Interview Summary: Marlene Riley

Towson University has faculty with years of experience teaching, conducting research, and in clinical practice. Marlene Riley is a clinical associate professor at Towson University. Her areas of expertise include rehabilitation, disability, hand therapy, and community based practice.

Jear Anne Lebaquin, an occupational therapy combined B.S./M.S. program student, interviewed

Marlene Riley about her influences and experiences in occupational therapy.

Marlene Riley had early exposure to healthcare professionals and individuals with disabilities from working in the food service division at the Maryland Rehabilitation Center (MRC). She worked at the MRC throughout high school, completing six to ten o’clock shifts at night during the school year and day shifts in the summer. The facility was a residential rehabilitation center that provided vocational training to clients with a variety of disabilities. She was able to interact with clients, observing how they managed their daily living skills while dining and participating in a range of recreation and social opportunities provided in this regional center. The random, small details that she learned incidentally and not through schooling emphasize the importance of gaining experience through unstructured interactions with people with disabilities. If the client had a prosthesis, she would remember to not fill up the Styrofoam cup all the way to avoid spills. She learned that these clients were able to use the terminal device of their prosthesis to control the grasp of a cup from the rim.

In 1975, Ms. Riley took the initiative to take a shop class in high school. She received a lot of attention during this time period as occupations were still gender biased. Despite this, she continued to embrace the situation because of her love for making crafts. Ms. Riley’s shop teacher recommended a career in occupational therapy after noticing her interests with woodworking, leather and hands on activities and excelling in the class. She had similar personality characteristics and work habits that reminded her teacher of his wife who was an occupational therapist. In 1980, Marlene Riley graduated from Towson University with a bachelor’s degree in occupational therapy.

Ms. Riley worked in a variety of settings throughout her occupational therapy career. She was offered a job at the Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland upon completion of her final Level II fieldwork there. Over the ten years of working there, she worked in acute care, outpatient care, and eventually became the director of rehabilitation services. At the time, being the director was not typical for someone with an occupational therapy background as it was more common for physical therapists to hold the position. She had a staff of fifty people in five departments; it was definitely an accomplishment to be proud of. Ms. Riley’s career was able to shift as her interests shifted too. After the birth of her first child, she decided to put together a combination of teaching part­time and doing clinical work part­time. Occupational therapy allows you to have flexibility with your interests as there are a wide range of tracks and settings to choose from.

Ms. Riley is also deeply involved with local and national occupational therapy organizations. She joined the Maryland Occupational Therapy Association (MOTA) after graduating college. Back then, occupational therapists were not receiving proper reimbursements from insurance companies. She joined MOTA’s legislative committee to advocate the cause. Working on the committee allowed her to meet people who continued to play a role in her career. Dr. Charlotte Exner was on the same committee and was the chair of the Department of Occupational Therapy at Towson University at the time. She was also the person who later invited Ms. Riley to teach at Towson.

Betty Cox started a company to host educational workshops and seminars on occupational therapy topics around the world. During the 1990s, Ms. Riley would present weekend seminars for her company around the United States. Being part of Betty Cox Associates, Inc. contributed to Ms. Riley’s professional development. Involvement is very important because it allows you to connect with people who are more experienced. Ms. Riley is also a member of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA).