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HTR Profile: Kirk Hines, HTR

Interviewed by: Debra Edwards, HTR

photo credits: Mary Newton/A.G. Rhodes

■ Tell us about your background and education.

I grew up in a small town south of Atlanta, called Griffin. We lived out in the country, so I spent quite a bit of time outdoors and in the forest. It was there that I cultivated a great love for nature, the garden, trees and then, later, the art form of bonsai. I attended college at Berry, in Rome, GA, where my love for horticulture led me to major in that field. During the course of majoring in Horticulture I was introduced to the



Kirk Hines, HTR and elder discussing blooming plants in A.G. Rhodes- Atlanta Horticultural Therapy Greenhouse

field of Horticultural Therapy. My Hort 101 instructor, John Paul Breault, HTR, and my major professor, Dr. Candice Shoemaker, worked with Berry to tailor my curriculum. This allowed my horticulture major to have a concentration in horticultural therapy. During my final semester, I began my internship with John Paul's HT program at Northwest Georgia Regional Hospital.

■ Have you always worked in the field of horticultural therapy?

Yes. Upon completing my degree in Horticulture (horticultural therapy concentration) and year-long internship I moved to Atlanta to begin my career.

■ How did you get your start in horticultural therapy?

The job in horticultural therapy that brought me to Atlanta was working with adolescents in a psychiatric unit at Hillside Hospital. After a brief stint there, I was asked to interview for a position at Wesley Woods Geriatric Hospital of Emory, a university teaching hospital. I founded its horticultural therapy program and built it



Co-treatment session with HT, OT and PT at A.G. Rhodes- Wesley Woods

from grants and private donations to include horticultural therapy greenhouses and gardens specifically designed for acute care geriatric patients. I led this program for 21 years until program changes and budget cuts closed the Rehabilitation Services department in 2013.

■ When did you become a horticultural therapist?

I became a registered horticultural therapist upon receiving my credentials from AHTA in 1993.

■ How did you combine your interests within the horticultural therapy profession?

I try to do this on a daily basis. It's my belief that keeping horticulture interesting to me allows me to keep it interesting and engaging to those I serve. One of the great wonders of horticulture, gardening and the natural world is that there is always something new to learn and discover. My love for bonsai guided me toward the profession of horticultural therapy. I try to incorporate it as often as possible.

■ What has been your experience in developing a career in horticultural therapy?

It has ultimately been fulfilling. I had a very straightforward and charmed professional course moving from school to internship to job. I have throughout the years participated in multiple research projects, student Master's thesis, served on defense committees and published journal articles. Still, the old phrase, "It's been a hard row to hoe" feels appropriate. To this day horticultural therapy isn't commonly known or understood in the medical community. It feels like the majority of my career has required constant education, explanation and justification. Satisfaction comes from seeing the horticultural therapy programming, gardens and greenhouses make a positive impact on patients, family members and staff.

■ Can you describe the steps you took and the resources you utilized throughout your career to develop HT programming?

The most important resources I've utilized are my degree in horticulture and my internship. Without them I would have never been equipped as a horticultural therapist. Horticulture is our primary modality, so without an expertise in it, I would not be able to provide horticultural therapy with any level of knowledge or skill. Dr. Candice Shoemaker was a warm but demanding professor and truly ensured that we received a well-rounded education in horticulture. During my internship, both she and John Paul Breault, HTR, drove home the necessity of being independent, self-reliant and creative (with horticultural therapy and budget). John Paul said on multiple occasions



Kirk Hines, HTR and elder watering in A.G. Rhodes- Atlanta Horticultural Therapy Greenhouse

that in all likelihood I would be the only horticultural therapist at any program or facility. I needed to be confident and skilled to operate in that capacity. I continue to utilize education and internship experience as a resource to this day.

When I started my programs, first at Wesley Woods Hospital and then at A.G. Rhodes, I took steps to understand the dynamics of the facilities so that the horticultural therapy program would be a good fit for patients, staff and family members. Horticultural therapy programs are different from many other services offered in healthcare because it dovetails with departments other than therapy or medicine. In most cases a horticultural therapy program has to interact with and involve administration, a foundation (fundraising), marketing, communications, volunteer services, facilities/maintenance and many others.

■ **How did horticultural therapy develop at your facility and what is the present status of this program?**

In 2013, major program changes and budget cuts eliminated the Rehabilitation Services department at Wesley Woods Hospital. I, along with the music therapist and others, was laid off. Losing the 21-year-old program that I founded, the gardens I planted and the greenhouses that I built was one of the most difficult experiences that I have ever faced. The music therapist and I were almost immediately recruited to A.G. Rhodes Health & Rehab, a skilled nursing and sub-acute rehab organization with three locations. A.G. Rhodes is 115 years old and one of Atlanta's oldest non-profits. Fortunately, the Foundation of Wesley Woods donated my greenhouses, plants and equipment to A.G. Rhodes to help me jumpstart the new program.

As I prepared to dismantle and relocate two glass greenhouses, I began by holding meetings with administration and staff to design how the new horticultural therapy program would fit. I would have to provide horticultural therapy for three facilities across the Atlanta metro area for approximately 400 geriatric residents in skilled nursing and sub-acute rehabilitation. I also started providing horticultural therapy sessions and surveying the grounds to get a grasp on the needs of my clients.

Since moving the greenhouses, the horticultural therapy program has been integrated well into the services offered by A.G. Rhodes. The organization promotes the horticultural therapy program enthusiastically and that has led to quite a few articles, radio and television appearances. I just constructed a third greenhouse so that we have one at each building. The grounds have improved dramatically and I continue to install therapeutic gardens at each building as we receive grants.

■ **Do you have some favorite plants and activities you use in your horticultural therapy programs?**

I think my favorite plant is the one that we're working with at the time. Many may think that you need to work with heirloom plants or plants recognized from childhood when working with older adults, especially those with dementia. I find that the elders I serve love to work with anything interesting and unusual. Bonsai, carnivorous plants, showy tropicals and, of course, edibles are favorites. As I work with individuals or groups, we utilize space at the bedside, common areas, horticultural therapy gardens and our greenhouses. I try to grow a great variety of plants in our greenhouses so that I have resources to pull from at any given time based upon the needs and preferences of the elders.

■ **Do you accept horticultural therapy Interns? How does your internship work at your facility?**

Not at this time. I feel that I am still in the building phase and spread between three buildings across the city. Hopefully I'll be able to offer an internship in the future.

■ **Do you have personal perspectives to share with present or future horticultural therapists? Anything else you'd like to add?**

Gain the very best education in horticultural therapy possible. Having a strong grasp of our modality gives us the confidence and authority to present ourselves in the most professional manner possible to the rest of the medical community. Over the years I have been called "Nature Boy", "The Plant Guy", "The Gardener" and "Mr. Green Jeans" just to name a few. All met with good humor and used as an opportunity to educate. Most have never heard of horticultural therapy and feel that providing services such as ours is done by enthusiastic gardeners or volunteers "playing in the dirt". Equipping ourselves with a strong background in HT and clinical skills allows us to present ourselves as fellow clinicians providing a skilled, necessary service in the healthcare arena. 🌱

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 ▶ **The Portland Memory Garden** *continued from page 5*

Thanks, Grace. A garden is indeed "the first sign of commitment to a community," so let's all keep "digging in together" to make other horticultural therapy collaborations around the country and the world as rich and inspiring as the Portland Memory Garden. 🌱