

Dr. Kay Schwartz Delivers Powerful Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lecture at 2009 AOTA Conference

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Kay Schwartz, EdD, OTR, FAOTA

The many spontaneous eruptions of applause indicated the genuine enthusiasm of the AOTA Houston conference attendees listening to the 2009 Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lecture. Dr. Kathleen (Kay) Barker Schwartz presented a memorable speech that spoke to the hearts and minds of occupational therapists. The audience recognized that they were hearing a scholar of the highest calibre, resonated with the message and heralded the speech as “an inspiration” and “a gift”. In

attendance were Dr. Schwartz’ many San Jose State University associates including students, faculty and alumni, as well as San Jose State University’s first Slagle Lecturer, Dr. Lela Llorens.

The singular honor of being awarded the Eleanor Clarke Slagle lectureship was based on Kay’s impeccable scholarship using the historical inquiry methodology that she learned during her doctoral studies at Harvard University. Her extensive list of professional presentations, as well as authored journal articles and textbook chapters, has shaped the education of countless occupational therapists throughout the world.

It was especially fitting that as the profession prepares for its 100th anniversary with our Centennial Vision, that one of the key people in our 75th anniversary celebration be honored and given the opportunity to share her vision. Dr. Schwartz was the guest editor for the American Journal of Occupational Therapy’s seminal 75th Anniversary Issue and was also the contributing editor of the “Looking Back Department” of AJOT from 1988-1998. More recently, she was elected to the Board of Directors of the California Foundation for Occupational Therapy as

Foundation Historian, a position that was created in honor of her expertise in this area.


In Dr Schwartz’ lecture titled Reclaiming our Heritage: Connecting the Founding Vision to the Centennial Vision, she proposed that “the commonalities within the two visions create a continuity between our past and present: that the Centennial Vision does not represent a new set of values, but rather, builds on values that the profession has held since its inception in 1917.” A critical feature of all of Kay’s scholarship is how it has helped countless occupational therapists understand what unites us as a profession, the uniqueness of our discipline, and the proud accomplishments of occupational therapists from the inception of the field to current day practice.

Dr. Schwartz chose to focus on three of the founders: Eleanor Clarke Slagle, George Edward Barton, and William Rush Dunton. Not only did the audience hear about the social and political events that shaped these founders’ thoughts, Kay’s eloquent description helped the founders “come alive” as she explored the personal challenges and courage that



Front row seated (left to right): Susan Cox Johnson, George Edward Barton and Eleanor Clarke Slagle. Back row (left to right): William Rush Dunton, Isabel Newton Barton and Thomas B. Kidner.

also shaped their belief and values. The reformers of the early 20th century held “strong views about democracy and social justice, and a firm belief in the power of science to influence proposed social, educational and medical reforms. In particular, the reform movements involving arts and crafts, moral treatment, scientific management, and women’s suffrage would have a significant and direct influence on the founders of the profession of occupational therapy. . . . The founders displayed confidence, courage, hard work, creativity and a willingness to take risks. These characteristics are what we need to cultivate if we are going to lead our profession in implementing the Centennial Vision.”

In the conclusion of her speech Kay issued a “call to action” reminding us that “like the founders, we are confronted with inequities and disparities in society that affect people’s health, quality of life, and participation. Like the founders we have a powerful tool, the use of engagement in occupation, as both a means and end to health. . . . We all have the potential to be political activists, risk takers, and confident leaders. . . . Now it is our turn to take up the challenge as we enter a new century of occupational therapy.” 

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