

Original Date of Publishing: *PT News*, Monday, February 18, 2019



Vision, Courage, Compassion: Black Physical Therapists Who Transformed the Profession

For this Black History Month, we dug into APTA's Archive to take a look back at some truly groundbreaking African American physical therapists who achieved greatness despite obstacles, transforming the profession along the way. Now deceased, they offer us all examples to strive for as individuals and as a profession, urging us to keep "moving forward" and challenge the status quo.

Lynda D. Woodruff, PT, PhD, was a trailblazer since 1962 when, at age 13, she was 1 of 2 African American students to desegregate E. C. Glass High School in Lynchburg, Virginia—an experience that greatly influenced her approach to life: "I could never trust anyone. I ceased asking by the time I was 14 for help, because if you asked for it, and they gave you something, 9 times out of 10 it would be the wrong information, or the wrong feedback. And that was more detrimental than having no feedback."

After receiving her master of physical therapy degree from Case Western Reserve University, Woodruff went on to become the first African American to join the physical therapy department at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She was a founding director of the department of physical therapy at North Georgia State College and established the first DPT program at Alabama State University. She joined the faculty of Georgia State University in 1978, where she received her PhD. Woodruff was appointed to the Georgia State Board of Physical Therapy and served for 10 years. As an APTA member, Woodruff was a strong advocate for diversity and inclusion, helping to establish APTA's Advisory Council on Minority Affairs, as well as for true mentorship, especially for women and minorities.

Woodruff was a founding member of the Section on Clinical Electrophysiology, at a time when PTs who conducted electromyography testing were being charged with practicing medicine without a license. She received numerous awards for her leadership, including the Lucy Blair Service Award. In recognition of her many achievements, the Georgia Senate declared February 24, 2006, as Dr Lynda D. Woodruff Appreciation Day.

One of Woodruff's mentors, **Mary McKinney Edmonds, PT, PhD, FAPTA**, had originally intended to be a physician. But just a few weeks from her 1953 graduation from Spelman University, Edmonds attended a

lecture by physical therapist Wilmotine Jackson. "[Jackson] spoke about raging polio epidemics, and I just got totally excited," Edmonds said in an oral history recorded for APTA. She earned her physical therapy certificate from the University of Wisconsin. Before the phrase "social determinants of health" was popularized, she noticed how black and white women with diabetes who came to rehab would have above-the-knee amputations vs toe amputations, leading her to complete graduate degrees in sociology at Case Western Reserve University. During her postdoctoral fellowship at University of Michigan, Edmonds examined how social class affected people's experiences with health and health care.

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. She was a prolific author and presenter on issues related to cultural competency throughout her career. As a member of the APTA Commission on Accreditation (precursor to the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education), Edmonds helped lead the fight for autonomy from the American Medical Association. Edmonds was the first African American PT to become a Catherine Worthingham Fellow of the American Physical Therapy Association.

Edmonds was hired for her first physical therapy position by Leon Anderson Jr, PT, who was then chief physical therapist at Highland View Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. Anderson, who completed his degree in physical education at Johnson C. Smith University, didn't know much about the profession before he attended physical therapy school at Boston University, he just knew he "didn't want to preach or teach"—prominent professions for black Americans at the time. Ironically, after getting his master's degree in education, Anderson did spend several years as an assistant professor at Case Western Reserve University. After 20 years as director of physical therapy at University Hospitals of Cleveland, Anderson left to start a private practice with 6 colleagues. The first African American member of APTA's board of directors, Anderson held more than 15 elected positions at APTA throughout his career and chaired the Advisory Council on Minority Affairs.

Thelma Brown Pendleton, PT, and Vilma Evans, PT, EdD, were among the first black physical therapists in the United States. Pendleton originally was a nurse; although she aspired to be a PT, black students were not allowed to enroll in physical therapy programs at the time. In the mid-1940s she was finally able to enroll at Northwestern University and get her PT certificate, becoming the fifth African American PT. She founded and headed the physical therapy program at Provident Hospital and later was chief physical therapist at La Rabida Children's Hospital and Research Center. Pendleton also supervised clinical instructor education programs at Northwestern University for many years, and was an active member of the Illinois Physical Therapy Association.

Evans was born in New York City, attended school in Jamaica, and returned to New York for high school. Like Brown Pendleton, Evans had a hard time applying to PT school due to her race. She earned a degree in zoology from Hunter College, a physical therapy certificate from University of Pennsylvania in 1951, a master's in physical therapy in 1956 from New York University, and later a doctorate in education. Evans was director of physical therapy at St Elizabeth Hospital in Danville, Illinois, for 26 years. A lifetime APTA member, she received the Illinois Chapter's Outstanding Service in Physical Therapy Award in 1976 and APTA's Lucy Blair Service Award in 1985, and was a member of the APTA sections for education, geriatrics, and health policy and administration. Early on, Evans decided she "wanted to be part of the 'inner workings' [of APTA] because that's that way I—or anyone else—could make changes. Members

can't all sit on the outside and expect someone else to carry on. If you want change in your organization, you have to get involved."

Arnold Bell, PT, PhD, ATC, was one of the first African American ABPTS-certified clinical specialists in sports physical therapy. Born in the Bronx, he earned his bachelor's degree from Springfield College, a physical therapy certificate from New York University, and a master's degree in exercise science at Columbia University, and a PhD at Florida State University. He established Florida A & M University's physical therapy program, teaching there for over 30 years. Bell was an athletic trainer at the 1984 and 1996 Olympic Games, and was inducted into the Springfield College Olympic Alumni Hall of Fame and the Florida A & M Sports Hall of Fame. A longtime APTA member, Bell was a member of the Advisory Committee on Minority Affairs.

Another PT with an Olympic connection was **Theodore "Ted" Corbitt, PT, MPT**, Army veteran, professor, and clinician for 44 years at the International Center for the Disabled in New York City. After returning from World War II, Corbitt earned an MA in physical therapy from New York University (NYU)—and 2 years later became the first African American Olympic marathon runner to represent the United States. He is known as the "father of American distance running." A professor at Columbia University for 20 years, he was one of the first PTs to teach connective tissue massage, proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation, progressive resistance exercise, and applied kinesiology. Always setting records, Corbitt walked 303 miles in a single 6-day race—at age 82. Corbitt was active in the New York Chapter of APTA. [Read more about this American pioneer.](#)

Another NYU graduate, **Roberta F. Cottman, PT, MEd**, from Greensboro, North Carolina, received her bachelor's degree from Bennett College in 1945. According to her oral history, "as a young black woman" it was not possible for her to attend North Carolina medical schools. So she went to PT school. For one of her clinicals in a New York state-owned rehab facility, she was not allowed to stay in the dormitory with the white students and had to stay in a private home. She found that, once she entered the field, "nobody cared then what color you were or where you came from. As long as you knew your skills and were able to translate that...into clinical practice." Later, as director of the physical therapy department at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, she hired a PT named Jane S. Mathews-Gentry, PT, MS—who later became APTA president.

Cottman received a scholarship from APTA to pursue her doctorate and was the first female student in the department of anatomy at Wayne State University in Michigan. However, the physical therapy department asked her to assist them as they navigated a crisis, and she never finished her dissertation. Still, she became a tenured professor there.

A charter member of APTA's Committee on Minority Affairs, Cottman also served on the Congressional Black Caucus' Health Braintrust, was a consultant to members of the US Congress, and attended the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. She observed that health care in the United States is not a human right but "is still based on privilege and the ability to pay. We must begin to look at individuals and the issues of health which surround our citizens, not wait until they become ill."

This article is reprinted with permission of the American Physical Therapy Association. © 2019 American Physical Therapy Association. All rights reserved.