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Albert E. Copolillo, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

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Sponsor Profile:

Albert E. Copolillo, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA



The *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* is pleased and honored to add Albert E. Copolillo, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, to the gallery of sponsor profiles. We thank Dr. Fred Sammons and Dr. Barbara Rider, who selected Dr. Copolillo for recognition in the Winter 2020 issue.

Dr. Copolillo is an exemplary member of our professional community, who has made many significant contributions in his multiple roles as a clinician, scholar, researcher, educator, and leader. Currently serving as the chair and program director of the Department of Occupational Therapy at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Dr. Copolillo launched his academic career in 1996 as an adjunct faculty instructor at the University of Illinois at Chicago where, in 1997, he completed his PhD in Public Health with an emphasis on Gerontology and Health Promotion and Health Education. In the same year, he joined the faculty at VCU as an assistant professor of occupational therapy and was ultimately appointed chair and program director in 2009.

During his tenure at VCU, Dr. Copolillo enjoyed a highly productive career that included being named both a Merit and Distinguished Mary Switzer Fellow for the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR); receiving a number of grant awards; publishing numerous peer-reviewed articles in prestigious journals, including the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, the *Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*, and the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy* (AJOT); and publishing chapters in numerous textbooks. In addition to his extensive publication record, Dr. Copolillo has shared his knowledge and expertise by way of many professional presentations in local, state, and national venues, both peer-reviewed and invited.

Along with these extensive and productive contributions as a scholar and educator, Dr. Copolillo has served on many university and professional committees and has held significant leadership roles. These include chair of the Academic Leadership Council for the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), associate editor of AJOT, research panel reviewer for the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research, and editorial review board member for AJOT and *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Geriatrics*. Dr. Copolillo has taught many graduate and undergraduate courses while actively engaged in numerous thesis and dissertation committees while at VCU.

Dr. Copolillo's contributions have been recognized by induction into the AOTA Roster of Fellows and with the AOTA Cordelia Myers Writers Award. He has also been honored by the Virginia Occupational Therapy Association with the Award of Merit for Educators, among many other honors

and awards received throughout his career. Dr. Copolillo has indeed demonstrated that he is a consummate professional, wearing many hats throughout his career.

Following completion of a bachelor's degree in Biology from the University of Illinois, Dr. Copolillo wanted to explore how his interest in science could best be applied. Along with having friends in special education and an opportunity to work for a year in a program for children with special needs, he also developed a friendship with an occupational therapist who seemed to have values and interests similar to his own. Dr. Copolillo soon noted that the profession provided a diversity of practice areas and intervention approaches. This led him to begin his graduate education in the Master of Science Program in Occupational Therapy at the University of Puget Sound. Being the only male in the program, he initially reflected on whether his role as an occupational therapist might be slightly different from his classmates and wondered whether he had chosen the right profession. However, the cohort of 10 students became close friends and were highly supportive of one another. He noted that "I loved learning from them and I could tell from early field experiences that they [as women] had a more nurturing and caring style of intervention than I did . . . one of my 'aha' moments came from watching them interact with their patients." He realized early on that "success in this field had as much to do with caring and building relationships as it did with obtaining scientific knowledge."

Other "aha" moments emerged gradually for Dr. Copolillo. One of his most significant occurred after reading an article on the Model of Human Occupation by the late Dr. Gary Kielhofner, Professor and Chair of the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC). Completing an assignment that required him to review and then present the article in class, this experience provided a clearer sense of what he could achieve as a practitioner through occupation. He further noted that his Level II fieldwork experience at Schwab Rehabilitation Institute in Chicago provided the realization that successful rehabilitation was as much about the social determinants of health as it is about therapeutic intervention and training. Dr. Copolillo credits other significant mentors throughout his career, including Juli McGruder, his psychosocial professor; Lynette Chandler, who served as his thesis advisor; and his fieldwork supervisor for his Level II fieldwork assignment, Susan Schroeder. Seven years into his clinical work, Dr. Copolillo was mentored by Gary Kielhofner, Shelly Lane, Craig Velozo, Anne Fisher, and Gail Fisher, all prominent scholars in occupational therapy who helped him to solidify his understanding of occupational therapy through his clinical work, teaching, and research for his PhD dissertation at UIC-Chicago. Dr. Copolillo also expressed gratitude for his faculty peers, who he indicated have contributed in countless ways to his career advancement. He further noted that the opportunity to get to know Fred Sammons over the past few years has given him a clear sense of the extent to which one innovative and committed occupational therapist can have on the profession throughout a career.

When asked about significant experiences that shaped his ability to "think like an occupational therapist," Dr. Copolillo noted that the clinical experiences that allowed him to develop occupation-focused interventions or interventions that eventually lead to improvements in occupations, and that were relevant to the client, shaped his thinking like an occupational therapist. He noted that "using a wide range of media to help people organize their thoughts, plan, reduce impulsive or inappropriate behaviors, and build self-confidence felt like solid OT practice."

Dr. Copolillo's decision to enter academia was motivated by both idealistic and practical ideas, including the opportunity to influence a larger number of future occupational therapists, not only in terms of clinical skills but also to develop their skills and knowledge as researchers to determine

evidence necessary to support occupational therapy intervention. He undoubtedly achieved that goal as he mentored many, many students by way of his classroom teaching and direct mentoring on numerous theses and dissertations throughout his career as a professor and program director.

Given his many years in the profession, Dr. Copolillo cites significant events that have shaped our profession. As he listed these events, it became clear that he was an active participant who was not only engaged in the development of these changes but who also served in leadership roles as an active facilitator of these important evolutionary events:

- The shift from bachelor's to master's entry-level and advancement of the occupational therapy doctorate degree.
- Efforts to create uniform terminology and, eventually, the OT Practice Framework.
- Development of models of practice and theoretical perspectives that strengthened the foundation for OT practice and research.
- Initiatives to increase leadership, train career researchers, and encourage mentoring relationships, supported by a stronger and collaborative national association.
- Efforts to increase diversity and promote inclusion.
- Ongoing commitment to occupation-focused practice that emphasizes creativity, innovation, and problem-solving.

When asked about the most significant “lessons learned” in his career, Dr. Copolillo noted that one of the most significant lesson is that “people function best in a supportive environment that emphasizes the inter-relationship between therapist and client, teacher and student, and between colleagues within an intra- and interprofessional context.” He also cited the “value and necessity of open and honest communication, which includes the key skill of listening with the goal of understanding another person’s insight.” Finally, he noted that “change has been the only constant and that the ability to embrace the need for change and to put forth the effort it takes to create change are essential qualities of leaders.”

Dr. Copolillo’s productive career was shaped early on by being born into a working-class family on the south side of Chicago where his parents worked hard to ensure opportunities for a strong educational foundation for him and his four sisters. An emphasis on education from his parents, and his mother in particular, led to his pursuit of advanced degrees and his entry into academia. He and his wife, Kathy, who holds a doctorate in social work with a specialty practice in child trauma, have two sons: Chris, who works in education policy in Los Angeles, and Ben, who is pursuing a career in sculpture in Brooklyn, NY. In his description of his roles as a husband and father Dr. Copolillo stated that they “have been the most important and joyful roles in my life and have provided lessons that I’ve been able to apply in a variety of work environments.” Further, he noted that “I am fortunate to be able to say that I have been surrounded by loving friends and family who have supported me through difficult periods. I am grateful beyond words for their kindness and compassion.”

Finally, when asked about significant professional accomplishments, Dr. Copolillo stated that his “contributions to educating students, treating patients, and advancing the careers of my faculty colleagues are the accomplishments I’m most proud of.” We are pleased to celebrate this exceptional member of our professional community as our sponsor profile for the Winter 2020 issue.