Interview with Loretta Foster by Marie Berman, OTS

# Summary

When asked to speak about her background, Ms. Foster explained that she started out with a bachelor’s degree in Studio Art. After getting this degree, Ms. Foster started her own business called Clay Happenings, one which involved her traveling to various locations to teach children how to work with clay. When asked how she discovered the profession of occupational therapy, Ms. Foster explained that she decided to change career paths and spoke to the Occupational Therapy Assistant program director, Judy Davis, at Catonsville Community College at that time. Although Ms. Foster was initially interested in the higher salary, her personal experiences, primarily her experience taking care of her mother who lived with Parkinson’s disease for many years, drove her to choose the profession. During a phone call in 1990, Ms. Davis helped Ms. Foster understand and appreciate how occupational therapy can help improve quality of life. She then decided to start the OTA program at Catonsville Community College (CCC), since renamed the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). After graduating from the OTA Program in May 1992, she became licensed to practice in July, 1992. She worked in a variety of settings, primarily in skilled nursing facilities. In January 2012, Ms. Foster was hired to work at CCBC, where she is Assistant Academic Fieldwork Coordinator and Instructor in the COTA program.

When asked about her current position in the Maryland Occupational Therapy Association (MOTA), Ms. Foster stated that her involvement began following her completion of a master’s degree in Healthcare Administration and Management. Ms. Foster received a letter from the dean congratulating her on her achievement; this served to motivate her to become involved with the MOTA. As an OTA representative from 2004 – 2006, Ms. Foster held meetings, invited speakers, and created “COTA kits” for graduating OTA students. She also wrote a section for OTAs in the MOTA bi-monthly newsletter.

From 2008-2011 and 2011-2014, Ms. Foster volunteered on the AOTA Ethics Commission OTA Representative.

When asked about someone that influenced her career, Ms. Foster spoke about her pediatrics professor, Judy Blum, who later became the CCBC OTA Program Director. Judy Blum was a mentor for Ms. Foster and supported her as a student and throughout her career.

When asked about her experience in different settings, Ms. Foster shared that she has worked in the homes of patients, in a skilled nursing facility, and in the school system. Ms. Foster feels that her background in clay and her desire to “work with her hands” have influenced her practice. She has always believed in “healing body and mind through the use of hands.” She remembers a time before she became an OTA that “there was a boy who refused to touch the clay” while she was teaching clay to a group and she adapted the lesson by telling him he could step on the clay with his shoe to flatten it instead of using his hands. Her favorite setting, however, was the skilled nursing facility, this primarily was due to her passion for working with the geriatric population. When asked about a project in her career that stood out to her, Ms. Foster described how she and the interprofessional rehab team designed and created a harness using her sewing machine for a patient that was unable to walk due to obesity. The harness wrapped around the patient’s body and secured with Velcro to enable support for body weight and making it possible for the patient to walk with assistance.

When asked about what she felt was the most meaningful thing she achieved during her career, Ms. Foster spoke about her experience visiting Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in Sheffield, England in July 2015. There she spent the day meeting with the Deputy Head of Allied Health, OTA Course leader and faculty at the SHU OT department to establish an international fieldwork placement. Although the placement did not work out, due to visa requirements, she said the overall experience was very meaningful and exciting.

Ms. Foster mentioned that her favorite thing about occupational therapy is its diversity, particularly the differentiation of environments that occurs. Ms. Foster also spoke about the link between the history of OT and OT practice. She said that she views the founders’ beliefs about occupational well-being and humane treatment for patients with mental illnesses as the linkage between the two disparate concepts.