Interview Summary

Kelsey Feeney conducted an interview with Dr. Rae Ann Smith on October 3, 2018 at the Towson Diner in Towson, Maryland. The two met to gain greater insight on the evolution of the occupational practice and the impact of theory on clinical practice. Dr. Smith originally worked as a social worker for 10 years in outpatient mental health but decided to switch to medical social work after experiencing burnout. She heard about occupational therapy at an information meeting at the University of Maryland for their Master of Social Work program. At the meeting, Dr. Nancy Blake spoke about occupational therapy and sparked Dr. Smith’s interest. After further research, she realized that it had everything she wanted in a career and decided to pursue occupational therapy instead of medical social work. Dr. Rae Anne Smith originally worked as a social worker for ten years in outpatient mental health but decided that she wanted to switch to medical social work instead of mental health social work. She attended a meeting at the University of Maryland with the goal of participating in their Master of Social Work program and later working in a hospital setting. At the meeting, Nancy Blake spoke about the occupational therapy (OT) program at Towson University. Dr. Smith had previously heard of OT but did not fully understand what it was. However, after looking into it, she discovered that it was the perfect match for her. It combined the skills she already had from working in a mental health setting, the medical aspect that she was searching for, and a large focus on rehabilitation. She mentioned that she wanted most to work with clients who wanted to get better, which was often not the case during her time in mental health social work. She was accepted into an outreach program that Towson University and the Western Maryland Area Health Education Center had created. Dr. Smith traveled to Towson every week for the next four years. She graduated from the program in 1998 and stated that she never once regretted her decision to switch. For five years, she worked as an occupational therapist at a rehab unit in a general hospital, evaluating and treating patients. During her time at the hospital, Dr. Smith also did some adjunct teaching, which she thoroughly enjoyed and resulted in her switching to program director of the occupational therapy assistant program at Alleghany College for the next 15 and a half years. Currently, she works as a per diem therapist at a nursing home, is an adjunct faculty member at the Community College of Baltimore County and online for an occupational therapy assistant and occupational therapy doctorate programs. Dr. Smith also serves on the board of directors for the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy.

Dr. Marcie Weinstein was one of the people who really stood out to Dr. Smith during her education, as well as Dr. Carol Dennis. Dr. Sonia Lawson was her first instructor when she came to the Towson Campus in the old Lida Lee Tall building. She has maintained strong relationships and contact with all three women and often sees them at conferences.

Dr. Smith told two stories of patients who stood out in her career. The first was about a little boy with Cerebral Palsy who she helped get his own special wheelchair after using one his mother found in a dumpster. The second story was about a 66-year-old patient who suffered a severe left-brain stroke and became completely paralyzed on his entire right side. She said that before his stroke, he was an extremely active man. After his stroke, he was contemplating killing himself until his first therapist gave him hope and motivation. Two months later, the man ended up walking out of the hospital on his own and was able to continue living a full and active life.

Dr. Smith said that her career was everything she thought it would be and more. She went on to talk about the many doors it has opened for her, friends she has made, and places she has traveled because of occupational therapy.

The conversation then shifted to the topic of the Maryland Occupational Therapy Association (MOTA) and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). She stated that the biggest influence she had on our profession through MOTA and the AOTA was participating in changing the mandate of the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education to make the occupational therapy assistant degree a bachelor’s entry. Dr. Smith also offered her thoughts on how to make membership and service to state and national level associations a source of pride and commitment. She said that the biggest deterrents to joining such associations for many are the cost and accessibility. Dr. Smith noted that if memberships were more accessible and fees were not as high, more therapists would be aware of what is going on in the community and be able to benefit from the many resources that are provided. When she was a program director, Dr. Smith made it a requirement for her students to join the AOTA and encourage them to maintain their membership after college. Unfortunately, many of the students dropped their AOTA and MOTA membership after their education. She mentioned that part of the reason they dropped their membership was that the locations of events for MOTA were so centralized to Baltimore, and not everyone was able to travel many hours to attend meetings. She suggested that MOTA meetings and conferences rotate to different counties and areas so that occupational therapists from other parts of Maryland may feel more included and have better access. Dr. Smith also mentioned that a barrier for many was the fees to join AOTA, particularly for those in Maryland, since licensure fees are some of the highest in the country. She also introduced the idea that educators instill the benefits of joining both MOTA and AOTA. She stated that if membership was more affordable and accessible, more therapists would be aware of what is happening in the community and be able to benefit from the many resources that are provided.

Finally, Dr. Smith stated that it is important for occupational therapists to know from where the profession came and understand the tenets from which it was founded to move it forward. She specifically mentioned the importance of Towson students understanding occupational therapy theory, philosophy, and practice, because we are right down the road from where the profession started. She said that there is no one theory or frame of reference that she uses when treating patients. Rather, she pulls from a variety of theories and principles, and research. The interview ended with Dr. Smith stressing the importance of taking advantage of every fieldwork opportunity and an actively participating by asking lots of questions. Dr. Smith also emphasized that students remember to be purposeful rather than productive and focus on the patients and their goals.