Interview with Carole Hays by Emily Andre, OTs

Ms. Carole Hays is an 80-year-old woman who is currently living in Baltimore, Maryland (MD). She worked as an occupational therapist (OTR) for roughly 57 years, having earned both her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan. She worked in a variety of practices and in multiple settings such as the state hospital in Michigan, Wayne State University, American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) in Rockville, and Springfield Hospital in Sykesville, MD.

Originally, Ms. Hays went to Eastern Michigan University at age 17 to pursue teaching, however, very quickly she knew teaching was not for her. Having no other degrees in mind, Ms. Hays asked the hall monitor what her major was. When Ms. Hays heard the hall monitor was doing occupational therapy (OT), she said, “Ok, sounds good,” (C. Hays, personal communication, September 18, 2018) and chose to do that instead of teaching. Because she had had Guillain Barré as a young teenager, she was familiar with OT and physical therapy (PT), but still had no idea what she was really getting herself into. After her first semester, she switched her major and in January started her OT program with a cohort of two other students. After graduating with her Bachelor’s degree in 1960 and doing 11 months of mandatory internships, she was not sure what field of OT to go into because she loved them all. To get advice, she met with Gail Fidler who recommended that she start off practicing in mental health for one or two years. Gail Fidler advised that all new OTRs should first practice in mental health to acquire a good perspective on humans, communication, and occupations. Ms. Hays took Gail Fidler’s advice and got her first job in mental health practice at Kalamazoo State Hospital in Michigan. She indicated that she loved working there. Afterwards, she felt grounded and able to work with people. Ms. Hays commented that even today she thinks new OTR graduates should do their first jobs in mental health.

When asked to talk about a particular person, who influenced her career as an OTR, Ms. Hays remembers Lyla Spelbring, the director of OT at University of Michigan hospital when Ms. Hays first worked there. Lyla Spelbring always saw potential in Ms. Hays and wanted her to be the best she could be and to give back to the community and the field of OT. To work under Spelbring, Ms. Hays had to join the local, state, and national OT associations. From participating in these associations, Ms. Hays not only learned how to work with legislators but was also inspired to work on getting Handicap Accessibility laws passed. Lyla Spelbring knew Ms. Hays personally and encouraged her to use her gifts and abilities for a significate portion of Ms. Hays’s career as an OTR.

One patient who stands out was a 16-year-old boy who had been in a diving accident and was a quadriplegic as a result. This was back when I first worked at University of Michigan. He was a very nice boy. At the time we had just started working with new equipment, and in his case, we were working with electrodes to help with opening and closing his hands. He had gone over to the orthopedics department to get it adjusted and then he had come back over to me. I was supposed to check the device but “being a bad OT, I didn’t check the stetting” when he returned (C. Hays, personal communication, September 18, 2018). I told him to open his hand and when he did he got burnt because they had not turned the electricity down. He got burned in two places on his arm from that. I worked with him for six months. During that time, I made him a sandwich holder. I never quit treating patients, even when I was the head of the department. It gave me ground information and allowed me to see how my decisions affected the people working for me and our OT department.

When asked about how the Maryland Occupational Therapy Associations (MOTA) and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) impacted her career, Ms. Hays commented that being part of all the associations made her realize how, as a group, OTRs have the power to “actually change things that you cannot change by yourself” (C. Hays, personal communication, September 18, 2018). She also learned through working with the associations the importance of stepping up to fill a role when she had the qualifications to do so. She commented that “If there is a need, someone else will fill the gap but they may not do it as well as you could do it or as professionally” (C. Hays, personal communication, September 18, 2018). One of her regrets today is that the newer generations of OTRs do not seem to value the OT associations and are not joining the MOTA and AOTA. Ms. Hays said that the best way to encourage new OTR graduates to join OT association is to lead by example. She said OTRs in the associations should show new OTRs the importance by being personally involved and encouraging and inviting new OTRs to also be involved so that they can learn how important it is.

Ms. Hays found her career to be more fulfilling then she thought that it would be when she first started, after all, as she said, “I chose [OT] out of stupidity” (C. Hays, personal communication, September 18, 2018). Reflecting on her past career, she thinks that she did an excellent job training students and creating student programs at all the places she worked. She thought student programs were important in all practices because “students make you question what and why you are doing something” (C. Hays, personal communication, September 18, 2018). She also was proud of the fact that at every place that she worked she helped the management team understand the power and the purpose of OT to help the people that they were serving.

**Critique and Reflection**

Overall, I was relatively pleased with how the interview preparation and the interview process went. I sent a formal email explaining what the interview was for and responded in a timely manner to her responses before the interview. I arrived to our decided meeting location early and dressed professionally. After the interview, I asked for her address and told her that the transcript would be sent to her. However, there were several things that I could improve upon. To start with, I forgot to send the list of questions far in advance before the interview and only sent them an hour before we met. As a result, I am not sure that she saw my email before we met or had time to look over the questions. In the future, I would send the questions earlier. At the beginning of the interview, I was very nervous and my hands were shaking making it hard to take notes. However, five minutes into the interview I was calm and no longer nervous. Another thing that I would change is location. While the Starbucks on York Road was convenient for both of us, it was a loud environment for conducting an interview because Ms. Hays spoke softly. I often found myself asking her to repeat herself because I had trouble hearing her. I was also not sure if my phone would be able to record the conversation due to the noise. Something I could have done to have improved our conversation would have been to test my recording device in the environment before she arrived so that if the environment would not work I could have suggested another place close by to meet. I was also not very time conscious or considerate. Absorbed in taking notes and Ms. Hays’s story, I forgot to ask how much time she had at the beginning of the interview and if she had time for another question as I moved through my question list. Fortunately, our interview did not cut into her schedule. In the future I will strive to make sure to respond to emails in a timelier manner, provide all needed information up front, and choose the interview location carefully, taking into consideration how the environment will effect note taking and communication.

I am surprised by how much I learned during this interview and while reflecting on it. Before the interview, I did not understand the importance of the different associations, the history of OT, or even the overall importance of practicing OT in community with other OTRs. After talking to Ms. Hays, however, I have a new understanding and appreciation for all of these things. Ms. Hays talked often of the importance of the association and her regrets that OTRs where no longer forced to join an association in order to practice. Her passion for the associations and experiences with them helped me to realize the influence and power that OTRs can have in not only changing one person’s life but in changing multiple lives for the better. I never considered that as an OTR I could work to change laws that might improve the lives of those with disabilities or injuries like Ms. Hays did. It was only because she was involved in the different association that she had those opportunities and was inspired to do so. As mentioned before, Ms. Hays also noted the importance of taking the initiative when a spot needs to be filled. She taught me not to be scared of taking on a role that I know I can do, no matter how large it is, because if I do not, someone else will fill the role “but they may not do it as well as [I] could do it or as professionally” (C. Hays, personal communication, September 18, 2018). After listening to Ms. Hays, I want to look into joining an association, if not while I am in school, then certainly after I graduate so that I will know what is happening in the world of OT and will have more opportunities to fill roles and stand up for what I know is right.

History can teach us many things about the past, but it was not until I heard Ms. Hays talk about Gail Fidler and realized that she was the same Gail Fidler that I was learning about in Philosophy class that history really became tangible for me. Learning about the founding fathers of OT was no longer something that I just had to retain to my short term memory for a test, but rather became something that greatly affected OT and I could now personally see the impact. I knew from class that Gail Fidler worked in mental health but hearing from Ms. Hays that Gail Fidler advised that all new OTR graduates do their first job in mental health changed my understand of that fact. I learned from Ms. Hays the impact that working in mental health had on her understanding and career as an OTR and came to understand how Gail fiddler had those same realizations that greatly changed and impacted OT when it was first getting started.

Before the interview I knew that community was very important in all areas of life, but came to understand its impact in a new way in relationship to OT. Ms. Hays talked about how Lyla Spelbring knew Ms. Hays’s strengths and weakness and because of this was able to push Ms. Hays to improve her skills by taking different jobs. Listening to this, I realized that it is important to be open with my strengths and weakness in the work place so that other OTRs can know to come to me for help or direct me when I need help. Ms. Hays also talked about how important it was to her to have student programs at every place she worked. She believed that having students in the work environment caused practicing OTRs to question everything that they are doing. From listening to her, I came to realize that having this level of accountability is very important for staying alert while working in the field and not becoming too comfortable with routines. OTRs should never stop learning and should never stop questioning why they are doing what they are doing. When I begin practicing, I want to have students shadow and do fieldwork with me so that I am always performing to the best of my ability.