Speaker 1: You're listening to Further Together, the ORAU Podcast. Join your hosts, Michael and Jenna, as they discuss all things ORAU through interviews with our experts who provide innovative scientific and technical solutions for our customers. They'll talk about ORAU's storied history, how we're impacting an ever-changing world, and our commitment to our community.

Welcome to Further Together, the ORAU Podcast.

Michael Holtz: Good morning and welcome to this edition of The Further Together Podcast. I'm Michael Holtz here in the Communications and Marketing Department at ORAU with my colleague and cohost, Jenna.

Jenna: Good morning.

Michael Holtz: How's it going?

Jenna: It's going. It's actually good. It's early, but it's good, and I'm [crosstalk 00:00:50]-

Michael Holtz: Absolutely.

Jenna: Excited about today's episode.

Michael Holtz: Today is an exciting episode. We have the wonderful, luminous Dr. Jim Vosberg, Director of ORISE here and Jim, good morning. Welcome.

Jim Vosberg: Good morning. This is awesome. Thanks for inviting me.

Jenna: We're excited [crosstalk 00:01:06]-

Michael Holtz: We're glad to have you, absolutely. So Jim, tell us a little bit about you. Who is Jim Vosberg?

Jim Vosberg: Okay. That's a loaded question, isn't it?

Jenna: Choose wisely.

Jim Vosberg: I'm just a blue collar kid from Western New York, basically. Grew up in New York, went into the Air Force and then took off with my career from there, so if you want to kind of talk through that or not?

Michael Holtz: Sure, absolutely.

Jenna: I'm seeing a Vanderbilt [crosstalk 00:01:36] little key ring [crosstalk 00:01:38]-

Michael Holtz: Lanyard [crosstalk 00:01:38]

Jenna: Yeah, a lanyard on here, so I don't know how we feel about that. We're in [crosstalk 00:01:43]

Michael Holtz: We're in UT country.

Jim Vosberg: Yeah, it's tough to be a Vanderbilt fan in East Tennessee, that's for sure. Anyway, I got there eventually, but yeah, I can kind of walk you through my career process and how I [crosstalk 00:01:56]

Michael Holtz: Please do.

Jim Vosberg: Got to be the Director here and talk about the program a little bit, but it was a little disjointed, my career. I started out in law enforcement.

Michael Holtz: Really?

Jim Vosberg: Yeah.

Jenna: I didn't know that.

Jim Vosberg: I was a police officer in the Air Force initially right out of high school and, after that, got out and became a deputy sheriff in Upstate New York and then a deputy sheriff in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Michael Holtz: Really?

Jim Vosberg: Now-

Jenna: I had no idea.

Michael Holtz: No idea.

Jim Vosberg: Most people don't. ... and then I got smart. I realized people were trying to hurt me so I better go get an education and do something different. So, honestly, I ended up with the Federal Government with the Department of Energy. I started my career as a federal agent with the Department of Energy, dealing with nuclear security transportation, big program in DOE most people don't know about.

So it was mostly law enforcement up until the point where I transitioned with DOE over to a training-type process in education where I was training federal agents. So that got me into the education area. Went back to school on the GI Bill, got my undergrad degree in education. Got an MBA after that and then ... You mentioned Vanderbilt, Jenna. Ended up getting accepted at Vandy's doctoral program and finished that up in the late '90s.

So I ended up basically coming back to Oak Ridge from Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I was working for the Office of Secure Transportation. I came back here and focused more on the federal side on safety and health and environmental programs, right up the street at the federal building.

Michael Holtz: Sure.

Jim Vosberg: So the people that we work for here in Oak Ridge on the DOE side, most of those were coworkers of mine and people I have a lot of respect for. So, honestly, I had no intention of staying in this kind of business. Thought I was going to go work for another law-enforcement-type company when I retired from the Federal Government, but I got a call from our CEO who got a tip from somebody in the company that I might be interested in this job as a director of [ORISE 00:04:02] and I had never met [Andy Page 00:04:03] before.

Michael Holtz: Got you.

Jim Vosberg: So he flew me out here and he brought me into the conference room with all of the senior people and they're having lunch together. I didn't know any of them. So basically it was a job interview over lunch.

Michael Holtz: With a group, mind you.

Jim Vosberg: With a huge group. All the big dogs are upstairs right now. So it was fun. Andy called me later on and he said, "hey, I want you to come bid on this contract for the ORISE Director position." He said, "the only problem is you got to be here in three weeks." Now as a fed, you usually glide path out of retirement, right?

Michael Holtz: Right.

Jim Vosberg: Takes a year, two year, to kind of think about it. I told my boss. I said, "I got to be gone in three weeks. I'm early retiring."

Michael Holtz: Right.

Jim Vosberg: Came out here, took a chance on Andy. He took a chance on me and it turned out great. So we won the ORISE contract and I can talk a little bit about that as we go on.

Michael Holtz: Sure.

Jim Vosberg: This job has been fabulous for me. It's been a combination of everything in my career, from the science side to the safety and health side to education, which is our primary stuff I can talk about a little bit, but what a great job to come to and I have no regrets. Of course, being around people like has been great.

Jenna: Well, we're lucky to have you.

Michael Holtz: We are lucky to have you.

Jim Vosberg: Thank you.

Michael Holtz: So we've mentioned the acronym, ORISE. What is ORISE and what do we do?

Jim Vosberg: Right, so for your listeners, ORISE stands for the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education. It's formally been around since 1992. That's when they started ORISE and there's a long story with that, but our company, Oak Ridge Associated Universities, has been doing this work since the '40s, right after the Manhattan Project and, because in '92 the Department of Energy saw ... Well, OR, you can't be running the ORU program. They set up an institute and that's when ORISE was born, if you will.

So it is, what we call, an integrated contract. It's got very unique functions in it that are very unique to the government and the private sector, the biggest one being workforce development. I can go into a little bit of detail on that. ... but that's what ORISE stands for.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Thank you for that and, under the ORISE contract, we have these five, we call them, PWS areas, the performance work statement areas. Right?

Jim Vosberg: Statement areas. Right.

Michael Holtz: So talk a little bit about what those are and a little bit about what we do in those areas.

Jim Vosberg: So every government agency ... When they issue contracts, they identify performance areas and they're called PWS areas, as you mentioned, Michael. We have five in ORISE: one very large performance area and then four that aren't quite as large. Our biggest one is basically STEM workforce development. What that means is we're in charge of basically identifying and recruiting STEM talent worldwide, not just in the United States.

The idea is, as you guys know, STEM fields are booming right now and there's great competition for anybody that's in a STEM field, science, technology, engineering, math, and we have to convince people to come to our programs versus going to work for Google or Amazon or something like that. ... but what it is is we identify these people and offer them internships, if you will. I think your listeners would understand that term. We call them STEM participants, but there're are people are all different levels of their college program. It could be community college, could be undergraduate, graduate school, or even post-doctoral programs.

So we identify them, we place them in DOE national laboratories, and they work alongside a mentor, if you will. If you had an internship in college, you have a boss, if you will. It could be for six months, a year, two years, and they actually get to work in laboratories doing research. So it's an education and training program that's very unique and the idea is to make our nation competitive with the rest of the world and there's about ten thousand interns under our program right now, nationwide. That's a huge number.

Michael Holtz: That's a huge number.

Jenna: Yeah, and they get a glimpse. They're working on, you said, research and it's real-world research. It's research that's going to be used to help our nation and so it kind of gives them a glimpse into what could be a [crosstalk 00:08:38] possible future-

Michael Holtz: Job. Job path.

Jenna: For them.

Michael Holtz: A career path.

Jenna: And also, meeting mentors and making those connections and it's really exciting. [crosstalk 00:08:47]

Michael Holtz: It is exciting.

Jenna: Actually, to kind of glimpse at a future career path and what might be possible.

Jim Vosberg: It is. I mean, that was well-said Jenna. Basically, it gives them an opportunity to experiment with areas. It might be in fossil fuels. It might be in alternative energy out at one of our facilities in Denver. ... but it allows them a chance to actually get hands-on training. We all went through college and you sit in class and you learn the book stuff, but you don't get a chance to actually go into a national laboratory and work with a PhD mentor and that's why this program is so unique. It gives them a chance to test us and for us to test them and see if there's a match and if we want to offer them jobs.

So, very unique. ORISE is the only program with a sole mission of STEM education and training. So that's our biggest area and that's the focus DOE has primarily on this contract and obviously it gets a lot of attention from the political appointees and the politicians all the way up to the Secretary of Energy. He knows about our program too.

Michael Holtz: No pressure then.

Jim Vosberg: He's a great guy. I mean, everybody we've dealt with from him to the Deputy Secretary and all ... They've just been phenomenally supportive of this program. So it's been fun being able to pitch it-

Michael Holtz: Awesome.

Jim Vosberg: And brag about it, if you will.

Jenna: Well yeah. Absolutely. Especially since it's one of a kind. I mean-

Jim Vosberg: It is very unique. Very unique, but it is a competition, if you will. We're competing with people that are going to pay these kids, I'm going to call them, probably more money working at Google, Amazon, and high-tech companies, but this allows them to go into different areas and to work with a PhD-type person. I mean, think about that. When you were in college, the best you get is you might get an internship in an office and you're making copies for somebody. So you can claim it on your resume, but this is actually ... You're doing work world-changing experiments, so [crosstalk 00:10:56]

Jenna: And there're multiple students, participants if you will, that have gone through the ORISE program and then actually stayed. They were a good fit, like you said, and they stayed with their mentor and actually were given full-time jobs out there completing their research, so ...

Jim Vosberg: Yeah so that's really an important point, because what the Secretary and the people below him are asking us to do is to show the value of the program. So our program right now is looking at doing evaluation and longitudinal studies on those people you're talking about, Jenna. Are they staying at these laboratories? Are they staying in STEM fields or are they going and doing something else? If not, are they going to a STEM career in the private sector? It doesn't matter.

The idea is to make sure our nation is competitive in the technology areas, but we're working very hard to track where these people are ending up and showing each one of the facilities the value of the program and ironically a lot of them ... For instance, one of the facilities in West Virginia and Pittsburgh ... They have about a 65% retention rate for their participants, [crosstalk 00:12:12] these interns.

Jenna: That's awesome.

Michael Holtz: That's great.

Jim Vosberg: That's really high and they like that. They want them staying there and there's other national labs that want these individuals to come in, work in their labs, and they purposely want them to go elsewhere, just so they can expand their horizons, work in fossil fuels or other areas, maybe the weapons programs. So it's different philosophies at each one of the DOE national laboratories. ... but they look to us as sort of the sole provider for these individuals. We recruit them from all the high-end universities and from international universities that pretty well known also. So it's a great program.

Michael Holtz: Well and just sort of to follow on the retention piece, I mean, I know some of our longitudinal studies show that, whether they stay with the national lab that they started working in or the research facility they started working in, upwards of 96% in some cases stay in the STEM fields in some way shape or form, so ...

Jim Vosberg: They do and we're not talking people like me that knows basic science. These kids are brilliant, most of them. If you go to one of, what we call, the poster sessions, they actually present what they've been working on that summer for the past year and it is just phenomenally impressive how smart these kids are and what kind of research they're doing. I keep calling them kids. I guess that's okay. [crosstalk 00:13:37] Most of them are in their twenties to early-thirties.

... but just brilliant and they're really excited about the STEM field and what they're doing, whether it's in environmental or whether it's in physics and so on. So most of them do stay in STEM areas and we're very pleased to see that they're not bolting for the money. They're not going to the big tech companies. They want to be engaged and they want to know what they're doing is meaningful.

Jenna: Yeah, making a difference.

Jim Vosberg: Making a different. So that is the key to this generation coming up right now.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely.

Jim Vosberg: It's are they having an impact or not. It took us a while to realize that. So that's part of our recruiting process: showing the value of the national laboratories.

Jenna: Absolutely.

Michael Holtz: Well, and you talked about poster sessions. I mean, they're getting published while they're doing research, which you wouldn't be doing [crosstalk 00:14:28]

Jenna: In a regular internship.

Michael Holtz: If you're making copies as an intern somewhere else.

Jim Vosberg: It's exactly right and that's one of the things they mention. They say, "Hey, look. My name's on this research at the end, but it's on there."

Michael Holtz: It's on there. Absolutely.

Jenna: It counts.

Jim Vosberg: It's just an exciting program.

Jenna: Great.

Jim Vosberg: And growing too, right now.

Michael Holtz: Because I know you're working on, potentially ... Well we're always working on, potentially, other business. So always hoping to bring more people to the party.

Jim Vosberg: Well one of the things DOE has asked me to do and the whole program is to do outreach to other national laboratories. So we've really focused on that the last year. We've gone to a number of national labs. Most of them kind of heard about us or they knew a piece of it. They knew about the STEM programs. They didn't know the other four performance areas or they hadn't thought about the value added to us versus doing it themselves. So that outreach is getting legs right now. We're getting additional interest in the ORISE program and that's what it's there for and that's something I report to the DOE leadership, how the outreach efforts are going and what impacts it's having.

Michael Holtz: Excellent.

Jenna: Great. So you mentioned the other four PWS areas. Let's cover those briefly.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely.

Jim Vosberg: Sure. So one of the other ones is scientific peer review and basically, this is ... We are the intermediaries between government money, an agency that wants to give money for research, and people out there that want money to do research. So you just can't give it to them. There has to be a formal process through the government that they can show they're doing their due diligence to basically determine who's worthy of getting the funding.

So peer review is a significantly formal process. They bring in experts in whatever given area, whether it's nuclear engineering or environmental engineering, and we actually have a database of about 17,000 subject matter experts that we can call upon to do peer reviews. Now, why would somebody do a peer review? It isn't for the money. I think we pay them a hundred bucks or something like that, but what we're finding is it's for the betterment of their field, whether it's physics or environment and otherwise, and plus they get to put it on curriculum vitae.

That's a value, but I didn't know how formalized the process was until I went through it. I sat down and went through one one time, where I was working on something called Peernet. That's the program we use to do the evaluations that the SMEs use and then they score them. They'll score all the research submittals and then the Government makes a final decision on who gets the funding and they give them the funding and they manage it after that, but we are the independent group that does that for the Department of Energy and other agencies and even for state agencies ... are very good at it. So that's something that's really important under the performance area and this is something the DOE scores us very highly on every year when we get our score card, our report card, if you will.

So scientific peer review is the second one. Our third area is extremely unique and it's one of a kind. It's the Radiation Emergency Assistance Program and Training Site. So what this is ... It's located here in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and it provides 24/7 response for any kind of radiation emergency nationwide or worldwide. Basically, we have two medical doctors on staff, Doctor Carol Iddins, who's our director and a former director that's on call. So we've got nurses, health physicists, and experts that can get on a phone, if you will, if somebody thinks they've been exposed to radiation or other exposure and basically help them make determinations, or they can actually be activated. They'll be activated somewhere to a site.

They also work with other government state agencies on exercises. The Radiation Emergency Exercise is where they go out in the field, set up tents, and actually do the triage. The really cool thing they do is training classes and they do training classes both here in Oak Ridge and internationally to teach emergency response for medical radiation exposure. People come from all over the world here and-

Jenna: What kind of people usually attend those classes?

Jim Vosberg: Great question. So it's anywhere from medical people to emergency response personnel, fire departments. I tell this story. I was on a plane from Albuquerque to Dallas and I was sitting next to a guy I was talking to and I said, "Where are you going," and he said, "Well I'm flying to East Tennessee." He said, "I'm going to a place called Oak Ridge." He goes, "Do you know where that is?" I go, "Yeah." [crosstalk 00:19:27]

Jenna: Maybe.

Jim Vosberg: Kind of. Why?

Michael Holtz: As a matter of fact.

Jim Vosberg: And he said, "Well, I'm going to this REEX place and so [crosstalk 00:19:35] I'm taking a training class."

Jenna: Oh really?

Jim Vosberg: I said, "Oh really. Where are you from," and he goes, "Well, I'm from the United Arab Emirates." He worked for Ramco.

Michael Holtz: Oh my gosh.

Jenna: Oh wow.

Jim Vosberg: And I said, "How did you find about that?" He goes, "Oh, REEX is known all over the world right now."

Jenna: How cool.

Jim Vosberg: Yeah. I said, "Well I'm Jim Vosberg. Here's my business card," and he goes, "Oh okay. I know who you are."

Jenna: Nice.

Jim Vosberg: So we shared email addresses. I said, "Please email me. Tell me how the class went," and he did. He said it was just phenomenal, one of the best he ever had. So that's a kind of touch we have in that program, not only people internationally coming here but Doctor Iddins and her team go all over the world.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely. They do.

Jim Vosberg: They've been to Estonia. They've been to Russia and they basically teach classes for people that need them. Mostly military response, but it is such a unique program, one of a kind, and it's an area that's really expanding, so ...

Jenna: Great.

Jim Vosberg: The fourth area is, we call it, our health program. We keep databases for people that have been exposed to radiation, beryllium and other things. I mean, there's millions of names in there. My name's in one of the databases, because of my former job, but that's available for people that are doing research or for politicians. They'll call us and say, "I've got a FOIA request and I need some data." So we do quick turnaround, keep those updated, and they're available to anybody.

And our fifth area is very small, but very important. It's called Independent Verification and what does that mean? It means they go out and verify the cleanup sites, that are former DOE facilities, have been cleaned up to be able to be released to the public for parks or for developments.

Jenna: Very important.

Jim Vosberg: Yeah and it's independent in that we don't do any cleanup work. All we do is do the verification so there's basically a wall between that. So those are the five performance areas. The biggest one is the first one. Michael, you had mentioned. That was the whole STEM [WD 00:21:31] programs, so ...

Jenna: Great.

Michael Holtz: Very busy.

Jim Vosberg: Very busy.

Michael Holtz: Five PWS areas, no matter how big or small they are.

Jim Vosberg: Yeah, I always say I want to have just one boring day of my life. I haven't had one yet.

Jenna: I don't know. I bet you have one boring day and then you're like, "Give me the chaos right back again."

Jim Vosberg: Probably.

Michael Holtz: All right. Well, that kind of covers everything, Jim. Is there anything else that you want to make sure people understand about ORISE and who we are?

Jim Vosberg: I think I would be remiss in not pitching our website.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely.

Jim Vosberg: I have to do that everywhere because we've redone our entire website. To anybody listening to this, just Google ORISE and it'll popup. It's been refreshed over the last year, thanks to your team, and it's very interactive and it's the one thing that our customer looks at. They're not on social media, but they're always saying, "Hey, I noticed you're keeping it fresh on the website, changing things up." ... and then we highlight these STEM people we were talking about. We highlight them and things going on in the program so it's ... Yeah, I would pitch the website, our social media.

Jenna: So if someone's listening and they're a student and they're interested in seeing if they fit in one of these WD programs, the website is the place to tell them to go and the website is nice where you can kind of choose your path. We were talking. You have all of these performance areas and so sometimes it's a little confusing about which way I go, but the website's great. Up at the top, you can choose [crosstalk 00:23:12]-

Michael Holtz: Because if you're a student.

Jenna: Self-identify-

Michael Holtz: Yep. You can.

Jenna: Who you are and then it kind of funnels you to the correct information, so ...

Jim Vosberg: Exactly.

Jenna: The same thing to be said if you're interested in IV work, Independent Verification work, visit the website and there's more information and contact info. Correct?

Jim Vosberg: Correct. I mean, you guys designed it very user-friendly and it's basically, get past all the fluff. Go right to where you need. So if it's one of those students, Jenna, that you're talking about, they can just go under workforce development, do a pull-down, see where the programs are, what's open right now. Also our Twitter account, Facebook account, and all of that are advertising these programs all the time.

Michael Holtz: All the time.

Jim Vosberg: What's coming open, what's available to them. So that's the point.

Michael Holtz: We never have a shortage of content, which is a great thing.

Jim Vosberg: And according to DOE, I'm supposed to be available 24/7 so anybody listening can call me. Do not email me. I get too many emails.

Jenna: That's good to know.

Michael Holtz: Call Jim Vosberg.

Jim Vosberg: My number's on the website.

Jenna: I have a workforce development question at 3:00 in the morning.

Michael Holtz: I'm going to call Jim.

Jenna: All right, well thank you for being here.

Michael Holtz: Thank you so much.

Jenna: This was great.

Jim Vosberg: Very fun. Very fun.

Michael Holtz: Thanks Jim.

Jenna: We look forward to hearing more about ORISE and how it grows and-

Michael Holtz: Absolutely. Other programs.

Jenna: Yeah. Exactly.

Michael Holtz: Little deeper dives.

Jim Vosberg: Sure.

Michael Holtz: Thank you so much.

Jim Vosberg: You're welcome.

Jenna: Thanks again.

Jim Vosberg: Appreciate your time. Thank you.

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