



ESPO Members Reflect on Their Careers in Aging

By Elizabeth Hahn Rickenbach, PhD, Natalie Leland, PhD, and Glenise McKenzie, PhD

Each spring during Careers in Aging Week, campuses and communities around the world hold events to bring awareness to the various career options for students who want to help meet the needs of our aging population. In this installment of ESPO News, two members reflect on their careers in aging and offer some advice to those who may be at the beginning of their career paths.

Glenise McKenzie, PhD, RN, MN

Glenise is currently an assistant professor of nursing at Oregon Health & Science University. She entered the nursing field as a direct care worker. As a young nurse, Glenise had a nurse mentor who readily listened to her questions and inspired her to explore what makes people “well and not-well.” Spurred by this experience, Glenise secured her baccalaureate in nursing from Washington State University.

In this field, she enjoyed the direct involvement with patients and families, secure employment opportunities, and numerous research options. She was intrigued by the psychiatric needs of older adults in acute care and helped to open the first geriatric psychiatry hospital unit in Seattle, WA. After 20 years working as an RN, she decided to pursue her master’s and PhD in nursing. Funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Glenise’s PhD work focused on the health care work force and the needs of older adults with dementia.

In her current role, she is able to combine both her psychiatric and occupational expertise working with nursing students in a simulation lab and helping the students develop the communication skills they will need to work with persons with dementia and those that provide their care. We asked Glenise how she would advise her 16-year-old self about her career path.

“I am very happy with my career,” she said, noting that she would have advised her younger self to stay on the nursing career trajectory. She added that throughout her career she was able to focus on issues that really interested her and, at the same time, contribute to the science of health care. In Glenise’s case, the gerontological nursing path offered intellectual challenges, meaningful experiences, and multiple opportunities for self-development.

Natalie Leland, PhD, OTR/L, BCG

Natalie’s first job was working as an occupational therapist in a skilled nursing facility with older adults. After working for several years in this setting, she began a graduate program in gerontology. When discussing the transition back to school, Natalie said, “Throughout graduate school I maintained my clinical connection to stay current in practice and learn from my clients.”

She said she enjoyed the interactions with the patients, noting that they provided her with the real world perspective for the concepts she learned in school related to aging, healthcare, and policy. When talking about her current research interests, Natalie said, “My practice has been the main motivator for the research questions I have explored and continue to work on.”

After graduation and the completion of a post-doctoral fellowship, Natalie now works as assistant professor at the University of Southern California. As a faculty member, she continues to develop her own research agenda focusing on rehabilitation quality in skilled nursing facilities. She said she is now hoping to make an impact on her patient’s lives in a different way.



We asked Natalie what advice she had to offer students who are still finding their career path in aging. She said, "When I look back at my professional path, from my first clinical job after occupational therapy school to my current job as a junior faculty on the tenure-track, I realize there were many twists and turns along the way." She said she would not have predicted living in California when she was a student, and she encourages "all ESPO members to stay focused on where you want your career to take you. Identify the steps you need to take to achieve that professional goal and get involved in your profession. Do not get frustrated if that initial path you plan does not pan out. Take the time to readjust your approach and keep working towards those goals."

She credits her involvement in GSA, ESPO, and other state and national organizations as helpful in making the connections she needed to grow professionally and learn about potential job opportunities. Natalie said that the people she met through professional service have served as mentors in a variety of ways as she has navigated the path to her first faculty position.

Careers in Aging Week 2012

Both Glenise and Natalie's careers in aging offer some insight into the diverse pathways that can lead to careers in research or in teaching roles at colleges and universities. For more information on other types of careers in aging or events taking place in your community for this year's Careers in Aging Week (April 1 through 7), visit www.careersinaging.com.

Special thanks are given to Newsletter Task Force member Allison Lindauer for her participation in the writing of this article and to Dr. Natalie Leland and Dr. Glenise McKenzie.