

Interview with Lissa Abrams regarding her mother Rosalie Silber Abrams (June 2, 1916—February 27, 2009) Senator Abrams was the sponsor of the Maryland Practice Act, SB 441



Lissa Abrams is an occupational therapist and former Deputy Director, of the Maryland State Mental Health Administration(MHA) of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH). Prior to her administrative work, Lissa worked at Springfield Hospital Center and was one of the first occupational therapist to work in community mental health at the Way Station in Frederick County. As a deputy director within MHA, Lissa was instrumental in maintaining reimbursement codes for occupational therapy in public mental health. We met to discuss her mother, State Senator Rosalie Silber Abrams, the sponsor to the Maryland Occupational Therapy Practice Act, SB441. <http://dhmh.maryland.gov/botp/docs/comar/1-20.pdf>

Background:

Senator Abrams originally wanted to be a doctor, however according to Lissa “her father would not allow her to go to medical school”. After working for a short time as a legal secretary, Senator Rosalie Abrams decided that she would prefer the occupation of nurse. She enrolled at the Sinai Hospital School of Nursing, graduating in 1938. Senator Abrams soon was head nurse on the men’s ward transferred to the operating room. She left Sinai to become a school nurse (Patterson Park High School), a public health nurse for Baltimore’s Eastern Health District, and joined the United States Navy Nurses Corps , serving as an Ensign during World War II Senator Abrams developed a broad array of nursing and people skills including a broad knowledge of the delivery of healthcare services that would be useful in her government career. She also worked for a short period of time at Sheppard Pratt and “while not working with OT’s probably saw the impact they had on patient care”.

She was a member of the [Maryland House of Delegates](#) and [Maryland State Senate](#). She was the first female and [Jewish](#) majority leader of the state Senate.¹

Senator Abrams was awarded a First Citizen Award by the Maryland State Senate. Rosalie was a strong social activist throughout her life, marching for women's equal rights, protesting the Vietnam War, and working to legalize abortion.

In her nursing career Senator Abrams did not work directly with occupational therapists but saw them as a sister profession who should be paid for the work that they did and have comparable levels of autonomy in delivering patient care. Lissa Abrams indicated that her mother saw this as a natural outgrowth of her work with nursing professionals who were undervalued and were not seen as a group that could improve the healthcare system. OTs like nurses were predominately women who worked under physicians' orders. "My mother always said that there was a better way to provide health care than just in a strictly medical model". Note that in the bill she introduced "OTs did not have to work under a physician's orders".

The OT bills

In 1978 SB 538 was introduced to license OT, passed and was vetoed

In 1979, SB 441 was enacted.

1983 introduced legislation SB 189 regarding renewal fees for OT and PT assistants enacted.

When asked why did her mother sponsor the OT Practice Act, Lissa indicated that her mother introduced the legislation because of her chosen profession. She indicated that Charlotte Exner, who was the MOTA Legislative point person, had spoken with her mother and enlisted her as the sponsor. Dr. Torrey Brown was the sponsor on the house side. Throughout the time of introducing the legislation and the passage both Senator Abrams and Delegate Brown worked with MOTA, the Maryland Physical Therapy Association and the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland to respond to concerns. This background work resulted in the successful passage of SB 441. In recognition of her work and intervention, the MOTA awarded Senator Abrams the 1979 President's Commendation. The MOTA also wrote the awards nomination for the AOTA Certificate of Recognition and in 1989 she received the award from AOTA -Certificate of Recognition

Broader Impact:

Rosalie turned out to be an extremely effective legislator, serving in the House of Delegates from 1967 to 1970 and in the state Senate from 1971 to 1984. In that time she introduced or sponsored some 300 bills (by her count), and made healthcare her signature issue. She and a hand-picked commission rewrote Maryland's mental health code, and passed laws regulating involuntary commitment procedures. She introduced legislation updating the Nurse Practice Act. The Health Services Cost Review Commission, established in her first year in the Senate, was particularly significant, reducing hospital costs in Maryland from the second highest in the nation at the time it was enacted to below the national average today. Senator Abrams was a champion for all of the health professions. Lissa indicated . "she introduced lots of legislation

that had a profound impact on Marylanders and their health care. Some of those healthcare bills that changed Maryland are:-

- Regulated Health Maintenance Organizations,
- Established the Geriatric Evaluation Services,
- Licensed Home Health agencies,
- Established Hospital Cost Review Commission
- Enacted hospital planning legislation, cost control etc.

Additional legislation included:

- Practice of physician assistants
- Legislation to revise mental health commitment laws, enacted requirement for aftercare plan for mental health services,
- Smoking prohibition,
- Inspections of hospitals,
- Domiciliary care homes,

When asked what would she think would be her mother's legacy Lissa indicated that her mother would say that we should "strongly assert yourself, be paid for what you are worth, change the system by being part of the system, mentoring is important and be an advocate. Finally, Lissa indicated that her mother would say to the Maryland Occupational Therapy Community, **"if you want to really change things advocate and run for office"**.