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Sandra E. Edwards, MA, OTRL, FAOTA

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Sponsor Profile:

Sandra E. Edwards, MA, OTRL, FAOTA



The *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) is pleased to present its Fall 2022 sponsor profile featuring Sandra J. Edwards, Professor Emerita of Occupational Therapy (OT) at Western Michigan University. Over a career spanning more than 50 years, Sandra has built a legacy as an accomplished clinician, educator, scholar, advocate, and leader in our profession.

Reflecting on what led to her selection of occupational therapy as a career, Sandra described an early influence from a great aunt who was active in prison reform at a time when few, if any, women engaged in this work, particularly in some very dangerous correctional facilities (see Figure 1). Her great aunt's strong commitment to service for a highly vulnerable population was inspirational and perhaps seminal in her seeking a profession that incorporates service to others as a salient feature. An initial interest in elementary education transitioned to occupational therapy because of a desire to incorporate the strong biological, medical, and social science emphases in the OT program at the University of Florida (UF). As a student in the OT department, Sandra was fascinated by intricate details that could be learned from the study of anatomy, which included dissection and exploration of a cadaver. At that time, OT at UF joined classes with medical students in neurology and anatomy. Sandra also describes the excellent training she received in clinical observation at UF and felt this led to a strong skill set in observing factors necessary for a thorough understanding of the impact of a wide range of conditions on occupational performance.

Figure 1
Aunt Mittie



After working in a general hospital, Sandra was awarded a grant to study clinical techniques in the prestigious rehabilitation center at Ranchos Los Amigos. Since her early days as an occupational therapist, Sandra has pursued recognition of OT equity with other health care providers. Obtaining advanced certifications by way of direct training with Jean Ayres (Sensory Integration) and Drs. Berta and Carl Bobath (Neurodevelopmental Treatment) led to self-assurance that she could, when applicable, propose and explain these approaches to other professionals on her team. "I was competitive and wanted [occupational therapists] to be recognized equitably on the team. My goal has been to educate physicians to understand the power of OT." The experience that led to her "thinking like an OT" was an insistence on "walking that labyrinth of being scientifically objective while remaining as human as possible."

Following 8 years of clinical experience, Sandra was drawn to an advertisement for a position at Western Michigan University. She applied and was hired after completing a master's degree in special education. For the next 32 years, she was instrumental in shaping the curriculum's pediatrics, including developing a highly acclaimed graduate course in sensory integration that provided intensive clinical, hands-on experiences in addition to state-of-the-art didactics. This course was viewed by the professional community as a "must" for any student who wished to complete a Level II fieldwork placement where this approach was used. She held a persistent connection to her students that is expressed by her statement, "I love occupational therapy students. I adore them." In addition to her strong focus on the formative development of relational, creative, meaningful, and rigorous approaches to teaching and learning, Sandra was consistently active as an engaged advocate with leadership roles in the Faculty Senate, which is solely dedicated to policy and procedures that drive the academic component of the university. In describing "lessons learned," Sandra states the need for:

listening and knowing how to really 'get behind the eyeballs' of the client and the parents. If you get and understand their perception of what they are experiencing and what they want, then you are better able to assist them. Respect for the person is key. I also learned it is particularly important to treat your own self with compassion, kindness, and love when dealing with such sad, tragic situations. We encounter many challenges and need to learn how to restore ourselves to continue to be compassionate.

Career accomplishments of which she is proud include the trust that she acquired with students, the efforts she consistently put forth to ensure creative and meaningful classroom experiences, and the Teaching Excellence Award. She is also proud of her Outstanding Alumna Award from UF (2016), her 40 juried presentations at national and international conferences, numerous journal publications, invited chapters in textbooks, and two books. Her nationally recognized research on hands, as well as the neurophysiological responses to therapy, led to publications, presentations, and workshops on assessment and therapy for children with Down Syndrome. The publication by Slack in 2002 of *Developmental and Functional Hand Grasps*, coauthored with two former graduate students, Donna J. Buckland and Jenna D. McCoy-Powlen, included a taxonomy of power and precision grasps. This taxonomy was used by engineers (robotics), physicians, and health care workers. She was invited by Slack to write a 2nd revised and expanded edition entitled *Hand Grasps and Manipulation Skills* (published in 2018 with an added fourth author, Dr. Michelle Suarez). The first edition of the book led to research collaborations with faculty and graduate students from the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department using a Haptic Robot. "We designed assessment and intervention programs that developed Rehabilitation Engineering at Western Michigan University."

She "met and married a wonderful man," Al Garcia. They live in Michigan and Florida (snowbirds); are now in their 46th year of marriage; and have two outstanding sons, a dynamic daughter-in-law, and four fabulous grandchildren. Among many supportive actions that Sandra appreciates is Al's gift to the Department of Occupational Therapy at UF, which led to the creation of the Sandra Edwards Colloquium honoring her contributions as a UF alum to occupational therapy practice, education, and research. This colloquium is an annual event providing a robust educational opportunity that has drawn expert speakers and nationwide attendance. Since its inaugural event in 2017, the keynote speakers have

included Elizabeth Skidmore, Roseann Schaaf, Anita Bundy, Sharon Cermak, Susie Stark, and Timothy Wolf. More information can be found here: <https://ot.phhp.ufl.edu/category/sandra-edwards-colloquium/>.

Throughout her career, Sandra has been a dynamic force as an advocate for occupational therapy as a clinician, educator, and scholar, and in leadership positions in her professional community with the continual theme of insisting that others know the significant value of occupational therapy. Induction into the Roster of Fellows of the American Occupational Therapy Association in 1996 is a testimony of the peer recognition of her many contributions as an educator, clinician, scholar, and advocate. Clearly, Sandra has made many significant contributions to our profession on so many levels. She is a treasure to her family, her colleagues, and this profession, and we proudly celebrate her in this Fall issue.

Authored by Sandra Edwards and Al Garcia – an effective, collaborative team