

Being the Change: Black Physical Therapy Leaders in Their Own Words

Stories about the lives of the physical therapy profession's leaders can be inspiring, but there's nothing quite like hearing from the leaders themselves. That's why, some 40 years ago, APTA began collecting oral histories of some of its most outstanding members.

These interviews, conducted by fellow PTs, cover everything from the subject's childhood to their personal victories and thoughts about the future of physical therapy.

In celebration of Black History Month, here are excerpts from the oral histories of four Black physical therapy leaders whose words, recorded in the mid to late 1990s, still resonate today.

Roberta Cottman, PT, MEd (birth year unavailable)



Roberta Cottman grew up in North Carolina in the 1930s and 40s, receiving her physical therapy degree from New York University. According to Cottman, she would've preferred to attend a program in her home state, but at that time Black women weren't allowed to attend any North Carolina medical schools.

Cottman went on to become the first female student in the department of anatomy at Wayne State University, in Detroit, Michigan, where she soon found herself involved in helping out the physical therapy department. Eventually she became a tenured professor at Wayne State and helped to develop innovative programs within the school. An APTA member since 1947, Cottman was a charter member of APTA's Committee on Minority Affairs, and received the Lucy Blair Service Award in 1982.

Date of interview: June 26, 1995

On the importance of college in her family:

"My family, one brother, one sister, my mother and father, knew and told us over and over again that college was a natural. Even though we had no money, college was a natural, and so I know going through my segregated high school experience, I know that college for all of us would be an opportunity."

On her childhood in North Carolina:

"It was still segregated, but within the segregated group, there's warmth and acknowledgement and role models. You do not come out bitter. You still love life, there's no hatred, and the painful experiences that you have are minimized because of your supportive community."

On helping Wayne State University enrich its PT program:

"I became tenured and developed interdisciplinary programs throughout the university, and we had some firsts. We were the first to actually put research, a full semester of research, into the curriculum — Eugene Michels [PT, PhD, FAPTA] came and helped us do it."

On involvement in minority affairs issues at APTA:

"I was a charter member of the first committee for [APTA], the Committee on Minority Affairs in which we did programming. We did a lot of looking at clinical performance from the affective domain and how interracial experiences can impact — that if the environment by which a student who is different, whether that student is disabled, or by race or ethnicity, that if that cultural environment is not present, that sensitivity, it is very difficult

for the student to learn. And so we were able to say that ... as you're looking at your patients, you should be culturally sensitive."

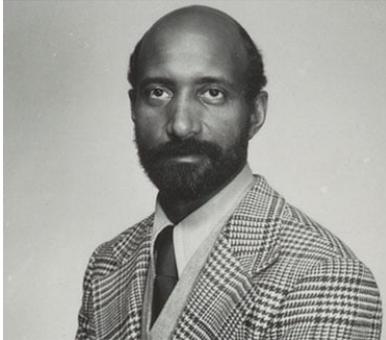
On the PT's ability to work through the continuum of care:

"We need to look at developing this ambulatory model, these models of ambulatory care, and through the continuum, into the home or whatever extended care facility, nursing home, hospice. I don't know any other professional that can go from prevention through the continuum of care than the physical therapist."

On APTA's responsibility to look beyond the medical model:

"The American Physical Therapy Association now must begin to look at individuals and the issues of health which surround our citizens — not wait until they become ill, which is the medical model. We must begin to look at the health model."

Robert L. Babbs Jr, PT, MPA, b. 1934



Robert Babbs graduated from Northwestern University, in Chicago, in 1957, and went on to establish himself as a widely respected leader both nationally and in Illinois, where he served as treasurer and then president of APTA Illinois. At the national level, Babbs was a president of the Section on Administration (now Health Policy & Administration Section), chair of the APTA Nominating Committee, trustee of the Foundation for Physical Therapy, and a charter member of the American Academy of Physical Therapy. He received the APTA Lucy Blair Service award in 1986.

Babbs dedicated his career to mentoring and supporting up-and-coming physical therapists, and was instrumental in building physical therapist services at the University of Chicago. He joined APTA in 1956.

Date of interview: June 6, 1994

On imagining the future of acute care physical therapy

"I'm concerned with physical therapy as it's currently practiced in the acute setting. I don't see that hands-on physical therapy will be nearly the same, in terms of intensity, in the acute settings as it has been. I can see that the physical therapist's role will be one of triage, screening, designing particular programs that will be carried out by a person with the appropriate level of qualifications — they may be someone that falls under the umbrella of physical therapy, or it may be some other discipline. The PTs will carry larger caseloads, and they will be very active in the discharge planning and placement process. My guess would be that the more hands-on would be occurring at the subacute levels."

On being an APTA chapter president:

"The most difficult job [within APTA] that I can imagine anyone ever taking on is the chapter presidency. That is, in my opinion, even more difficult than being chairman of a section, which is nationwide, or even probably being on the board of directors, because that is not something that goes on every day. But the chapter president's job is 365 days a year, and there's always something going on."

On advice to new PTs:

"Be dependent on your hands and your mind and what you can do with those, as opposed to dependent on machines. That's not to say that machines don't have an appropriate place in what we do, but you can take your mind and your hands wherever you go."

On professional turf battles:

"I think we should not be frightened of people that infringe on physical therapy, nor should we be frightened when we infringe. I think we should expect that things are going to be fluid, and that responsibilities will be overlapping and shifting, as the changes come down."

Mary McKinney Edmonds, PT, DSc, PhD, FAPTA, 1932 - 2017



Mary McKinney Edmonds founded Cleveland State University's physical therapy program, was dean of Bowling Green State University's College of Health and Community Services, and was vice provost at Stanford University, as well as a professor at Stanford Medical School. During her career she mentored many PTs, including Lynda Woodruff, PT, PhD.

Edmonds helped lead the fight for the autonomy of accreditation of physical therapy education programs from the American Medical Association, becoming a member of the APTA Commission on Accreditation (precursor to the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education). In 1995, she became the first African American to become a Catherine Worthingham Fellow of APTA.

Date of interview: June 6, 1998

On the "Jim Crow train" that she and other black college students rode from northern states to HBCUs in the South:

The blacks had to go into these bad train cars that were right next to — at that time they fired up with coal, and the cinders would blow into the first car and that's where they put us. And so, going to Atlanta — that's where the culture shock was. But when you talk about the resiliency of Blacks — students coming on that train from Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, all met there. And we were all in these trains together, so developed our own little groups of friends ... coming home at Christmas we would sing the whole way up, and it was, you know, we were in a bad system, but there were always ways you could make it at least palatable.

On the challenges of clinical affiliations for black PT students in the 1950s:

"When we wanted to go on our affiliations, there were some places where we could work in the clinics, but we couldn't live in the dorm. I won't mention them. So we had to choose places in the north."

On the importance of nurturing PTs from minority populations:

"There weren't [many minority PTs], but we would get together at conferences and deal with a whole set of issues — we had to try to mentor the new minority students and therapists. Because it wasn't easy all the time. It's not always easy even today, I think. People think it's gone, but it isn't."

On the intrinsic rewards of being a PT:

"In physical therapy the intrinsic rewards are so much better, to see that person come in on a stretcher and walk out the door. I mean, that's when you sit down and cry. Those are intrinsic rewards."

On creating pathways for more PTs from minority populations:

"We need to get down in the elementary schools to try to get more minority physical therapists. We need not just Black ... How you do that is to get them motivated really early and keep them from being shuffled into vocational programs and programs that are not going to get them there, and also to get into the community colleges and get them on the proper tracks."

On the importance of recognizing a patient's culture:

"You have to talk to them. You have to understand where they're coming from. You have to understand how they're perceiving their health — for example, what quick compliance with medical regimens means to them, what food means to them."

On the gifts of being a PT:

"Physical therapy gave me an outlook on life that I don't think I could have gotten any other way."

Harold "Rick" Hawkins, PT, b. 1942

Rick Hawkins graduated from the physical therapy program at the University of Pennsylvania in 1967, and after a few years of working in hospitals found his niche in private practice, where he remained until retirement. Hawkins was devoted to connecting minority populations to the physical therapy profession, serving as chair on APTA's Advisory Panel on Minority Affairs and helping to write an APTA resource titled "Plan to Foster Minority Representation in Physical Therapy" with Don Jackson, PT, MS, in 1992. He received the APTA Diversity Award in 2000.

Outside APTA, Hawkins was active in the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (now World Physiotherapy) serving on WCPT's organizing committee as well as being chair of publicity and public relations. Hawkins was also active in his community, hosting a popular call-in radio show focused on health.

Date of interview: Feb. 3, 1994

On weathering the first year of PT school:

"In school, it took me about three quarters of the first semester to really put things together. I think when you first start off in school, you're just taking courses, and you try to do the best you can in those courses. And probably, just before the end of the first semester in December was when I finally started to put things together — 'Oh, this — I'm learning physical agents, I'm learning therapeutic exercise. Now I see where it fits in with the physiology, the neurophysiology, the pathology,' the courses that were being taken. It seemed to all fit in."

On meeting physical therapy pioneer Leon Anderson:

"We took a tour of Case Western Reserve University Hospital system and I — having had little knowledge, having been out of school for ... about eight, nine months at the time — I was amazed at how neat this physical therapy department was. It was set up with senior therapists and staff therapists and assistant directors and so forth.

Really, I thought, a well-organized department. And lo and behold, the director was Mr. Leon Anderson. And I had the opportunity to meet him. That really impressed me. He was a director, and an African-American as director of that department. And it was just beautifully run and set up. I was really impressed by that, and he's been a mentor ever since."

On the nature of physical therapists:

"Physical therapists look for challenges. Our job is challenging."

On PTAs:

"I believe in the advent of physical therapist assistants. I think that was a milestone in the development of our profession."

On the challenges to the profession in 1994:

"Right now, in 1994, I think one of the [physical therapy profession's challenges] is, number one, the survival of the practice of physical therapy as we know it. I believe we have to impress upon the individuals involved in health care change ... that physical therapy is a needed, and much-needed, profession."

On the role of his parents in his education:

"[My father] gave up school. He probably graduated from high school, but because of finances, he went to work right out of high school. So he never went to college, but he was always an avid reader and very strong on education. I have both my parents to thank for making me study and get good grades. I think that enabled me to focus, and I think it pays off now."

On his choice to become a PT:

"I've never regretted one single day getting up in the morning and doing my job. I love it. And probably always will."