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The Art and Science of Occupation as Therapy

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The Art and Science of Occupation as Therapy

Abstract

Ashley Woo Lee, an occupational therapy student based in Loma Linda, CA, provided the cover art for the Winter 2018 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (Figure 1). The piece, titled "Tree of Life," is a 11" x 14" drawing made from mixed media. As a child living in Korea, Ashley enjoyed drawing as a favorite pastime. After her family relocated to the United States, art became Ashley's primary means for self-expression. When a career in art was not an option, the field of occupational therapy satisfied Ashley's artistic and scientific interests. In a recent interview, Ashley shared how she uses her talents to help others participate in meaningful occupations.

Keywords

occupational therapist, occupational therapy, student, art, science, drawing, occupation

Credentials Display

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“Man, through the use of his hands as they are energized by the mind and will, can influence the state of his own health” (Reilly, 1962, p. 2). Occupational therapy practitioners enable their clients to participate in meaningful activities using occupation as therapy. Wood (1995) uses the metaphor of weaving a tapestry to describe the art and science of occupational therapy practice. Wood’s article is organized around two fundamental principles: warp and weft. In weaving, warp is a technical term for the thread held in tension on a loom, and weft is the thread woven over and under the warp to create structure. Together, warp and weft characterize the substance of a tapestry. Wood describes the warp of occupational therapy practice as the philosophical belief that engagement in occupation can influence health outcomes. No tapestry is complete with just warp. Therefore, the weft of occupational therapy practice is the humanistic value of respect for the person. Occupational therapy is a powerful tapestry of human potential that unfolds when these beliefs and values are woven together (Wood, 1995). Thus, the warp and weft of occupational therapy refers to the art and science of clinical practice. Woven together, these common threads create a bond that is inseparable.

Ashley Woo Lee, an occupational therapy student at Loma Linda University in California, provided the cover art for the Winter 2018 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1). The piece, titled “Tree of Life,” is an 11” x 14” drawing made from mixed media. As a child living in Korea, Ashley’s favorite pastime was drawing. After her family relocated to the United States, art became Ashley’s primary means of self-expression. When a career in art was not an option, the field of occupational therapy satisfied Ashley’s artistic and scientific interests. In a recent interview, Ashley shared her experiences using occupation as therapy.

Ashley was born in 1990 in Seoul, Korea. When the Korean economy entered a period of financial crisis in 1997, Ashley’s father, Han, lost his job. In search of opportunity, Han relocated the family to Los Angeles, CA. Ashley, her older sister Jenny, and their parents lived in a one-bedroom apartment furnished with a small table and a single used mattress. Ashley was 9 years old at the time. “I grew up watching my parents work diligently to support our family,” she said. Han worked several jobs while Ashley’s mother, Myung, studied tirelessly to become a registered nurse. Ashley’s parents demonstrated a strong work ethic, determination, and perseverance to their daughters starting at a young age. “I learned to appreciate the small things in life, and to celebrate all accomplishments, no matter how small,” Ashley said.

As a child living in Korea, Ashley enjoyed spending time with her older sister. “I looked up to Jenny and copied whatever she did. Jenny liked to doodle so I did the same,” she said. After relocating to the United States, art became much more than a pastime. “When my limited vocabulary failed me, art was my voice,” said Ashley. According to Coppola, Miao, Allmendinger, and Zhang (2017), “Art is a form of expression that can fill a void in our ability to use words to communicate feelings, experiences,

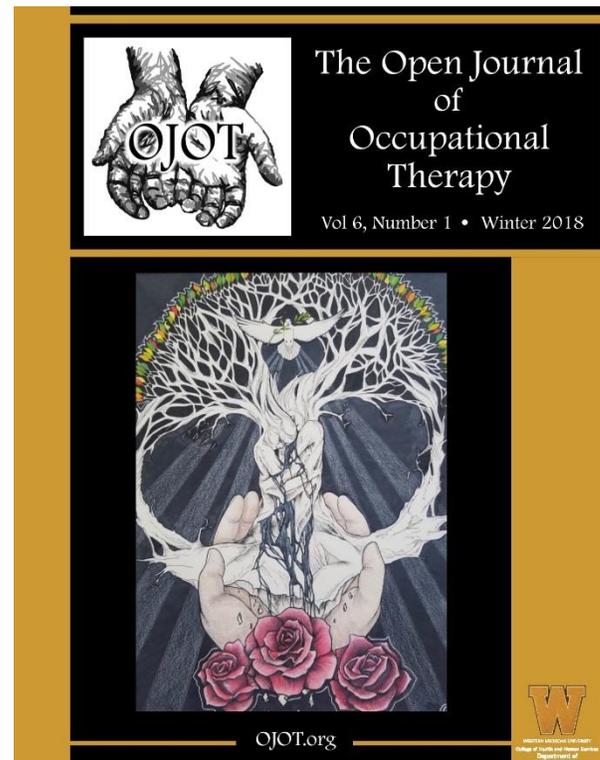


Figure 1. Cover of Winter 2018 issue of OJOT

and connections to each other” (p. 13). Drawing also made school work easier for Ashley. “I did not realize that I had artistic talent until my elementary school teachers gave me praise for my drawings,” she said. At home, a career in art was never a long-term option. Ashley’s father even discouraged her from drawing. “My parents always told me I needed to get an education and to find a stable career. Part of me did not want to turn art into a career,” she said. Ashley realized early on that she did not want someone else to put deadlines on her art. “When I am drawing, I can get in a flow where I start in the morning and suddenly its evening and I wonder, Where did the day go?” she said. Art has always been a therapeutic form of self-expression for Ashley. She wanted her art to remain free.

In 2008, Ashley began her freshman year at the University of California, San Diego, where she concentrated her studies on both art and science. Ashley believes weaving together her artistic talents and scientific interests helped her prepare for a future career in occupational therapy. “My training in art has helped me to think outside of the box, and to see things differently,” she said. These skills are evident in the piece titled “Barbara Palvin,” an 11” x 14” portrait made from mixed media (see Figure 2). Ashley also credits art for her keen observation skills. “I am very detail oriented and can pick up on subtle things,” she said. Ashley’s ability to perceive fine details has made it easier for her to build rapport with others quickly. A study by Coppola et al. (2017) found art-based experiences to be feasible and important aspects of pedagogy for preparing occupational therapy students for entry-level practice. Ashley also believes that growing up with family members employed in the health professions sparked her curiosity for science. Having background knowledge in the health sciences has made it easier for Ashley to learn new concepts quickly. “The science side of me enjoys the biomechanics of how the body functions in a tangible way. The artistic side enjoys the creative process,” she said. In *Occupational Therapy: Configuration of a Profession*, Mosey (1981) states that “the capacity to establish rapport, to empathize, and to guide others to know and make use of their potential as participants in a community of others illustrates the art of occupational therapy” (as cited in Peloquin, 1989, p. 220). Peloquin (1989) adds that Mosey believed that without art, “occupational therapy would become the application of scientific knowledge in a sterile vacuum” (Peloquin, 1989, p. 220).

As college graduation grew near, Ashley began exploring options for graduate school. With Myung working as a registered nurse and Jenny in pharmacy school, Ashley decided to focus on the health professions. “I always thought I would end up in a medical profession,” she said. Jenny suggested a career in occupational therapy. Ashley was not sure what occupational therapy was, so she did some research. “When I found the word ‘creativity’ in the description I was intrigued,” she said. The idea of a medical profession that would satisfy both her artistic and scientific interests excited Ashley. In 2012, Ashley graduated from the University of California with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology and a minor in studio arts. Ashley says her undergraduate training and education helped her to develop a balanced and holistic perspective in preparation for graduate school. After graduation, Ashley wanted to gain some real life experience in the field, so she started volunteering at a pediatric occupational therapy clinic. Over time, Ashley made connections to her own life as an immigrant child.

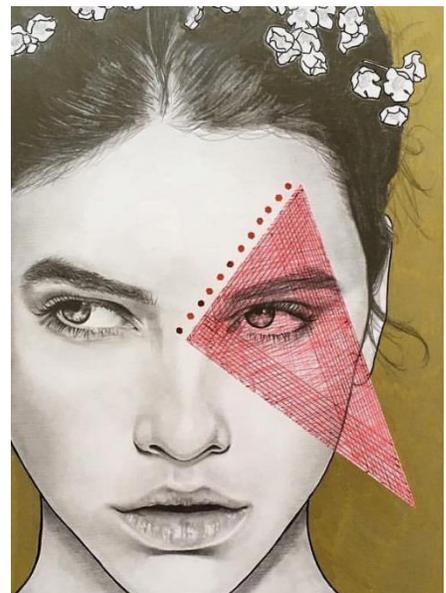


Figure 2. “Barbara Palvin” by Ashley Woo Lee

There were many times when she relied on art as a means to communicate. “I thought that maybe I could help people with disabilities find their voice through art,” she said. “The art of occupational therapy is the soul of its practice” (Peloquin, 1989, p. 219).

In 2015, Ashley entered the occupational therapy program at Loma Linda University. Early in the program, Ashley attended an educational program focused on the role of occupational therapy in end of life care. The speaker, Dr. Heather Javaherian-Dysinger, OTD, OTR/L shared a personal story of her late husband’s experience with illness after receiving a diagnosis of stage IV cancer. Dr. Javaherian-Dysinger described her attempts to balance her roles as wife, mother of two, occupational therapist, and caregiver. She also expressed how her faith helped her to get through such a difficult time. “This experience touched my heart and influenced the way I look at palliative care,” said Ashley. She left the event feeling inspired. To process her feelings, Ashley began to draw. The finished piece, titled “Tree of Life,” is the cover art featured of this edition of OJOT. “I chose this title because Dr. Javaherian-Dysinger said that before her husband passed away they made a promise to each other that they would reunite one day at the Tree of Life in heaven,” Ashley said. Every detail of the drawing contains special meaning. For example, the couple entangled in the tree trunk represents the reunion at the Tree of Life. The water flowing through the trunk signifies the tears that were shed and the difficulties endured by the family. The three roses at the base of the tree represent a romantic Valentine’s Day the couple spent together at the hospital. The dove at the top of the drawing and the hands supporting the base of the trunk represent God’s presence. When Ashley presented the drawing, Dr. Javaherian-Dysinger was overcome with emotion. Ashley says this piece is the most meaningful drawing she has ever done.

Ashley is currently in her final year of the occupational therapy program at Loma Linda University. She recently completed her first Level II fieldwork rotation in the outpatient hand therapy clinic at Loma Linda University Medical Center. During this experience, she realized self-expression comes in many forms. “I am learning that people express themselves through participation in meaningful occupations,” she said. “A man buttoning his shirt, a mother breast-feeding her baby, a teenage boy styling his hair. . .these occupations are all forms of self-expression.” In future practice, Ashley hopes to return to the hand therapy clinic. “I fell in love with hand therapy during fieldwork. It’s a lot of fun,” she said. Ashley says a lot of patients do not realize how important their hands are until they have an injury. “It is kind of humbling to meet patients who come in after an injury. They struggle so hard to complete everyday tasks,” she said. Ashley enjoys helping her patients make gains from beginning to end. “I enjoy everything about it.”

Ashley is on track to graduate from Loma Linda University with a master’s degree in occupational therapy in the Spring 2018. Although she did not have the opportunity to integrate art into practice during her fieldwork assignment, Ashley can imagine it in future practice. “I have a lot of dreams where I help people develop coping mechanisms through art,” she said. Ashley is specifically interested in using art as a therapeutic modality to help children who have experienced trauma and individuals living with mental illness. Yerxa (1998) describes occupational therapists as “search engine[s] for potential,” (p. 413) committed to improving life for all people. The original values and standards on which the profession of occupational therapy was founded are grounded in the use of occupation as therapy. Like the woven tapestry of art and science, Ashley looks forward to using occupation as therapy in future clinical practice.

Additional Information

OJOT Gallery: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

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