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## Longevity: Celebrating 10 Years of OJOT Publication with Occupational Therapy Experts

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### Keywords

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### Credentials Display

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This issue of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) marks 10 years since our first publication. A typical letter from the editor on the 10-year anniversary of a journal would include all the accomplishments of the journal during that time. While we love to celebrate achievements, I will save that for the State of the Journal letter from the editor in January of 2023. In this anniversary issue, I have chosen to explore the concept of longevity and to celebrate some of the occupational therapy (OT) profession's longest living and most accomplished experts. Each of these participants is a role model for longevity in OT, and they are experts because they have acquired comprehensive and authoritative OT knowledge through their many years of experience.

Longevity, an extended time of service, has been an ongoing issue in the health professions and in the OT profession specifically. Factors such as being a female-dominated profession, job-related stressors, compassion fatigue, and challenges to professional identity, which are now compounded by the COVID pandemic, collectively contribute to compromised resilience, burnout, and decreased longevity in the health care professions (Ashbey et al., 2013; Edwards & Dirette, 2010; Heath et al., 2020). In addition to the toll on the professionals and the clients with whom they work, turnover of health care employees creates exorbitant training and replacement costs in the health care system (Adams et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2021).

Longevity and resilience in the profession of OT are fostered through increased knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings of the profession and an understanding of the evidence that supports occupation-focused interventions (Ashbey et al., 2013; Edwards & Dirette, 2010). Through extended service, occupational therapists who have been in the profession for many years bring historical perspectives, depths of experiences, and wisdom from which we can reflect and grow our knowledge base. With those thoughts in mind, I decided to discuss these issues with some of the most long-established, thoughtful occupational therapists I know from my community to record their words of wisdom and to understand what has driven them to persist with great determination through long careers in the profession.

On June 23rd, 2022, I had the opportunity to spend the evening with Dr. Ben Atchison, Ms. Sandra Edwards, Dr. Fred Sammons, Ms. Bobbie Cummings Smith, and Dr. Barb Rider (shown left to right in Figure 1). Collectively, they represent 299 years of service to the profession of OT with a range from 47 to 67 years of service. Each of these occupational therapists have made significant contributions to the profession with many awards, such as Fellows of OT, Outstanding Alumni, Faculty and Chair Emeriti, Award of Merit, and 100 Most Influential Occupational Therapists. Even though they have been officially retired from their primary OT jobs for many years, all of them have maintained active roles as therapists, educators, researchers, consultants, innovators, and philanthropists. They also have persisted to overcome obstacles, such as misogyny, racism, and ignorance about the OT profession, both in their work settings and in the public sphere. In addition to their contributions to the profession, each of these occupational therapists has made significant contributions to OJOT as sponsors, editors, cover artists, and advisory board members. We sat down and discussed their answers to questions about longevity in the OT profession (See Appendix).

### **Creative and Meaningful Opportunities**

When asked to reflect on the reasons they stayed in the profession for so many years, their answers focused on creativity, varied opportunities, and satisfaction with the value of OT. Ms. Cummings Smith stated that she appreciates the flexibility of the profession so much that she may never give up her OT license. Dr. Atchison said he has stayed because of "the many opportunities to be creative in developing unique programs that provided meaningful services to people across the life span." Dr. Rider stated,

“People valued what I did, and I could see the results with my patients.” In relation to her myriad professional activities and awards, Ms. Edwards stated that “these activities contributed to my satisfaction of curiosity, creativity, and competition.” They also discussed the value and satisfaction they felt in providing interventions that focused on the mental and the physical aspects of care.

### Figure 1

*Longevity Interview Participants*



*Note.* From left to right: Dr. Ben Atchison, Ms. Sandra Edwards, Dr. Fred Sammons, Ms. Bobbie Cummings Smith, and Dr. Barb Rider.

### Influence

Influence is the capacity to impact the character, development, or behavior of someone, and this influence is often thought to be driven by the leaders of a profession. While there are many great leaders in the profession of OT who can influence practice, when I asked these role models of longevity who most influenced their careers, their answers were more personal. Each of them separately discussed close relatives, parents, great aunts, and friends who were close to them and who had personally encouraged them. Others talked about their professors or their first supervisors. After discussing the influence of her friend and coworker, Dr. Rider added an exception and stated that she was inspired to expand her OT endeavors into the research arena after having personal interactions with Dr. Gail Fidler and Dr. Jean Ayers and after hearing speakers such as Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, Dr. Margaret Meade, and Dr. Anna Freud.

### Favorite Memories

Even though most of these experts spent much of their careers doing work beyond the clinic, all of them stated that their favorite memories were from their days providing clinical services. Ms. Edwards talked about the mother of a child with whom she was working who cried when she read a strength-based report that included the positive attributes of her child. Dr. Sammons discussed the thrill of seeing patients

use the gadgets he invented. Dr. Rider talked about the “aha moment” she had when she realized that the OT services she was providing were valued. Dr. Atchison discussed the many collaborative interactions he had with parents as co-therapists. One compelling memory was from Ms. Cummings Smith, who described her favorite memory as follows.

I was assigned as the therapist to treat one of the public officials of the city of Detroit. He asked the physician in charge of the Rehabilitation Department to assign him to another therapist as he did not want to be treated by a colored person. Fortunately, the physician in charge told him that I was his therapist and that if he refused to be treated by me, he would not be treated in this department. Case closed. He (the public official) decided to receive his treatment with us. After completion of the evaluation, the patient decided that I did “know how to treat patients,” so we were successful in completing his occupational therapy goals. He became one of my best advocates in the community and offered suggestions on becoming an active part of my neighborhood and profession.

### **OT is Who I am. It is My Whole Life**

When asked how their career in OT shaped their lives and vice versa, their answers were simple and profound. Dr. Atchison said that OT “created an awareness of the need to develop and sustain meaningful occupations and balance” in his life. Ms. Cummings Smith stated that OT “taught me how to balance life’s journey. How to grow.” Ms. Edwards said that OT “created an awareness of others, especially those living with disabilities.” She added that through her OT practice, she “learned persistence, acceptance, and humility.” Dr. Rider simply stated, “OT is who I am,” and Dr. Sammons added, “It has been my whole life!”

### **Trends in the OT Profession**

This group of OT experts has seen “many” changes over their years in the profession. They discussed the change from undergraduate to graduate training, the significant increase in the number of occupational therapists and OT university programs, the expansion of settings in which occupational therapists practice, and the increased productivity demands. Ms. Edwards pointed out that when she started practicing in 1965, there were only 8,000 occupational therapists compared to almost 130,000 now. They discussed the increased scholarship of OT and all agreed that they are pleased about the improved research and publications that have brought evidence, value, and respect for our services.

The topic of “bandwagons” that have been drawn through the OT profession over time resulted in a complicated discussion. The changes brought about by shifting trends were perceived as having both positive and negative effects. In their opinions, the alignment of OT with the medical model changed the profession in profound ways resulting in better reimbursement, value, and respect for our services, but also perhaps squelched some of the creativity in the profession. For example, they discussed the use of crafts and wood shops in OT, noting the value of these modalities for promoting vocational skills, creativity, and group cohesion, but also noting that other modalities of treatment may be more valued and respected by other professions and reflect the more current occupational pursuits of the people we serve.

In contrast, the group had brief and clear answers about what has stayed the same in the profession of OT over their years of service. Drs. Rider and Sammons both responded that occupational therapists are still trying to help people “do what they want to do.” Dr. Atchison stated that occupational therapists have consistently wanted “to make a difference in people's lives.” Ms. Edwards stated that we still “focus on function,” and Ms. Cummings Smith stated that we still “treat the whole person.” In summary, this

group thinks that occupational therapists have maintained the noble mission of impacting people's lives by improving their ability to function in the activities of their choice by treating the whole person.

### **Recommended Changes for OT**

The recommended changes in the profession of OT that were generated from these questions mostly focused on improving public relations and recognition. They recommended providing more education about OT to physicians who make referrals for OT services, to interdisciplinary co-workers, and to the public in general. They also recommended more promotion of research in the OT profession to improve the quality of care through the life cycle. In general, the group wanted to discourage the bureaucratic conflicts that happen within the profession and unite the members around a common goal: to promote the profession that they love.

### **Longevity**

On the topic of longevity itself, the group had many words of advice and wisdom. Ms. Sandra Edwards stated, "Longevity requires commitment" and that "emotional commitment makes the profession more meaningful." Ms. Cummings Smith added that occupational therapists should focus on growing "in every aspect of life." Drs. Atchison, Rider, and Sammons all talked about staying involved and continuing to influence the OT profession through connections to a university and students who are starting out in the profession.

### **OT will get into Your Soul**

When I asked each of these experts in OT if they had any advice or words of wisdom for occupational therapists who are new to the profession, their responses had common themes. Ms. Cummings Smith and Dr. Sammons advised new therapists to explore various jobs and specialties until they find a good match and then "study to become the best" in that area. Both Ms. Edwards and Dr. Atchison recommended that new occupational therapists collaborate with and consider interdisciplinary points of view. Dr. Atchison and Dr. Rider both said that occupational therapists should always remember that they became occupational therapists to serve their patients. Dr. Rider ended with these simple, profound words, "OT will get into your soul. Love it. Help it grow."

### **Conclusion**

Longevity in the profession of OT is crucial for developing experts who can provide their insights and wisdom to guide the continued growth of the profession. These experts have described how longevity is fostered through personal connections and a personal desire for meaningful contributions to the profession. Resiliency in occupational therapists also can be fostered through positive, supportive relationships in educational and work environments (Kreitzer & Klatt, 2017; Sullivan & Germain, 2020). The insight from these interviews not only celebrates 299 years of OT service but also demonstrates the heart and soul of the profession through lives devoted to compassionate care for others. Their lives and the myriad personal connections that they have made have had a significant impact on the profession.

I am fortunate to know each of these occupational therapists, and I am fortunate to be able to celebrate 10 years of working with the fabulous people who make up the OJOT team. Most of the members of the OJOT team have been working on the journal for the entirety of these 10 years. They are dedicated and hard-working and have a desire to make meaningful contributions to the profession we love and to improve the lives of the people we serve.

In this issue, we are continuing the conversation on some of the topics discussed by this panel of experts. This issue includes articles in the categories of applied research, guidelines for practice, topics in education, and opinions in the profession related to antiracism as discussed by Ms. Cummings Smith. We

also are publishing applied research and educational resources on the topic of the use of art in occupational therapy, as discussed by the entire panel. And leadership, as demonstrated by each of these experts, is the topic of articles in applied research and education.

Thank you to these expert occupational therapists for spending some time with me discussing their experiences, and thank you to each of you for your continued support of OJOT. We look forward to the next 10 years!

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**Appendix**  
**Longevity in Occupational Therapy**

1. In what year did you become an OT?
2. How many years did you work in clinical practice or teach OT?
3. What made you stay in the profession?
4. Who or what most influenced you during your career?
5. Can you share a favorite memory from your career as an OT?
6. How has your career in OT shaped your life or vice versa?
7. What are some of the changes you have seen in the profession?
8. What is something about the profession that you think has remained the same?
9. What advice or words of wisdom do you have for therapists who are just starting out in the profession?
10. If you could change something about the profession of OT, what would it be?
11. Is there anything you would like to add about longevity in occupational therapy that I have not asked?