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## Picturing Life

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## Picturing Life

### **Abstract**

The cover art of the summer 2013 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* provided by Jonathan Darnall reflects his unique life perspective, current roles, and values. An exploration of Jon's life experience reveals how creative arts, including photography, have positively influenced his life and inform OT practitioners about the benefits of photography as an intervention and an occupation.

### **Keywords**

occupational therapy, art, photography, disability

Jonathan Darnall provided the cover of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* for the summer 2013 issue. The cover art reflects Jonathan's unique life perspective, his current roles, and his values. An exploration of Jonathan's life experience reveals how creative arts, including photography, have positively influenced his life and can be incorporated into occupational therapy (OT) interventions.

Jonathan, who prefers to be called Jno (pronounced John-O), is currently a student at Columbia College in Chicago, IL, majoring in photography. He has always had an interest in art, photography, and videography. As a child, he enjoyed drawing and painting, but these interests gave way to photography and videography as he got older. In high school, Jno explored several types of art and media through courses that included charcoal drawing, paper cutting, film and video, and broadcasting. He began photographing sporting events for his high school publication, and he was a member of the local art league. After high school, he continued to develop his skills in photography by taking summer courses through local colleges as a part time student. Additionally, he participated in photographing and videotaping family events as well as producing videos and making compilations of photos for his family and friends. Along with an interest in photography, Jno has always had an intense interest in movies, paying particular attention to the directors, producers, camera effects, and make up. Each year, he looks forward to watching the Oscars and other award shows that highlight achievements in film making. Jno hopes that he will have the opportunity to make his own

movies and to see his name in the credits one day. In 2011, a few years after completing high school, Jno decided to embark on the adventure of becoming a full time college student, pursuing his dream of having a career in photography, film, and video.

Jno's transition to a full time college student came with the same excitement, fears, and challenges each new college student experiences, but he faced additional challenges because he is a student with disabilities. Jno, supported by his parents and friends, has navigated the transition by acquiring needed supports and focusing on his strengths. His motivation to attain a career working in film and photography prompted him to take the risks of enrolling in school full time, living in a dorm, and navigating the campus located in busy downtown Chicago. Additionally, the social aspects of college, such as meeting students with similar interests and trying new things, were interesting to Jno. Literature examining the transition process for youths with disabilities into adulthood indicates several facilitating factors for positive transitions. These include positive peer relationships, parents advocating for the youth's participation, effective coping strategies, and the belief in one's self (Stewart, 2013), all of which are among Jno's strengths.

Jno has endured several health crises throughout his life. At birth, he experienced meconium aspiration and persistent fetal circulation, which resulted in the need for extra corporeal hemo-oxygenation (ECHMO). The ECHMO procedure saved Jno's life, but it resulted in several injuries, including infarctions in the brain, bowel, and both

kidneys. Jno remained hospitalized for management of his conditions until he was 14 months of age. During the hospitalization, physicians managed his end-stage renal disease and performed a small bowel resection. He also received multiple therapy services to address developmental delays and motor impairments. Jno left the hospital with a g-tube; continued to participate in occupational, physical, and speech therapy; received in-home peritoneal dialysis; and was provided hearing aids for bilateral hearing loss.

Jno continued to require medical interventions and has undergone multiple surgeries, including three kidney transplants, several surgeries to manage renal insufficiency, and surgeries to address orthopedic and bowel issues. Jno continued to receive occupational, physical, and speech therapy services up to the age of 8. Although formal OT services stopped, the influence of OT was never far from his life, as his mother is a pediatric occupational therapist.

While growing up, Jno was active in many extra-curricular activities, despite multiple medical issues. He trained in Martial Arts, ultimately achieving a Black Belt. In high school, he received several awards, including a humanitarian award and an award for leadership after he started an American Sign Language Club at his school. He also received the "Courageous Huskie Award," given to students who succeed in the face of life's challenges. After high school, Jno worked as a dog walker, a photographer for a local college sports team, and as an assistant at his mother's outpatient pediatric OT clinic.

Jno views his disabilities as strengths that contribute to his artistic perspective, photography skill, and learning environment. He indicates that because his sense of hearing is diminished, he has always relied on his sense of sight more, which has been keenly developed throughout his life. He possesses a unique view of the world that he attempts to capture through photographs and video. He also shares this perspective with other students at Columbia College. During his visual media course, for example, he discussed the value of visual communication for people with hearing loss. Because he has a right arm impairment, Jno has adapted to use his left hand to hold his camera. At Columbia College, Jno receives support from his advisor, teachers, and friends. He has a deaf interpreter with him during classes and often employs lip reading skills during group discussions and in meetings with students outside of class. His course directors have commented on how having Jno in the classroom has positively influenced discussions and learning experiences.

Jno has used his participation in photography and videography to enhance his relationships with the people around him. He enjoys recording events, editing the footage, and providing video files to friends and family. He reflects that recording events allows him to capture them in time and to build memories. The act of recording, creating, and giving helps Jno to build connections with others in his life. His photography has also led to work opportunities in which he provides photo, video, and editing services for hire.

Jno's description of the journal's cover art embodies his view of life. Jno took this picture in

Pentwater, MI, while vacationing with his family. During a recent interview, he reported that while walking along the beach, the sunset “caught [his] vision and [his] breath at that moment.” He recalls saying to himself, “WOW! This is fabulous!”. He equates the beauty of the sunset and the moment to heaven. In moments like this, Jno uses his camera to capture the image and store it because, he states, he is unsure when he might be able to see and experience the beauty again. Admiring and capturing experiences through photography, Jno says, is also his way of “thanking God for what he created on this earth.”

The integration of photography into Jno’s life can inform OT practitioners about the value of using photography in treatment. Just as other forms of creative expression, such as painting, drawing, crafts, and creative writing, are valuable modalities in OT treatment, so too is photography (Perruzza & Kinsella, 2010). Individuals can use photography to express themselves in a variety of ways. This can include the subject matter they record, the aesthetics of the image they capture, the processing methods for the film and/or digital image, and the effects used to enhance the images. One specific method for using photography that has been employed in OT practice is Photovoice, a technique in which

individuals use photographs and writings to express their individual perspective on a topic (Stoffel, 2011). Photography can also be viewed as a therapeutic task, requiring attainment of specialized knowledge and skills. OT practitioners can use photography to help clients develop new skills and gain a sense of mastery. Last, photography may be or become an occupation for a client, as in Jno’s life. As photography becomes more accessible because of the growth of digital technology, creative OT practitioners can incorporate it into treatment to provide the benefits described above.

Jno lives his life with an explorer’s lens, looking for new opportunities and challenges through which he can learn, observe, be thankful, and give to others. He has used photography to record his life experiences, providing a chronicle of memories. His family relationships and friendships have also been enhanced through Jno sharing his talent in photo and video production with others. He has used photography as work, and it has established his current occupation as a college student. Photography will likely be a vital tool to guide Jno in the future. And, as he looks back and reflects on his life, he will have many memories captured through photography to help him take a deep breath and say, “Wow! This is fabulous!”

To view samples of Jno’s photographs and a video, visit:  
[http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot\\_occupationandartist/](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/)

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