

Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of MaryLou Wittmann, OTR/L

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Introduction

- This life history is one of 31 life history interviews which are a part of a larger project, *Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) in North Dakota and Wyoming*. The purpose of the project is to gather information about the history and evolution of OT practice in North Dakota and Wyoming through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT in these two states. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information. This study is intended to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice in North Dakota and Wyoming.

Description of the Participant

- MaryLou Wittmann is a highly respected professional who has been devoted to the field of occupational therapy for almost 40 years, with 23 years of experience in early intervention. After graduating from the University of North Dakota with her Bachelor's of Science in Occupational Therapy, she began her practice by serving pediatric clients. This population has been her focus, until her recent work serving adult clients. She has worked in the school setting, infant development programs, outpatient pediatric services, and in the acute hospital setting. She has also been influential to students of occupational therapy through her work as an instructor for pediatric courses. Throughout her practice she has filled a variety of roles. MaryLou Wittmann is currently employed full time at Douglas Place in East Grand Forks, Minnesota, where she works with adults recovering from substance abuse.

Timeline Literature Review

- The passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 allowed for more occupational therapists to serve in the school setting (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2017).
- The UT Martin Infant Stimulation Program was established in 1976 and served children with developmental delays, especially within their homes (Infant Stimulation Program, n.d.). MaryLou Wittmann was involved in integrating this program within the state of North Dakota.
- During her time in practice, improvements in medical care for mothers prior to, during, and after birth have led to a decrease in cases of cerebral palsy and visual impairments (M. Wittmann, personal communication, October 15, 2018).
- Deinstitutionalization of children began a shift of services to the local school districts and allowed MaryLou Wittmann to serve more clients in the schools (M. Wittmann, personal communication, October 15, 2018).



Methodology

- This was a qualitative study that used a life history approach.
- The participant was assigned from a list developed by the project directors through purposive sampling.
- Initial contact was made by project directors and there were no specific gatekeeper issues.
- Informed consent was obtained from the participant prior to the interview.
- The semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the project directors. The questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all the individuals interviewed as part of the larger project. The researchers were allowed to modify and add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.
- The interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participant gave the researchers a copy of her resume.
- The interview was conducted in person at the participant's home. The interview lasted an hour and a half.

Data Analysis

- The analysis process began by transcribing the interview verbatim. Notes and comments from researchers were added to the margin of the transcription. Emergent coding was used to group the data. The codes were then separated into three separate categories. The timeline of personal and national events influenced how the researchers categorized the codes. The categories were reflective of the main components of the Kawa Model by considering life experience, environmental factors, and personal beliefs (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). From the categories, overarching themes and meanings were identified. A final assertion was formed to summarize the entirety of the data. Researchers collaborated throughout the data analysis process and the analysis was reviewed by the project directors.

Findings

Roles & Career Path

- She chose occupational therapy because it was a combination of medical, teaching, and creative aspects.
 - She has had experience teaching not only clients and their families, but also occupational therapy students as a formal instructor.
- Working in early intervention and grading approaches for parents has translated into her current work with adults.
 - "Those are the individuals [adults] that I've been working with over time as the parents. And when you're working with something like early intervention with adults that have their own unique needs, you have to grade the way you teach them."
- Her family influenced her career choices as she stayed in rural North Dakota to practice and took a break from practice to raise her children.

Practice Influences

- Practicing in a rural area has taught her the importance of knowing a little bit of everything, going out of her way to provide quality care, having personal and professional resources, taking advantage of interprofessional relationships, and staying up to date on new developments.
 - She learned early on in her practice to ask questions and appreciate the roles of other professions.
- She believes that those who practice in rural areas have a "pioneer resiliency" that drives them to do whatever is necessary to provide care to rural families.
 - "It shows that resiliency, the perseverance. It shows the kind of qualities that we hope that we can pass on to the families we work with."
- She has often felt that there is too much to do in not enough time, which can leave her feeling like she is pedaling uphill. This includes duties such as documenting or traveling to several locations to provide services.

Core Values

- She has been able to look at others' difficulties through a different set of eyes that allows for positivity in situations and celebrations of victories with clients and their families.
 - "I view people through a different set of eyes."
 - "I think it has to be just celebrating with parents and seeing their kids do things, and there'd be tears, you know, we'd all be crying."
- Her work allowed her to follow her call and use her talents to demonstrate respect to others and empower them.
 - "I really do see our work as our call."
 - "But just to find work that you are able to share who you are and it's genuine."
 - "So that you're showing them, I respect what you've seen and I get it, I believe you. I know you saw that. And let's see what will happen next."

"I really do see
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Conclusion

Final Assertion: Occupational therapy has always been a good fit for MaryLou Wittmann and has shaped who she is as a person. Being an occupational therapist has given her a way to communicate who she is through respect and positivity.

- MaryLou Wittmann entered the profession of occupational therapy in 1979 and has been influential in the development of pediatric practice in North Dakota.
- Throughout her career, she has influenced children and their families, adult clients, other professionals, and occupational therapy students by fulfilling multiple roles.
- Her practice has been influenced by her context and personal beliefs, giving her an outlet to share who she is. She feels that occupational therapy is her call and has allowed her to fulfill her purpose.

Acknowledgements

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References

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