

USC Chan

THE MAGAZINE OF THE MRS. T.H. CHAN DIVISION OF
OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

2025
REVIEW

HOPE IN ASHES

The Eaton wildfire of January 2025 destroyed their homes. Now, hope defines their futures.

FEATURE *



IN A CONFERENCE HALL PACKED WITH THOUSANDS OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONERS AND STUDENTS, USC faculty member and American Occupational Therapy Association President **Arameh Anvarizadeh '05, MA '06, OTD '07** stands at center stage. During AOTA's 2025 Inspire Conference in Philadelphia, Anvarizadeh gave her inaugural presidential address celebrating the strength of diverse perspectives, experiences and backgrounds to drive social change, resolve challenges,

advance occupational justice and strengthen the occupational therapy profession. She was elected to the volunteer leadership position in early 2024, and began her three-year presidential term on July 1, 2025.

Anvarizadeh is the fifth USC-affiliated president to serve the association, following **Wilma West MA '48** (AOTA President from 1961-64), **Florence Cromwell MA '52** (1967-73), **Mary Foto '66** (1995-98) and Professor Emeritus **Florence Clark** (2010-13).

INSPIR

2025 Annual Conference & Expo | A



DEAR ALUMS, COLLEAGUES AND FRIENDS,

THE YEAR 2025 TESTED OUR COMMUNITY IN WAYS WE WON'T SOON FORGET. EARLY IN THE YEAR, THE PALISADES AND EATON FIRES RIPPED THROUGH FOOTHILL COMMUNITIES IN LOS ANGELES, DEVASTATING MANY IN THE TROJAN FAMILY. In their aftermath, USC Chan students, faculty, staff and alumni put our core values of integrity, collaboration and, especially, compassion into action as we supported each other in the long journey to recover and rebuild. This issue's cover story, "From Destruction to 'Dena Strong'" on p. 26, chronicles the harrowing experience.

Yet amid this heartbreak, 2025 was also a year of remarkable progress — not to mention the year that artificial intelligence went mainstream. Here at USC, Sook-Lei Liew received a \$2.9 million NIH grant to use AI to augment clinical-grade MRIs into research-grade MRIs, with the ultimate goal of developing more precise, data-driven rehabilitation interventions after stroke. Amber Angell received a \$3.6 million NIH grant to use AI algorithms to analyze large datasets of clinical records to elucidate the relationships between social determinants of health and relative mental health risks in autistic children and youth.

This past year, we also celebrated our collective identity as a division, via those who help to shape it. Renowned Angeleno muralist Paul Botello, with input from and painting by our community, completed a beautiful mural inside our Center for the Health Professions building — one that artistically conveys the kindred spirit linking occupational therapy and the many diverse patients, clients and communities with whom we work. We celebrated 30 years of guest lectures by Michael Sugar, who has indelibly influenced generations of occupational therapy students with his story of grief, survival and triumph. We also highlighted the entrepreneurial ambitions of alum Evelyn Mardyan, who is showing how occupational therapy influences non-clinical ventures which, in many ways, can still be fundamentally occupation-based. Find all these stories and more inside this issue.

Above all, 2025 reaffirmed the power that can emanate from, and be harnessed by, a committed community like ours working together with purpose and resolve. Whether as an alum, mentor, educator, student, collaborator or friend, thank you for keeping engaged with our mission of innovation to transform health and well-being through meaningful occupations.



With Gratitude,

Grace Baranek PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

Associate Dean, Chair and Mrs. T.H. Chan Professor of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

USC Chan

USC Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

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CONTRIBUTORS



MICHELLE MCCARTHY, writer of “Kindred Spirits” (p. 22), has been previously published in the Los Angeles Times, Forks Over Knives and CBS Radio.

What are some of your favorite occupations?
I love nature, and go camping with my family in our camper van as much as possible.

What did you learn from writing “Kindred Spirits?” Writing this story uncovered for me the similarities between art and occupational therapy.



DANIEL P. SMITH, writer of “From Destruction to ‘Dena Strong’” (p. 26), specializes in writing about higher education, and has written stories for various colleges and schools across USC.

What are some of your favorite occupations?
I enjoy daily runs, coaching high school basketball at my alma mater and attending extracurricular events for my two children.

What was it like writing “From Destruction to ‘Dena Strong?’” It provided a sobering look at the devastation of this tragic event, yet more than anything, underscored positivity, perspective and resilience, even amid grim circumstances.



JAMIE WETHERBE, writer of “The Bear Necessities of Entrepreneurship” (p. 16), has been previously published in the Los Angeles Times, LAist, City of Hope and The Huffington Post.

What are some of your favorite occupations?
Running, camping and spending time with my wife and son.

What did you learn from writing “The Bear Necessities of Entrepreneurship?”
As a mom myself, I enjoyed hearing about how experience as a parent can become a passion for an entirely new career path.



FIRST COHORT OF ENTRY-OTD GRADS

THE FIRST COHORT ENROLLED IN THE DIVISION'S ENTRY-LEVEL DOCTORATE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY DEGREE PROGRAM GRADUATED IN AUGUST 2025, capping more than a decade of faculty planning and preparation to launch and deliver the three-year professional degree program, which is fully accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education.

"In many ways, these past three years have been a shared adventure," said Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Samia Rafeedie**, the program's director, at the capstone project presentations. "There were moments that truly felt like we were building the plane while flying it, but [our students] stayed on board. For that, we thank [them] deeply."



ANVARIZADEH'S TERM AS AOTA PRESIDENT UNDERWAY

PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ARAMEH ANVARIZADEH BEGAN HER THREE-YEAR TERM AS PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION (AOTA) IN JULY 2025. She is the first Black and Iranian person to lead AOTA, an especially significant milestone for a predominantly white profession (more than 80 percent of the U.S. occupational therapy workforce is white).

"My presidential campaign slogan, "Empowering Our Profession, Ensuring Our Longevity," reflects a timely and urgent call to action," Anvarizadeh said. "Now more than ever, occupational therapy must boldly demonstrate its impact, elevate its visibility and expand public understanding of our scope and value."

She has outlined several strategies to achieve those objectives, including strengthening collaborations with state associations, supporting practitioners who work in innovative and entrepreneurial settings and advancing occupational therapy education.

"My presidency represents more than a leadership transition — it is a reimagining of what is possible," Anvarizadeh said. "With AOTA's Board of Directors, I am committed to cultivating a shared vision and building a high-impact team that will amplify the voice of occupational therapy on a global scale, promote equitable access to care and strengthen our workforce."



THE CHAN DIVISION, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CHRIS AND EMILY TRENTACOSTA, IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THE ABBEY MARTERELLA SCHOLARSHIP CREATED IN MEMORY OF ABBEY MARTERELLA PHD '10, USC ALUMNA AND FORMER USC FACULTY MEMBER.

Marterella was an occupational therapist for nearly 25 years with experiences in various settings including community mental health, jail diversion, adult inpatient and acute physical rehabilitation, home health care, private practice and case management. Her research interests included intervention studies, qualitative inquiry, usability studies and theoretical developments in occupational therapy and occupational science. She is remembered for her infectious laugh, radiant spirit, sarcastic wit and ability to make heartfelt connections and extend care to others.

The Abbey Marterella Scholarship will be awarded annually in the amount of \$5,000 to a doctoral-level occupational therapy or occupational science student enrolled at USC Chan. Positive considerations may be given in the selection process to those who demonstrate interests in mental health practice; conducting occupational-based research; identify as LGBTQ+; and/or demonstrate commitment to professional service, advocacy and entrepreneurship.

TO MAKE A GIFT

TO THE ABBEY MARTERELLA SCHOLARSHIP:

1. Visit giveto.usc.edu/?fundid=GF1015059
2. Enter your gift amount and desired frequency
3. Select "Make this gift a memorial or tribute in honor of someone"
4. Select "In honor of"
5. Enter the name Abbey Marterella into the first and last name fields
6. Follow the "Next" buttons to fill remaining details to process and submit your gift



MARTERELLA LEGACY SCHOLARSHIP



WEBSITE REFRESH

NEW WEBSITE, WHO DIS? We recently rolled out a new look to our website — a fresh mix of new layouts, photos, artwork and bold typography that conveys the unique and extraordinary strengths of our programs, people and contributions to occupational therapy and occupational science. If you haven't yet, take a look at chan.usc.edu.

According to webmaster **Travis Smith**, the back-end implementation required:



ADDING 72,636 NEW LINES OF CODE
DELETING 15,475 LINES OF CODE
CHANGING 780 SERVER FILES

“SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE” AND THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC



FEELING LONELY? YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

Recent surveys show that approximately half of adults in the United States experience loneliness, with some of the highest rates occurring among young adults. By these estimates, loneliness and isolation are more widespread than many health issues including smoking, diabetes and obesity.

Because there is no single source of isolation and loneliness, ending what has been called the “epidemic of loneliness” will require a constellation of strategies to strengthen social relationships and support community-wide efforts for making meaningful connections. For example, the first plank in the Surgeon General’s six-part “national strategy” for advancing social connection is to develop

social infrastructure — defined as a community’s physical assets such as libraries and green spaces, the programs available to a community such as volunteer organizations and member associations, and local policies like transportation and housing that impact social connections. The logic is that people will better connect when they have more places to go, more things to do once they get there, and encounter relatively fewer barriers on their way.

For occupational therapists like Assistant Professor **Joy Agner**, working at this intersection between people, environment and occupation comes second nature.

“Occupations are the building blocks of community,” Agner says. “Occupational

therapists and occupational scientists have a unique role to play in ending the loneliness epidemic because meaningful relationships are developed by working side-by-side towards a shared goal.”

Read more about a recent project Agner helped coordinate at a Hollywood interim housing facility for 56 adults and transitional age youth who have experienced chronic homelessness, and the various ways that occupational scientists can partner with community organizations to address one of the most consequential health issues of our time, at tinyurl.com/social-architecture.



AZIZ-ZADEH EARNs LIVE LONG AND PROSPER AWARD FOR GUT-BRAIN RESEARCH

PROFESSOR LISA AZIZ-ZADEH IS A 2025 RECIPIENT OF THE LIVE LONG AND PROSPER TRIBUTE AWARD FROM THE NIMOY KNIGHT FOUNDATION. The honor celebrates those whose career work exemplifies the values of the iconic “Star Trek” character Spock — rationality, peace, compassion and belonging — originally portrayed on-screen by the late actor Leonard Nimoy.

Nimoy played the half-human, half-Vulcan character Spock for nearly 50 years, beginning with the 1964 television pilot episode of “Star Trek.” Nimoy created the iconic Vulcan hand salute that Aziz-Zadeh is shown demonstrating, with its accompanying blessing of “live long and prosper.”

“I am deeply honored to receive the “Live Long and Prosper” Tribute Award for my research on the brain-gut-microbiome system in autism,” Aziz-Zadeh said. “I grew up watching “Star Trek” and was very inspired by Leonard Nimoy’s portrayal of Mr. Spock as a deeply complex

character, balancing reason and emotion/ belonging and difference.”

Findings from a recent study led by Aziz-Zadeh suggest that gut imbalances in autistic children may create an imbalance of metabolites in the digestive system — ultimately disrupting neurotransmitter production and influencing behavioral symptoms. The research article, published in 2025 in *Nature Communications* and already accessed nearly 30,000 times in less than nine months, adds to a growing body of science implicating the “gut-brain” axis in autism and raising the possibility of new treatment avenues.

“We demonstrated that gut metabolites impact the brain, and the brain, in turn, affects behavior,” Aziz-Zadeh said. “Essentially, the brain acts as the intermediary between gut health and autism-related behaviors. Previous studies highlighted differences in gut microbiomes and brain structures in autism, but our research connects the dots.”

“I AM DEEPLY HONORED TO RECEIVE THE “LIVE LONG AND PROSPER” TRIBUTE AWARD”

Read the open-access article, titled “Relationships between brain activity, tryptophan-related gut metabolites, and autism symptomatology” (Aziz-Zadeh et al., 2025), in *Nature Communications* at tinyurl.com/gut-brain-axis-autism.

ALUM ON GOOD MORNING AMERICA

ALUMNA KARY RAPPAPORT ’04 SHARED INSIGHTS FROM HER CO-AUTHORED BOOK, “SOLID STARTS FOR BABIES,” about safely introducing solid foods to infants, during a Good Morning America appearance with hosts Lara Spencer and Michael Strahan. Rappaport has extensive NICU, outpatient and home-based experience, and is currently the senior feeding and swallowing specialist at Solid Starts.



SYMPOSIUM RECAPPED





THE 28TH USC CHAN OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE SYMPOSIUM, “EMBODIMENT, EMPLACEMENT, AND OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE,” WAS HELD IN OCTOBER AT THE HUNTINGTON IN SAN MARINO, CALIFORNIA.

This rendition of the division’s signature academic event was dedicated to the life and legacy of the late **Elizabeth Yerxa** ’52 and explored concepts of embodiment and emplacement in occupational science. Presenters challenged traditional views that separate mind, body and environment, and encouraged more integrated understandings of human occupation.

Antoine Bailliard from the Duke University School of Medicine gave the Wilma West Lecture titled “Imagining Occupation through Embodiment and Emplacement.” Nearly two dozen speakers from the Chan Division and from across the university led breakout sessions throughout the day, which accentuated the embodied and emplaced nature of occupations across different populations and contexts.

Additional highlights included a tribute to Yerxa by one of her mentees and former USC faculty member, **Diane Parham** MA ’81, followed by the Elizabeth June Yerxa Lecture by **Linda Tickle-Degnen** MA ’80, professor emerita at Tufts University, titled “A Primer in Mentoring: Lessons from Dr. Yerxa.”



JANE GOODALL, 91

JANE GOODALL, THE RENOWNED PRIMATOLOGIST WHOSE PIONEERING RESEARCH WITH CHIMPANZEES AND THEIR OCCUPATIONAL BEHAVIOR WAS SO INFLUENTIAL THAT SHE HAD BEEN CALLED THE “EINSTEIN OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES,” DIED AT THE AGE OF 91.

Goodall was the keynote speaker at the 1989 USC Occupational Science Symposium, a connection made possible thanks to the late USC Dornsife Professor Emeritus Granville “Zandy” Moore. Moore, an anthropologist, worked with then-Department Chair and Professor Emeritus **Florence Clark** to support the Department’s efforts at establishing and legitimizing the young research discipline of occupational science.

Moore and Clark helped bring Goodall to USC, and she held a joint faculty appointment as Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Anthropology and Occupational Therapy from 1990 to 2003. In this 1988 archival photo, pictured from left to right are Clark, Goodall and then-Dean of Social Sciences C. Sylvester Whitaker.

MOSHAYEDI INNOVATION COMPETITION TURNS 10, WITH 30 YEARS AHEAD



IN 2016, BOARD OF COUNCILORS MEMBER SEMIRA DARIUSHNIA AND HER HUSBAND, MARK MOSHAYEDI, PLEDGED \$100,000 TO FUND AN INNOVATION PRIZE COMPETITION EXCLUSIVELY FOR USC CHAN STUDENTS

to develop and pitch their ideas, products and services at the cutting edge of occupational therapy. For 10 years since, the Mark and Semira Moshayedi Innovation Competition has showcased students’ entrepreneurial and commercial potential, with the annual winner receiving a \$5,000 prize to support next steps in product development.

In 2023, Dariushnia and Moshayedi generously doubled their philanthropic commitment to USC Chan, which means for the next 30 years, USC students will continue to present their innovative ideas to accelerate occupational therapy. Pictured with Dariushnia is **Alexandra Arguelles** OTD ’25, the winner of the 2025 Moshayedi competition.

CAN CHATGPT SEE RED?



COLOR METAPHORS LIKE “FEELING BLUE” AND “SEEING RED” ARE COMMONPLACE THROUGHOUT THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, THEREFORE COMPRISING PART OF THE DATASET CHATGPT IS TRAINED ON. But while ChatGPT has “read” billions of words about what it might mean to feel blue or see red, it has never actually seen a blue sky or a red apple in the ways that humans have. Which begs the questions: Do embodied experiences — the capacity of the human visual system to perceive color — allow people to understand colorful language beyond the textual ways ChatGPT does? Or is language alone, for both AI and humans, sufficient to understand color metaphors?

Results from a study published in *Cognitive Science* led by Professor **Lisa Aziz-Zadeh** and a team of university and industry researchers offer some insights into those questions, and raise even more.

“ChatGPT uses an enormous amount of linguistic data to calculate probabilities and generate very human-like responses,” said Aziz-Zadeh, the publication’s senior author. “But what we are interested in exploring is whether large language model’s kind of statistical learning is sufficient in processing language, and how actual lived experience contributes to language processing.”

The research team — included psychologists, neuroscientists, social scientists, computer scientists and astrophysicists from UC San Diego, Stanford, Université de Montréal, the University of the West of England and Google DeepMind, Google’s AI research company — conducted large-scale online surveys comparing four participant groups: color-seeing adults; colorblind adults; painters who regularly work with color pigments; and ChatGPT. Each group was tasked with assigning colors to abstract words like physics. Groups were also asked to decipher familiar color metaphors (“they were on red alert”) and unfamiliar ones (“it was a very pink party”), and then to explain their reasoning.

Results show that color-seeing and colorblind humans were surprisingly similar in their color associations, suggesting that, contrary to the researchers’ hypothesis, visual perception is not necessarily a requirement for metaphorical understanding. However, painters showed a significant boost in correctly interpreting novel color metaphors. This suggests that hands-on experiences using colored pigments unlocks deeper conceptual representations of it in language.



ChatGPT also generated highly consistent color associations, and when asked to explain its reasoning, often referenced emotional and cultural associations with various colors. For example, to explain the pink party metaphor, ChatGPT replied that “Pink is often associated with happiness, love, and kindness, which suggest that the party was filled with positive emotions and good vibes.” However, ChatGPT used embodied explanations less frequently than humans did. It also broke down more often when prompted to interpret novel metaphors (“the meeting made him burgundy”) or invert color associations (“the opposite of green”).

As AI continues to evolve, studies like this underscore the limits of language-only models in representing the full range of human understanding. Future research may explore whether integrating sensory input — such as visual or tactile data — could help AI models move closer to approximating human cognition. —Mike McNulty



PEACE GARDEN RELOCATION

The USC Peace Garden will be putting down roots at Kerckhoff Hall, a 10-minute walk north from the UPC Campus. Last fall, a Peace Garden community survey was completed by 291 respondents, followed by the announcement of the Kerckhoff Hall site in November. In collaboration with campus partners including the USC Office of Sustainability, growth is already underway, with a full opening planned for spring. Dig in to the survey results at peacegarden.usc.edu.

INSTRUCTOR OF CLINICAL OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY JOAN VARTANIAN IS THE DIVISION'S ACADEMIC FIELDWORK CONTRACT AND PREREQUISITE ADMINISTRATOR, PART OF THE TEAM DEDICATED TO MAKING STUDENT FIELDWORK EDUCATION AND CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES THE BEST THEY CAN BE. HERE ARE FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT VARTANIAN:

1. She found occupational therapy relatively early, thanks to mom. Vartanian owes her first exposure to OT to her mother. "I found out about OT from my mom, who was a social worker at a hospital and worked closely with the OTs and the PTs." Vartanian had even shadowed some of the hospital OTs as a middle schooler growing up in Fargo, North Dakota. But it was a fellow sorority sister majoring in occupational therapy at the College of St. Catherine who helped seal the deal. "I thought I wanted to be a PT, but then I realized that you have to take physics as a pre-req. So I thought, 'You know what? I think OT probably suits me better anyways.'"

2. A service trip to Armenia changed everything. One of the most defining moments

of Vartanian's life began "on a whim" when a colleague recommended she apply for an international service trip. "I was living in Washington, D.C. and needing to do something different in my career, so I called the American Red Cross and they said, 'Can you come in for an interview?' The next thing I know, I was going to Armenia." She spent a year and a half living and working in harsh conditions providing rehab services for people with spinal injuries following a devastating 1988 earthquake there. "The conditions were harsher than North Dakota, if you can believe it." Her time in Armenia was more than professional — it's where she also met her future husband.

3. USC was never in the cards, or so she thought. Vartanian and her husband moved to southern California in 1995, and she began working at what is now known as Keck Hospital of USC. She transitioned into the academic side of the division in 2007 after an injury made hospital-based patient care too difficult. Ironically, years earlier, Vartanian had written off the idea of ever working at USC. "I had heard Florence Clark come speak to the Minnesota OT Association, and I remember thinking to myself that I could never work at such a theoretical, intellectually-charged place like USC." Today, she can't help but laugh at how things have

turned out. "Yet here I am, going on 30 years at USC!"

4. She's learning (and loving) the law. What does Vartanian enjoy most about her current role in fieldwork education? "This might sound weird, but I really like the contract negotiation part of it, working with legal counsel and learning all about the clinical sites where we place USC students for fieldwork." That interest led her to enroll in the USC Gould School of Law's Master of Studies in Law degree program, which she finishes soon. "I was 61 years old when I went back to law school, and I'm loving it!"

5. Her advice to current students? Be open to the unexpected in life. Vartanian's guiding philosophy is hard-earned yet simple: "Be open to every opportunity that presents itself, and never be afraid to explore the most random things." Perhaps that's because she's living proof that a willingness to be open to possibilities can shape one's life in unexpected ways. "I would never have moved to Washington, D.C. if I hadn't been open to a new job there. If I hadn't moved to Washington, D.C., I would have never gone to Armenia. And if not for that, I would have never met my husband and we never would have made it out here to California. You just never know where life is going to take you."

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT

JOAN VARTANIAN

OTR/L





1. LAWLOR GAVE SSO:USA ZEMKE LECTURESHIP

Associate Chair of Research and Professor **Mary Lawlor** gave the 2025 Ruth Zemke Lecture in Occupational Science, awarded by the Society for the Study of Occupation:USA, at the society's annual research conference in Galveston, Texas. The lectureship is a forum for visionary, theoretical and critical analyses of occupational science, and is named in honor of Professor Emeritus **Ruth Zemke**. Lawlor is the eighth USC-affiliated scholar to be recognized with the Zemke Lectureship since the award's inception in 2002.

LECTURES. GRANTS. AWARDS.

There's always so much going on at USC Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy — keep your finger on the pulse with these news briefs.



3. NINE TROJANS RECEIVED AOTA, AOTF AWARDS IN 2025

Nine USC faculty members and alumni received annual awards presented by the American Occupational Therapy Association and American Occupational Therapy Foundation during the association's 2025 conference. Assistant Professor **Leah Stein Duker** received the AOTF Virginia Scardina Award of Excellence for sustained commitment to evidence-based practice through research that advances theory in the area of brain-behavior relationships and sensory processing disorders. Associate Chair of Occupational Therapy Clinical Services and Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Chantelle Rice Collins** was inducted into the AOTA Roster of Fellows. **Mary Lawlor** received the AOTF Fred Sammons Volunteer Recognition Award for her generous service to AOTF to advance occupational science. Additional alumni awardees included: **Annie Baltazar Mori** MA '00, OTD '03; **Jayson Davies** '11, MA '12; and **Heather Thomas** MA '98 (AOTA Roster of Fellows); **Donald Fogelberg** PhD '08, Postdoc '10 (AOTF Leadership Service Commendation) **Krysti Teng** OS Minor '14 (AOTA Gary Kielhofner Emerging Leader Award); and **Jennifer Weaver** MA '11 (AOTF Early Career Research Excellence Award).



5. PHD CANDIDATE RECEIVED 2025 AOTF KIELHOFNER AWARD

Occupational science PhD candidate **Marshae Franklin** OTD '21, PhD '26 was the 2025 recipient of the Dr. Gary Kielhofner Doctoral Research Scholarship in Occupational Therapy awarded by the American Occupational Therapy Foundation. This \$5,000 scholarship is awarded annually to an occupational therapist enrolled in a doctoral-level research program in order to support their scholarship and, ultimately, to advance occupational therapy research. Franklin's award, "Exploring Authentic Belonging as Narrated by Black Autistic Women in STEM and Its Implications for DEI in Higher Education and Beyond," will use a qualitative and participatory approach to expand belonging theory in occupational therapy in order to inform a new occupation-based intervention that will promote authentic belonging for all. The award's namesake, **Gary Kielhofner** MA '75, was one of the most influential figures in occupational therapy history as the co-creator, with **Janice Burke** MA '75, of the Model of Human Occupation.



2. LIEW AWARDED \$6.5 MILLION P50 GRANT

Associate Professor **Sook-Lei Liew** is the principal investigator of the newly funded Data Science and Analytics for Precision Rehabilitation (DAPR) Center, a five-year project supported by a \$6.5 million P50 grant from the National Center for Medical Rehabilitation Research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. P50 grants support a full range of research and development activities around a specific, yet often multidisciplinary, problem area. The purpose of the DAPR Center is to generate large, harmonized rehabilitation datasets for personalized, precision rehabilitation, and to improve the rigor of medical rehabilitation research by leveraging data science, artificial intelligence and machine learning.



4. EIGHT TROJANS RECEIVED OTAC AWARDS IN 2025

Congratulations to the eight USC faculty members and alumni who received annual awards presented by the Occupational Therapy Association of California during the association's 2025 conference. Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Rebecca Cunningham** received the Vision Award. Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Don Gordon** received the OT Practice Award. Board of Councilors member **Terri Nishimura** MA '85 received the Lifetime Achievement Award. Additional alumni awardees included: **Lisa Test** MA '89, OTD '09 and **Rena Katrikh** MA '09 (Luella Grangaard Political Action Award); **Trinity Mecham** OTD '28 (Outstanding Student Award); **Barb Phillips** OTD '11 (Susan J. Harris OT Entrepreneur Award); and **Jhenny Rivera** OTD '25 (Spirit Award).



6. AHTO TRANSLATED NBCOT RESOURCES INTO SPANISH

Student members of Asociación Hispanohablante de Terapia Ocupacional recently provided the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy with Spanish translations of downloadable resources to support prospective occupational therapy students in learning more about the profession. In support of NBCOT's "Why Choose OT?" campaign, AHTO translated the handouts titled "¿Qué es terapia ocupacional?," "Empieza tu camino como terapeuta ocupacional," "Empieza tu camino como asistente de terapia ocupacional," and "¡Animálos [estudiantes] a explorar una carrera en terapia ocupacional!" AHTO is a student organization at USC Chan dedicated to improving the educational experience of Latine- and Hispanic-identifying occupational therapy students, serving as a resource for community members to support one another and advancing clinical care for Spanish-speaking and Latin American populations. View the Spanish language handouts at whychooseot.com/resources

NEWS BRIEFS

Life Lessons

*three decades
in the making.*



BY MIKE MCNULTY

EACH YEAR, MICHAEL SUGAR VISITS CAMPUS TO SPEAK WITH A CLASSROOM FULL OF USC OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY STUDENTS, MOST OF WHOM HAD NOT BEEN BORN AT THE TIME HIS DOCTORS TOLD HIM HE ONLY HAD TWO YEARS LEFT TO LIVE.

For the talk, Sugar does not prepare Powerpoint slides. He doesn't follow a canned script. He's not an occupational therapist, researcher or public speaker.

Sugar is a long-term survivor of HIV/AIDS, and since 1995, he has shared his personal experiences and advice as a guest lecturer in "Creativity, Craft and Activity Analysis." In this foundational course, first-year OTD students learn how to analyze the skills, steps and conditions necessary for successfully engaging in occupations. Students also study the profession's frameworks and views on the interrelationships between occupation, health, narrative and identity.

Sugar comes to students as a consumer who has experienced the health care system

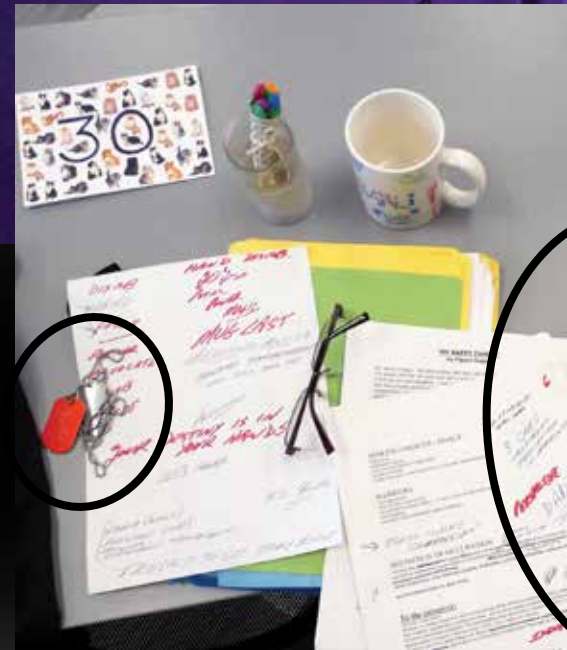
long enough from the inside to powerfully communicate both its successes and its failures. The story he tells is one of loss, survival and, ultimately, hope. It's also a story that continues to develop with each passing year.

"It's not as simple as going back to last year's notes," Sugar says. "Over the years I've told my story, it has evolved a lot."

He started speaking with USC students in 1995, after another guest speaker had to cancel at the last minute. A then-OT student and friend of Sugar's suggested to the course instructor, the late Ann Neville-Jan, that he would have valuable insights to share with practitioners-in-training.

At the time, Sugar says he was still working through his own emotions. He was diagnosed with HIV about a decade earlier at the height of the AIDS epidemic, a time rife with fear, bias, stigma, misinformation and, perhaps more than anything else, a sense of anguish and devastation.

"I was still dealing with a lot of grief," Sugar says. "I talked about my anger, about the



government's neglect, about losing over 100 friends to AIDS."

Yet over the three decades since, Sugar says his lecture now mirrors the ways in which his own perspectives have shifted.

"I have a couple philosophies and mantras that I live by, and one of them is that life is a show about perspective," Sugar says. "I think my perspective has shifted. The anger and grief and how I contend with those things are still a piece of what I talk about, but there's so much more."



Longtime guest lecturer Michael Sugar reflects on his 30 years of sharing perspectives and experiences with USC occupational therapy students.

FOLLOWING THE PLOT

Sugar is one of many “experts by experience” integrated across USC’s curricula — laypersons with firsthand understandings of disease, disability and health conditions. They bring their experiences and wisdom into classroom learning activities, assist when debriefing student fieldwork experiences and consult with various faculty teams on various projects.

Altogether, their unique perspectives help shape the knowledge and professional development of USC students by serving as a bridge, of sorts, between the classroom and the “real world.”

More recently, Sugar has reorganized his lectures around what he calls “plot points,” those definitive moments that shift the entire structure, direction and momentum of one’s life story. The plot metaphor is a familiar one for Sugar, who is now retired after a long career in the entertainment industry. Returning to the classroom year after year has proven a welcome opportunity to keep connecting the plot points within the ever-unfolding self-narrative of his own life.

“Things feel random when they’re happening,” Sugar says. “But when you look back, you can see where these points had an impact on everything that’s happened. Talking at USC to OT students over the years has really given me an awareness of the depth of my capacity for compassion that I might not have otherwise known about myself.”

SETTING THE PACE

For today’s USC students, most of whom hail from a generation that has only heard about the AIDS crisis through textbooks or documentaries, Sugar is able to fast-forward cultural memory into the immediate present.

He also inspires students to consider how they will approach building therapeutic relationships with their own future clients. In his lectures he often shares a mnemonic acronym that he’s developed over the years based on his own experiences: PACE, which stands for Partnership, Advocate, Collaborate, Evolve.

“Partnership is to let patients know they can count on you; that they have you in their back pocket,” Sugar says.

Advocate, he says, functions as both a verb and a noun, and is as much about what patients can do for themselves as what providers can do on their behalf.

“Depending on a particular person’s needs, to advocate is to help connect them with resources, and maybe also to help them learn how to better advocate for themselves,” Sugar says.

To collaborate is to find ways of meaningfully working together. As an example of meaningful collaboration, Sugar tells of a time when he and his primary care physician together compiled a list of his self-care activities and goals.

“We wrote it down and [my physician] said, ‘Would you excuse me for a minute?’” Sugar recalls. “She went out of the room and then came back a minute later with two copies of [the list]. She made me sign one and kept the other, and she said, ‘Now we have a contract.’”

Last but not least, to evolve is to continuously appraise what’s working well for clients, what isn’t and to be willing to adjust care plans and interventions accordingly.

“Sometimes things have diminishing returns,” Sugar says. “What worked for a while, doesn’t work well after a while.”

Sugar emphasizes that PACE is a practical framework for students to cultivate their own therapeutic identity, with a focus directed toward their future patients.

“It’s really important that people who will work in health care have an understanding of history,” Sugar says. “That, as an occupational therapist, when you begin to work with somebody you will want to understand their story by asking, ‘Who are you?’ and, ‘How did you become who you are right now?’ and, ‘How do we work together in ways that promote you being you, or returning to being fully you?’”

THE POWER OF PERSPECTIVE

Outside the classroom, Sugar’s life in retirement includes many everyday occupations that bring him meaning, purpose and joy.

He is a self-described film junkie; “The Wizard of Oz” and François Truffaut’s “Jules and Jim” are among his all-time favorites. He is a devoted animal lover, and credits his longevity to his cats as much as to any medical or pharmaceutical intervention.

But when he makes his annual visit to USC, as he has for more than 30 years running, Sugar is equal parts historian, activist and educator, telling the latest version of a story he has shared with thousands of students now practicing as occupational therapists.

“I really feel like I’m making a contribution with my story, one that students take into their career and maybe into their personal lives, relationships and interactions too,” Sugar says. “Hopefully that will resonate, because some of what has worked really well for me has enhanced my life tremendously. It’s almost like magic to be able to have that kind of impact on people’s lives.”



The Bear Necessities



of
Entrepreneurship



**FOR THIS ALUM,
LAUNCHING A SMALL
BUSINESS WAS A
COMBINATION OF
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY
INSIGHTS, PARENTING
EXPERIENCES AND
A WILLINGNESS TO
DREAM BIG.**

BY JAMIE WETHERBE



“Let’s bring this back — let’s bring back a piece of our childhood.”

ANY CAREGIVER KNOWS THAT NIGHTTIME ROUTINES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN CAN BE A CHALLENGE — A “REAL BEAR,” IF YOU WILL.

“Kids don’t want to go to bed; they struggle,” says Elvin “Evelyn” Mardyan ’09, MA ’10.

“Zippy can make it so much easier — that was the whole goal, and this is where my OT background and inspiration came into the mix.”

With comfort, care and companionship in mind, Mardyan and her cousin, best friend and USC dental hygiene alum Amy Nazarian, co-founded Zip N’ Bear in 2023, a direct-to-consumer children’s pajama company featuring a plush, multi-purpose teddy bear as its brand’s centerpiece.

“Growing up, Amy and I would always have slumber parties with our teddy bears,” Mardyan says. “As we grew older and became moms, we talked about how we wanted to create those old-school memories for our own kids. So we put our heads together and said, ‘Let’s bring this back — let’s bring back a piece of our childhood.’”

ALL THE FEELS

Pairing her clinical expertise with her own experience as a parent, Mardyan created Zippy, a sensory-friendly teddy bear designed to help make the transition to sleep smoother and more calming.

“Companionship is the most important aspect of Zippy,” Mardyan explains. “Zippy facilitates a fun activity, and through play, children learn the rhythm of bedtime and build positive sleep routines.”

As an occupational therapist, Mardyan has experience in pediatrics and sensory development, as well as treating musculoskeletal and sports injuries in adults.

“I did a lot of hand rehab focusing on fine motor skills,” she says. “When creating Zippy, I combined what I knew from working with these injuries and my background in pediatrics.”

Sensory needs and fine-motor movements are key to Zippy’s design, including a zip-up compartment on the bear’s back where children can store Zippy’s pajamas.

“I organized it in a way so that children use different fine-motor skills and grasp patterns without even realizing it,” says Mardyan. “So it becomes a natural part of bedtime and learning self-care.”

Zippy is made with varied textures and materials — from nose, to fur, to feet — to engage the senses and provide tactile input for children, including those who are hypersensitive to touch.

“I did that intentionally,” Mardyan says. “I want kids to experience different touch sensations while cuddling their bear or going through their nighttime routine.”

This sensory-friendly concept extends to the company’s line of tactile-friendly pajamas. Tagless, stretchy, and made from bamboo-based fabric, the pajamas are engineered for comfort and to foster healthy sleep patterns, especially for children with touch sensitivities.

“We want all kids to enjoy the pajamas, especially those who are sensory sensitive,” Mardyan says. “We launched the company around the time my son was born, so I tested everything on his skin to figure out what felt best.”

Children can even dress Zippy in matching pajamas, helping to reinforce a consistent bedtime routine through play as an occupation.

“Self-care with kids is difficult,” Mardyan notes. “This makes it fun and intuitive — a natural part of getting ready for bed. We’ve received so much feedback from parents saying Zippy has become their child’s source of comfort.”

A NEW THREAD

Mardyan credits her time at USC with preparing her for this next chapter of her career.

“USC made me very resilient and encouraged me to reach for the top,” says Mardyan, who, fittingly, graduated at the top of her class. “When I was a student, I was always pushing myself to absorb every aspect of the experience and education to truly understand how the body functioned.”

That mindset gave her the foundation to follow a passion, even if the timing was less than ideal.

“We were launching Zip N’ Bear literally right when I got pregnant,” Mardyan says. “People thought I was crazy to start a company, but I felt nothing could stop me. I discovered that when you create something that combines happiness, routine and mindfulness, people really respond.”

While Mardyan remains inspired by her new role, she admits it’s a constant balancing act.

“When you’re an entrepreneur, you have to wear so many hats at once,” she says. “And it’s the same when you’re a mom.”

Still, Mardyan encourages other occupational therapists, including those who are parents, to explore their entrepreneurial aspirations.

“Don’t ever think you can’t accomplish something just because you already have a career or started a family,” she says. “Those experiences can open new doors for you. There’s always another way — so my advice is to dream big.”

Editor’s note: As a “thank you” to the Trojan Family, Mardyan is offering a 30 percent discount on purchases using the code USCOT30 at zippbear.com.

AI-AUGMENTED MRIS

BY MIKE MCNULTY



AI-AUGMENTED MRIS MAY IMPROVE POST-STROKE PROGNOSIS.

SOOK-LEI LIEW TO LEAD \$2.9 MILLION NIH-FUNDED STUDY USING AI TO ENHANCE MRI IMAGE RESOLUTION TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW GLOBAL BRAIN HEALTH IMPACTS LONG-TERM STROKE RECOVERY.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS SEEMINGLY, SUDDENLY, EVERYWHERE. Soon, thanks to a new USC-led study funded by the National Institutes of Health, it will be used to generate synthetic stroke MRI images that are just as accurate and detailed as those produced by the world's most powerful MRI machines.

If you or a loved one just had a stroke, that's incredibly exciting news.

Stroke is the fifth-leading cause of death and leading cause of long-term disability in the U.S., and costs America's health care system more than \$50 billion each year. Unfortunately, it is challenging to accurately predict patient outcomes, especially for those who have more severe initial impairments, and especially when predicting the longer-term trajectory for the months after stroke.

Thanks to a new \$2.9 million grant from the NIH National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, a research team led by Associate Professor Sook-Lei Liew MA '08, PhD '12 looks to better forecast stroke survivors' recovery through 12 months after stroke.

To do so, the team will take low-resolution MRIs — the type of brain images typically captured at a local hospital immediately after a stroke — and feed them to AI algorithms which can generate crisp, accurate, high-resolution versions of the same MRIs — analogous to the type captured by ultra-high field MRIs, which are mostly reserved for academic research at large, urban medical centers.

These AI-generated MRIs can provide additional data about global brain health (GBH), a composite measure of the brain's cellular, vascular and waste disposal systems. In previous research studies, Liew and her team showed that GBH buffers the severity of damage to the brain after stroke, and is associated with more successful post-stroke outcomes. The better the overall brain health, the more likely that their long-term outcomes will be positive.

"We know that global brain health is a clinically meaningful biomarker, but measuring it requires research-grade MRIs that aren't available to most stroke survivors," said Liew, the study's principal investigator.

Liew holds joint appointments at the Keck School of Medicine's Mark and Mary Stevens Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute, the USC Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy and the USC Viterbi School of Engineering. She is also a licensed occupational therapist.

"We can sidestep this bottleneck by using routine clinical MRIs that most stroke patients get when they come into the hospital, and augment them with AI to generate better brain images that provide clearer data for predicting patient outcomes and empowering rehab providers, like occupational therapists," Liew said.

A TOOL FOR PRECISION REHABILITATION

The four-year study, titled "Global Brain Health Predictors of Post-Stroke Sensorimotor Recovery using AI-Enhanced Clinical MRIs," has three main objectives.

First, the team will train AI algorithms to take actual low-resolution stroke MRIs and generate the equivalent of high-resolution MRI images. The algorithm will also "read" those high-res MRIs and automatically generate accurate metrics about GBH and stroke lesion size and location. Then, the team will validate the algorithm's accuracy by comparing it against a database of actual low- and high-res MRIs gathered from more than 430 participants from the ENIGMA Stroke Recovery consortium, which Liew also leads. The expectation is that the AI-enhanced MRIs closely correspond to that of the real-world, high-resolution MRIs.

Secondly, the team will recruit more than 200 stroke survivors and collect low-res MRIs, clinical assessments and comorbidity data



at four time points: at baseline, 3-, 6- and 12-months after stroke. The researchers will then model those data with the AI-generated images and metrics to reveal whether declining GBH after stroke is also a predictor of declining sensorimotor and cognitive outcomes. If so, that may mean the time window for effective post-stroke rehab therapies is actually open wider than what is currently thought by the clinical community.

Thirdly, the team will use the AI-generated MRIs to create clinical decision trees to accurately predict survivors' 3-, 6- and 12-month outcomes. They will validate the robustness of the decision trees against data gathered in a previous multi-site study of nearly 500 stroke survivors.

Finally, they will build an open-source, downloadable software toolkit with the low-to-high-resolution upscaling AI algorithms and predictive models. That will allow any clinician or researcher, no matter where they are in the world, to input a standard clinical MRI image and get AI-generated imaging and metrics that can predict 12-month post-stroke outcomes with a goal of more than 80 percent accuracy.

"Ultimately, this project is about moving from one-size-fits-all therapy to precision rehabilitation," Liew said. "AI can effectively enhance low-resolution MRIs to help better predict how people are expected to recover, so that clinicians can deliver customized care that gives every stroke survivor the best possible chance at recovery."

"Global Brain Health Predictors of Post-Stroke Sensorimotor Recovery using AI-Enhanced Clinical MRIs" (RF1 NS115845-06A1; PI: S.-L. Liew) is funded by the NIH/National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

**“WE CAN
SIDESTEP THIS
BOTTLENECK
... WITH AI.”**

AI TOOLS UNVEIL EHR PATTERNS

BY
MIKE MCNULTY

A NEW USC-LED STUDY WILL APPLY ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS TO ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS (EHRs)

in order to better understand how social determinants of health — non-medical factors impacting health, such as education, income, housing and neighborhood resources like grocery stores and transportation access — are related to mental health of autistic children and teens.

Social determinants of health account for up to 50 percent of health outcomes, yet they are mostly unstudied in autism research, which has traditionally focused on racial and ethnic variables for understanding care disparities. That limitation is especially problematic because autistic children and youth, compared to neurotypical populations, have disproportionately higher rates and frequencies of psychiatric care, such as hospital stays and emergency room visits. That suggests their

mental health care needs were not adequately managed at lower levels of care, like primary care or psychiatry.

Using an AI method known as natural language processing, the research team will flag and extract keywords and phrases from anonymized clinical notes already stored within the EHR systems at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and the University of Florida Health System.

Then, using another AI approach called machine learning, the researchers will develop a model for predicting which social determinants pose relatively higher mental health risks, and for whom. That type of individualized risk assessment will empower clinicians and health systems to customize the mental health care and resources they offer to autistic patients.

The study is funded by a \$3.6 million grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Institute of Mental Health.

“We know there is valuable data about the social and contextual drivers of mental health hidden in plain sight within patient records,” said Assistant Professor Amber Angell, the study’s principal investigator. Angell holds a joint appointment in the Department of Pediatrics at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

“By using AI to analyze large datasets of clinical records, we will use an existing resource to gain an evidence-based understanding of what social determinants protect autistic people’s mental health, and what increases vulnerability,” Angell said. “That will help individuals, families, providers and policymakers to enact innovative solutions that enhance mental health in autism by decreasing adverse outcomes.”



AI TOOLS TO HELP UNVEIL PATTERNS BETWEEN SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH RISKS, AMONG AUTISTIC YOUTH

AMBER ANGELL TO LEAD FIVE-YEAR, \$3.6 MILLION STUDY ANALYZING ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS, WITH COLLABORATORS FROM ACADEMIA AND THE AUTISTIC COMMUNITY.

PROJECT POWERED BY COLLABORATORS

At the USC Chan Division, Angell directs the Disparity Reduction and Equity in Autism Services, or “DREAmS” lab, a multidisciplinary group that includes neurodivergent team members working together to identify, measure, understand and reduce disparities in autism diagnosis and services.

For this particular project, they are joined by collaborators from the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, the University of Florida and the University of Indiana.

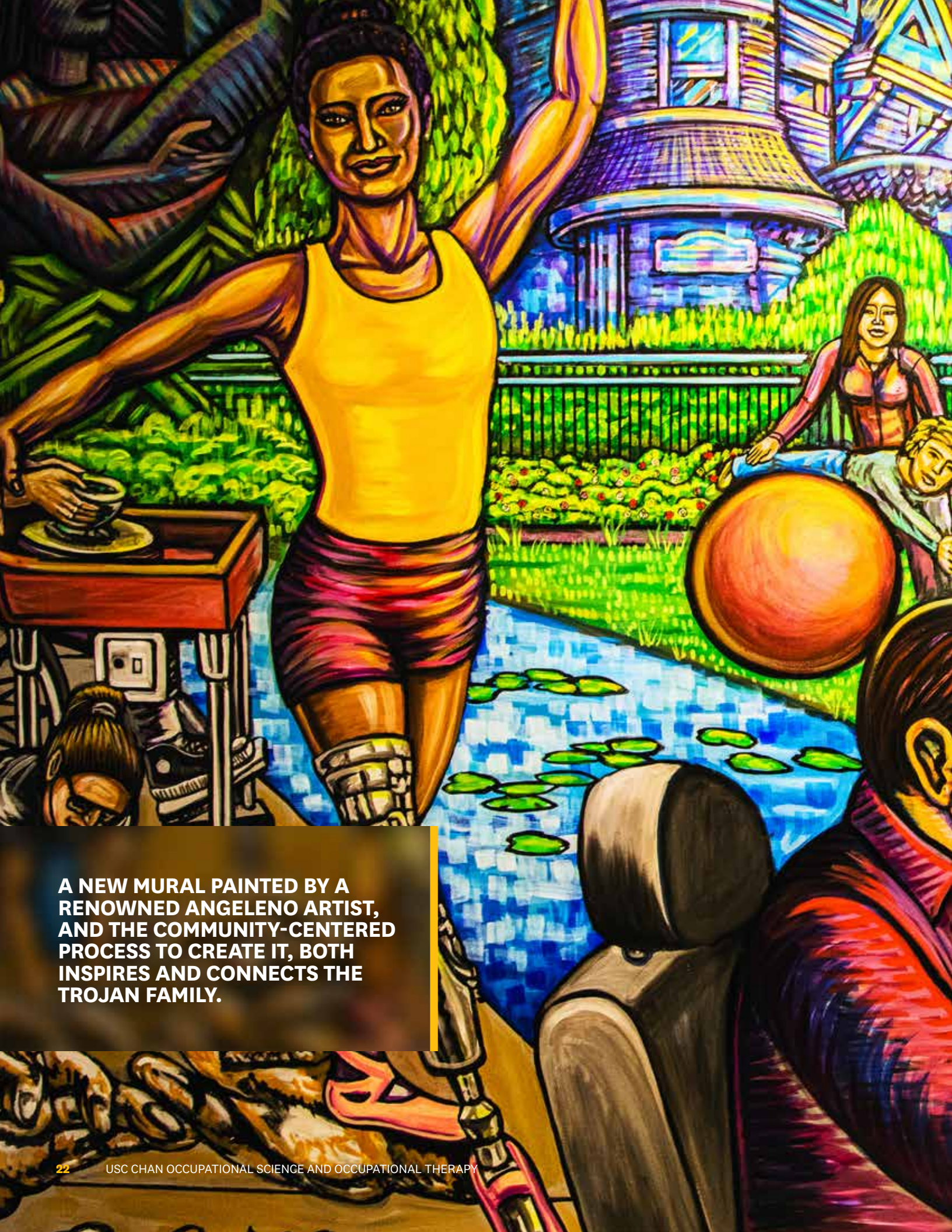
The team will also work closely with a community advisory board of autistic adults and caregivers of autistic children and youth. The board’s participation ensures the project is relevant, responsive and impactful in light of their own lived experiences, and its members will help spread and share the study’s findings as they become available.



The study team will also gather insight from a range of people who work in systems of care that provide services for autistic people — including physicians, therapists and public school and Regional Center administrators — to collectively determine how the study findings can be practically implemented within health systems to identify the most vulnerable autistic children and proactively provide appropriate supports.

“We know that, for an autistic teen experiencing a mental health crisis, the emergency department is one of the worst, most dysregulating environments to get care, so we want to minimize that by providing robust, lower-level care that meets individual needs,” Angell said. “Every year in the United States, at least half-a-million autistic children turn 18 and become autistic adults. This project will give us a much clearer idea of ways to optimize mental health for today’s autistic youth, who are tomorrow’s autistic adults.”

“Machine learning prediction of persistent adverse mental health outcomes for autistic children: Leveraging social determinants of health from clinical data” (PI: A. Angell; 1R01 MH135867) is funded by the NIH National Institute of Mental Health.



A NEW MURAL PAINTED BY A RENOWNED ANGELENO ARTIST, AND THE COMMUNITY-CENTERED PROCESS TO CREATE IT, BOTH INSPIRES AND CONNECTS THE TROJAN FAMILY.

KINDRED SPIRITS



BY MICHELLE MCCARTHY

IN THE HEART OF THE USC CHAN DIVISION'S MAIN HALLWAY AT THE CENTER FOR THE HEALTH PROFESSIONS BUILDING, ACRYLIC SUNLIGHT SPLASHES ACROSS A 9-BY-18-FOOT EXPANSE THAT'S ALIVE WITH FORM, MOVEMENT AND MEANING. Thousands of brushstrokes are a chorus of color and care, transforming a once-gray hallway into a living record of community.

"Kindred Spirits," a mural completed in late 2024 by artist Paul Botello, has become far more than paint on drywall. For students, faculty and staff, it stands as a living testament to identity, collaboration and belonging — a visual embodiment of who the USC Chan Division is, and what it strives to be.

Botello, who has spent decades painting large-scale murals across Southern California, came to the project through a prior university collaboration.

"I'd worked with USC before on a COVID-awareness campaign," he says. "They liked what I did and reached out again. It turned out to be a really great opportunity."

Born and raised in East Los Angeles, Botello has been immersed in the Chicano muralist tradition for practically his entire life. As a UCLA-trained artist influenced by Mexican masters like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, he has long viewed murals as more than aesthetic decoration. For him, they are a way to reclaim space, share stories and build identity. His works across Los Angeles chronicle community histories by blending realism with symbolism, and local imagery with universal themes.

But Kindred Spirits would be something new for Botello — not just his first collaboration with the USC Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, but also a rare indoor commission.

"I usually paint outdoors," he explains. "Outside, you have to worry about sun damage and fading. Indoors, I could focus on details, layering color and expression in ways that feel more like painting a canvas than a wall."

CREATION THROUGH CO-OCCUPATION

Collaboration and connection were central to the mural's commissioning, says Associate Dean and Chair Grace Baranek.

"Our community was deeply affected by the pandemic and other societal events polarizing communities around the globe," Baranek says. "I could tell that we needed to engage in a community-driven occupation that could bring us unity, hope and a sense of purpose."

Occupational science uses the term "co-occupation" to encapsulate the powerful, health-promoting effects of engaging in a meaningful activity with other people, side-by-side in not only the literal, but also the metaphorical, sense.

"We often talk about how occupational science and occupational therapy, at their core, embrace the power of human occupations to heal and to restore," Baranek says. "We needed something beautiful that would tell our own cultural story from multiple viewpoints, while also putting our own ideas to the test — something that reflects USC Chan's incredible legacy, the hopes and dreams of our current community, and a bridge to a brighter future."

So before he made the first brushstroke, Botello did something that artists seldom do. He listened.

From the outset, the creative process reflected the participatory ethos of occupational therapy — collaborative, inclusive and deeply human-centered. With Baranek's encouragement, Botello held multiple brainstorming and listening sessions with students, faculty and staff to better understand what mattered most to the division.

"We met at Lincoln Park," he recalls.

Lincoln Park is located literally across the street from the Center for the Health Professions, and includes Plaza de la Raza, a community arts and education space.

"About a hundred people — teachers, staff, administrators — showed up. I gave a presentation with slides of my past work, and then asked everyone to respond. I handed out paper and pencils and said, 'Show me what this place means to you.'"

The responses poured in, and included sketches, words, poems and personal reflections. Back at home, Botello and his wife spread the papers across their dining table to look for patterns. Common themes included community, empowerment, diversity, healing and family. Those ideas formed the backbone of his first drafts. When he presented initial sketches, he was surprised by the amount of engagement that followed.

"We had three focus groups with students, faculty and a big group over Zoom," he says. "They gave feedback on everything. I changed quite a few things because some imagery looked too much like physical therapy. I really learned what occupational therapy was."

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AN EYE FOR DETAIL

Every brushstroke in Kindred Spirits carries significance extracted from those community conversations. At the mural's right, a radiant elder woman rises, her hair blending into leaves and sky.

"She represents all the deans who have led the division," Botello explains. "She's part human, part nature, a woman of color composed of hundreds of brushstrokes in different tones. She's wise, intellectual, nurturing; a scholar who embodies continuity."

To the viewer's left, a ballerina with a prosthetic leg strikes fourth position pose with strength and grace. Originally painted in soft pinks, the dancer transformed thanks to student feedback.

"They said, 'Mr. Botello, what about USC colors?'" he says with a laugh. "Then someone told me about Misty Copeland, the first Black principal ballerina at the American Ballet Theatre. That inspired me to reimagine her as a strong Black woman wearing cardinal and gold."

Nearby, a family of two fathers and their daughter picnics on a blanket.

"That idea came from a student who said the mural should reflect same-sex families," Botello says. "I thought that was beautiful. I wanted it to feel like home for everyone."

For Onedit Lara-Rico OTD '26, now a third-year occupational therapy doctoral student, the mural, more than anything, was a chance to be heard.

"We [students] were invited from the very beginning," she says. "They told us, 'This is your space. Help us shape it.'"

As a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipient, Lara-Rico has often felt invisible in academic settings. But participating in the making of Kindred Spirits felt different.

"I've had a lot of obstacles pursuing higher education," she says. "Seeing my input reflected on the wall was powerful. It told me that my story, and others like mine, belonged here."

She even painted a small section herself.

"It was just a patch of color," she says, smiling, "but I'll never forget it. That's my brushstroke."

Each day, walking by the mural reminds her of the inclusive community she has helped build with her own hands.

"In that hallway, most portraits are of white women," she says. "Seeing people of color, seeing diversity, it gives me a sense of belonging. It tells me this space includes me."

Enhancing that sense of belongingness is an everyday objective of Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy Jesús Díaz MA '08, OTD '09. In his role as associate chair of community, culture, and belonging, Díaz leads initiatives, events, dialogues and creative activities to strengthen cohesion among the nearly 800

members of the USC Chan community. Díaz and Sarah Bream MA '96, OTD '09, associate chair of operations, community partnerships and development, were instrumental in bringing the project to life.

Díaz says that the mural's creation mirrors the ways in which occupational therapists leverage meaningful activities for the good of others.

"Occupational therapy is about collaboration and creativity," he says. "We design interventions with people, not for them. The mural process was the same: collective, participatory and healing."

As students, staff and faculty contributed their sketches and stories, they weren't just designing a mural. They were co-creating a shared identity.

"It became a community effort," Díaz says. "Everyone could look at the finished piece and say, 'I see myself there.'"

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IT HAS TO CATCH YOUR EYE FIRST.

THAT'S THE HOOK.



REFLECTIONS OF COMMUNITY

As with all great art, beneath its surface lie complex meanings merging personal and collective histories, using symbolism both subtle and overt.

“It has to catch your eye first,” Botello says. “That’s the hook. But once you stop to look closer, it should make you think.”

Beside the ballerina are seemingly transparent figures representing occupational therapists who play essential, yet too-often underappreciated, roles. As Botello sees it, rehabilitation and recovery depend on connection, especially when family cannot be present and providers like occupational therapists step in with compassion, patience and strength. That said, Botello isn’t self-serious.

“I like to hide little Easter eggs, details that reward people who spend time [viewing] it,” Botello says.

For example, a tree trunk is carved with a small heart and the initials P + R for Paul and his wife, Renee.

Botello is also detail-oriented, so much so, that he even had USC Facilities staff adjust the temperature of the hallway lighting so that the mural’s colors and tones would appear as he intended.

No matter how big or small, every motif in Kindred Spirits connotes community. That includes a few visual references, like Pre-Colombian sun iconography, to the East Los Angeles community that surrounds USC’s Health Sciences Campus. More than 95 percent of people in East LA identify as Hispanic/Latino, the highest concentration of any city in the continental United States.

“Sometimes we get isolated inside our building,” Díaz says. “This mural brings a little of that outside world in. It reminds us to stay rooted in the communities we serve.”

As painting progressed, it also became clear that Botello’s humility and openness were essential to the mural’s success.

“I’m an expert in my field,” he says, “but I always go into each space ready to learn. Every project teaches me something new.”



Botello says he learned much from the faculty who lingered between classes, and the students who dropped by to chat. For many, checking in on its progress became something of a weekly, or even daily, communal ritual, a chance to exchange stories, laughter and mutual admiration.

“It was a loving, caring environment,” Botello says. “Sometimes I’d spend an hour just talking with people before painting.”

Lara-Rico says that approach was truly transformative.

“[Botello] never acted like it was his mural. It became our mural.”

A year after its final touches, Kindred Spirits continues to inspire all who pass by, still sparking storytelling, laughs and admiration. It’s not only a visual centerpiece but also a teaching tool for the next generation of OT students, a tangible reminder of the ways in which collaboration, empathy and creativity are essential to healing and learning.

“When future students walk by, I want them to feel welcome and safe,” Lara-Rico says. “To know that their voices matter here.”

Botello shares that same hope.

“I want people to feel joy and pride, and to see something new every time because every time they bring a new story to it,” he says.

In so many ways, Kindred Spirits does just what occupational therapy practitioners do best: turn doing into belonging, art into connection and a building into a home.

The Paul Botello Kindred Spirits Scholarship is a new opportunity to celebrate the therapeutic potential of art, and the transformative power of community-centered creative practices.

Inspired by the vibrant murals of Paul Botello, this one-time scholarship will support a USC occupational therapy student who will likewise use creativity to one day meaningfully impact their own community through therapeutic art and creative occupations.

The inaugural scholarship is anticipated to be awarded during the 2026-27 academic year. Become one of our kindred spirits by making a gift to the Paul Botello Kindred Spirits Scholarship fund today!

1. **Visit** tinyurl.com/usckindredspirits
2. **Enter** your gift amount and frequency
3. **Select** “Make this gift a memorial or tribute in honor of someone,” then select “In honor of”
4. **Enter** “Paul Botello” into the first and last name fields
5. **Click** the “Next” buttons to enter payment details to submit your gift

FROM DESTRUCTION TO 'DENA STRONG'

AMID THE EERIE, EARLY-MORNING DARKNESS ON WEDNESDAY, JAN. 8, 2025, JOSHUA KOTLER STOOD BEFORE HIS ALTADENA, CALIFORNIA, HOME CLUTCHING HOPE AND A GARDEN HOSE.

As the wildfire swept westward and smoke consumed the typically crisp foothill air, Kotler continued watering the roof of the three-bedroom ranch home he and his wife, Emily, had purchased, gutted and renovated just less than two years prior.

His phone binged with a text from Emily: "Leave now."

His father-in-law called with a similarly succinct, urgent message: "My daughter and grandchildren need you."

Kotler dropped the hose and his futile attempt

to combat Mother Nature's indiscriminate wrath. He stepped into his car and began driving away down the cul-de-sac. Peering into his rearview mirror, he saw flames and uncertainty.

The Eaton Fire of January 2025 devastated the foothill communities northeast of Los Angeles, particularly Altadena, a 42,000-resident unincorporated community sitting about 13 miles northeast of the USC Health Sciences Campus. The wildfire torched more than 14,000 acres, destroyed nearly 9,500 structures and claimed the lives of 17 civilians, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Numerous individuals affiliated with USC Chan — faculty members like Kotler, an assistant professor of clinical occupational therapy, as well as students and alumni — had their

homes destroyed by the Eaton Fire. It was the largest disaster event to impact USC occupational therapy since damage from the 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake forced the program's relocation from the Rancho Los Amigos hospital campus in Downey, California, to the USC Health Sciences Campus.

The Eaton Fire delivered devastation, shock and loss. It also inspired acts of kindness and proof of human resiliency.

"REALITY SET IN."

After more than a dozen years living in different spots around Los Angeles, Linsey Grunes, '05, MA '08, OTD '15, and her husband, Danny, purchased a home in Altadena in January 2023.





THE EATON FIRE OF JANUARY 2025 INFLICTED PAIN AND LOSS ON MEMBERS OF THE USC CHAN COMMUNITY. NOW, HOPE DEFINES THEIR RESPECTIVE FUTURES.

BY DANIEL P. SMITH

“We intentionally picked Altadena because it’s such a wonderful community,” says Grunes, an associate professor of clinical occupational therapy at USC Chan. “It’s where we wanted to put down roots.”

After a year of renovations, Grunes, her husband and their two young children moved into the home. On trips to local parks, they found a proud, welcoming community. During hikes into the mountains, they discovered nature’s serenity hovering high above urban commotion.

“It was the perfect place for our family,” Grunes says.

Throughout the evening hours of Jan. 7, Grunes tracked the wildfire surging in Eaton Canyon, fueled by 100 mph Santa Ana wind gusts. While nervous, she remained calm and measured

for her two children, then four and one. She treated the wildfire-induced power outage as an adventure and honored the household’s nightly routines — dinner, bath and bedtime stories — by candlelight.

Soon after putting her two children to sleep around 8:00 p.m., Grunes’ mother sent a text encouraging her to download the Watch Duty app, a real-time wildfire tracking and alert platform. Grunes obliged. Three hours later, the app shared an evacuation order. They woke the children, grabbed blankets and assorted items and packed the car, bound for a friend’s house in the nearby San Fernando Valley.

“We were in fight-or-flight mode rushing to get out of the house with our kids,” Grunes recalls. “But I never thought we weren’t coming back.”

Once in the car, Grunes got her first clear look at Eaton Canyon. The view shocked her, dramatically raising her level of concern.

“It almost looked like lightning bolts coming down the canyon, and reality set in,” she says.

Throughout the night, Grunes tracked the fire’s steady progress on her phone. Her fear swelled. The next day, a neighbor contacted Grunes.

“It’s gone,” she said of Grunes’ house.

“My heart dropped,” Grunes says.

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“GRIEF ON TOP OF GRIEF.”

In December 2024, Ariyana Griffin OTD '28, who earned a degree in health and human sciences from the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences the previous May, learned USC Chan had accepted her into its occupational therapy graduate program. The achievement's euphoria, however, proved short-lived.

Days later, her father, Toney Griffin, passed away.

And two weeks later, the Eaton Fire overpowered Altadena and consumed Griffin's family home of the last dozen years.

“It felt like I was stacking grief on top of grief,” Griffin says.

Before the winds shifted and the Eaton Fire seriously threatened Altadena, Griffin and her mother left their home voluntarily, largely out of concern that the mushrooming smoke would complicate Griffin's asthma. They packed a few essentials and traveled to Griffin's grandmother's home in Highland Park, California.

“It seemed purely precautionary,” Griffin says.

As flames continued consuming Altadena, however, Griffin's cousin called with a report from the frontlines. Their neighbor's house was gone, and Griffin's fence was ablaze.

“I lost hope then,” Griffin says.

The following day, Griffin's cousin phoned again. She confirmed that Griffin's home, like all but one other house on their block, was destroyed.

Griffin's heart pounded and her mind swirled as she considered all she had lost, and all that would never be recovered.

“I had a framed photo near my bed of my dad and I when I was little,” she says. “It was tough to think I'd never see that again.”



“WHAT HAPPENED, HAPPENED.”

As sunlight drenched Los Angeles on the morning of Jan. 8, only hours after one of the darkest nights of his life, Kotler received a video on his phone. A neighbor recorded the devastation, panning from one heap of charred ruins to the next.

A day later, Kotler and his wife returned to their neighborhood. They parked their car at the cordon line at the base of the hill, and hiked two miles up the road to their property. Among a sea of black ash and debris, a few small fires still burned.

“We cried,” Kotler says. “It's all we could do.”

Kotler asked a nearby firefighter if it was possible to look for anything.

“Pick one spot and I'll help you,” she said.

Kotler pointed to where their family room had stood. A day earlier, that space proudly displayed his young daughters' holiday decorations; now, it was the scorched remains of furniture and memories. Kotler looked down to find one treasured family heirloom intact: his grandmother's menorah.

“She was a Holocaust survivor, so that menorah was a symbol of faith, family and perseverance,” he says.

When Kotler began dating Emily, a proud Altadena native, a decade prior in New York, she laid out clear plans for marriage and a family, including pointing to Altadena as their eventual home.

Truth be told, Kotler cringed at the thought. As a native New Yorker, swapping his Big Apple grit for Hollywood glam seemed a betrayal of sorts. Nevertheless, he moved west, admittedly with a void in his heart. It was Emily, his daughters and the dynamic energy of Altadena that made him feel whole again.

“I fell in love with Altadena, and it became home,” Kotler says.

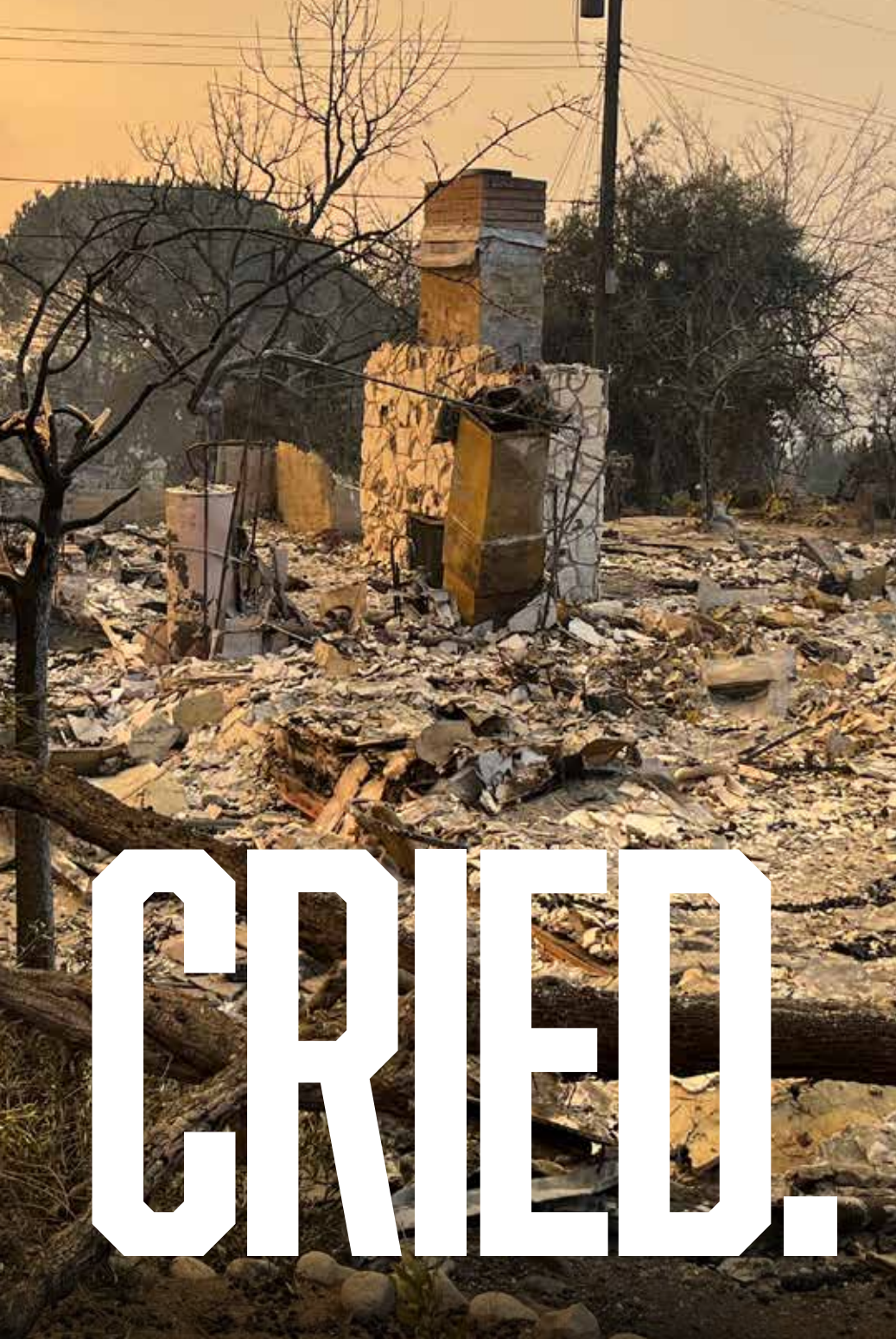
The Eaton Fire, however, eviscerated the community — the Kotlers' home and those of neighbors, their daughter's school, beloved restaurants, parks and more. Kotler questioned his next steps.

“What happened, happened,” Kotler says. “You try to find the best way forward.”

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“IT’S WHAT [WE] NEEDED.”

In the aftermath of the Eaton Fire, Altadena residents impacted by the wildfire scrambled to find safety and slivers of normalcy.

The Kotlers lived out of suitcases in San Diego before moving in with various family members across the L.A. area. By the end of January, the couple’s oldest daughter returned to school, albeit a temporary space in Pasadena. Kotler and Emily have focused on showing strength and composure in front of their daughters, who display an innate resiliency that seems to be naturally embedded in youth.

“My oldest daughter said to me the other day how awesome it’s been to be traveling and spending time with different family,” Kotler says. “It’s great that’s her perspective amid all the disarray.”

Grunes and her family first lived with her parents in Ojai, California, and then friends, before finding a short-term rental in Los Angeles, where leasing rates soared as demand (and capitalism) overwhelmed housing supply. More recently, Grunes and her family returned to Ojai — 80-plus miles from the USC campus — to be closer to her parents.

Being a pediatric occupational therapist, Grunes is attuned to the needs of children, especially in the aftermath of a traumatic incident. She leaned on her professional experience to support her own children, prioritizing family time, connection and keeping things simple.

“I’ve focused on how my kids are processing all the change and what I need to do for them,” Grunes says.

Griffin and her mother, meanwhile, moved in with her brother in Orange, California, for three months before securing a rental property near the USC campus.

“It felt too exhausting to look for a new place immediately,” she says. “We were stressed and overwhelmed.”

Amid the emotional upheaval, Griffin calls living with her brother “a blessing” and source of comfort. She appreciated coming home to family and his splashes of comedic relief.

“It’s what my mother and I needed,” Griffin says.

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“SO MUCH LOVE AND SUPPORT”

Much as failure prompts personal growth, tragedy often alters life perspectives.

With USC’s spring semester set to start five days after the wildfire ripped through Altadena, the USC Chan community quickly delivered support to Grunes. Colleagues covered her classes, and division leadership formulated a hybrid work schedule. One co-worker established a GoFundMe page, which attracted donations from Chan colleagues, alumni and current students alike.

“Students, who may be living on a tight budget, were making small donations to support our family,” Grunes says. “It was just so moving.”

Grief and gratitude make odd bedfellows. But that’s the pairing Grunes encounters today.

“Amidst all the difficult parts of this experience and trying to figure out next steps, there’s been so much love and support,” Grunes says. “Honestly, we’ve been overwhelmed with gratitude at all the support that’s come our way.”

Kotler appreciated the many USC colleagues who reached out with offers of support, as well as structured help from Care for the Caregiver (C4C), a Keck Medicine of USC program designed to support the well-being of health care staff. C4C led an essential items drive, raised money for fire victims and created an employee hotline offering emotional support as well as details on resources for housing, food, transportation and other needs.

Kotler also drew strength from his Altadena community. Neighbors called, shared important information and offered earnest support. Kotler says he’s never felt so close to his neighbors, an admittedly odd feeling for a native New Yorker who spent much of his life in multi-unit dwellings.

“We’re trauma-bonded for life,” he says.

While Griffin had yet to enroll in USC at the time of the Eaton Fire, she was surprised to hear from USC Chan faculty and staff, many of whom checked in on her well-being and forwarded resources available to fire victims.

“There was so much genuine concern about how I was doing,” she says. “I had experienced the Trojan Family before as an undergrad, but never like this.”

Griffin says losing her father and her home within a two-week span opened her eyes to the support around her. It also drew her closer to her mother.

“It’s easy to take that for granted when things are going well, but I see the care others have for me now, more than ever,” she says. “It’s why community and gratitude are a bigger part of my life now.”

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THERE'S HOPE.



“THERE’S HOPE.”

Days after the Eaton Fire, Adrienne Huffington OTD '25, an Altadena resident whose home escaped the wildfire, began looking for ways to help fire victims in her hometown.

Huffington designed a “Dena Strong” T-shirt and found a company that could print on-demand and ship directly. She then posted the tee and purchasing information on Instagram.

Hoping to collect \$500, sales soared past that figure within hours. To date, Dena Strong T-shirt sales have eclipsed \$14,000, with all proceeds directed to fire victims.

“People are coming together, and it’s so beautiful to be a part of the healing,” Huffington says.

To be certain, one year after the fire, there is healing, purpose and a renewed focus on the future among many fire victims.

While Griffin initially feared she would have to defer entering the professional program at USC Chan, she indeed enrolled this past fall, and thrived in her opening semester. The support she received after the Eaton Fire helped her realize the value of human connection, and she promises to bring that spirit to her professional work.

“As a future OT, I want to connect with people and unlock their potential,” Griffin says. “It’s hard to believe in a better future if no one else around you does, but I want to be that person who helps people discover opportunities and see the little wins.”

For Grunes and her husband, who once held a clear vision of the future, the Eaton Fire blurred the map forward. Forced to re-evaluate their goals, Grunes says the wildfire sharpened priorities, an ultimately positive, insight-driving development for their family.

“The fire has changed the trajectory of our lives forever, and we’re now focused on finding the path that is best for our family,” says Grunes, who calls rebuilding in Altadena a strong possibility.

While Kotler was initially “50-50” on rebuilding in Altadena, his wife never wavered. With nearly all damaged properties now cleaned, he sees movement, albeit slow, toward Altadena’s resurrection.

“We’ll be rebuilding there,” Kotler confirms.

He’s hopeful others will too. While concerned about the economics of new home construction and recreating Altadena’s artistic, family-friendly vibe, he is optimistic Altadena and other communities ravaged by the January 2025 wildfires will return better than ever.

“There’s hope,” Kotler says. “And hope is powerful.”



WE’LL BE REBUILDING THERE.

EMILY AND JOSHUA KOTLER, WITH THEIR CHILDREN.
(PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSHUA KOTLER)

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TROJAN FAMILY



Q&A

TINA (SEHREMELIS) DIMOPOULOS
'15, MA '16, OTD '17

FOUNDER, PULSE OT
NEW YORK CITY

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CLINICAL PRACTICE, AND WHAT ASPECTS OF IT YOU FIND MOST MEANINGFUL OR IMPACTFUL?

Pulse OT is a private practice in Manhattan where we emphasize evidence-based and client-centered occupational therapy to help clients recover, move better and regain strength. I'm a Certified Hand Therapist and Neuro-IFRAH certified for the treatment of adults with brain injury and stroke. I'm also the only STOTT PILATES® Rehabilitation Mat & Reformer Certified Instructor in the state of New York.

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN OT — SPECIFICALLY OT INTERVENTIONS FOCUSED ON THE HAND AND UPPER EXTREMITY — AND PILATES?

While working as a CHT, I noticed a handful of clients with repetitive strain injury returning to my caseload every nine to 12 months. In these chronic cases, treating just the area of injury was not enough, and I knew I needed to expand my treatment to ergonomics and postural control. Many individuals have difficulty understanding the causes of their repetitive stress injury, which can be due to subtle inefficiencies in alignment, timing and/or load transfers, which can then evolve into chronic pain and dysfunction. Emphasizing trunk strength, postural control and ergonomics leads to stronger patient outcomes and overall education to promote increased functional success.

I knew that better postural control meant better upper extremity function. However, I did not fully understand how to address the core in treatment. This led me to pursue the STOTT PILATES Rehab certification in 2022. The knowledge gained from this training allows me to proficiently address posture and abdominal strength as it relates to extremity use.

Demonstrating the role of the pelvis and trunk to extremity movements in functional tasks is often an "aha!" moment for many clients. Once a client understands how important the position of the pelvis or thoracic spine is in relation to arm or leg movements in daily activities, there is often a significant increase in carryover of safe and efficient movement patterns, which leads to overall functional success.

YOU FIRST DISCOVERED PILATES AFTER AN INJURY DURING OT SCHOOL — WHAT HAPPENED, AND HOW DID THAT IMPACT YOUR EDUCATION AND CAREER?

During the first year of the master's program I had a bike injury which tore my left ACL. I completed nine months of traditional physical therapy, however I was not at my prior level of functioning, and I knew I wanted to continue

to work on my recovery. My mom suggested I try reformer Pilates at a local studio, which introduced me to STOTT Pilates. During the classes, I would often think about how many of the exercises or movement patterns would benefit clients, because I saw firsthand how Pilates-based exercises improved my own functional engagement and participation in daily tasks.

WHAT DOES A PILATES-FOCUSED OT TREATMENT SESSION LOOK LIKE?

First, the client's occupational goals are central to treatment. I assess posture and analyze movement to identify asymmetries and compensatory movement patterns. Treatment begins with traditional OT interventions, which may include manual therapy and/or stretching as indicated. Then, neuromuscular re-education and/or therapeutic exercise may be introduced using Pilates-based principles. These can be performed on a yoga mat or Pilates reformer, depending on the client's needs and abilities. Emphasis is placed on developing appropriate control and strength of the pelvis, thoracic spine and shoulder complex, as proximal stability is essential for efficient upper extremity movement.

Once adequate trunk control and strength are demonstrated, exercises may be progressed to include upper extremities. Sessions conclude with interventions addressing specific self-care needs or therapeutic activities directly related to the client's occupational goals. Pilates-based exercises are an adjunct to, not a replacement for, more traditional OT approaches.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT IN THE NEXT CHAPTERS OF YOUR CAREER?

I look forward to demonstrating how Pilates-based rehabilitation can benefit many other patient populations within the scope of OT practice, and to produce research and publications that support this work. I am also excited to connect with other OTs working in this niche practice area. I'm using social media to engage a community that can build this niche practice area. Let's connect at @ThePilatesOT.

SWITCHING GEARS SLIGHTLY — DO YOU REMEMBER A FAVORITE INSTRUCTOR OR FAVORITE CLASS FROM USC?

Three professors come to mind. I was the graduate assistant for the adult rehabilitation course taught by Dr. Samia Rafeedie, which helped spark my passion for teaching, which I now do as an adjunct professor. Dr. Julie McLaughlin Gray was my capstone advisor, and she helped guide me in program development, which set foundational skills for

building a small business. Dr. Camille Dieterle introduced the importance of health and wellness in OT through her Lifestyle Redesign elective course, and as an OT now specializing in a wellness niche, I am constantly reminded of many key concepts from that course.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE USC FOR YOUR OT EDUCATION?

USC has consistently maintained a top-ranked OT program nationwide, with strong ties to research. A high-quality, comprehensive and research-focused education was a significant deciding factor, as that prepares graduates to become scholar-clinicians. I was also admitted as one of 10 students in USC's accelerated undergrad-to-graduate program, which further solidified my decision to attend USC.

HOW DO YOU THINK YOU GREW DURING YOUR TIME AT USC?

I was eager to become a clinician when I began grad school. I wanted to be "hands-on" with patients as soon as possible. But I quickly learned the importance of research and evidence-based practice. It became evident that, to be a strong clinician, I needed to have strong evidence to back my treatments.

I also worked in Dr. Shawn Roll's Musculoskeletal Sonography and Occupational Performance lab on a systematic review focused on repetitive strain injuries in dental professionals. It was published as a cover story for the *Journal of the American Dental Association* and sparked my interest in the repetitive strain injury population, which my practice now focuses on.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO CURRENT USC STUDENTS OR TO NEW GRADS?

Do not be afraid to try something new or be the first to pave the way! Like I said, I am currently the only STOTT PILATES Rehab Certified Instructor in all of New York. Being the first to do something is not always easy, but if you truly believe in your work, your passion will translate through your therapy and benefit your clients. Believe in yourself, and pursue your interests!

Elizabeth June Yerxa

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DR. ELIZABETH JUNE YERXA '52, DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR EMERITUS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA (USC) MRS. T.H. CHAN DIVISION OF OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY, DIED ON DEC. 18, 2024. SHE WAS 94.

Dr. Yerxa was a remarkable woman: an internationally renowned scholar, an accomplished researcher, a revered teacher and a wise, caring and supportive friend.

EDUCATION, INDOORS AND OUTDOORS

“Betty,” as she was affectionally known by many, was born Aug. 18, 1930, in Pasadena, California,

to Thomas Frederick Yerxa II and Elizabeth Yerxa (Wood). As Betty wrote in her journal, “these were the times of the greatest economic depression the U.S. had had, followed by WWII, the war to end all wars.” Although her family struggled during her childhood, she recalled “it contained much love.”

She was the third of three children, following her brother Tom and sister Jean. Tom died serving in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific theater during World War II. Betty recalled that, as a child, her mother “seemed like a god” in her eyes — powerful, wise, accomplished and worthy of reverence. Betty attended several public schools in the Los Angeles basin and at each, she strived

to meet her mother’s and other’s expectations and consistently performed at the top of her class.

Throughout elementary, middle and high school, she assiduously focused on developing writing and oratory skills with the help and encouragement of several teachers whom she deeply admired. These encounters inspired her to become a lifelong teacher, one who would alter the lives of her own future students in positive ways, foster confidence in their abilities and kindle their excitement for subjects she taught.

Importantly, Betty cultivated another set of skills and passions completely unrelated to

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Former chair of the USC Department of Occupational Therapy and founder of the research discipline of occupational science.

academics. For several months every summer, the Yerxa family camped in Reds Meadow, a valley in the Inyo National Forest in the eastern Sierra Nevada. During these summers, she developed a passion for fishing and hiking, fell in love with the austere life of the High Sierra and honed competencies she would eventually use decades later during her retirement.

Betty discovered occupational therapy in a *Seventeen* magazine article describing the profession, and had what she called “an immediate ‘aha!’ experience” compelling her to pursue a career that would “click with my eclectic interests.” Betty enrolled at USC and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Therapy in 1952. To fulfill graduation requirements, she took many liberal arts courses in which she refined her writing skills, developed a penetrating interest in philosophy and came to fully appreciate both the sciences and humanities.

Immediately following graduation, Betty was employed as a staff occupational therapist at Orthopaedic Hospital in Los Angeles. She was hired by the California Elks Association as a mobile pediatric occupational therapist providing in-home services for children with cerebral palsy living in the Lancaster–Palmdale region. In this role, she drove from house to house, carrying loads of therapy equipment piled into the trunk of her car.

A CALLING TO TEACH

In 1955, she was appointed to her first teaching position as a faculty member in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the College of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. Following one year of teaching, she returned to clinical practice at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey, California, where she worked from 1956–67.

Consistent with her belief that her true calling was in the realm of teaching, in 1967 she began graduate studies at Boston University (BU). By 1971, she had earned both a Master of Education degree and a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Psychology from BU, while also serving as an instructor in the Master of Occupational Therapy program at the BU Sargent College of Allied Health Professions.

Betty’s academic career can be considered to

have “officially” begun in 1971, when she returned to Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center as research coordinator in occupational therapy with a faculty appointment as associate professor in the USC School of Medicine’s Department of Community Medicine and Public Health. In 1976, she was selected chairperson of the USC Department of Occupational Therapy, a position in which she served for 11 years, and during which she was promoted to professor in 1982. Upon her retirement in 1987 at the age of 57, she was named professor emeritus. In 1991, USC recognized her eminent career contributions to the university, the profession and the community by naming her distinguished professor emeritus.

At the time of her retirement, Betty was widely regarded as one of occupational therapy’s foremost scholars. Consequently, she was invited to spend stretches of time as a visiting professor or fellow at universities throughout the world including in England, Australia, Finland, Canada and Sweden. Betty’s publication record was exceptional; her papers are today considered classics in the field, and will continue to be read and re-read for generations to come.

HER BOUNDLESS IMPACT

Dr. Yerxa earned numerous professional awards and recognitions for her contributions to the profession, including several from the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF). She served as president of AOTF from 1966–68, vice-president of AOTA from 1972–75 and chair of the AOTF Research Development Committee from 1982–85. She was awarded AOTA’s Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lectureship Award, the association’s highest academic recognition, in 1966. She was inducted into the AOTA Roster of Fellows in 1973, and was named a charter member of the AOTF Academy of Research in 1983. In 1987, she received the AOTA Award of Merit, the association’s highest award. She was granted honorary doctoral degrees from Thomas Jefferson University (Philadelphia) in 1988 and the University of Exeter (Exeter, England) in 1995.

Dr. Yerxa left a legacy to occupational therapy virtually boundless in its impact. Most notably, while serving as chair of the USC Department of Occupational Therapy, she founded a new academic discipline, occupational science, which

focuses on studying the impact of participation in everyday activities upon health and well-being. Today, occupational science programs are flourishing at universities throughout the world, and more than 100 academicians who hold occupational science doctoral degrees serve as faculty members in these programs. Not surprisingly, Dr. Yerxa’s publications in occupational science are treasured for their deep insights on the central role of daily activities in health maintenance and promotion, and on how to best nurture the human spirit to stay active, no matter the circumstances.

Betty’s “retirement phase” of life spanned 37 years, during which she not only traveled widely, but also realized her lifelong dream of living alone in a small mountain community in the Eastern Sierra. In 1988, she moved to the hamlet she called “beautiful Aspendell,” approximately 45 miles south of Reds Meadow where she and her family had spent those joyous vacations. Her life had come full circle — immersed in the natural beauty of the Sierras, frequently hiking and fishing while exercising the many skills she had honed during childhood summers.






Aspendell was also the perfect backdrop against which she continued her writing projects, studied Buddhism and other philosophical traditions and read voraciously across a wide range of disciplines — occupations she routinely engaged in well into her nineties. Betty also cultivated a circle of friends residing in the nearby town of Bishop, California, and the surrounding area. These friends cherished her generosity of spirit, wisdom, support and wise counsel. It is not surprising that throughout her retirement, Betty still received letters of gratitude written by former students for whom she was their life-changing teacher and mentor.

There is no question that she indeed fulfilled her calling as a dedicated, effective and inspiring teacher.

Elizabeth June Yerxa was preceded in death by her parents Thomas F. Yerxa II and Elizabeth Yerxa (Wood); her brother Thomas F. Yerxa III; and her sister Marjorie Jean Weeks. She is survived by her nephew Edward William Weeks and niece Marjorie Elizabeth Miller.

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