Jim Sears:

We've got training and education programs in a world-class in some unique areas when people go to the website and they look at what we provide, but we've got that capability across the entire spectrum of what it is we do and being able to talk to people and clients and help them with their problems in those areas really make it exciting to come to work every day.

Speaker 2:

You're listening to Further Together the ORAU podcast, join Michael Holtz and his guests for conversations about all things ORAU. They'll talk about ORAU's storied history, our impact on an ever-changing world, our innovative, scientific and technical solutions for our customers and our commitment to the communities where we do business. Welcome to Further Together the ORAU podcast.

Michael Holtz:

Welcome to Further Together the ORAU podcast. As always, it is me, your host, Michael Holtz from the Communications and Marketing Department at ORAU. I am really excited and I know I literally say that every episode. I'm really excited today to be having a conversation with Jim Sears, who is senior vice president here at ORAU with us for about a year, and we have a lot to talk about. We haven't had the opportunity to have this conversation, but it felt like with an anniversary coming up and all of that stuff, work anniversary, I should say, that it was a good time to have this conversation. Let me start by welcoming Jim Sears to the podcast. Jim, welcome.

Jim Sears:

Hey, thanks, Michael, and I really appreciate the invite. I'm looking forward to this conversation today as well. It's been an interesting but a great year to have some pretty dramatic changes in my life that are now happening as well across ORAU and the great folks we've got here. I'm looking forward to the time today.

Michael Holtz:

I know we'll get into this more, but it's a challenging time, but at the same time, it's an exciting time because we have the opportunity to maybe do some things we've not done before. Before we get into all of that, Jim, tell me a little bit about who you are, what's your background, education? I know you came from the military. How did you get here, basically?

Jim Sears:

Yeah, it's been an interesting journey to ORAU through my adult life. I was a kid that grew up on a farm a little north of Kansas City, Missouri, that at the same time in high school that I decided I probably didn't want to become a farmer and my dad was a pharmacist in that small town. I knew I didn't want to do that. There was also, this movie that came out that you may have heard of, called Top Gun.

Michael Holtz:

Oh yeah.

Jim Sears:

I said, "How can I do that but not live on a boat," and was looking for somebody to pay for college and had a mentor growing up who taught me about the Air Force Academy and what a great opportunity that would be to be able to go and do things. It is interesting because when I was in the Air Force, people always assumed if you stay in the Air Force as long as I did, you've got long history in the military and we really didn't in my family. I get to the Air Force Academy and really learn about service and something bigger than myself. That took me forward through 33 years in the Air Force where I got to do a lot of great things. See, we moved 16 times in 33 years, so my family and I saw a lot of the world and that brought me through flying airplanes and leading operations around the world. About a third of my time I actually spent in education and training in the Air Force and that really kind of brought me to who I am today and to ORAU.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome, so as we mentioned earlier, it's been nearly a year since you onboarded as senior vice president. You came to corporate life after, as you said, more than three decades in the military. What was it about ORAU that drew you here?

Jim Sears:

I spent those three decades. I really learning about how service and being a part of something bigger than myself was a lot of what drove me and kept me, between that and the people, that kept me in the Air Force for so long. As I was looking at other opportunities in the Air Force or was it time to make this change, I really see post-secondary education and workforce development as national security imperatives for our country.

My wife and I fell in love with East Tennessee a few years ago and we had a house waiting for us here to turn it from a vacation home into our retirement home. I found this opportunity to explore ORAU and in the interview process and the researching of the company process to figure out if this was the right spot for me to land in this next phase of my life, I got to meet some great people. I felt I had found a mission-driven organization, which was important to me as well, and to be able to at least have part of what I do in that space that I have so much passion for. That's, like I said, post-secondary ed and workforce development was just a great opportunity for this next, the first step anyway, in the next phase of my life. Then there's other things in the area that drew us here as well, but it's been a great journey for this year to learn more about that.

Michael Holtz:

You've talked about service and being part of something bigger than yourself, and I think that's why a lot of us love working for ORAU, right? Is we are a mission-driven, service-oriented organization focused on improving learning and science and security for the nation. We're a nonprofit organization, so we do that really for the benefit of other people, so it's truly the continuation of your service-oriented mindset.

Jim Sears:

It is, and I'll tell you that mission mindset and really being focused on our purpose and our mission to benefit the public and to work across learning health and science. More than just what brought me here has been an interesting journey and the thing that keeps me coming back every day is when you retire from three decades in the military, all of my friends and mentors told me the two things I was going to miss the most were the people, working with great people who are dedicated to a mission and understand what each other are doing. Then no kidding, having that mission yourself by being able to find that here with some amazing people, has really been better than I could have expected for my first step on this second mountain of a journey.

Michael Holtz:

Excellent. I know my next question was going to be what keeps you coming back every day, but really it is the people. We work with some pretty stellar and amazing people in this organization.

Jim Sears:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michael Holtz:

We are a government contractor and, of course, with changes in the current administration, there have been some adjustments in the government sector. How have we been addressing these changes and what do we look like on the other side of all of those?

Jim Sears:

It's an interesting question that across the ORAU executive team, we've really been asking that since before administration change. As we've really tried, we've understood that to be able to continue to operate as the world changes, and that's before we got to the administration change, one of the things we need to do to be more agile, more innovative, and still center ourselves on that mission and purpose that we have already talked a little bit about today, but it's not just about benefiting the public or advancing learning health and science. We're a unique organization in how we also, have the ability to integrate academia and industry and the government at the same time. There's plenty of people out there who know how to talk to academia, which is its own unique language, know how to talk to the government, which is another own unique, it's more than just a language.

To be able to bring all of that together with industry, I think, is at the core of you asked what do we look like on the other side? The good news is that while there is change happening, particularly in science and research, we've got a long history in health that is another great place that I'm learning more and more about every day about how we can do better things for our nation there. Being able to work in those spaces and tie things together, it gives us some unique opportunities to be able to move forward and impact those things as we look at not just reacting, but proactively figuring out who do we want to be on the other side?

Michael Holtz:

You talked about health. Health is certainly a priority for this administration and I think as you said, we're looking at how can we adapt to meet those needs? I know we've had some conversations with like Brenda Blunt, who's a senior health policy director and some of the folks on the health communications team to sort of rise to the moment. That's really what we've kind of always been about. You mentioned a little bit about our adaptability and our responsiveness. We've always done that, right?

Jim Sears:

We have. We've got a long history in being able to work with the government, work with our clients inside and outside the government to be able to move forward. What we're learning this spring is that it really starts with making sure we align behind the mission so that we can respond when things change with greater agility than maybe we've had in the past. As we look forward and understanding that our customers right now in particular are reacting as much or more than we are, but we have to know them well enough to be able to thrive as things change and to help them thrive as things change and move as far forward as they are right now.

Then we can deliver the initiatives from our perspective to meet their needs and their mission with much more speed, quality and innovation. Because we understand their needs, we understand where they're trying to go and we can help them get there better. As we do that, it allows us to offer more innovative solutions in our key areas, increase our capacity for innovation in our own areas where we're working in the places here at ORAU as we move forward so that we've got that agility and responsiveness like you talked about to our own needs, but more importantly to serve the benefit of the public and who we are and what we do.

Michael Holtz:

Mm-hmm. Jim, we are a company with a broad range of capabilities. We do a lot of different things, which makes sometimes having an elevator speech about ORAU little challenging because 30 seconds doesn't always cover what we get to. In terms of those capabilities and perhaps others, what can we offer our existing and potential government customers by way of supporting them with the capabilities we have?

Jim Sears:

Saying that we have a lot of capabilities is definitely an understatement and which could lead people to think that we have a lack of focus, but that nothing is further from the truth. It's been part of the journey while I've been here is working across ORAU to understand what are the capabilities we have and what are the things we can do to be able to answer those questions in a better way? There's really two big things that I see we do. If you take all of our clients, the work we do, learning health and science and bringing together, there's two big things that ORAU does and I think it's better than anyone else who's out there if there's even other people who do. The first one is we really understand what it takes to create a subject matter expert, and that's a big part of it's from, we talk about K through 12, 16 or 20. I actually liked the way Dr. Ashley Stowe, our chief research and university partnership officer puts it. It's really K to gray.

Early childhood educational experiences all the way through the post-doctoral programs and the participant programs that we run for a variety of government agencies are important in science and research and really creating that workforce for the government and for the nation. We also, understand that the workforce development in STEM-driven career fields are becoming more and more important in today's society. When you think about the nuclear renaissance that's happening here at East Tennessee, the work that the ORAU STEM Accelerator is doing to build that workforce that's going to be able to build the plants and work on small module reactors and do the really highly technical work in advanced manufacturing in the future that we haven't really thought of as going to be exciting and how we're working locally and nationally to be able to do that. The second thing that we do is we really understand the health and resilience of people in communities.

That really comes from a long history in public health and total exposure science in an organizational culture assessment capability and emergency preparedness all coming together in exactly, like I said, health and resilience of people in their communities, which there's really a relationship between who we are and where we live that ORAU can get to the heart of. When you take that, how do we develop STEM leaders for the nation? How do we take care of people in their communities to make them more resilient? Now you put that with the backdrop of access to the research, the expertise, the knowledge and the capabilities of 161 university consortium and people who understand how to talk to the other 3,000 or so research universities in America. There's really some neat things we can do for the nation across a variety of areas.

Michael Holtz:

Which is really exciting. I mean, in the work that you're talking about, the capabilities you're talking about, I know from my perspective in the communications department are the things I love to talk about because I know from my own life as a patient, my own life as an advocate that these are issues that matter to people, and we are right there on the cutting edge trying to meet the needs of our current and our future customers, which is an exciting place to be.

Jim Sears:

It is, and then as I really think through within those two big areas, now there's four capability areas of integrated solutions that ORAU can bring to either of those larger more strategic work areas. We've got technological solutions in IT software and in other areas where we can really help people solve their problems faster and move forward research support services that span the entire gamut of that, like I talked about, building subject matter experts as we move forward. Professional services across research and health and resilience is our really big capabilities that we bring that we can do it in a unique way, particularly when you think of everything else there. Then at the end of the day, we've got training and education programs that are world class in some unique areas when people go to the website and they look at what we provide, but we've got that capability across the entire spectrum of what it is we do, and being able to talk to people and clients and help them with their problems in those areas really make it exciting to come to work every day.

Michael Holtz:

That's awesome. Yeah, there's a lot we do that I wish every day we could tell those stories and we try the best that we can to get the word out there about all of the great things that we're doing. For folks who are listening, so much more to come so much more.

Jim, this was not a question we talked about beforehand, but I feel like I would be remiss if I didn't ask it, but you are relatively new to the organization. We have, as you mentioned, Dr. Ashley Stowe, our new chief research and university partnerships office officer. We just announced Megan Millwood is our new CEO. We are in a time of very major leadership change in the organization, which I think also, adds to the excitement of where we're going and where we're headed as a future focused organization. Do you agree with that?

Jim Sears:

I absolutely do. It is another part of what makes it exciting to be in ORAU now, and it could be really easy right now to focus on all of the change and everything that's happening across the government and how that's impacting people's lives across ORAU. I'll tell you, even before the leadership changes that you just talked about, our focus was on the future and growth and agility and innovation and things that will make us more resilient on the other side.

Then I'm really excited to work with Megan and her leadership team in who we can be on the other side, like we talked about a few minutes ago, and her vision and where we go that I think a big part of it's going to be retaining the things that make ORAU special in the people and who we are and our purpose while at the same time getting to be a more agile, nimble, effective, and efficient organization, meeting national priorities of who we are and where we're going as we're moving forward in what really is an exciting time that has a lot of opportunity. We've just got to get past the current everything that's going on right now and I really look forward to any way I can help Megan lead our team and be more successful going forward is going to be an exciting part of the journey.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely. I 100% agree. Jim, we've talked a lot about life at ORAU. For you, what does life outside of our EU look like? Tell me about your family, hobbies. Are you flying jets?

Jim Sears:

Yeah. The number of times I've gotten to go faster than the speed of sound seems to have gone down quite a bit in the last year. They don't let me at the controls of the airliners. It's interesting, part of what I got to do in the Air Force was I ran the most productive pilot training operation in the Air Force for a couple of years, and so I got to speak to the graduates every year and whenever you speak at a graduation, you're actually speaking to grandma and grandma more than you're talking to the graduates.

All the graduates want to do is get across the stage and see the pilots and I used to always go, "Graduates, you all get to live out a dream that all of us have as pilots and you're sitting in the back of the airliner at 40,000 feet and you hear the announcement come over the public address system, 'is there a pilot on board,' and you can raise your hand now." I still have to live within that, but I'll tell you, I've been so blessed with my family, my wife, I was commissioned in the Air Force on a Wednesday. We got married on a Friday and she's still with me. You were talking to me, anniversary is 34 years, about a month ago.

Michael Holtz:

Congratulations.

Jim Sears:

We've been together for 34 years now. It's hard to believe because she's only 29. What a great ride we've had across the Air Force. We've got two amazing daughters that are 30 and 27 now. One's an RN, the other one is as a civil servant. She's a developmental test engineer for the Air Force here in Middle Tennessee at Arnold Air Force Base. They've both got wonderful that are doing great things as well. Really been blessed with my family. My wife was in the fitness industry for the last 25 years. She started as an aerobics instructor and grew through personal training. She was a national certifier for one of the national certification bodies of aerobics instructors for a few years and what that got us during COVID was a really, really good gym in the garage. We spend a lot of time together. We also like to bicycle, we road ride together and then I mountain bike.

I am a budding photographer. If I hadn't have gotten a job, I was looking at doing things in photography now. Since I can't go above the speed of sound, I've got a good sports car that I can find a country road on in Tennessee, thankfully, and in the evening when I've got time, a good friend of mine and I 30 years ago became whiskey hobbyists and really enjoy learning more as Brown Rock Water has had a new rejuvenation as well over the last decade, and I don't like that it's become more expensive, but I do like the opportunities and the variety that is here today that might not have been there 30 years ago when we got started.

Michael Holtz:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm a fan of the Brown Water myself and Bo Cumberland, who works is on our videography team is a bourbon documentarian, so I'll have to hook you up because he has a lot of connections in the industry.

Jim Sears:

Yep. Yeah, my brain may have gone that direction a little bit, but I love talking and enjoying that with people and it's not that you have to drink to enjoy that. I just love to sit down and it's neat to have a conversation like this with friends and family and meet people and that can be a part of it or it can't be, but the mentality and things that go around that are just, it's a great place to be, meet people, connect with friends, and do exciting things.

Michael Holtz:

If you're doing it right and you're sipping, then the conversation lasts longer. Right?

Jim Sears:

Yes.

Michael Holtz:

Much more time to connect and I agree with you, that's what I love about it as well, is the opportunity to just hang out for a little while and take life a little slowly and ...

Jim Sears:

Yes.

Michael Holtz:

... enjoy someone else's company.

Jim Sears:

Mm-hmm.

Michael Holtz:

Jim, last question for you. What brings you joy?

Jim Sears:

Michael, it is interesting because it's a question that I knew was coming and there's so much going on and so many neat things and opportunities right now that I really think of it a couple of ways because professionally, I had more opportunities in the Air Force I decided it was time to do things, but when I get to see people around me who are growing and moving forward and continuing to excel, I am so proud of the fact that there are, I retired as a two-star major general, and there's two people who worked for me in the Air Force now that are three-star generals.

Knowing that I had a part in that and moving them forward and the other general officers who have worked for me is exciting professionally to see that and to see people grow around me here at ORAU. Even with everything going on right now, is professionally what really uplifts me and helps me. Then the real joy on the personal side is having loved ones and family around me that I get to spend more time with now, and we get to do things and have some of those conversations like you talked about, but that ability to just have people around me who care and we care about them and having those relationships is what really matters as we go forward. Everything else is noise. As long as we've got that, we're in great shape and I truly do. People ask me how am I doing? I always say I'm living the dream and it's a good dream and I cherish every day and love what I'm doing and how we can move forward.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Well, Jim, let's keep living the dream. Thank you.

Jim Sears:

Absolutely, Michael.

Michael Holtz:

Thank you so much for spending this time with me. I really appreciate it. It's been a pleasure getting to know a little bit more about you and we will soon be sharing this conversation with our listeners, so thank you so much.

Jim Sears:

Yeah, no, I appreciate it. Thanks, again, for the invite and just wish everyone a great time as we move forward.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely. Thank you so much.

Speaker 2:

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