

Harriet A. Schaffer, LPC, LMFT, CCMHC, NCE

Acknowledgements and Introduction:

JB: *I visited Ms. Harriet Schaffer on April 8, 2017. The Alabama Counseling Association has been fortunate to have her as a strong advocate and mentor for decades. Her leadership has been phenomenal. The following offers a glimpse of this amazing woman and her contributions over seven decades.*

Interview Excerpts:

JB: *The first thing we would like to know is when did you begin your career and how long did your career span?*

HS: I began my career in 1946 and retired in 2016, seventy years later.

JB: *Your career shows a lot of dedication and what an impressive amount of years you gave to the counseling field. We are so fortunate to have had you and your contributions in the helping profession. Thank you for what you have given us over time.*

JB: *Where were you born, when, and what was it like during your early life?*

HS: I was born in New York City in 1922. After school, time was spent with friends in New York's Central Park and, when the weather was bad, in the Museum of Art and the Museum of Natural History, both of which bordered the park.

JB: *What were some early influences in your life?*

HS: I was an avid reader, but early influences included people watching. I loved being around people and always found them interesting.

JB: *What were some influences in early adulthood in your life?*

HS: In early adulthood, starting in high school, I actually was interested in the work my favorite aunt was doing. She worked with exceptional children and adults who were unable to cope with life on their own and were housed in a psychiatric facility, where they received some treatment. That is when my abiding interest in psychology began to develop.

JB: *Tell me about your formal education.*

HS: I graduated from the State University of Iowa in 1943 with a major in Psychology. I completed my graduate work at Columbia University in New York. I received a Master's of Art in Psychology in 1945.

I completed coursework at Yale University around 1946 and 1947. The work at Yale was mostly in projective testing. I also worked monthly for about two years with Jamshed Morenas from the Philadelphia Child Guidance Center. He came to Birmingham and worked with about twenty practitioners in family therapy in the 1980s.

JB: *Ms. Schaffer, you mentioned, that early in your career you worked at Yale University. That time had to be interesting. Can you tell us more about that aspect of your career?*

HS: Well at Yale actually I did, mostly I did a lot of testing, a lot of psychological testing. We also worked with veterans and Yale students.

JB: *Were you doing career-related testing?*

HS: Usually, when it was with Yale students, it was with students who were having trouble. With the veterans, it was more career-related because they were looking for where to go next in their career.

JB: *Exactly, and there would have been federal money tied into testing at that time, right?*

HS: Yes, it was tied to testing. I started out with IQ testing, then we learned other types of testing, and actually I learned my projective testing there, too. So that was my Yale experience.

JB: *Tell us when you moved to Birmingham and why Alabama?*

HS: We moved to Birmingham, Alabama when my husband took a job at Southern Research Institute to run the Department of Economic Research and Development.

JB: *I know after you moved to Birmingham, you worked at the Spain Rehabilitation Center.*

HS: Yes, I started at Spain Rehabilitation Center in 1965. I started there part-time and I think I became full-time in 1967. I learned a lot about spinal cord injuries. They were at that point of finding out how to treat people with spinal cord injuries. I even taught a course in the Physical Therapy School on Psychology of Disability. I remember getting ready for that course and there was still very little written about the field.

JB: *After you moved to Alabama and raised your children, you decided to go back into the field. Did you have a private practice then?*

HS: Eventually, I first went back into the field after someone called me from UAB. At that time, Dr. Clarence Rosecrans, in the psychology department at UAB handled all of the child work at the medical school and Dr. Sherman Raffell handled all of the adult work. This was when the rehabilitation center was just built in Birmingham. They needed someone at the new center, so they called me and asked me if I would like to start there part-time.

JB: *Right.*

HS: This was wonderful for me because I could make my own hours since the patients were there all the time. They gave me an office and I really did not know much about rehabilitation because that field was very new. At the time, there was not much written about rehabilitation counseling. They gave me an office and told me to read.

JB: *You were on the front of the counseling profession. You were a pioneer in our state, helping us get things set.*

HS: Yes, everything was really new at that time. I was at the rehabilitation center for seven years. Then, I moved over to the psychiatric area and I got involved with the patients there.

JB: *The professional helping fields have come a long way.*

HS: I learned a lot at Spain Rehabilitation Center about brain damage, spinal cord injuries, arthritic kinds of illnesses, and it was quite interesting. I felt as if I learned more than I gave, if you know what I mean [laughing].

JB: *I know you contributed quite a bit, too.*

HS: It was a very interesting experience.

JB: *What you just said was interesting, you were on the forefront of counseling and you were finding your place in the psychology world and the counseling world. You know the federal money came in the 1960's to establish the counseling programs and training of counselors. You were a pioneer in the field. What about your private practice?*

HS: At that time, psychologists were getting reimbursed by the insurance companies and that seemed really unfair to me because I felt that counselors were doing pretty much the same kind of work. We needed to get reimbursed, too. I decided to call a few friends and I remember we had a meeting of about seven people at my house. We decided to form an organization to try to get reimbursement from the legislature.

JB: *Yes.*

HS: I got involved in politics and by the end of that first year, I had about 200 members and we hired a lobbyist. I learned about and legislature and about politics and got very involved in something I didn't expect to be involved in. Our legislative bill went pretty far, but then it did not pass the first time. We worked on it for several years. Overtime, programs and counselors were coming along also and we finally did get reimbursed by insurance companies.

JB: *Right, with your hard work and that of others in the field.*

HS: I must have headed that organization for about seven years.

JB: *You were a part of the movement toward the third-party payments. I hope we do not take your work for granted now.*

HS: ALCA was always supportive. That was an interesting period in our counseling history.

JB: *About what year would that have been?*

HS: It was during the seventies.

JB: *I know Alabama was the third state to have licensed counselors. Were you among the first LPCs in the state?*

HS: Yes, I got licensed early.

JB: *I did not know if you were involved in heading up the licensure in Alabama.*

HS: They already had that program.

JB: *Well, you would have been a great advocate - one to help out if they had needed you.*

HS: I probably would have gotten involved in that, too. I would throw myself into whatever was coming along at the time.

HS: I can recall that when I first got into a counseling program. I was appalled to find out that, counselors really did not know very much about how to counsel. They did not know when they needed to refer to a psychiatrist. I remember a meeting with the counseling association. I made a little speech and said we really needed to do something through the board to require supervision.

JB: *Right, you saw deficits in the training of counselors.*

HS: Yes, we needed to work on supervision of counselors. We eventually developed a very fine licensure board and we had pretty tough requirements to become a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC).

JB: *Three thousand hours above the Master's degree is rigorous, but we want people that are qualified and are very well-trained.*

HS: When I first got involved with the legislature, I remember a trip to Montgomery to meet with one of the legislators. He said that he thought counselors were just little old women who wanted to do good. They had no idea what counseling was all about.

JB: *Wow.*

HS: We really had to educate people about our counseling profession.

JB: *You were a great advocate. If you could offer any advice to new counselors, what would it be?*

HS: The first piece of advice is something I learned from Dr. Rosecrans. That is to "avoid the urge to utter." The only way to listen is to stop talking. Then, you actually learn what it is the client is trying to tell you.

The second piece of advice is "don't talk about yourself unless what you say is therapeutic for the client." You are there to offer counseling, not receive it.

The third piece of advice is "any time counselors are confused or too involved with a client they are seeing, it is very important to get a consult." Consultation was something I sought no matter how many years I had been practicing.

JB: *What was your proudest moment as a helper as a counselor?*

HS: I was very proud when I was appointed to the Alabama Board of Examiner's in Counseling. Being on the licensure board was important to me.

JB: *How long did you serve in that capacity?*

HS: Well, it was a five-year period. But you stayed on the board until a governor appointed a person to replace you. I was there probably about six and a half years. That was a very valuable experience. I was always impressed with the caliber of the people who were on that board.

JB: *I have asked several of our ALCA Icons a question that brings interesting comments and insight. The question is, if you could bring back anything in the profession from two or three decades ago, what would you bring back?*

HS: [pause] I do not know. I always look forward I do not think in terms of going back in time. I think we kept progressing and our field has gotten better and better. I would not want to go back to where we were. We did not know very much back in the early years [laughs].

JB: *It has to be neat to have experienced the early years in the counseling field and to see 70 years of progress and growth in the profession over time.*

HS: I came into it when it was all so new. I was interested in everything, from working with individuals and group work. I was also interested in family and marriage and family work, a little bit of all of it...

JB: *Theoretically speaking, who was the theorist you liked the best? I hear Carl Rogers in what you say, but theoretically where were you?*

HS: Rogers did influence me a lot. I suppose to young people today, he is ancient.

JB: *Carl Rogers theory is still relevant and his foundational counseling skills are used.*

HS: One thing that you find if you spend a number of years doing therapy is that your own particular type of counseling – is – you do what works for the clients [laughs].

HS: I have checked with colleagues. That is what they would say, you get to that place where you may vary what you do theoretically, depending on who you see.

JB: *You know that it is important to be able to facilitate and help the person in the moment. To be eclectic in your theoretical background offers flexibility. You adapted well.*

JB: *Is there anything else that you would like to offer about yourself? This opportunity to spend time with you is so important and valuable.*

HS: I am really impressed with how we have come along in the counseling field. I know that if I started out now I would go into the counseling field rather than go for the psychology field. That's where my interest is. We have a lot to offer and I hope we keep on growing the way we have been. I am so pleased to see the way things have come along in our field.

JB: *I have to say that our field has been very fortunate to have you.*

HS: Thank you, I think we have some great people in the field.

JB: *This time to talk to you has been wonderful. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. You truly are an icon. I admire you and appreciate your profound influence on our counseling field.*

HS: Thank you for coming.