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Moyers turns childhood dream into national goals

Many people decide to dedicate their lives to health care because they have a desire to help others. Some make the decision because they saw a loved one struggle with an ailment or disease.

Penelope Moyers, Ed.D., is one of the latter. She remembers wanting to study occupational therapy as a child after watching her grandmother battle tuberculosis, which in part meant that her grandmother had to go to a sanitarium and be isolated from the rest of the world. She wasn't allowed visitors, and the only contact she had with her family was through letters or an occasional talk on the phone.

"Her letters were very sad," Moyers says. "She was very depressed, and we did not think she was going to make it."

But after some time the letters became more upbeat. She began to talk at length about the occupational therapy she was receiving and being able to live her life in a way that made her happy.

"I decided if occupational therapy could make my grandmother happy, that was what I wanted to do," Moyers says.

On the national stage

Occupational therapy is a vital health-care service; its practitioners help to restore and sustain the highest quality of productive life to persons at risk for or recovering from illnesses or injuries, or coping with developmental disabilities or changes resulting from the aging process.

There is no question that Moyers has dedicated her life to learning, teaching and promoting occupational therapy. And now she will move onto a national stage for the next three years as president of the 35,000-member American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). Her presidency officially began at the AOTA's 87th annual Conference and Expo earlier this month in St. Louis, Mo.

"It's certainly an honor to be given this opportunity by AOTA's



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members to serve the association and the profession,” says Moyers, who was elected president by the association’s members in spring 2006.

Moyers says AOTA will undertake two major projects among many missions during her tenure. One of those is collaboration with the American Association of Retired Persons and the National Homebuilders Association to better articulate and understand the housing needs of the elderly population.

“Occupational therapists can advise as to what kind of needs are to be addressed in the environment so people can age in place and remain as safe and independent as possible,” Moyers says.

The other project, involving the military, will target the needs of aging veterans and wounded servicemen. Moyers recently visited the Center for the Intrepid in San Antonio and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and discovered a growing need for rehabilitation for those who have severe eye injuries, head injuries and/or suffered an injury that resulted in the loss of a limb.

“The kind of injuries they’re getting in Iraq are quite different than other wars, and their needs are rather acute for intensive physical and mental health rehabilitation,” Moyers says.

There also is a real concern about aging veterans, Moyers says. “The VA hospitals are going to be flooded in the coming years. We really have to increase our capacity for graduating occupational therapists to meet their needs.”

UAB positioned to lead

Moyers believes UAB is positioned to play a key part in helping to meet some of these demands.

“I actually think UAB can play a real leadership role,” she says. “We have the only low-vision graduate-certificate program for occupational therapists. A majority of elderly persons have macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy. UAB’s occupational therapy faculty are internationally known leaders in low-vision rehabilitation. AOTA looks to them for guidance in better preparing occupational therapists.”

Moyers also hopes the AOTA can increase its membership during her tenure and recruit more occupational therapists. She says the profession is facing a shortage of occupational therapists and soon will be seeing a shortage in faculty at the collegiate level due to retirement. Moyers says the AOTA is committed to putting a greater effort into

marketing and recruiting on both fronts.

“We have not been graduating enough people nationally,” Moyers says. “There is a strong societal need for mental and physical health rehabilitation, and we need to continue to grow so we can meet our mission of helping people overcome or adapt to circumstances that limit their participation in every day life.”

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