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## Life Repurposed: Finding a New Calling Through Meaningful Occupation

Jennifer K. Fortuna

*Grand Valley State University – USA, [jennifer.fortuna@wmich.edu](mailto:jennifer.fortuna@wmich.edu)*

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## Life Repurposed: Finding a New Calling Through Meaningful Occupation

### Abstract

Kelly Allen, an occupational therapist and artist based in Grand Rapids, MI, provided the cover art for the Spring 2021 edition of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Follow" is a 16" x 20" painting made from oil on panel. The painting, which features a coati from Central America, is from Kelly's Animal Totem series. After more than 2 decades as a fine artist and educator, she began searching for a career change. Kelly's background in fine art and her desire to help others prepared her for a career in occupational therapy. Certain events in Kelly's life aligned not by chance, but to prepare for her for what was next.

### Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, art, painting, creative reuse, Kelly Allen

### Credentials Display

Jennifer Fortuna, PhD, OTR/L

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Kelly Allen, an occupational therapist and artist based in Grand Rapids, MI, provided the cover art for the Spring 2021 edition of the *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). “Follow” is a 16” x 20” painting made from oil paint on panel (see Figure 1). The painting, which features a coati from Central America, is from Kelly’s Animal Totem series. After more than 2 decades as a fine artist and educator, she began searching for a career change. A background in fine art and a desire to help others prepared Kelly for a career in occupational therapy. Certain events in Kelly’s life aligned not by chance, but to prepare for her for what was next.

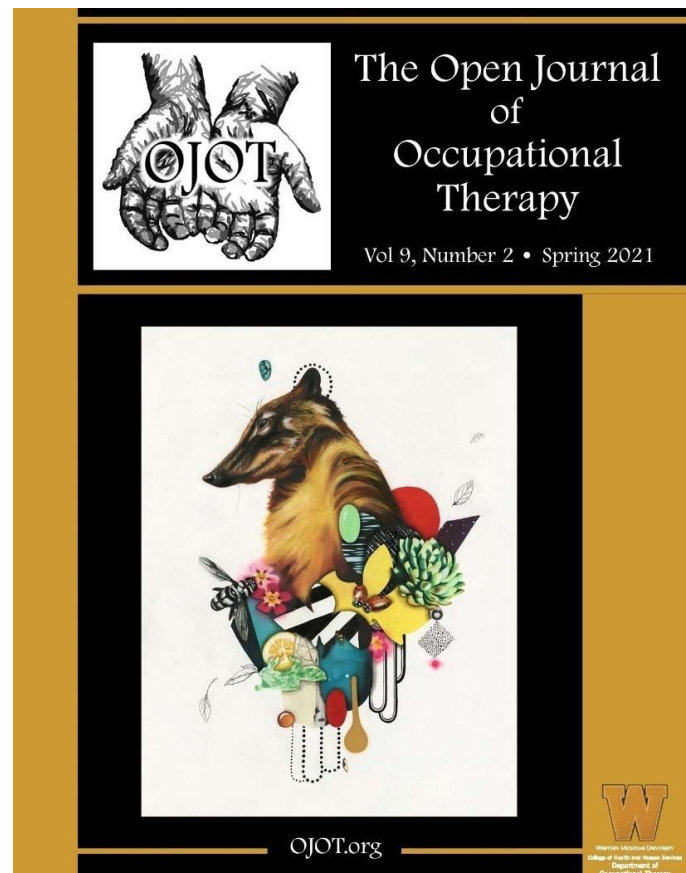
Kelly Allen was born and raised in Woodhaven, MI. As a child, Kelly was constantly creating things. She often woke up early in the morning eager to start creating. For example, at the age of 5, Kelly made a weaving loom. “I used a pair of scissors to snip my garbage can on both ends to make the loom,” she said. Kelly practiced weaving while she watched Saturday morning cartoons. “I have always had a strong drive to be creative, productive, and to work with my hands,” she said. “I find it endlessly thrilling and soothing to produce something beautiful out of the materials around me.” In high school, Kelly’s family moved to Grand Rapids, MI. She was admitted into the advanced placement art class at her new school. Kelly enjoyed having free reign of the art room and unlimited access to supplies and materials. During her senior year, Kelly began to explore potential career paths. She was interested in psychology and wanted to help people. Kelly considered art therapy as an option. “My art teacher encouraged me to pursue a career in fine art,” she said. “Art has been an obsession my whole life.”

Kelly enrolled at Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA. In 2003, she earned a bachelor’s degree in studio art. After graduation, Kelly moved back to Grand Rapids and found love. Kelly and her partner started Ruby Clothing Company. “I designed t-shirts and he did the screen printing,” she said. The shirts were sold in boutiques across the country and in Tokyo, Japan. Kelly decided to pursue a master’s degree at Kendall College of Art and Design. While in graduate school, Kelly worked as a freelance artist. She was also employed as the assistant director at the Byrneboehm Gallery and served as curator on the Visual Arts Committee at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts. In 2007, Kelly completed the Artist’s Residency program at the Ox-Bow School of Art in Saugatuck, MI (ox-bow.org, n.d.).

In 2008, Kelly earned a master’s degree in fine art from Kendall College of Art and Design. She considered using her advanced degree as an art professor. “It was important for me to live and work as a professional artist before teaching young art students to do the same,” she said. In 2010, Kelly moved to San Francisco, CA, to begin her career as a professional artist. Kelly describes the body of work

**Figure 1**

*Cover Art for OJOT Vol 9, No 2, Spring 2021*



produced during this time as hyper-realism based on collage. “Sweet Breath” is a 15” x 16” oil painting on canvas (see Figure 2). Kelly’s creative process includes building a collage from paper and other mediums, painting a realistic representation of the collage, and disassembling the collage so the materials can be reused. Kelly’s paintings were very successful in local art shows. “The markets were open to my work,” she said. “My career really took off.” Kelly’s paintings were exhibited and sold all over the world. In 2012, Kelly moved to Los Angeles to seek new opportunities and collectors of her art.

While living in California, Kelly sought out opportunities to help others in her community. She volunteered at Creative Growth Art Center, a non-profit organization serving artists with disabilities in Oakland, CA ([creativegrowth.org](http://creativegrowth.org)).

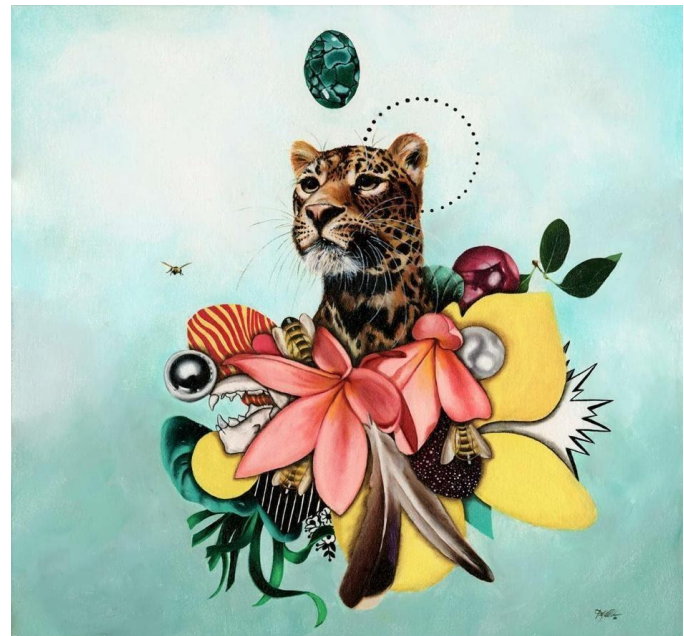
“I took one step in the building and my heart was stolen,” she said. “It changed my life.” Kelly spent as much time as she could volunteering in the studio. She developed workshops on costume making, drawing, sculpture, and printmaking. The artists at Creative Growth have a vast range of skill levels and abilities. Kelly invented ways to modify and adapt tools for artists who were without sight, or lacked fine motor skills. Occupational adaptation is an intervention process used to guide critical thinking and clinical reasoning in occupational therapy practice (Grajo, 2019). “I enjoyed working one-on-one with these unique individuals,” she said. Although Kelly did not realize it at the time, these experiences helped to prepare her for a career in occupational therapy.

During her free time, Kelly could be found exploring creative reuse stores. These non-traditional art supply stores aim to repurpose a variety of materials that can be used in creative projects and educational workshops. Materials such as fabric, paper, and wood are donated by local businesses, manufacturers, and individuals in the community. Each year, organizations such as the East Bay Depot for Creative Reuse divert over 200 tons of reusable materials from landfills ([creativereuse.org](http://creativereuse.org)). The concept of creative reuse is important to Kelly as both a person and an artist. She believes these stores are a valuable community resource.

In 2013, Kelly moved back to Grand Rapids with vast knowledge about the professional art world. “I realized working with artists with disabilities was more meaningful and profound,” she said. Kelly shifted her focus to becoming a college art professor and sought out organizations similar to Creative Growth. She began working as a teaching artist for Artists Creating Together (ACT), a non-profit organization that empowers individuals with disabilities to learn and grow through the arts ([artistscreatingtogether.org](http://artistscreatingtogether.org)). ACT provides access to visual arts, music, creative movement, and other forms of creative expression to promote skill development. At ACT, Kelly was introduced to sensory integration, a concept she would use in future occupational therapy practice. Kelly enjoyed teaching art classes that reused recycled materials. “I have always been interested in creating with the materials I have around me,” she said. Kelly believes working with limited materials can make you more creative.

**Figure 2**

“Sweet Breath” (2012) by Kelly Allen





“Bioforms 5” is a 36” x 36” painting made from acrylic and mixed media on panel (see Figure 3). Although Kelly enjoyed working with ACT, she wanted to do more. Kelly made the decision to open a creative reuse store similar to the shops she frequented in California. She envisioned a space where people could purchase reclaimed art supplies, participate in workshops, and learn new skills. In addition, Kelly wanted to repurpose art supplies and materials to keep them out of landfills.

In 2014, Kelly founded Wisemaker Creative Reuse Store and Studio, an arts and crafts thrift shop and studio space. The store was housed inside of a maker’s space in downtown Grand Rapids. Although creative reuse stores are common in large cities across the United States, this concept was novel to West Michigan. With a history rooted in manufacturing, Kelly knew Grand Rapids was the ideal location. In addition, she had connections with local designers who could donate samples of fabrics, foam cut outs, and other materials. Kelly’s store was well received by the local community. “I had several volunteers who were willing to help in any way they could,” she said. Kelly’s volunteers included individuals of all abilities including an older adult seeking work to keep her mind busy, and a woman who was legally blind. Kelly modified tasks to ensure all volunteers could engage and participate. “I was thinking like an occupational therapist without realizing it,” she said.

At Wisemaker, Kelly led creative workshops on a weekly basis. To keep the costs low, she selected workshop themes based on the current inventory of art supplies and materials. One workshop involved a collaboration between local artists and children to create a recycled art and sustainability parade. “We met weekly over the course of a summer,” said Kelly. “The costumes and floats were made from 90% recycled materials. Other themes included puppet making, dream catchers, and mixed media collage.

In addition to her duties at Wisemaker, Kelly was commissioned to paint murals for several businesses and organizations in Grand Rapids. In 2015, she painted a mural of colorful leaves at the historic Lincoln Lodge (see Figure 4). The leaves were representative of trees found in the neighborhood. Kelly designed the project to include up to five volunteers at any given time. With volunteers helping her paint, Kelly completed the mural in 1 month.

In 2015, Kelly closed Wisemaker because of funding challenges. “I realized that aside from teaching art, my job outlook was not good,” she said. Kelly was sure of one thing: she wanted a career where she could help people. She began researching the health professions and briefly considered a career in physical therapy. “It was a serendipitous occurrence that led me to the field of occupational therapy,” she said. During a conversation with a new neighbor, Kelly realized they shared a mutual acquaintance in Terri Cooper, OTR/L, co-owner of Family Tree Therapies, an outpatient clinic that

**Figure 3**  
*“Bioforms 5” (2020) by Kelly Allen*



specializes in occupational and speech therapies. Inspired by a conversation with Terri, Kelly researched the history of occupational therapy and made an immediate connection to the profession's use of art-based activities as therapy. "I spent some time observing at Family Tree and knew this is what I wanted to do," she said.

Kelly enrolled at Grand Rapids Community College to complete the prerequisite classes she needed for an occupational therapy program. At the same time, Kelly worked as a receptionist at Family Tree to gain a greater understanding of the billing and reimbursement process. In 2017, Kelly was accepted into the occupational therapy program at Western Michigan University. She was able to complete her level II pediatric fieldwork rotation at Family Tree. "It was always my goal to work there," she said. After passing the National Board for

Certification in Occupational Therapy exam, Kelly was hired immediately. She started working at Family Tree a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The clinic transitioned to providing telehealth services. A few months later, face-to-face treatment sessions were reinstated. Kelly enjoys the constant challenges involved in meeting the individual needs of her pediatric clients. Traditional therapy sessions do not allow much time for art-based interventions; however, Kelly tries to incorporate creative activities whenever she can.

Recently, Kelly made the difficult decision to leave Family Tree. She felt this change was needed for better work-life balance that includes time for studio artwork, self-care, and quality time with friends and family. Kelly accepted a full-time position at an assisted living and memory care unit in Grand Rapids. She hopes there will be opportunities to engage future clients in art-based activities. "I want to bring joy and music to their lives," she said.

Novelist Douglas Adams wrote, "I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be" (1991). After more than 2 decades as a fine artist and educator, Kelly Allen was ready for a career change. Several meaningful life events prepared her for a career in occupational therapy. As an occupational therapist, Kelly has found a calling that satisfies her creative interests and desire to help others. As Kelly prepares to work in a new setting, she looks forward to applying more of the skills learned in the occupational therapy program at Western Michigan University. Kelly is also excited to have more balance in her own life and to continue making art.

**Figure 4**  
*"Lincoln Lodge" (2015) by Kelly Allen*



**View more of Kelly’s art work in the OJOT gallery:**

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot\\_occupationandartist/34/](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/34/)

**Visit Kelly’s Website:**

[www.kellyallen.com](http://www.kellyallen.com)

**Follow Kelly on Instagram:**

<https://www.instagram.com/kellyallenart/>

**Watch a time-lapsed video of Kelly’s art installation at Thinkspace Gallery:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtRseeor05E>

**Learn more about WiseMaker Creative Reuse Store and Studio:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kc9b41L7M18>

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