

Interview with AOTA President, Dr. Arameh Anvarizadeh

Dr. Stedmon Hopkins (TNOTA Diversity & Inclusion Committee Chair) met with Dr. Arameh Anvarizadeh (President, *American Occupational Therapy Association*) this Black History Month for a conversation about how personal background, identity, and professional obligation all intersect in occupational therapy.

Read the transcript below to see their full conversation, and how they see occupational therapy – both as a profession, *and* within the professional associations that represent OT practitioners – might evolve into the years ahead.

HOPKINS: *During Black History Month, what does the milestone of being the first African American/Iranian AOTA President mean to you?*

ANVARIZADEH: It means representation. It means like gate opening. I'm a believer of gate opening Vs gate closing, and I truly believe that just by me being in this position it has inspired and empowered people to see themselves in this room too I mean, looking at my board now and who's on my board.

This has never been in the history of AOTA, so for me, it's like there's work to be done. I feel like my culture, my lived experience, my intersectionalities, the identities that I hold I started defining my core values in how I see leadership and how I engage in community. My identity is more than just a representation which matters. It's more than gate opening, but it's how I lead, and it's the blood running in my veins and, my DNA is what makes my leadership stand out, which I hope that the future coming up can see themselves and be proud and want to also be the change that they want to see.

I don't believe in being outside of the door and complaining, but being inside of the systems to really create change.

HOPKINS: *You speak about culture and that is shaping things. How does it shape your vision for AOTA going forward?*

ANVARIZADEH: Yeah, I operate in my 4 c's, which I call my presidential 4 c's, and I really believe it's connected to my identity and my core values, which I think is why this presidency is not business as usual, you know, and I think anybody who comes in after me. I'm going to be elevating the bar so high that they really have to come correct.

“C” number one is community right? Do the things in community. My identity, being black, being Persian, being Iranian, we do things in community, we don't do things solo or silo or in a

colonial way. So we do things built-in community, and so I think that oftentimes that's difficult when historically organizations have been doing things in their own lane, and I'm saying, well, let's work with this person, let's talk this person, let's engage with this person, and so that's building community, which is something different, and I feel like community led leadership is something that we need, and particularly in this climate.

My other “C” is connection.

And so we are the occupational therapy profession, right? How do we build rapport? We understand relationships and without building connection and creating connection what are we truly doing? Why are we not connecting with each other? You know, and so to me, when we think about the infighting, that happens within our profession, it lessens our power. It lessens our boldness to see it lessons how we can move, and if we can build connections with each other and outside of each other, even like with other disciplines, imagine how much more powerful we can be. So building connection is also something that I've learned through my identity.

You know, when I had to go to my Persian parties. You know my dad would make me say and hug and greet every single person. I cannot skip one person right connection and that, it's in me.

The third C is coalition building. It's black history month and when I think about the black panthers, when I think about coalitions, when I think about politicians all over this world that have built that have worked together that have formed in a grassroots way to create systemic and structural changes, coalition building is part of my identity, is part of who I am right, it's why I started COTAD, coalition, it's in the name of COTAD because it is in my identity, where I understand how we organize and how we build momentum through minoritized lenses, to understand what change can be through coalitions.

And then the last “C” is courage. Courage and how to walk in courage? How to elevate each other in courage how to show for each other in courage courage, and that again, is because of my culture. You know, being courageous, particularly Iran, is having some issues right now. People are dying in Iran and here too. So my identity does not let me ignore the conflicts that are happening globally and in our own backyard, right? So with that being said, how do you stand up in courage in your leadership? I don't have to call everything out or make a statement about everything, but by me showing up day in and day out with this identity and calling everyone in vs out to be courageous, that is leadership, and that comes from my identity. But resiliency, courage confidence, you can't not feel that by being a black woman or an Iranian woman period

HOPKINS: *So speaking on some of the topics that are happening in the world today, where we live, how do you see the role of DEI evolving within our profession?*

ANVARIZADEH: Yeah, I don't necessarily see it as an evolving thing, I see it as a necessary thing. DEI needs to be infused and incorporated in all the decisions and all the lenses and all of the blind spots in how we're moving as an organization.

This Friday, we're voting on our AOTA strategic plan that we've worked so hard to do throughout my presidency in only 6 – 7 months right. So we're building on this strategic plan, and part of it is looking at centering voices, looking at occupational justice in a way that we've never looked at it, and I keep on challenging my board, are we just saying this to be performative, or are we saying this because we're actually going to do and center voices do we understand what that means right do we understand what responsibility we have for the staff to create operational goals around DEI, like centering voices of minoritized voices and lived experience, and that forces DEIJAB and forces a framework, a lens, a perspective, a pedagogy that has to be infused and embraced throughout everything that we decide to do in this association, which I envision trickling into the profession and the way of thinking.

I created this education committee and in the education committee, I'm looking at also, like, how do we incorporate the DEI into curriculum? These are the questions being asked like, if any committee that I create were also asking the DEIJAB questions so nothing gets lost. So it's not even the fact that it's evolving, it's a must It's a necessary step. It's necessary in the function and the success of this association and this profession.

HOPKINS: *Can you speak on how you incorporate these concepts into the curriculum? What types of things have you done? I know from our standpoint, we've added more diverse cases, and thinking about what culture looks like for different individuals and incorporating different occupations.*

ANVARIZADEH: I created a course from scratch on anti-racism and anti-oppression course in occupational therapy, but I'm not playing these games, and I think these programs love to say, well, we're including the DEI and threading it through the curriculum and I'm like how? Number two are the faculty prepared to have the conversations and be uncomfortable. Because if not, then you don't have the right training.

You don't have the right resources. So besides case studies, right? Because then you could have the case study, but is the person prepared and comfortable to have the conversation about it.

So what is that next step? It's like it's in the pedagogy, right in the case studies it's in what we read. Who we're reading, you know, it's in the guest lectures. It's in the examples if you're going to show pressure ulcers, and you also have to show pressure ulcers on darker skins, because it looks different on lighter skin, right?

So we have to have that perspective in that framework. But also, when we're talking about it, it's so palpable to be like, oh, let's talk about social determinants of health and let's talk about occupational justice. But when it gets down to it, no one really wants to activate, you know, like, what does that actually mean when you do occupational justice, or are you just talking about it theoretically, or do you know what that really looks like when ice is coming into your communities how are you activating occupational justice? Right. So basically it's like let's talk about how we got into this position.. Let's talk about redlining, right? There's an example like in a class and I had to have a teaching team. You know, we had 4 sections, there were three different professors. I was like, well, let's talk about redlining and how redlining created this housing issue, which created unhealthy communities, which created access and inequities, and

they're like, what's redlining? But I'm like you should know this. You know, this is our history, and this is what's created health inequity period and so I then the labor becomes well, can you teach all the 4 sections? No, I can't. You are responsible for learning this information. And so it is holding our faculty also accountable and having the resources and being prepared. It is knowing that making the connections to go deeper than just saying oh, let's talk about social determinants of health. What caused it? Why are we here? How do we reverse it? How do we use courage to advocate for the changes that we need to see through using occupation, It's in these conversations and the way we dialogue the way we frame the discussions, the way we frame the critical thinking, the way we ask the questions is necessary in incorporating anti racism and anti oppression. These type of courses have to be mandatory, and we have to have faculty that are trained prepared to do it. It's hard when there's a new OT school popping up every other day and we're scrambling for faculty, and we're, you know, it is that's why I started this ad-hoc.

HOPKINS: *In your opinion, how can state associations like TNOTA better celebrate and support black history and black excellence in OT throughout the entire year? What would you like to see more of?*

ANVARIZADEH: Highlighting black excellence is critical, right. It's key. Centering the voices and spirits of black excellence.

Not just highlighting like thank you for highlighting me, I appreciate and grateful, but how can we lock arms together throughout the year to support the initiative so that I can be successful in this role. That is a coalition building for the state and national initiatives and collaboration of partnership that I really want to create, how can we work together so we can be successful? And I think that really showcases more excellence. Because it's like, how are we helping move the things forward, but how do I help the state associations also be successful? All right, so it's really taking me out of the equation or anybody out of the equation so that we all could be successful, that's a different initiative.

But you asked about black excellence, I think we continue to feature, we continue to highlight, we continue to tell the stories we continue to speak light and truth in the stories we don't change the stories we let individuals tell their stories.

HOPKINS: *What is your best piece of advice for Black OT students who are currently navigating their programs and looking for a sense of belonging?*

ANVARIZADEH: When I was a student, I mean, I didn't have anybody to look like me and no professors, no reading, no publications, no pictures on the wall, no nothing and so I understand that, sense of belonging right? But also, like I was taking initiative right? Sometimes it might not be off afforded to you. Somebody might not take you by your hand and be like, let me be your

mentor. You might not get that and I didn't get it. No one said, let me teach you how to publish. Let me teach you how to write a presentation. Let me make sure you go to conference. No one said let me make sure you get this scholarship.

I did not know, for now, I feel like we've made progress to where we have faculty like you and me that they can go to or they have a president, or they have people in leadership roles that they see, and they understand representation, or there's more than one of them in the classroom. But the onus is still on us to take the initiative. To say I'm here and to be your authentic self and to keep showing up. I didn't have a walk in the park even getting in this position as president? I had to keep showing up. When doors are being slammed in my face when people were being political. When nonsense is happening, I had to keep showing up right? I always say this. You can feel you can have this sense of inclusion like you can be included, but you might not feel listen to belonging. They're different and it's up to us to continue to try to help build that community in identifying where we can create that sense of belonging. So if you don't feel like you have a sense of belonging, create your community, so you have the space to feel a sense of belonging. We can't do the labor for everyone all the time, but we must take the initiative to say, Okay, I'm gonna put myself at the table. I'm gonna see this, I'm gonna do this, and I'm gonna create the space because I'm showing up in courage, and I'm showing what belonging community looks like, hopefully it'll be returned, and if it's not, I'm gonna keep showing up. You might not always have belonging. That's the reality of our society. Does that mean we just say Dang, I don't have belonging, so I'm just not gonna be my best self. I'm not gonna be committed to excellence. I'm not gonna keep showing up. I'm not gonna keep rising to the top. You know, and eventually, hopefully, we've done enough change and created enough gates that are opened that there's enough of us to take the future by the hand by the heart, by the spirit and say we see you, you are safe you are supported, you belong. I'm hoping that the generation above can make the difference and say we see you, because there should be enough of us to be able to do that. And to be able to recruit and make sure when we recruit that we keep them and we protect them and that they get through and that even when they get through and they get their first job, they have us to lean back on and hopefully when we do that, and they lean on our shoulders that they pay it forward to somebody else, the only way we create a sense of belongin.

So let's keep on increasing diversity positions of power to make decisions. Let's keep on centering voices in our lived experience. Let's keep on giving truth to power and let's keep on creating a sense of belonging. It's up to nobody but ourselves.

HOPKINS: *Looking ahead 10 years, what are the most significant milestones you hope we've reached in our journey toward professional equity?*

ANVARIZADEH: Yeah, and I want us to be a bold, powerful unique visible profession of workers that were not stuck just calling ourself a healthcare profession. But we are the profession, right?

I see ourselves being centered in how every decision is made for everyone how showing who we are and our true value.

Yeah, I also started a new committee called the innovative practice committee to talk about the innovation entrepreneurs that are doing these things. And they can't call themselves a OT and they're not getting reimbursed because they can't fit into a cpt code and then they go somewhere else and leave the profession because they still had to make a living. My thing is that we have to be able to give space so that people can do the things that we say do in your capstone or in your fieldwork, be creative, be innovative and then they go to practice they can't even do it. You know, so like we're losing, we're losing our opportunity to really demonstrate our distinct value and that's through occupations.

HOPKINS: *If you could share one call to action with every OT practitioner today, what would it be?*

ANVARIZADEH: Yeah, I've been thinking about that for my presidential address. Right now, I'm leaning into this. I've been sitting in obedience really, to say, like, use me Lord and how you really want me to command the call to action.

I really feel like we need to be leading in courage and I feel like our issue right now is that we are likely to call out each other vs calling each other , and I think in this generation of this digital advocate, or whatever, like this, digital like like people think by like calling you out or calling someone out or calling anyone out like they've done their job.

And that's it and they've done their repost, but their repost leaves in like 24 hours. Okay. Great. I'm just given example of ice. You don't want ice and you put your post and you know your stance. But my thing is, how are you organizing? How are you organizing?

How are you being strategic? I want us to be smarter. I want us to say, okay, I'm loud, I'm loud but how passionate am I. I'm loud but not making a change. How am I being courageous and actually calling in vs calling out so that we can be strategic intentional and make the change. Me and my role, I'm battling systemic changes. I've never been in this role.

Systemic changes you know you have to build the relationship so that you can make the change and bite out of the apple bite by bite by bite by bite, right? And so I don't think many of us understand how to really organize

And I really want us to be wiser, smarter, more strategic, more courageous, and how we work together, because calling each other out consistently does not make us strong. And so I just want to be mindful and work together. Know that people's hearts are in the right place.

People want to do right, and if we can work together in it, we can really make change. So that's what the 4 c's are. In community we make change through connecting with each other through coalition building and doing it in courage.

We don't do it through divisiveness through colonialism through silencing through calling out. That's not how I operate in my leadership. It's purpose driven its heartfelt, and it's through community That's my call to action, call in be smarter, stop play connect floor and play Chess.