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LA-UR #:

Walking in his grandfather's footsteps

During his August 11 visit to the Lab, Charles Oppenheimer participated in several events, and encountered a few surprises along the way

Charles Oppenheimer never met his grandfather **J. Robert Oppenheimer** — the famed physicist died before Charles was born. But through family lore, popular narrative, and retracing his footsteps in Los Alamos, most recently on August 11, Charles knows this man well.

Charles speaks on behalf of the Oppenheimer family, offering a perspective so many authors, filmmakers, and interviewers have forgotten to ask for. "The thing that stands out most is the family culture of being supportive of Robert Oppenheimer. It's something I experienced as family culture ... he had these really wide interests and was able to pursue them to his heart's content," Charles said.

During his visit Charles participated in a [panel discussion](#) with Department of Energy (DOE) Secretary **Jennifer Granholm**, DOE Under Secretary and National Nuclear Security Administration Administrator **Jill Hruby**, and Lab Director **Thom Mason** following a screening of an abbreviated version of the [National Security Research Center's](#) (NSRC) newly-released documentary, "[Oppenheimer: Science, mission, legacy](#)." He then toured the [Bradbury Science Museum](#) and his grandparent's Los Alamos residence.

Panel discussion with Secretary Granholm

In a poignant moment during the panel's discussion of the Atomic Energy Commission's (AEC) [1954 revocation of J. Robert Oppenheimer's security clearance](#), Secretary Granholm explained her December 2022 decision to vacate the AEC's decision. "[Due to] how he [J. Robert Oppenheimer] was railroaded, the lies upon which the decision rested, [and the] notion that scientists might be afraid to speak up when they disagreed with something based upon science," she said, " ... it was important for our DOE community, our Lab community ... for scientists around the country to say, to know, that truth prevails."

When asked about his family's reaction to Granholm's decision, Charles gave a heartfelt response. "It's simple — I felt happy," he said. "My dad this morning said he felt grateful to your [Secretary Granholm's] decision ... and the courage it took. Robert Oppenheimer didn't complain, and it wasn't something that we in the family demanded an apology for. But being given one — to forgive — is divine."

At the Bradbury: the Oppenheimer family then and now

During his day trip to Los Alamos, Charles and his wife and two daughters visited the Bradbury Science Museum. NSRC Historian **Nic Lewis** (WRS-NSRCMS) showed the family the NSRC-Bradbury's joint display that features collections related to his grandfather.

Bradbury's collections specialist **Wendy Strohmeyer** (EPC-ES) shared an anecdote from the visit: "Our display of his [Charles's] grandmother's [calling card with the taped four-leaf clover](#) made Charles smile. He told us it conjured up nostalgia because collecting four-leaf clovers is a sort of family passion. He said that the cabin in the Santa Fe Pecos was full of framed, preserved samples because the plant grows in the field outside. It was a charming story, and added a unique human connection to our historic object."

The exhibit will remain on display at the Bradbury Science Museum through October 15.



Caption: Charles Oppenheimer toured Bradbury Science Museum with his family. Left: Charles Oppenheimer shakes hands with this grandfather's likeness. Right: NSRC Historian **Nic Lewis** (WRS-NSRCMS) (standing far right) provides background on the artifacts on display.

Image link:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AAJrSmtKg3QCe-3Fp5Wa9b7N44H5kzpN/view?usp=sharing>

Growing up Oppenheimer: An Interview from J. Robert Oppenheimer's personal study

After the panel, Charles paid a visit to his grandfather's Los Alamos residence, which is maintained by the [Los Alamos Historical Society](#), and sat down in J. Robert Oppenheimer's study for an interview with NSRC Director **Brye Steeves** (WRS-DO). The conversation is a part of the NSRC's unclassified collections and portions of it are included in the final version of the "Oppenheimer: Science, mission, legacy" documentary.

During the interview, Charles described how he was a child when he first learned about his famous grandfather. "The first thing I heard about my grandfather was that there was a really big war, an important war, and your grandfather was very much interested in helping win that

war. He [J. Robert Oppenheimer] used his skills in science but would have been a soldier if he didn't do science," he said. "Information would come up playing with [other] kids and I'd ask my parents, 'What's this about a bomb?' Now I'm in my forties and people are talking about my grandfather more than ever."

Today, Charles works on behalf of an organization called The Oppenheimer Project, which is centered on international cooperation regarding scientific and technological growth. Also during the interview, he considered how his grandfather's values help inform this work. "Realizing how important my grandfather was in the world, I've come to terms with [the fact that] if Oppenheimer's name can help improve the world with the threat of nuclear war, then you should participate," he said. "If there's a way to promote his values in improving the world, I think he would approve of that."



Caption: Charles Oppenheimer sat down with NSRC Director **Brye Steeves** (WRS-DO) for a half-hour interview discussing his grandfather's work, among other topics.

Image link:

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Caption: Panel discussion following a screening of "Oppenheimer: Science, mission, legacy," on August 11, 2023. From left to right: Moderator LAN Historian **Alan Carr** (WRS-NSRCMS) with panelists: DOE Secretary **Jennifer Granholm**, Lab Director **Thom Mason**, DOE Under Secretary

and National Nuclear Security Administration Administrator **Jill Hruby**, and J. Robert Oppenheimer's grandson **Charles Oppenheimer**.

Image link:

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The scientific legacy continues on

While outside the Oppenheimer House on Bathtub Row, Charles was approached by young fellow science-lover **Beckett Potter**, who expressed his admiration. "Beckett just turned 12 years old last week. We were touring the Bradbury Science Museum and then visited the Fuller Lodge and Bathtub Row when Beckett ran into the Oppenheimer family," said Beckett's father, **Scott Potter**, who was visiting from Dallas, Texas with his wife and son. "Beckett is knowledgeable about Robert Oppenheimer and the work on the Manhattan Project. He has an interest in nuclear energy and its opportunities, including nuclear fission and nuclear fusion."

This serendipitous meeting seemed to echo what Charles stated in his interview regarding science, cooperation, and hope. "If we could learn from our past, and some of its lessons, how can we apply them today? The world is in a situation today where we have existential risks that everybody in the world is participating in ... What Robert Oppenheimer's message was, was that we need to work together on those problems ... That's the most hopeful part of it."

Beckett and his generation's interest in science certainly reflect that hopeful future.



Caption: **Charles Oppenheimer** poses with his wife Karen (left) and daughters Lucy (far left) and Olivia (right) in front of the famous statue of his grandfather, first Lab director J. Robert Oppenheimer, and head of the Manhattan Project Gen. Leslie Groves.

Image link:

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Caption: While touring his grandfather's old haunts, **Charles Oppenheimer** ran into fans, such as this young child, **Beckett Potter**, who was visiting from Dallas, Texas. Beckett told Charles Oppenheimer about his ardent love for science, and asked Charles for his autograph.

Image link:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1kgDTnK1hzZPDT_PyrBBI9My74TKWwnLj?usp=drive_link

Looking for more?

- The documentary, "Oppenheimer: Science, mission, legacy," is available to watch online: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNO3Oi0ENDVajdBypRivOMbyTAx197Dam>
- Check out related stories, podcasts and legacy items from the National Security Research Center's collections on our [website devoted to Oppenheimer](#).
- Want a sneak peek? [Watch this two-minute trailer](#) of the documentary.
- Charles Oppenheimer stopped by [The Bradbury Science Museum](#) during his August 11 visit to Los Alamos; read more about that in the September issue of [@The Bradbury](#).
- Learn more about the Atomic Energy Commission's [1954 revocation](#) of Oppenheimer's security clearance, and [Secretary Granholm's 2022 vacating of that decision](#).
- Build up your Oppie and Manhattan Project knowledge with the summer 2023 issue of the Lab's [National Security Science](#), which showcases Oppenheimer's life and work and

emphasizes Manhattan Project-era science and technology still relevant to today's national security work.