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Dr. Lyla Spelbring

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Lyla Spelbring, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA (1922-2011) is the featured profile of this issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, and is sponsored by Fred Sammons. Dr. Sammons indicated that he wanted to feature Dr. Spelbring because she was a foundational member of the occupational therapy (OT) profession. Dr. Spelbring received a Bachelor’s degree in Occupational Therapy from Western Michigan University in 1951 and a Master’s degree in 1959. She went on to earn a PhD from the University of Michigan in Medical Care Organization in 1981.

Prior to beginning a career in OT, Dr. Spelbring served in the U.S. military. Inspired by her father’s military service, Dr. Spelbring joined the U.S. Marine Corps as a young woman. Her 27 years of military service began with 6 years in the Marine Corps and another 21 years in the U.S. Army. Dr. Spelbring served during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. She aided in the transportation of supplies and troops at military bases on the Hawaiian Islands during WWII. While on inactive service she worked at a reformatory for women and earned her OT degree at Western Michigan University. She transitioned back to active duty as a second lieutenant of the U.S. Army Women’s Medical Specialist Corps during the Korean War, working with returned service members in newly established facilities, such as the North Carolina Psychiatric Clinic for War Veterans. Additionally, her military service included teaching other service members. During the time that Dr. Spelbring served in the military, female service members were unique. After retiring in 1982 from the U.S. Army reserves at the rank of colonel, she continued to display her love of country by speaking to students about her experiences and supporting women’s military groups in her retirement.
Just as she contributed to the U.S. military service in unique ways, Dr. Spelbring also contributed
tremendously to the OT profession. Her leadership skills, honed through military service experiences,
contributed to success in leading OT practitioners both in clinical and academic settings. She was the director
of OT services for the University of Michigan Medical Center for 13 years. From 1974-1984 she was head of
the Department of Associated Health Professions at Eastern Michigan University. Her numerous publications
include research about OT education and OT practitioner roles. In Anne G. Fisher’s 1998 Eleanor Clark Slagle
Lecture, Dr. Fisher recognized Dr. Spelbring’s contribution to her own learning with the following quote:
“Spelbring seemed to be saying that, throughout our involvement, our focus should be on enhancing
occupational performance and not the remediation of underlying impairments” (Fisher, 1998), emphasizing Dr.
Spelbring’s focus on occupational functioning.

Others who had the pleasure of working with Dr. Spelbring describe her leadership style as “no-
nonsense.” Dr. Ben Atchison, PhD, OTR/L, Interim Chairperson of the Western Michigan University
Occupational Therapy Department, assumed his first faculty position under Dr. Spelbring’s leadership at
Eastern Michigan University. In a recent interview he referred to Dr. Spelbring as “multi-talented, creative, and
tough.” He indicated that she focused on research, practical experience, and curricular improvements in the
department. Dr. Atchison also recalls the high standards and expectations Dr. Spelbring had for both faculty
and students.

Dr. Spelbring’s commitments to the profession of OT, military service, and educating new practitioners have
been recognized with many awards. She was a Professor Emeriti in the Department of Occupational Therapy at
Eastern Michigan University and was honored with an annual lectureship initiated in her name: the Lyla M.
Spelbring Lectureship in Occupational Therapy. Dr. Spelbring was a fellow of the American Occupational
Therapy Association and in 1971 received the AOTA Award of Merit. She was a Member of the Michigan
Occupational Therapy Association and was recognized with an Honorary Lifetime Membership. Additionally,
she was a member of the American Public Health Association. Servicing the community, she was a member of
the advisory committee of the Michigan Cerebral Palsy Association and the Michigan Genealogical Council.
References


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