

# Center for Occupational Therapy and Lifestyle Redesign



Figure 1. USC's Center for Occupation and Lifestyle Redesign, which opened in December, combines education and research activities with occupational therapy services for the local community, including "lifestyle redesign," the process of customizing an individual's routines of daily activities to maximize efficiency and satisfaction.

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The information super-highway can get you to just about anywhere—the supermarket to buy groceries, an airline to buy plane tickets, even the IRS to file your taxes. The surge of technology has catapulted the world into a new millennium in which you never have to leave the house.

Although the information super-highway provides quick communication and convenience, it lacks one of the fundamental needs of humans—that is, humans themselves. Rather than participating in a book club gathering at a neighborhood bookstore, you can join a computer chat group to discuss a best-selling novel online. Discussion groups have been replaced with chat rooms, and in effect, human contact replaced with computer contact.

"Nobody has really researched this and that is our intent—to look at the impact of computer use on emotional and social well-being," said **Florence Clark**, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, chairperson of the

Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Southern California (USC). In December, the department opened the one-of-a-kind Center for Occupation and Lifestyle Redesign, which brings together community-based practice, education, and research.

The Center introduces the concept for which it was named—"Lifestyle Redesign"—a process of applying occupational science to everyday life and developing a daily routine that is health-promoting and meaningful for any person. The Center is the world's first dedicated to the study of how everyday activities or "occupations" shape health and well being. The data collected will help occupational therapists assist persons to organize their daily activities so that they can overcome illness and gain greater independence.

Because of the high use of computers at work and at home, the Center's researchers will conduct many studies on the general public's move away from traditional arts and crafts toward the age of advanced technology.

"What we don't know is what does [sitting at the computer] do to people physiologically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically?" Clark said. "One study we might try to reproduce looks at the physiological markers of people during the engagement of needlework versus computer use. [Other studies] found that when people were at needlework they were at a very different, and what seemed like more health-promoting, state than when they were at the computer. When they were on the computer it seemed they had more of the physiological markers of stress in their profiles than when they were doing needlework. That's a very concrete kind of study that we would look at and compare various kinds of occupations in terms of their impact on health."

In December, the occupational therapy department launched a \$2.2 million fundraising campaign to renovate Cockins House, site of the Center, near the school's campus. Based on the settlement home tradition, particularly George Barton's seminal 1914 Consolation House, Cockins House is a 6,000-



square-foot, 3-story Victorian home (see Figure 1). The renovations to the third floor represent the span of occupational therapy from its roots to the present, with an arts and crafts studio and state-of-the-art computer laboratory (see Figure 2). The other two floors house classrooms, meeting rooms, living quarters for visiting scholars, and a museum chronicling the history of occupational therapy.

"The house resurrects the traditional and at the same time ushers in a new kind of occupational therapy practice for the new millennium," Clark said.

In addition to the cutting-edge research, the Center will continue USC's dedication to community-based practice. Opposite the Center is a shelter for homeless women where ongoing programs—including a therapeutic garden—have laid the foundation for future Center programs.

The Center's studies also will explore the impact of computers, and in particular, computer games, on children, Clark said.

These virtual-reality games give children and teens the power to bomb and blast the "bad guys," and simulate violence without showing its true effects.

"[These children are] not out there playing with real children or experiencing the impact of their aggressive actions and seeing the consequences. They can grow up numb to the actuality of what aggression and violence is really like in the real world," Clark said. "What does that do to them in terms of becoming compassionate, caring, empathetic people?" Clark emphasized that advances in technology have provided great conveniences and advantages, "but we've marched forward on the path toward increased technology in the post-modern world without research about the relative health benefits of these changes."

Not only will occupational therapy students and professors conduct studies at the Center, but it also brings together

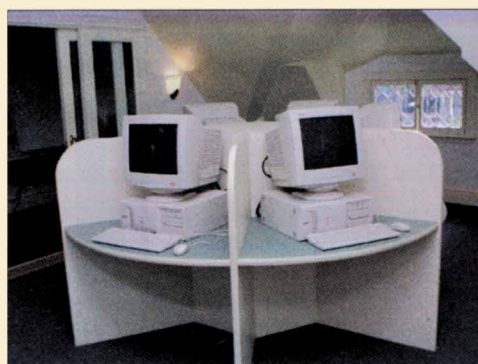
educators from other disciplines on campus: gerontology, education, anthropology, and social work. "Students at all levels of academic levels will be involved in research," said **Linda Fazio**, PhD, OTR, FAOTA. Fazio is the assistant chairperson of USC's Occupational Therapy department and has been instrumental in developing the new Center's activities. "We are fortunate to have the support that allows us to do this at a level at which we hope to involve all of our students in the process itself, and for colleagues to gather from all around the world to lend cultural perspective to explore this internationally."

Because the Los Angeles area is so diverse, the Center has an opportunity to conduct studies on various cultural occupations that will have a global impact, Fazio said. For example, a study could be conducted on changes in Japanese culture, which traditionally has used little furniture—people often sit and sleep on the floor, and sit at tables close to the floor. This practice of squatting

said. The Japanese even are moving away from their traditionally low-fat diet to a more Western diet, which is high in fat, calories, and cholesterol. "We need to think about lifestyle in a global sense. When you think about all of these different lifestyles that emerge in different segments of the world, right now there's a possibility all of them would become obsolete because a Western style of life will be adopted globally—but will that be maximally health promoting?" asked Clark.

With all of the data the Center gathers, researchers hope to educate others about what activities, or occupations, are the most health-promoting.

"We suspect we'll be able to show that humans have a need for specific kinds of occupations, not any occupation," Clark said. "Humans are physiologically and biologically designed with occupational needs. We will be able to show what kinds of combinations of daily engagements in occupations will be maximally health-promoting."



**Figure 2. The Center features two computer areas. One allows interaction among users and the other houses separate work stations. Researchers will compare and contrast the effects of these different environments on computer users.**



**Figure 3. (From left) James Papai, chief of the Maternal and Child Health Bureau at the Department of Health and Human Services, celebrates at the Center's opening with former department chairperson Florence Cromwell, current chairperson Florence Clark, and donors Carlotta Welles and Richard McCauley.**

many times a day has helped the Japanese to retain flexibility, Clark said. The Japanese also use chopsticks to eat, which requires fine motor coordination.

But the Japanese are slowly moving to a more Westernized society, using furniture more frequently and using silverware instead of chopsticks.

"In a sense, [the Japanese] could become more functionally compromised in terms of hand skills, which then relates to the capacity to craft," Clark

Arts and crafts is becoming an endangered occupation, and another goal of the Center's research is to show the negative ramifications if crafts such as needlepoint and painting become extinct, Clark said. "We hope our research will show there will be a loss to humanity if we lose their [persons with occupations in arts and crafts] knowledge and their skill in doing craft work." ■

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