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Mary M. Evert, ScD (Hon.), MBA, OTR/L,
FAOTA

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Sponsor Profile:

Mary M. Evert, ScD (Hon.), MBA, OTR/L, FAOTA



Fred Sammons and Barbara Rider are pleased to sponsor Mary Evert, ScD (Hon.), MBA, OTR/L, FAOTA for the Summer 2019 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). Dr. Evert has had a distinguished career with extensive experience in health care administration and professional leadership. She has been building relationships with occupational therapy associations around the world for years. Dr. Evert has made significant contributions to empower the profession of occupational therapy. Through a life of service, she has lived by example.

Originally from Minnesota, Dr. Evert was born into a military family. “Mom and Dad were both in the Army when they met,” she said. “Mom was working as a nurse at the time.” As a child, Dr. Evert’s frequent relocations provided ample opportunities to interact with other cultures. For example, Dr. Evert’s family lived in South Korea just prior to the Korean war. As a teen, she attended an Army high school in Germany. In the mid 1950s, the family also spent some time stationed in Alaska. When Dr. Evert began to ponder her future career path, her mother suggested she consider occupational therapy. “Mom thought I would make a good occupational therapist because of my interest in creative arts and adapting all sorts of things, along with my penchant for human sciences,” she said.

After high school, Dr. Evert moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to pursue a degree in math at the College of St. Catherine. During her first semester, she became very unhappy with some of her course work. “My high school math was behind what they are now calling *new math* in the United States. I was not succeeding at the top of my game for the first time ever,” she said. Dr. Evert sought guidance from a caring upper classmate. “She interviewed me and asked if I had ever considered occupational therapy,” said Dr. Evert. “Mom’s image flashed in my mind and made me smile.” Dr. Evert changed her major and immediately felt she was in a happier place. “Mom was a genius and never said, ‘I told you so,’ even when I became president of the American Occupational Therapy Association,” said Dr. Evert. She attributes her outcome to having an incredible role model who provided unconditional admiration and support.

In 1967, Dr. Evert earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Occupational Therapy from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota. She accepted a job at the occupational therapy department at Ranchos Los Amigos hospital in Los Angeles, California. Dr. Evert primarily worked in hand therapy. “At Ranchos, I was exposed to meaningful educational experiences, as well as opportunities to participate in research,” she said. “I could not [have] had a better first job.” By the end of her first year,

Dr. Evert transitioned to the role of occupational therapy supervisor. In 1970, she was recruited by Children's Hospital in San Diego to help launch Sharp Rehabilitation Center. "I had the opportunity to get involved in the planning stages of the new rehabilitation center and even provide feedback on the building plans," she said.

Dr. Evert decided to leave clinical practice when she was expecting her first child. With a husband in the Navy, she knew their family would be relocating on a regular basis. Dr. Evert enjoyed her administrative work, but she knew that to have clout in the business world she had to continue her education. In 1977, she enrolled at the National University in San Diego, California, to pursue a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Healthcare. Dr. Evert juggled her responsibilities as a wife, mother, and graduate student. She also remained active in her service work. "I was on five boards of directors while working on my master's degree," she said. Some of her roles included serving as treasurer for the Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC) and as vice president of the California Coalition of Independent Health Professions. In 1978, Dr. Evert met Mae Hightower-Vandamm, acting president of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). "Mae and I just hit it off," she said. "The next thing I know, I was appointed as a committee chair."

In 1980, Dr. Evert earned her MBA in Healthcare Administration. "Pursuing a master's degree was the catalyst that launched my career," she said. With a new degree in hand, Dr. Evert set out to lead by example. In 1982 and 1984, she won public elections to become president of the OTAC and chair of the board of directors at Palomar Pomerado Hospital, one of the largest hospital districts in the state of California. In this role, Dr. Evert directed two hospitals, a regional trauma unit, a rehabilitation center, a chemical dependency unit, two nursing homes, and various other clinics. In 1983, she was elected vice president of the California Coalition of Independent Health Professions. Between 1983 and 1985, Dr. Evert also served as vice president of the Association of California Hospital Districts.

In 1984, Dr. Evert was recognized for her outstanding service to the profession. The OTAC awarded Dr. Evert the Most Outstanding Occupational Therapist in California award and created the Mary Evert Service Award in her honor. That same year, the AOTA invited Dr. Evert to join the Roster of Fellows. This designation is the AOTA's highest honor recognizing occupational therapists who demonstrate extensive leadership and make significant contributions to the profession. A few months later, Dr. Evert was elected vice president of the AOTA.

In 1985, her husband, Commander Evert, was transferred from San Diego, California, to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. During the summer of 1986, Dr. Evert was appointed to the first of three distinguished positions at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) under the Reagan Administration. From 1986 to 1987, she served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health Communications. In this role, she was responsible for shaping communications policies and activities throughout the United States Public Health Service. From 1987 to 1988, Dr. Evert held the role of executive assistant to the administrator in the Health Resources and Services Administration. Her responsibilities included assisting and advising the administrator in the formulation of policy, planning, and coordination of health programs. That year, she also served as executive director of the DHHS Secretary's task force on pediatric HIV infection. From 1988 to 1989, Dr. Evert served as the director of the Office of Community Services, Family Support Administration. She was responsible for administering block grants with a budget of \$1.8 billion dollars, as well as managing a staff of 65 employees. In this role, Dr. Evert had many opportunities to help people get back to work and to advocate for the profession of occupational therapy. In 1989, Dr. Evert served as a consultant to the

Department of Agriculture under the George H. W. Bush Administration. Dr. Evert says her employment with the federal government was some of the most important work she has ever done. “I’m not aware of another occupational therapist who has held a position like this,” she said.

In 1991, Dr. Evert was elected president of the AOTA. Her tenure was a time of rapid growth and activism due to health care reform and managed care debates. As president, Dr. Evert’s theme was Empowering the Profession. Using a grass roots approach, she hit the road. “I visited every state in the nation and more than 10 countries,” she said. During her travels, Dr. Evert preferred accepting invitations to stay in the homes of AOTA members instead of hotel rooms to be more accessible to members. As president of the AOTA, Dr. Evert initiated outreach programs with Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT), the official representative organization of the occupational therapy profession worldwide. “I found the outreach process in this role absolutely fascinating and so helpful to AOTA members,” she said.

Between 1992 and 2005, Dr. Evert served two terms as the United States Delegate to the WFOT. During her first term, she served as an alternate delegate. Dr. Evert represented members from the United States at the WFOT International Congress. “Bringing American concerns to the table at the WFOT Council was a very personal matter,” she said. Dr. Evert transitioned to the role of delegate after she was elected president of the AOTA. International relationships became the cornerstone of her leadership and she perceived of this role as a continuation of her work.

While serving for the WFOT and AOTA, Dr. Evert was also working in higher education. Between 1992 and 1999, Dr. Evert was employed part-time as an adjunct assistant professor in the occupational therapy program at Washington University School of Medicine. She taught courses and helped to formulate strategies for organizational development and strategic planning. Between 1999 and 2006, Dr. Evert served as a faculty member at the Webster University School of Business. In this role, she taught courses on women in management and in health care policy.

In recognition of her distinguished career, Dr. Evert has received two honorary doctorate degrees. In 1993, she received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from her alma mater, the College of St. Catherine. In 1994, she received an honorary Doctor of Science from the University of Hartford. Dr. Evert believes she was awarded honorary degrees because of her work at the DHHS. “A lot of people knew I had done something unique and different,” she said. “It was a thrill to be recognized by my alma mater and give the graduation address in a cap and gown.”

In 1997, Captain Evert’s military assignment in Maryland ended and the family moved back to California. Dr. Evert accepted a position as a consultant for the Centre for Strategic Management. As part of a multidisciplinary team, Dr. Evert’s role was to facilitate organizational strategic systems change for local, national, and international organizations. “I wanted to focus on holistic systems change,” she said. “The only way I could do this was as a strategic planner.” Dr. Evert used her knowledge and skills in health care and professional organization administration to provide consultation to organizations around the world. “My role as a consultant also put me in a position to be a facilitator of growth and development in the interests of the field of occupational therapy,” she said. Dr. Evert’s efforts did not go unnoticed. In the year 2000, the AOTA recognized Dr. Evert with the Award of Merit, the highest honor recognizing an occupational therapist who has demonstrated extensive leadership through sustained and significant contributions to the profession. In 2012, the OTAC presented Dr. Evert with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Dr. Evert left her job as a consultant in 2016; however, she continues to travel extensively, as well as provide informal consultation. “My international work has not stopped,” she said. Dr. Evert remains focused on building relationships and developing occupational therapy associations both inside and outside of the United States. During a recent visit to Japan, she worked with the Japanese Occupational Therapy Association. Dr. Evert also assisted Mexico and South Korea in becoming full members of the WFOT.

Since retiring from the business world, Dr. Evert has been dividing her time between travel and serving as an advocate and activist in the San Diego Dementia Consortium. She leads a monthly support group for family members and friends of people with dementia. The group aims to help members cope and care for loved ones with dementia while working on their own personal well-being. “We work on family quality of life relationships and strategies to manage stress and anxiety,” said Dr. Evert. “Since there is no magic pill to cure dementia, the only thing we can do is change our behaviors to pursue a life worth living for all around us.” Dr. Evert also coaches her participants to take on leadership roles in other support groups. “The goal is to empower an entire community toward collaborative quality living environments,” she said. “This is a wonderful role for an occupational therapist, and we can each do so much more as consultants to advocate for this goal.” Dementia is a topic close to Dr. Evert’s heart, as she has known so many who have suffered from the disease. “Finally, I have come full circle as an occupational therapist, back to my roots in mental health and wellness,” she said.

Today, Dr. Evert continues to build relationships with occupational therapy associations around the world. “My work is casual these days and primarily based on friendship,” she said. Personal relationships have always been the cornerstone of her leadership style. Throughout Dr. Evert’s distinguished career, she has led by example. Through a life of service, Dr. Evert has made significant contributions to empower the profession of occupational therapy.

To learn more about the World Federation of Occupational Therapists visit:

www.wfot.org