXIBLE SCHOLARSHIPS
- ▶ CLARK COLLEGE STUDENT EMERGENCY FUND
- ▶ GREATEST NEEDS FUND

Online, any time at [clarkcollegefoundation.org/give](http://clarkcollegefoundation.org/give)

For assistance, email [foundation@supportclark.org](mailto:foundation@supportclark.org) or call 360-992-2301.



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