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**Acknowledgements and Introduction:**

**JB:** *I would like to thank Dr. Morgan Kiper Riechel for the interview she conducted with Dr. Thomas. I also want to thank Dr. Thomas for her willingness to visit us during the Alabama Counseling Association Conference in Birmingham, AL on November 20, 2013.*

*Dr. Thomas was kind and accommodating, while offering glimpses of her dry wit, candor, and dedication to the field of counseling. In January 2014, in a follow-up interview, I asked several additional questions to add a personal perspective to the initial interview. The following information reflects excerpts from both interviews. This version was reviewed and approved by Dr. Thomas, prior to publication.*

**Interview Excerpts:**

**MKR:** *Well, Dr. Thomas thank you so much for letting us interview you. We appreciate you taking the time today to talk to us.*

**CT:** I am happy to do it.

**MKR:** *The first question is, "Can you tell about when you began your career at Auburn University, Montgomery (AUM)?"*

I started at AUM as an adjunct in 1985 and I went full-time in 1987. I started in 1973 at Alabama State University (ASU). Even after I went to AUM, I continued teaching adjunct at ASU and eventually wound up teaching there 34 years. This is my 41st year in counselor education. I have been an Alabama counselor educator for 41 years.

**MKR:** *OK. What has it been like to be a counselor educator during your career?*

**CT:** Well, it has been fun. I really enjoy what I do. I think there are a good many people who may expect to see me retire. Others may not wish me to retire, but I love it. I love what I do, and I don't really see any reason to stop anytime soon. It has been fun, it's been challenging, and it's been intellectually stimulating. I love it.

**MKR:** *What have been some of the highlights of your career as a counselor educator?*

**CT:** Watching my students grow and succeed. They are all over this conference here today, and I see them in leadership positions in ALCA. They are outstanding members of the chapters and divisions. Three of the current leaders were my students. They have just done wonderfully, and I am very proud of them. That is the highlight, just watching your product.

**MKR:** *Sure. I can see that would make you very proud... to see them become leaders, as well. Can you tell us a little about the beginning years of counselor education?*

**CT:** I went to ASU, which you know is a historically black university. I had wanted to go home to Louisiana to work. It was right after the civil rights movement and a lot of people were moving out of the South. I wanted to stay in the South and do what I could for everybody in education, and I did not find a job in Louisiana. I went as close as I could (to Louisiana) and that was Alabama. I went as Director of Special Projects at ASU. I worked with a wonderful woman, Rose Robinson. I wound up being head of the counseling center, head of counselor education, started the agency counseling program at ASU, revamped the school counseling program, and initiated a whole bunch of things there. Then Rose left and I eventually went on over to AUM. My beginning years were just constant challenges and growth and just working hard.

**MKR:** *What were some of the particular challenges?*

**CT:** Politics. You know, just getting things done at a university can be very difficult, but somehow I managed to get a whole lot done.

**MKR:** *Absolutely. What are some of the things you have done throughout your career that you are most proud of as a professional counselor. You mentioned your students as one.*

**CT:** I think most people would expect me to say "starting shelters and services for battered women and the coalition against domestic violence." I worked for years on that, and President Bush recognized me as one of his "Points of Light". I am very proud of that. But I was thinking today, there are a lot of things I am proud of. One of the things was working with Dean Janet Warren (AUM) and Dr. Virginia Martin (ASU to start a joint Education Specialist degree program). It was an AUM/ASU joint program and students from both schools went into this program. I wrote an article about this program called "*The Best of Both Worlds*." I was watching people from that particular program today at the conference. The joint program has been terminated, but it went on for years and those people that went through the program are just amazing. I noticed them today, and a huge percentage of them have gone on to get their doctorates. One came to me, I hardly remembered her. She was going to get one of these doctorates online or something, and I told her she was too good a student. She thanked me for my advice and confidence, and said she attended a traditional program and was so proud of the accomplishment. Several of them have gone to very fine universities and they tell me they compete *very* well. In many cases they do better. Many of them are in counselor education. Nicole Driver was one of those. I could name people...Vincent Hinton, you saw him today. There are just gobs of them and I would put those students up against any student at any university in these United States. They have made a contribution to counseling in this state and to this organization. They came from that program. They had the best teachers from ASU and the best ones, I think, from AUM. They are fine people. I am *very* proud of that. The program is gone, but we put a lot of people through it and it made a lasting difference.

There are other things I am proud of. I do a lot of groups with adult survivors of sexual abuse and mothers of abused children. I have been doing that for almost 35 or 40 years...I am proud of that. The big accomplishments were those two things, the shelter work and the joint Ed.S. Program.

**MKR:** *I am just curious about how you see that the field of counselor education has changed over the past four decades? What are some trends you have seen or just changes from what it was forty years?*

**CT:** Well, the good changes were that our school counselors developed a comprehensive guidance and counseling program, and are finally able to say what they do for a living or define their role more professionally. Of course I am very active in group work, and I think group counseling has been improved. More people have become better skilled and educated. But excellence in some other parts of counselor education, I think, has diminished. I hate to be blunt, but some aspects have gone to the dogs because everything is going online. There have been a lot of improvements. Standards are wonderful. It was two professors at your university, the University of Alabama, that started all the new school counseling standards. Robert Comas and Jean Cecil (we used to call her "Ms. CACREP") really pushed and started the CACREP movement. That's a huge improvement. We were very unhappy with SACES and NCATE standards for counseling, and CACREP put us on the map. Your school started that, and those standards are the improvements.

**MKR:** *Well, along those lines...anything else that you would like to add about the history of the counseling profession here in Alabama, specifically. Some things that you've noticed over the years...*

**CT:** I have noticed that our state has kept up and we are ahead of others. I am on the Governing Council of the American Counseling Association, and I am amazed...you know we have 1,400 people attending this conference. There are huge states that do not even have 50 people at their conferences. New York has lost their counseling association and they are trying to start it back up. California does not have one. Georgia does not have a counseling association. This conference with the continuing education we do is bigger than whole national divisions. It is amazing, and I attribute it to the leadership. I think the counselors in Alabama do a wonderful job mentoring. I am sure Joy (Burnham) was mentored and now she is mentoring. I enjoy watching the leaders and how well they do. We have wonderful leaders.

**MKR:** *That's exciting.*

**CT:** Anyone that goes to other state counseling conferences and gets to know their association, if they compare theirs to Alabama, they would be impressed. We just keep growing.

**MKR:** *Thank you. If you can bring back anything from the profession from four decades ago what would it be?*

**CT:** Classroom teaching instead of online teaching. Now, I think there are some classes that are suited for online teaching or hybrid learning. I get my students to get resources online but I do not know how you can teach the helping relationship on a computer, Skype, or anything. I have colleagues (who teach online), when we talk about students, they do not know who they are and I'll tell them, "Well, you teach them two courses." They don't know them. On the other hand, I know my students. I know who has the flu, I know who is having a real hard time, I know whose boss has made them work seven days a week and they need a little time for a paper. That is very important. I think that was part of that combined program (AUM and ASU) that was so important. It is about relationships. Now, I do not mean to be so old-timey, to think that all online instruction is bad. But, I would like to go back to more personal relationships, good classroom teaching, and good resources.

**MKR:** *Well, I am also wondering, so this is my first year as a counselor educator, and I was just wondering if you might have any advice for people like me in my position, brand-new counselor educators? What would you tell us?*

**CT:** Well, as a supervisor, if you aspire to the developmental model, you would want your students not only to know content and keep up with changes, but you would be very interested in not just their professional development, but also their personal development. I would recommend that you pay attention to the professional *and* personal development of your students. If you do, you are going to see them all out here teaching you in a few years, and there is nothing better than having a student teach you later. Then, you know you've done your job.

**MKR:** *Well, is there anything else you would like to add about your experience?*

**CT:** No, except that I have always enjoyed training counselors, I enjoy it now, and I hope to continue to enjoy it. I would retire, but I cannot think of anything I would rather do.

**MKR:** *It has been great talking to you. Thank you so much for your time.*

**CT:** Thank you and good luck to you in counselor education.

#### Post-Interview Follow-up:

**JB:** I want to ask you a few questions about your life prior to your becoming a counselor. *Where were you born, when, and what was in like during your early life?*

**CT:** I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana and raised in Lake Providence, Louisiana, a small farming community. An aunt and uncle, Annette and Rupert Evans, raised me from the time I was two months old. The longer I live, the more I realize how much of my accomplishments can be attributed to the personal gifts they gave me. In addition to their gifts of love, they gave me about the best education available. I went to St. Patrick's Catholic School, The Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, and Newcomb College of Tulane University in New Orleans. I majored in Zoology and minored in Chemistry, continued at Tulane to receive my first master's degree in school counseling, then finished my Ph.D. in counselor education at the University of Iowa. Life was often very difficult in my early life, but the support of my aunt and uncle and an extended family helped me find a lot of meaning in facing and overcoming challenges.

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

**CT:** Again, family was always the positive influence in my life. My religion certainly played a significant role. Some may think it trivial, but I think animals have been, and remain important influences. From them I have learned responsibility, acceptance, faithfulness, sharing, humor, and the value of the important things in life. People often give me odd looks when I say, "My animals always kept me out of trouble." My commitment to family, my faith, and the love of animals still keep me out of trouble!

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

**CT:** The tragic loss of both parents was a big influence. Although I lived with an aunt and uncle, my parents were living until early adulthood. I deeply wanted to be a veterinarian, but their deaths just took a lot of the wind out of my sails. Few noticed the effect, but grades went down, and I just kind of walked through life for a few years. When I went to Tulane graduate school, some professors really encouraged me, and I became motivated again. Then I went to St. Croix in the Virgin Islands to work as a school counselor. Something good happened to me there. I do not really understand what it was, but I came back home with a career, a life plan to which I was very committed, and a mostly healed heart.

**JB:** *As you reflect back on your family, tell me more.*

**CT:** I often say the most important question a counselor can ask a person is “Who taught you how to love?” My family taught me how to love, and that is the greatest gift anyone can give another. Those who were my mentors are gone, but their examples live on. I just hope I even approach the legacy they left me.

**JB:** *Theoretically speaking, where do you stand?*

**CT:** I am basically an existentialist, and strongly believe we should be multi-skilled counselors, able to use a variety of theoretical approaches. Most theories have the central core of taking responsibility and owning our own behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Life can be difficult, and we are not often responsible for what that life delivers to us, but we are responsible for what we do with the challenges. Most theoretical approaches have the goal of helping people find ways to not only decide their goals, but decide how they will change themselves to meet those goals. Most theories emphasize freedom to choose, and therefore the responsibility to choose. Whichever theoretical approach I use, I know a client is on the road to positive change when the client’s language changes from “I want to be free **from**.....” to “I am free **to**.....”.

**JB:** *It has been a few months since we interviewed you. Would there be any other thoughts you would like to add to this interview?*

**CT:** I just wish to repeat what I believe to be part of the role of a counselor educator. We are teachers, but we are also mentors and supervisors. Only part of our role is fostering the professional development, knowledge, and skills of our students. I believe an important part of our role is to also foster the personal development of our students. Technology and online learning are great, but counselor educators need to retain the old skills of relationship building, nurturing growth and development, and commitment to excellence in the characters of our students.