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Molly Bathje

Western Michigan University, Rush University, molly_m_bathje@rush.edu

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Molly Bathje, MS, OTR/L

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Creativity in Transitions

Abstract

Professor Sandra Edwards, MA, OTR/L, FOATA, and professor emerita at Western Michigan University (WMU), provided the cover art for the winter 2014 issue of The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy. The oil painting, “Silent Witness, Cross Creek” was created over a period of two years. Professor Edwards has participated in many creative and artistic activities throughout her life, which have shaped her practice as an occupational therapist and her experience in life.

Keywords

Occupational Therapy, Professor Edwards, Creativity, Art, Retirement

Professor Sandra Edwards, MA, OTR/L, FAOTA, and professor emerita at Western Michigan University (WMU), provided the cover art for the winter 2014 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*. She created the oil painting, “Silent Witness, Cross Creek,” over a period of two years, and was inspired by a visit to Marjorie Rawlings’ home at Cross Creek, FL. Professor Edwards spent time in this area as a young girl, fishing with her father. During a return trip she was inspired to photograph and paint the magnolia. The painting represents many important parts of her life, including family, friends, travel, and learning. Professor Edwards has participated in many creative and artistic activities throughout her life, which have shaped her practice as an occupational therapist and her experience of life.

Professor Edwards has not always viewed herself as an artist, although she has engaged in artistic activities throughout her life. Her retirement from WMU’s Department of Occupational Therapy six years ago brought her opportunities to discover and immerse herself in creative explorations. In a recent interview, Professor Edwards indicated that art and creativity “are a strong part of who I am.” She has decorated her home with a variety of art pieces that she created, obtained while traveling, inherited from family, or received as gifts. The magnolia painting hangs just inside her front door, welcoming visitors to her home. Hanging near her piano, which her great aunt Mittie Waters taught her to play, are paintings created by another of her great aunts, Stamie Coleman. These two women inspired creativity early in Professor Edwards’ life. In particular, Mittie Waters’ work advocating for

gardening activities in the Florida prison system in the 1940’s illustrated to a young Professor Edwards the impact of purposeful activities on one’s life. Paintings and sketches that Professor Edwards completed in college hang in her study. A hand-made Turkish knot throw rug, created and given to her by a memorable client, adorns a side chair. Photographs of her family and friends line the hallways. Outside, she cultivates stunning gardens with a variety of plants and flowers. She also keeps illustrated journals of her life and creates her own stationary. Currently, she enjoys drawing cartoon characters for her granddaughter and helping her to make up stories about them. In addition to the visual arts, she relishes music and plays the piano and harpsichord. She indicated that she is “determined and tenacious” to learn new music and meets monthly with her music group. She described her art and music pursuits as “an escape, a way to manage stress.”

Her travels are also marked with an artistic component. When she and her husband travel, they always visit the local art museums. She gains inspiration from artists such as Michelangelo, Mary Cassatt, and Georgia O’Keeffe. In particular, she noted that Mary Cassatt was one of the first American artists accepted in Europe. Professor Edwards has displayed courage and taken risks in her own life and career by venturing to different parts of the country and often being one of the first occupational therapists in several of her positions. Visiting art museums across the world, admiring other’s works and life stories, and meeting other artists has influenced her career as well as her own artwork. Professor Edwards has also used art to

connect on a deeper level to the places to which she travels. In preparation for a trip to the Siberian Arctic, she studied and sculpted the Musk Ox, a species on Whalen Island, which she visited by helicopter. She has used art to establish deep connections with the world around her.

Professor Edwards has been more active in painting, music, and dance since her retirement, but the drive to observe, appreciate, create, and express herself has been a theme throughout her life. She noted a parallel between the artist and the clinician, indicating that “observation is critical to being a good artist and a good clinician.” Professor Edwards began her occupational therapy (OT) career at The University of Florida in the second cohort of OT students admitted. She was drawn to OT because of the combined focus on mental and physical health, and, in particular, because she liked anatomy. She, along with 12 other OT students, met in the basement of the medical school for classes and also took many classes alongside medical students. She recalled that most of the professors were military service members and that they had high expectations of their students. Her student clinical experiences took her outside of Florida for the first time. In a Veterans Affairs hospital in Bronx, NY, she participated in “Broadway Therapy” and used craft making as a treatment modality. Here, she would “jump out of bed in the morning to go to work” because she enjoyed her work so much.

Her OT career provided tremendous opportunities to travel and to pave a path for future OT practitioners. While in Atlanta, GA, she worked with pediatric clients with amputations. At

Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, MA, she was the second occupational therapist ever hired and practiced in the home health setting. Later, she began her pediatric career at Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Brookline and supervised OT students from Boston University. After moving to California, she did post graduate work at Ranchos Los Amigos Rehabilitation Center, and then took a clinical position at El Portal del Sol School for Cerebral Palsied and Orthopaedically Handicapped Children. She worked with children with developmental disabilities and supervised students. She also assisted people with substance abuse disorders, using art and humor to support their recovery. She indicated that during her primary years as an occupational therapist, she challenged herself to take risks and have new experiences.

In addition to unique work opportunities, Professor Edwards also found opportunities for growth and learning. She received training from Dr. Jean Ayers and was certified in Sensory Integration, and she also studied Neurodevelopmental Treatment with Dr. and Mrs. Bobath. She used these skills while working at a school for children with orthopedic conditions, practicing alongside a leading pediatric orthopedic surgeon. She began her Master’s degree in Special Education at Boston University and completed it at WMU in 1974. Because she enjoyed working with students so much, she sought a job in an educational setting.

Professor Edwards joined the WMU Department of Occupational Therapy in 1974 as an assistant professor working in the WMU OT clinics. She taught many courses, including signature

courses in Assessment and Sensory Integration. It was during this time that Professor Edwards married and started her family. While at WMU, she completed research on children with Down Syndrome and published a book chapter about the hands of children with Down Syndrome. In 2002, she and two of her former OT students published a textbook titled *Developmental & Functional Hand Grasps*. Building on this research, Professor Edwards participated in innovative, interdisciplinary work with computer and electrical engineers at WMU to develop and use a haptic robot in clinical practice. She and the interdisciplinary team researched and developed programs to enhance grasp, strength, visual perception, and hand-eye coordination. Additionally, she served on the doctoral committee for graduate students from electrical and computer engineering. After retiring in 2006, faculty, students, family, and friends established a scholarship fund at WMU for OT students in her name. The criteria for receiving the award include emotional intelligence, overcoming hardship, and creativity, all characteristics that Professor Edwards values as a person and as an OT practitioner. Her academic and career pursuits demonstrate her ability to cultivate opportunities, work collaboratively with others, engage in new activities, and share her talents with others.

Now that Professor Edwards has retired, she has more opportunities to explore her creative capacities. The transition to retirement has led Professor Edwards to fully embrace art as a primary occupation in her life. Her increased participation in artistic activities demonstrates a successful

retirement transition and the opportunities that retirees have for new occupational roles. As an occupational therapist, Professor Edwards is well aware of the benefits of meaningful occupations during all phases of life, and has applied this knowledge to planning and enjoying her retirement.

Pettican and Prior (2011) studied transitions in retirement and identified that transitional phases were not always marked by the use of time, but instead, by the use of activity. This underscores the importance of activities and occupations during retirement. Phases in retirement may be identified by the leisure activities in which the retirees are involved. For example, Professor Edwards has recently become involved in watercolor painting. She and her husband attended a watercolor painting retreat where they learned new techniques and completed several paintings. Learning and perfecting a new skill, such as watercolor painting, can provide the organization for defining this phase of her life.

Developmental theorists have identified that retirement and aging are marked by a series of stages with continued psychological growth (Cohen, 2006). Laslett's Theory of Four Ages identifies four distinct stages of life, each with a different focus (Cole, 2008). During the third age, individuals are experiencing a decrease in work responsibilities (partial or full retirement) and their focus shifts to developing new occupations (Cole, 2008). Pettican and Prior (2011) also identified three stages of retirement transition, including a) wind myself down—planning and decision making, b) feeling around—the transitional period, and c) regularized and routine. Creative activities can be

used through each of these phases of transition in retirement. In the first phase, retirees may explore different types of creative activities and identify how the activities align with their experiences and talents. As their investment and participation in formal employment decreases, retirees can be encouraged to explore options and plan for participation in activities. In the second stage, retirees begin to engage in new activities, or activities in which they previously did not have time to participate. During the third phase of transition, the activities become incorporated into routines and daily roles. Retirees identify these activities as a part of their role and daily occupation. Using this framework, OT practitioners can assist retirees in planning for the transition to retirement.

Creative occupations during the later stages of life can have a protective impact on health and wellness. Cohen (2006) studied the impact of older adult participation in intensive community-based art programs, including chorale and art activities. Preliminary results of the multisite longitudinal study indicated that those who participated in creative activities showed a greater degree of improvement on general health, depression, loneliness, and morale scales as compared to the control groups. Additionally, those who

participated in the community-based art programs had fewer falls and the rate of increase in medication use was slower than with the control groups. Cohen (2006) indicated that the sense of mastery and control achieved through participation in creative activities may lead to positive impacts on the immune system and brain plasticity, linking brain and body health. In addition to providing structure and routine during transitions, creative occupations can support physiological and psychological well-being during the retirement years.

Successful retirement requires self-evaluation and taking risks to try new things, which is also required to engage in creative activities. Georgia O’Keeffe, an artist who inspired Professor Edwards, once said, “To create one’s world in any of the arts takes courage.” Professor Edwards has been a risk taker throughout her life, challenging herself to live and work in many locations, with many different types of people, using many different skills. But even more so, she has taken the risk to be an artist and to share her artwork with others. Professor Edwards has used the opportunities of retirement to embrace her creative side, cultivate new skills, and connect with others through creative activities.

To view samples of Professor Edwards’ photographs and a video, visit:
http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

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