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Healing the Mind and Soul with Art and Music

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Abstract

Gracie Fisher, an artist and composer based in Santa Barbara, California, provided the cover art for the Fall 2020 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "The Fruit of Spirit" is a 16" x 20" oil painting on canvas. When a rare neurologic condition left Gracie paralyzed from the neck down, art and music helped to heal her mind and soul. Upon returning home from the hospital, Gracie's wish was to create an inclusive environment where children of all abilities could engage in art and music. She founded the Grace Fisher Foundation so others could experience the healing nature of occupation. Gracie believes art comes in many forms. With the right environment, tools and supports, anyone can create.

Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, adaptive art, music therapy, Acute Flaccid Myelitis, quadriplegia, Gracie Fisher

Credentials Display

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The construct of art as a therapeutic modality has received much attention in recent decades. A literature review by Madden and Bloom (2004) found creation of art in all forms to be a therapeutically effective tool. For many people, engaging in art and music creates opportunities to express thoughts and emotions they may have otherwise been unable to share. For people with disabilities, engagement in meaningful occupations such as these is often restricted by contextual factors. In the field of occupational therapy, context is interwoven with the concept of occupational justice, which is described as having access to, and participation in, the full range of meaningful occupations afforded to others, including opportunities or social inclusion and the resources needed to participate (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). With the right environment, tools, and support people of all abilities can experience art and music as a therapeutic modality.

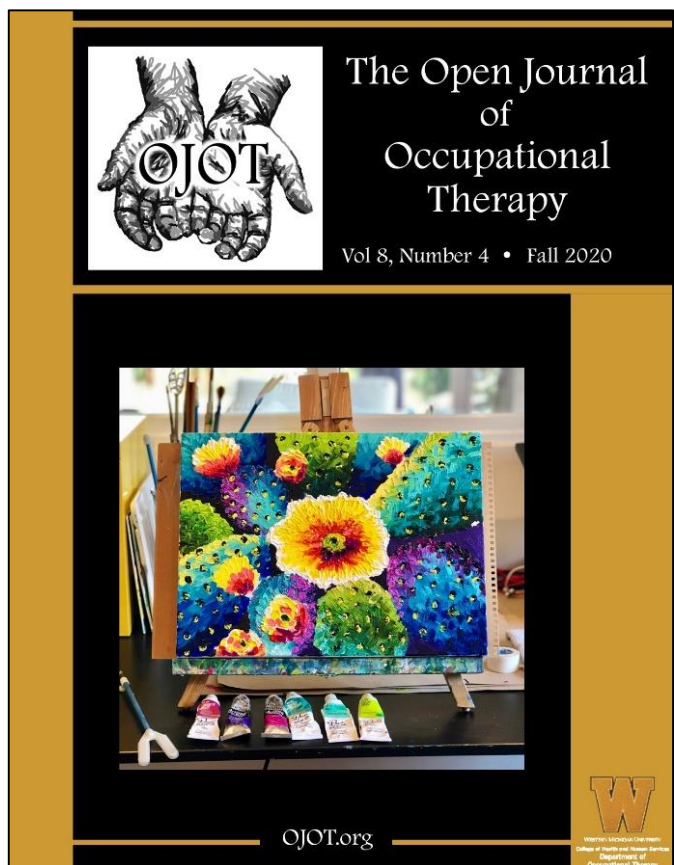
Gracie Fisher, an artist and composer based in Santa Barbara, California, provided the cover art for the Fall 2020 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1). “The Fruit of Spirit” is a 16” x 20” oil painting on canvas. When a rare neurologic condition left Gracie paralyzed from the neck down, art and music helped to heal her mind and soul. Upon returning home from the hospital, Gracie’s wish was to create an inclusive environment where children of all abilities could engage in art and music. She founded the Grace Fisher Foundation so others could experience the healing nature of occupation. Gracie believes art comes in many forms. With the right environment, tools, and supports, anyone can create.

As a child, Gracie Fisher wanted to try everything. “When I was younger, it was hard for me to sit still and fully involve myself in one activity,” she said. Gracie participated in several meaningful occupations, including music, dance, theater, and art. Gracie’s love of music began in kindergarten when she began taking piano lessons.

“My sister Emily played the violin so we enjoyed music together,” said Gracie. Dance helped Gracie to harness her energy in a disciplined way. She also enjoyed the theater. “I was in a few stage productions,” said Gracie. “For a long time, I really wanted to be an actress, but the time commitment was too much for me to continue.” Gracie always enjoyed art but with such a full schedule she had little time to develop her skills. “I had to pick and choose which activities I put my energy into when I was growing up,” she said.

When Gracie was in the sixth grade, she and Emily attended a summer music camp in Utah. “It was the first time I saw a string quartet play,” said Gracie. She developed a love for stringed instruments. Gracie returned from camp feeling inspired. “I asked my mom if I could play the cello,” she said. Once Gracie began to practice, she developed her skill quickly. Gracie says playing the piano was

Figure 1
Cover Art for *OJOT* Vol 8, No 4, Fall 2020



beneficial because it gave her a general understanding of reading music. During her freshman year of high school, Gracie started playing the guitar. “It was easy to pick up guitar after playing the cello,” said Gracie. “I learned most of what I know from YouTube.” The summer before Gracie’s junior year of high school, she attended a 5-week intensive program at Berkley College of Music. She enjoyed staying in the dorms and developing friendships with teens who shared the same goals and interests. As a result of this experience, Gracie decided to pursue a career in music.

Gracie continued her busy lifestyle through her senior year of high school. In November of 2014, Gracie’s 17th birthday came and went. “At the time, we were so busy filling out college applications I did not have time to celebrate with family and friends,” she said. Gracie postponed her party until December 21st, the first day of winter break. Gracie’s fun-loving spirit came through in her party planning, which included a swimming pool, inflatable jumper slide, and massive helium balloons. As guests arrived, Gracie suddenly began to feel ill. She experienced a sharp pain in her neck and tingling in both of her arms. “At first, I thought it was a pinched nerve,” said Gracie. “When the pain got worse, I knew something was really wrong.” Gracie’s mother took her to the hospital. During the 7 min. drive, Gracie’s symptoms progressed rapidly. “By the time we arrived, I was unable to walk,” she said.

Gracie was admitted to the hospital and her condition worsened. In a matter of hours, she was completely paralyzed from the neck down. That evening, Gracie went into respiratory failure. She was intubated and required a ventilator to breathe. Doctors diagnosed Gracie with a rare neurological condition called Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), AFM is a polio-like condition that affects the spinal cord causing rapid onset of weakness and paralysis (CDC, 2020). To date, there have been only 633 cases of AFM in the United States. Over 90% of cases have been in children. Gracie was the 101st confirmed case of AFM in the United States.

After 5 weeks in the intensive care unit, Gracie’s condition was unchanged. “I had the ability to move my neck, but it was very weak,” she said. Gracie was transferred to Craig Hospital in Denver, Colorado, where she began intensive inpatient rehabilitation that included 5 hr of therapy each day. “I was sick and in a lot of pain,” said Gracie. “It was really hard, but we were working on getting better.” Gracie’s therapies included physical therapy, occupational therapy, and recreational therapy. “One of the things I liked about Craig is how they have different types of occupational therapists,” said Gracie. “Some specialized in upper extremity rehabilitation, and some in robotic treatments, or adaptive technology.” Gracie’s primary occupational therapist suggested that she try adaptive art and music therapy. These activities would tap into Gracie’s intrinsic motivation, serve as a creative outlet, and provide a means to strengthen the muscles in Gracie’s neck. “I had some strength, but could not hold up my head very well,” she said. Gracie started painting with an adaptive brush attached to a mouth stick. She controls the brush with a mouthpiece held between her teeth. Gracie’s first attempt at mouth painting resulted in the canvas filled with brightly colored flowers. “Poppies” (see Figure 2) is an 8.5” x 11” oil painting on canvas. “I was proud because it was something really fun that I created,” said Gracie. “I felt like I could get good at this.”

With time and practice, Gracie's muscles grew stronger. She regained the ability to hold her head up independently. Participation in music therapy required some additional facilitation. "Since I could not move anything, we were not sure how I could use music therapy," said Gracie. "My music therapist was open to trying new things." One evening, an idea came to Gracie in a dream. "I was using a mouth stick to play a keyboard," she said. "I could use computer software to lay down multiple tracks and make something cool." As a talented musician, it took time for Gracie to adjust her own expectations. She went from performing complex arrangements on multiple instruments to playing simple melodies with a stick. "This experience opened me up to a great opportunity for growth." During rehabilitation, Gracie says her primary source of motivation was twofold: working toward a goal with a tangible result (i.e., painting) and building strength so she can create more art and music. Not only did participation in art and music strengthen Gracie's body, it also helped to heal her mind and soul.

Gracie spent 8 months in intensive rehabilitation at Craig Hospital. As she was preparing to return home, she experienced a period of transition. Gracie came to the realization that paralysis was something she would have to live with. "I thought I would go to Craig and everything would be fixed," she said. "What made it real to me was picking out the color of my wheelchair. I thought, okay, I am going home in this huge, bulky chair." At first, it was difficult for Gracie to accept that she would be living her life in a wheelchair. "Now I get excited about the thought of getting a new chair. That is definitely not how I felt when I was in the hospital."

Gracie received a warm welcome from her community. Friends and neighbors created a welcome garden in her front yard, complete with colorful signs, banners, and dozens of plastic pink flamingos. While Gracie was in Colorado, her home underwent modifications to improve accessibility. To ensure Gracie could enter the home safely, the front steps were replaced with a concrete ramp courtesy of two local Eagle Scouts. As Gracie settled in to her new normal, she observed friends heading back to college on social media. "It kind of put me in a sink hole," said Gracie. "I felt like I was not working toward something." Gracie tried to think of ways to apply what she had learned at Craig with her passion for art and music. "I wanted to create something we did not have in Santa Barbara," she said. "I wanted to make a difference." Gracie's wish was to create an inclusive environment where children of all abilities could engage in art and music.

In 2016, the Make-A-Wish Foundation helped Gracie's make her wish a reality. The Grace Fisher Foundation (GFF) was created to bring adaptive art and music education to children with disabilities and their families. Through their Allies for the Arts workshops, GFF provides opportunities for local families to engage in creative projects such as painting, mosaics, sculpture, and collaborative murals. Gracie believes art comes in many forms. "Art isn't just something you put on paper," she said. "Art is movement, art is sound, art is expression. All you need is the environment and the tools and

Figure 2
"Poppies" (2019) by Gracie Fisher



support to create.” GFF recently began offering an Adaptive Dance Series that provides opportunities for therapeutic movement and social interaction. “As a youth, dance might have been the single most important activity I was involved in,” said Gracie. For an active child such as Gracie, dance was so much more than physical activity. “Dance taught me self-expression, teamwork, spontaneity, discipline, and focus,” she said. “Dance also helped me to build bonds with my friends and gave me confidence.” Gracie has enjoyed engaging with the dance participants at GFF. “It is so special to see these girls build friendships and confidence in an inclusive environment.”

Gracie serves as GFF’s founder and creative director. As such, one of her roles is to assist with planning an annual fundraising event. Every year, GFF produces a Winter Music Showcase featuring Gracie’s original compositions performed live. Gracie enjoys writing songs and selecting the line-up of musicians and performers. This year, GFF was awarded a grant to hold the Winter Showcase at the Grenada Theatre, a landmark of the performing arts community in Santa Barbara. “Unfortunately, we can’t hold it there due to the restrictions created by COVID-19,” said Gracie. “We are going to film the event while practicing social distancing.” Gracie has selected eight groups to perform in different locations of the theater. “We want the event to be beneficial for the theater, too,” said Gracie. The Winter Showcase will be broadcast on local television stations, YouTube Live, and Hulu Live on December 19th, 2020. The money raised will allow GFF to continue bringing art and music to the children and families they serve. This year, GFF plans to create adaptive art and music tutorials to expand the reach of their services. “I would not be able to do what I do without the community in Santa Barbara,” said Gracie. “We are a close knit community where everyone supports each other.”

Since founding GFF, Gracie has continued mouth painting. Her work station is equipped with ergonomic tables with adjustable heights so her wheelchair can fit underneath. Gracie has developed an expressionist style that incorporates vivid colors, thick lines, and loads of texture. She uses oil paints but often abandons her paint brush for an adapted mouth stick with a glove at the end. Gracie has found this method more effective for moving the paints and creating texture on canvas. Gracie loves to paint flowers. “My garden is my greatest source of joy and inspiration,” she said (see Figure 3). Painting has become one of Gracie’s favorite creative outlets and stress relievers. “I could never have imagined the kind of joy painting would bring me, or the value others would see in my work,” she said. “The half-finished pieces, the frustration of painters-block, learning new skills, sore cheeks and blank canvas calling my name are all part of the process I would have missed if I had not accepted the challenge to start.”

In 2019, Gracie enrolled in her first formal art class. “This class was where I developed a real understanding of painting,” she said. “The instructors gave us prompts to paint from which were fun and interesting.” One of the prompts was to create a sequel to

Figure 3

Photograph of Gracie Fisher Painting with a Mouth Stick



an existing painting by a famous artist. Gracie chose “The Goldfish,” a painting that was originally created by French artist Henry Matisse in 1912. The painting depicts four goldfish peering out of a cylindrical glass bowl. Gracie’s sequel, “The Naughty Kitty” (see Figure 4), is a 11” x 14” oil painting on canvas. The painting portrays a similar scene to “The Goldfish,” but with a twist. Gracie added a cat perched on the table edge, dipping his front paws into the fish bowl. “I learned a lot from this experience,” said Gracie. “In a world of instant gratification, it taught me to have patience with myself and the creative process.”

Gracie has continued to create beautiful music. Her method has come a long way since the evening at Craig Hospital where she dreamed of playing her keyboard. In 2018, Gracie composed an original piece for a 12-part orchestra titled “Waltz of the Waves” using a mouth stick, keyboard, and QuadJoy assistive technology (see Figure 5). Gracie says the music was inspired by a seascape she was painting simultaneously. The piece was performed live by the Santa Barbara Youth Symphony. “I have adapted the way I do things,” said Gracie. “Along the way I have learned that no matter your limitations, we all can create.”

In 2019, Gracie committed to the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). She is currently studying music composition in the College of Creative Studies and will start her junior year this fall. Courses are delivered online. This works well for Gracie because she writes all of her music on the computer. “This has been a dream of mine since being affected by AFM,” said Gracie. She feels very blessed and honored to be accepted into this program. “I may not have as much independence as I once did, but I am still able to accomplish my goals,” said Gracie. “That is all that matters.”

Gracie says she will never give up on regaining function, but for the time being she is very happy doing what she loves. Through her foundation, Gracie pays it forward so children with disabilities and their families can experience art and music as a therapeutic modality. As she reflects on life since receiving the AFM diagnosis, Gracie wishes she could write her former self a letter. It would read: “Dear newly diagnosed Gracie. It might look like the end of world right now, but I promise it gets better. Each day will expose new light. You will find your hope, your passion, and your place in this new life. Have kindness in your heart and the strength to carry on.”

Figure 4

“The Naughty Kitty” (2019) by Gracie Fisher



Figure 5

Photograph of Gracie Fisher Using Assistive Technology to Compose Music



View more of Gracie’s paintings in the OJOT Gallery

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

Learn about the Gracie Fisher Foundation

<https://www.gracefisherfoundation.org/>

Watch Gracie’s story, “Song of Solstice,” on Vimeo

<https://vimeo.com/380839099>

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