Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

DEPARTMENT of
ALLIED HEALTH SCIENCES
UNC-CHAPEL HILL



HEATHER McKay ('07): Doing Dementia Care Differently

By Amanda Johnston, Second-Year OS student

"I started this idea as a seedling in my mind during classes," said Heather McKay (MS '07) describing her current model of practice while pointing to a conceptual model of occupational therapy sketched during her first semester in UNC's OT program. Fueled by personal and professional experience, Heather envisioned a model of dementia care that provides clients and their caregivers with information, strategies, and support from early signs of neurological changes to hospice care.

A dementia care specialist, Heather is OT and Dementia Care Program Manager for Hospice of Alamance-Caswell and Life Path Home Health. Prior to Heather's arrival in 2008, Hospice of Alamance had provided traditional and reputable end-of-life care

for 26 years. Heather's recognition of the "natural marriage of home health and hospice" led the organization to develop a new model of dementia care.

Heather began by educating the staff on dementia care best practices, including the significance of caregiver education and continued occupational engagement. Soon, Heather began Life Path, a home health program which guides clients and their caregivers through

the progression of dementia by providing care, education, resources, and compassion. Life Path also reaches out to families who do not yet qualify for medical intervention by providing free consultations to people seeking information about dementia.

Heather has impacted dementia care at local, state, and national levels. She provides free continuing education to community partners and training to assisted living administrators to support quality dementia care and build relationships that support Hospice and Life Path. In 2008, Heather partnered with the National Association of State Veterans' Homes and the Armed Forces Veterans' Homes Foundation to create Dementia Care for America's Heroes, a caregiver training video. She proudly shares her dementia care program in veteran's homes nationwide and will be releasing a second video this fall.

Heather has expanded the practice of OT to innovative roles to enact her vision. "Change occurs in OT in direct client interaction, but change also occurs in systems," Heather said. "When the therapist is operating in these multiple roles, then we can affect change in our patients' lives during the time we're with them... But then also seeing an organization change, seeing a community change, seeing our country come together around the needs of this population and being a part of that change."

Two UNC Chapel Hill alumni joined Heather at Life Path to address the flourishing requests for dementia care services. Michaela Mangrum (MS '09), also a dementia care specialist, and David Benthall (MS '11) now provide most of the direct home health services. Heather values their shared philosophical base, which allows them to evaluate occupation and contexts through the same lens. "In the beginning stages of a program when ideas are so important and the direction of your growth is what is taking all of your attention, then this team from UNC has pushed development with all of our energy in same direction," Heather said.

Heather's education at UNC provided a "wonderful think-tank" and an inspirational theoretical model to develop and test practice ideas. "You can't get away from that word transactionalism,"

"We are change agents in the individual lives of our patients because we are there, but we are change agents in a larger context because we are occupational therapists."

-Heather McKay



Above left and above, images from the caregiver training video Dementia Care for America's Heroes.

Heather said. "If readers can see that the curriculum and the theoretical beliefs that are shared in our program can come to fruition in a practice that allows an OT to be so diverse and so involved in bigger systems of change, then I would hope that we would serve as one example of that. It is all possible...it does all make sense this way."

Hospice and Life Path have potential for further growth and innovative OT roles in community outreach and political advocacy. Heather cites administrative support, staff motivation, and an occupational lens as key elements that fostered successful organizational change. Outreach to social organizations and churches to proactively support caregivers of people with dementia is the program's next initiative.

While at UNC, Heather received the Marlys Mitchell Pioneer Award for embodying humanitarian values and visionary leadership. The award is "one of the things I'm most proud of," Heather said. "It probably was a change agent in my life and gave me a lot of confidence going forward that I could live out the words on that page."

Heather certainly is a visionary leader and an inspiration to students and colleagues to expand our practices and advocate for OT. "We are change agents in the individual lives of our patients because we are there," said Heather, "but we are change agents in a larger context because we are occupational therapists."

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Alumni Spotlight: Valerie Fox ('08)

Valerie Fox received both the Mitchell Pioneer Award and the Research, Innovation, Scholarship and Excellence (RISE) Award at the 2008 OT graduation ceremony and her career since that time has demonstrated the appropriateness of those honors.

In September 2008, she became the first occupational therapist fellow in psychosocial rehabilitation at the Durham Veterans Administration Hospital. During the year-long fellowship, she engaged with clients in group and individual therapy, worked with the Mental Health Intensive Case Management (MHICM) team and Compensated Work Therapy Program, and participated in research seminars with three other fellows. Now a first-year



Valerie Fox

student in the UNC Chapel Hill Occupational Science PhD program, Valerie works full time at the VA-50% in acute care and 50% with the transition to home team.

Although her current position at the VA is not in mental health, Valerie continues to pursue her interest in working with people with chronic mental illness through community service as President of the Threshold Board of Directors. Threshold is a psychosocial clubhouse in Durham where Valerie completed an innovative summer fieldwork in 2007 funded by a grant from AHEC. Meanwhile, she says she loves her job at the VA for its diversity and holism. She continues to be drawn to the mental health arena though, and is encouraging the VA system to rework some of their job descriptions for roles within mental health that are not currently available to occupational therapists. Valerie is interested in pursuing mental health research as she works toward her PhD.



AOTF Research Colloquium

Faculty member Dr. Grace Baranek, PhD, OTR/L, (back row, far right) presented her research program at the AOTF Research Colloquium and Tea during the 2011 AOTA Conference in Philadelphia. Other speakers were Drs. Shelly Lane, Stacey Reynolds and Mary Schneider. A panel of PhD students including UNC's Lauren Little (front row, far right) posed questions to the speakers.

GIVING BACK TO UNC OS/OT

"To those whom much is given, much is expected."
-John F. Kennedy

These words inspire me to give generously of my time and talents so often in my role as an Occupational Therapist, and they also fill me with the desire to give back to the one program at UNC-CH that positively changed the course of my life forever.

With gratitude for the rich learning experiences, the bonds of friendship and mentorship, and for the investment of my professors in the Department of OT and OS, I will continue to give back. I challenge you to do the same out of your own well of thanksgiving and may future graduates of UNC be inspired by our giving.



Penny Small Hage, MS, OTR/L UNC-CH, Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy Class of 1995

How You Can Give Back to UNC OS/OT

To ensure your generosity will directly benefit the UNC Chapel Hill Occupational Science / Occupational Therapy program, it's important to designate your gift to the OS/OT Advancement Fund (Designation #8826). You can designate your tax-deductible gift in the following ways:

- Make your gift online through this secure Web site https://medicalfoundationofnc.org/givetouncosot.
- Use the enclosed gift slip and write "OS/OT Advancement Fund, Designation #8826," on the memo line of your check.
- If you are using a general Carolina gift slip or envelope, choose the "Other" category and write in "OS Advancement Fund, Designation #8826."
 Repeat the designation on the memo line of your check.

If you have any questions, please contact OS/OT Director of Development Kyle Gray at kyle_gray@med.unc.edu or 919-966-3352. Thanks!