



The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy

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Occupational Therapy

Summer 2013

Ms. Marion R. Spear

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Recommended Citation

"Ms. Marion R. Spear" (2013). *OJOT Sponsor Profiles*. 4.
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Marion R. Spear is the featured profile for the summer 2013 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*. One of the pioneers of the occupational therapy (OT) profession, Ms. Spear began her career in 1916 when she graduated from Massachusetts Normal Art School and began working as an “assistant therapist” at the Danvers State Hospital in Massachusetts. In 1918, she left Danvers to take a position at the Kalamazoo State Hospital (now known as the Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital) in Kalamazoo, MI. Her work as an occupational therapist at the Kalamazoo State Hospital included instructing patients in making furniture, repairing clothing, farming, canning, working a loom, woodworking, making pottery, and performing plays and pageants. She lived on the Kalamazoo State Hospital campus and received room and board as part of her wage. In 1922, she attempted to hire additional occupational therapists to meet the needs of the growing patient population, and she found a scarcity of trained applicants. This led her to start a training program of her own, and in 1922, she founded the Kalamazoo School of Occupational Therapy. The school was only one of six in the nation, and in 1939, it received full accreditation by the American Medical Association. Under Ms. Spear’s direction, the school grew and later became affiliated with Western Michigan University (WMU) (Massie, 1997).

Ms. Spear’s exemplary OT service to the patients at the Kalamazoo State Hospital generated a positive view of OT from influential mental health practitioners during the formative years of the OT profession. In 1922, Dr. Ostrander, Superintendent of the Kalamazoo State Hospital and Ms. Spear’s supervisor, attended a meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Detroit, MI. This event coincided with the opening of the Kalamazoo School of OT, and with Dr. Ostrander’s view and public support of OT. During the meeting, he

displayed photographs of patients participating in OT sessions and presented a paper in which he advocated for the training and hiring of more individuals to “rehabilitate the whole patient” (Spear, 1962); this, no doubt, spurred an interest in OT among other psychiatrists.

The Kalamazoo School of OT grew from two students enrolled during its inaugural year in 1922 to a thriving department with 157 students enrolled in 1951. At that time, WMU’s OT program was the largest in the country. Course work initially included craft and theory courses along with training in the hospital. As the profession changed, the length and rigor of the course work increased, and by 1939, OT students were receiving college credits through WMU. In 1944, the school was transferred from the Kalamazoo State Hospital to WMU, and Ms. Spear became a faculty member. She remained a strong leader for the school of OT and the profession itself, ultimately retiring in 1958. Ms. Spear left a lasting impression on her students, emphasizing “professionalism in both action and appearance” (Massie, 1997). She taught students to interact in a respectful manner with patients, physicians, and instructors. Ms. Spear expected the students to maintain a professional level of dress, grooming, and hygiene at all times. In addition, she built long lasting relationships with students who regarded her as a true friend after they graduated (Massie, 1997).

During her career, Ms. Spear produced several publications, including journal articles and books. In 1924, she published an article titled “Costuming a Pageant at a Slight Expense” in the *School of the Arts Magazine*, highlighting the strategies she used to produce, on a low budget, a theatrical presentation with patients of the Kalamazoo State Hospital. In 1926, she published an article in *Occupational Therapy and Rehabilitation* titled “The School Trained Aide in the Hospital,” in which she advocated for training aides working in psychiatric facilities, with training focused on the principles of psychology and sociology. Beginning in 1939, she produced a series of books titled *Waste Material Series*. Each of the three volumes (Volume 1: *Paper and Paper Products*, 1939; Volume 2: *Textiles*, 1939; and Volume 3: *Native Products*, 1942) included guides to creating products out of materials that are typically discarded. She identified her audience as “teachers of special education classes, camp counselors, occupational therapists, and housewives” (Spear, 1939). During this time of the Great Depression, budgets were likely small, supplies minimal, and the number of patients to be seen in institutional settings high. Ms. Spear sought out and shared innovative ways to use

limited supplies. In the preface to *Waste Material Series: Paper and Paper Products* (1939), she stated the following: “This small book has been prepared for those who have little or no material with which to work, but who are endowed with imagination and creative ability” (p. 4). This series of works highlights the focus of OT services being delivered during that time, which was heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts and Moral Treatment movements. Additionally, these works emphasize the creative approaches OT practitioners have used throughout our history to tackle challenges, such as practicing in a budget-restricted atmosphere, not unlike today. In 1950, Ms. Spear published an updated version of these concepts, titled *Keeping Idle Hands Busy; Occupational Therapy*. In 1961, she published *Fifty Years of Occupational Therapy in Michigan, 1911-1961*, in which she described in detail the history of the profession’s development in Michigan. This book chronicles the establishment of every OT school and clinical department in the state of Michigan prior to 1961, as well as the history of the Michigan Occupational Therapy Association. This valuable historical archive provides important details about the development of the profession and is peppered with interesting stories and reflections on the development of the culture and focus of the profession.

In 1960, Ms. Spear was recognized by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) with the Award of Merit, which is the highest honor bestowed on a member, and in 1974, she was inducted into the AOTA Roster of Fellows in recognition of her excellence in OT education and service to the profession. In 1978, she received the Distinguished Alumni Award from WMU.

The Department of Occupational Therapy at WMU continues to honor her contributions to the OT profession through the Marion R. Spear Award, which is an annual award given to a graduating OT student who demonstrates “outstanding interest, dedication and commitment to the goal of occupational therapy.” Additionally, the OT teaching clinic at WMU is named the Marion R. Spear Occupational Therapy Clinic in her honor.

OJOT expresses deep appreciation to Dr. Fred Sammons, who sponsored this issue in honor of Ms. Spear.

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The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy, Volume 1, Issue 4, Summer 2013