**Occupational Therapy Student Interview: Mrs. Harriet Watkins**

Mikenna Rogowsky interviewed Mrs. Harriet Watkins on October 2, 2018 at Brightview Towson Assisted Living for the purposes of further understanding Mrs. Watkins’ experience and role in occupational therapy over her lifelong career. Mrs. Harriet Watkins first pursed a career in occupational therapy in 1975 graduating from Community College of Baltimore (CCB). She worked in the field of occupational therapy, where she combined her loves of creativity and medicine, for 35 years She then passed the certification exam to become a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant (COTA). During her schooling, she fell in love with the field of geriatrics and immediately upon graduating, she began her career as a COTA at the Howard County Office of Aging. She completed the course of her entire career at the Howard County Office of Aging. Immediately out of school, Mrs. Watkins obtained a job with Howard County Office of Aging. She received three job offers upon graduating. At the Howard County Office of Aging, Mrs. Watkins played an important role in developing community-based programs. Mrs. Watkins feels her career path was unique because she was community based her entire career. She began her career at the Howard County Office of Aging in 1977 and retired from there in 2012. Her office has been a pioneer in health promotion and promoting functional independence for elderly people. She became the director of a social model adult daycare center which was cutting edge at the time. Then Mrs. Watkins went back to school and received a bachelor’s degree in Human Development and Aging and eventually a master’s degree from Towson University in Community Health Education and Health Administration. Mrs. Watkins had always wanted to teach and began teaching an aging course at the OTA program in Catonsville ( Community College of Baltimore County). Eventually, she wanted to be home with her kids in the evenings, so she retired from teaching, but is still in touch with Catonsville. At the Howard County Office of Aging, she developed unique evidence-based programs for keeping elderly people in the community. She also became a master trainer for an evidence-based fall prevention program that is used in the community called Matter of Balance.

During her time there, she implemented multiple cutting-edge programs to promote the independence and well-being of elderly individuals in the community. Mrs. Watkins values the power of education in the field of occupational therapy and went back to school and earned a bachelor’s degree in Human Development and Aging and a master’s degree from Towson University in Community Health Education and Health Administration. She went on to teach an aging course at the Occupational Therapy Assistant program in Catonsville. Mrs. Watkins was even able to combine her love of teaching and using occupational therapy skills to help elderly individuals in the community by creating a fieldwork program for her students to complete a field work opportunity and implement their own programs through the Howard County Office of Aging.

 When asked about individuals who influenced her professionally, Mrs. Watkins shared stories of several people who helped her to grow both as a professional and as a person. One of these individuals was the wife on one of the clients she worked with in her first year as a COTA who taught her the importance of focusing on the occupations that a client and their family find meaningful instead of only what the therapist thinks the client should be focusing on. Mrs. Watkins also shared the important impact that several professional mentors had on her career and the value she found in being able to mentor younger professionals in turn, such as several of her students who pursued careers at the Howard County Office of Aging. Mrs. Watkins also had two other mentors who greatly influenced her. There are 3 people who she looks back on who professionally influenced her. Because of this, Mrs. Watkins is a strong advocate for the positive influence mentors can provide both professionally and personally. Her first mentor was the director of the Howard County Department of Aging. Her director recognized and nurtured abilities in Mrs. Watkins that she had not yet recognized herself. The second person who had a great impact on her professionally was an OTR, Dr. Anne Morris, who recognized what Mrs. Watkins was doing in the community when Mrs. Watkins felt as though she was out by herself trying to make a difference. Dr. Morris, was the Geriatric Program Manager at AOTA, even helped her to write a proposal for AOTA. Mrs. Watkins went on to present many times at AOTA and in many other contexts. The third person Mrs. Watkins was strongly influenced by was Dr. Susan Radius, who was her research advisor at Towson. Dr. Susan Radius is a wonderful, bright, and encouraging person who taught Mrs. Watkins many things about what it means to be both a good occupational therapy professional and person. On the topic of mentoring, Mrs. Watkins noted how selfless being a mentor is because to be a successful mentor, one must eliminate their ego and partner with others to make a difference.

 Mrs. Watkins also discussed the importance of being an advocate within the field of occupational therapy. She met with the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) to advocate for her rights as a COTA. She also mentioned the opportunities she had to present at several AOTA conferences and in other contexts, as well as how much she enjoyed the AOTA conferences she attended. Mrs. Watkins has more experience with the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) than the Maryland Occupational Therapy Association (MOTA), so she focused on those experiences. She said that she felt at times as though she had to struggle with AOTA. People did not seem to always understand what she and her office were doing in the community. Once, she had to go to AOTA with her supervisor and explain what she was doing without an occupational therapist as a supervisor. She had to explain the difference between a medical model and a social or community-based model. Mrs. Watkins was practicing a social model, not doing billable occupational therapy work. Instead, she was using her occupational therapy skills to make a difference in the community. The AOTA’s lawyer told her that she did not have to have an occupational therapist as a supervisor because she was working outside of the medical model. She feels that she was part of a struggle of sorts within the profession to recognize the value occupational therapy could have outside of the medical model and in the community. She understands that occupational therapy students have invested financially in their educations and want to live comfortably, but she feels that occupational therapists need to go back to the roots of the profession and focus more on prevention than treatment.

 Mrs. Watkins feels that the Maryland Occupational Therapy Association and AOTA could play a role in advocating for the rights of occupational therapy professionals. For example, Mrs. Watkins thinks AOTA could also play a crucial role in occupational therapists being allowed to do assessments. She wonders why occupational therapists are not advocating for the approval to perform geriatric evaluations. When Mrs. Watkins was starting the programs she helped to lead, there was paperwork that said that nurses, social workers, physical therapists, and other health professionals could be the directors of the programs. It did not say anything about occupational therapists. She and her supervisor went to the state to advocate for occupational therapists and COTAs to be allowed to direct the programs. She feels the MOTA and AOTA could play a greater role in advocating for the expanding of the roles of occupational therapists.

Mrs. Watkins has not attended many MOTA conferences, but she has attended many AOTA conferences. She loved the time she spent at AOTA conferences and feels that they are very beneficial for occupational therapy professionals. Mrs. Watkins could not say enough about how much she enjoyed working in the field of occupational therapy. She strongly believes that occupational therapy can benefit many people, and she hopes that it will become more recognized and understood by the public in the future. Mrs. Watkins found her many years in the field of occupational therapy to very fulfilling.