

USC Chan

FALL 2024

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



FEATURE STORY

International
Summer Immersion
Program Turns 10

SPOTLIGHT

KMb with
Clubhouse
International



WORK IN PROGRESS

Celebrated Chicano muralist and native East Los Angeleno Paul Botello has been engaged with USC Chan students, faculty and staff throughout the Fall 2024 semester to paint a new mural in the Center for the Health Professions building. The mural is a visual cultural narrative depicting the USC Chan Division, the broader occupational therapy profession and affiliated communities near and far. While the final mural has yet to be unveiled, see more of Botello's work on Instagram @paulbotelloartistmuralist.



Dear Alumni and Friends,

Occupational therapists and occupational scientists know that the human experience is communal and multifaceted. No matter the setting or field, it is the dynamic interplay — between occupations, relationships, identities and health — that unites practitioners and researchers alike.

Similarly, being part of the USC Chan Family is to be part of many communities simultaneously: a global network of connections and resources advancing the profession worldwide; a best-in-class clinical enterprise treating some of the highest acuity patients in the United States; and a locally-connected organization mobilizing knowledge for change. This issue of the *USC Chan Magazine* demonstrates how these different facets, like tiles in a mosaic, come together into a cohesive picture that's more than the sum of its parts.

This issue's cover story commemorates the tenth anniversary of our Summer Occupational Therapy Immersion (SOTI) program. Since 2014, more than 500 students from 50 countries have come to Los Angeles to discover how occupational therapy is practiced in the U.S. Anybody who has ever met Director of Global Initiatives Danny Park and his team can attest to their hospitality, generosity and camaraderie, virtues reflected by SOTI's incredible impact and longevity. Here's to the next 10 years!

On page 20, meet Courtney Shoda and her family. A former Keck Hospital of USC patient, Courtney's inspiring journey through heart transplant surgery and beyond is a testament both to her own strength and to the dedication of clinical faculty members Elyse Peterson, Stephanie Tsai and Lucy Hosoda. I'm grateful for patients like Courtney, whose story shows how occupational therapy truly helps change lives. I'm also awed by the skill, creativity and perseverance that our faculty clinicians deploy every day on behalf of the clients they serve.

On page 24, read about a real-world example of knowledge mobilization — the ways in which USC Chan faculty, in concert with community partners, are turning innovative discoveries into action. In this case, researcher Joy Agner has been partnering with the nonprofit Clubhouse International to create and disseminate an impact report that, as of this writing, has been accessed by folks in more than 30 states and 20 countries. Our faculty are always looking for new ways to transcend traditional boundaries in order to share knowledge with those who can immediately use it.



PHOTO BY NATE JENSEN

Whether you're here in Southern California, across the U.S. or anywhere else on the globe, I hope you find these stories as inspiring as I do, and that you take pride in being part of our community. Thank you for the many ways you contribute to making our world a more caring, more thoughtful and more interconnected place. Fight On!

Sincerely,

Grace Baranek PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

Associate Dean, Chair and Professor

USC Mrs. T.H. Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC

USC Chan MAGAZINE

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The magazine of the USC Mrs. T.H. Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy is published twice yearly. For questions, comments, updates or story suggestions, contact Mike McNulty at mmcnulty@chan.usc.edu or (323) 442-2850.

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FEATURES & NEWS

OT A CORE DISCIPLINE IN NEW \$1 MILLION AHRQ GRANT EXPANDING LONG COVID CLINIC | P. 12

A new \$1 million grant, with faculty member Jamieson Wilcox named as co-investigator, will expand Keck Medicine of USC's COVID Recovery Clinic, an interdisciplinary care clinic that has included occupational therapy on its collaborative team since its establishment in 2020.

JOIN THE CLUB: FACULTY MEMBER JOY AGNER MOBILIZING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE CLUBHOUSE MODEL TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS | P. 24

Assistant Professor Joy Agner is mobilizing knowledge — proactively moving rigorous research out of academia and into the community — in partnership with Clubhouse International, a nonprofit and service model for people experiencing mental illnesses via a network of more than 350 Clubhouse sites around the world.

CAN SENSORY ADAPTATIONS EASE CHILDREN'S DENTAL FEARS AND ANXIETIES? | P. 28

A new \$5.5 million NIH-funded study led by Leah Stein Duker will test whether a Sensory Adapted Dental Environment — a novel intervention that provides soothing visual, auditory and tactile input within the dental clinic environment — can reduce anxiety and fear experienced by the general pediatric population during dental treatments.

DEPARTMENTS

UP FRONT | P. 5

Open letter from the OTAC president; On-campus talk with Emmy-nominated actor; Lifestyle Redesign® training in Portugal; Study to probe links between inpatient rehab services and patient outcomes; Kudos to Olympian alum; Former faculty now leading AOTA; Age-related brain changes may predict stroke outcomes; Two alums earn scholarships supporting psychiatric practice; Celebrating retirement of Cermak.

NEWS BRIEFS | P. 11

GENNEXT: HUMBERTO MAZARIEGOS OTD '26 | P. 13

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT: DEANNA MANNARELLI OTD '21 | P. 29

RESEARCH BUZZ: ON BOARD WITH OFFLOADING | P. 30

IN PRINT: IN PLAIN SIGHT: BELONGING AND CAMOUFLAGING WHILE BLACK, FEMALE AND AUTISTIC | P. 31

A DEEPER MEANING: ASHLEY UYESHIRO SIMON MA '10, OTD '11 | P. 33



COVER STORY

SUMMERTIME AND THE LIVIN' IS OT | P. 14

When the division formally established its office of Global Initiatives in 2013, Director Danny Park tasked his team to think big. "I said, 'why don't we each think of one ambitious, grand idea and pitch it,'" Park says. The result? USC Chan's Summer Occupational Therapy Immersion program, a four-week summer program for international professionals to learn about OT practice, education and research in the United States. Learn more about SOTI, which celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2024, and how it's changed participants' lives and careers.



GOLDEN GOALS | P. 20

“In life, everyone has two options: you either do it, or you don’t,” says Courtney Shoda, a former NCAA soccer player who underwent heart transplant surgery at Keck Hospital of USC in 2021. Read about Shoda’s harrowing pre- and post-transplant journey, and the role USC faculty occupational therapists played on her winning health care team.

CONTRIBUTORS



Katharine Gammon
Writer, *Join the Club*, p. 24

Meaningful occupations:
I’m a freelance science writer and lover of the beach.

About writing *Join the Club*: I was impressed with the dedication of the Clubhouse staff and members I interviewed. For all the challenges in managing mental health, Clubhouse seems like a model that has a lot of potential.



Michelle McCarthy
Writer, *Golden Goals*, p. 20

Meaningful occupations:
I love being in nature, hiking, camping and traveling to new destinations.

About writing *Golden Goals*: While researching Courtney’s story, I came across a video of her making her way up a hill with a little help from a friend. At one point, she fell down, got right back up and kept going until she made it to the top — the video brought tears to my eyes.

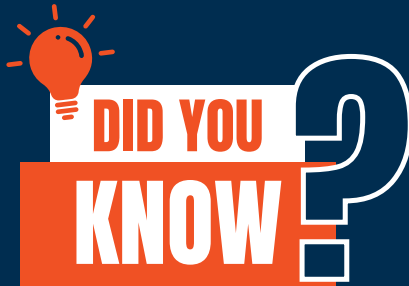


Jamie Wetherbe
Writer, *Summertime and the Livin’ is OT*, p. 14

Meaningful occupations:
I enjoy spending time with my wife, Emily, and son, Kingston,

especially trips to the beach, weekend campouts and being out in nature — this summer, we traveled to Iceland.

About writing *Summertime and the Livin’ is OT*: This story is particularly meaningful to me because my son has sensory needs. Learning about different specialized interventions offered by various providers across the world helps me understand his brilliant brain a bit better.



**DID YOU KNOW THAT
THERE ARE MORE THAN
22,000 OCCUPATIONAL
THERAPY PRACTITIONERS
IN THE STATE OF
CALIFORNIA? BUT JUST
OVER 1,000 OF THEM ARE
OTAC MEMBERS.**



SAMIA RAFEEDIE, PHOTO BY JOHN LIVZEY

OPEN LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA

Dear Esteemed Alumni,

As members of the Trojan Family, we are united by a legacy of leadership, innovation and a deep commitment to our community. Today, we invite you to continue this legacy by joining or renewing your membership with the Occupational Therapy Association of California (OTAC).

Assistant Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Candace Chatman** OTD '20, who serves as OTAC Treasurer, and I, serving as your OTAC President, are passionate about the association and the vital roles it plays in defending our scope of practice and representing our shared interests across California. Being a member of OTAC not only establishes you as a dedicated professional; it connects you to a network of lifelong relationships, fosters social responsibility and upholds our ethical obligations to the profession and people whom we serve¹.

Joining a professional association like OTAC offers numerous benefits, including the development of new skills and competencies, opportunities to share your talents and knowledge, consultation with

experts, staying current with best practices and emerging issues, attending conferences for continuing education, accessing job opportunities, building your professional resume through volunteerism and acquiring mentorship². Moreover, membership helps cultivate a strong sense of professional identity, appreciation for occupational therapy's role in health care and a shared sense of belonging and values.

Membership is also essential for the sustainability of OTAC. Your contributions directly support the association's daily operations, events organization and our crucial lobbying efforts in Sacramento. Without the advocacy of our lobbyists, our profession would face significant challenges in maintaining the protections and recognitions we need to continue providing services and receiving fair compensation. We view OTAC membership as a form of "career insurance" as vital as health, dental or car insurance.

Did you know that there are more than 22,000 occupational therapy practitioners in the state of California? But just over 1,000 of them are OTAC members. Think about how much more power and influence we could leverage with a greater body of members. The sad truth about health care in the United States is that money is power, but without financial resources and active members we become increasingly vulnerable.

We understand that the cost of living in California is a significant concern. Rising expenses raise the stakes of every financial decision. We acknowledge these realities, and therefore do not take this message lightly. But with so many leaders in the field as part of our Trojan Family, we trust that you also recognize the urgency of OTAC membership. We ask that you share this message with your colleagues, supervisors and managers.

The Trojan Family has always risen to the occasion, and we are confident we can do so again by supporting the only association dedicated to protecting and advancing occupational therapy in California.

Fight On, Trojans, and Fight On for OTAC!

— **Samia Rafeedie** MA '05, OTD '06, associate professor of clinical occupational therapy, and president of the Occupational Therapy Association of California

¹ Faber, B. (2002). Professional identities: What is professional about professional communication? *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 16(3), 306–337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10506519020160030>

² Escoffery, C., Kenzig, M., & Hyden, C. (2015). Getting the most out of professional associations. *Health Promotion Practice*, 16(3), 309–312. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839914566654>



EMMY-NOMINATED ACTOR FINN WITTRICK TALKS SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION WITH USC UNDERGRADS

What's one of the perks of being so close to Tinseltown? Celebs like Emmy-nominated actor Finn Wittrock get to pay a visit to campus any day of the week!

This past spring, Wittrock made a special guest appearance in the undergraduate course *GESM 131: Social Analysis Making Better Worlds: Collective Occupations and Social Transformation*, co-taught by USC Chan faculty members **Ashley Uyeshiro Simon** MA '10, OTD '11 and **Gabriel Cravens** MA '21, OTD '22.

The course addresses how collective occupations can be used to mobilize support and embody claims for social causes such as democracy, recovery from political violence, environmental justice and human rights. "Collective occupations" are defined as shared practices that unite individual and group intentions, meanings and purposes. Examples of collective occupations include engaging with social movements, conflict and post-conflict situations and "togetherness" occupations that can support individual and group healing processes.

Wittrock had a supporting role in the 2023 film *Origin*, an adaptation of the bestselling non-fiction book *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, which explores race issues in America. *Caste* is required reading in GESM 131, and thanks to Wittrock's family relationship to USC Chan (his mother, **Kate Crowley** OTD '06, is a USC Chan faculty member and his father, **Peter Wittrock**, is a USC Chan staff member), he was able to speak with students about the film, his perspectives on the occupations involved with being a stage and screen actor and the film production process.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GABE CRAVENS

FACULTY LEAD LIFESTYLE REDESIGN® TRAINING IN PORTUGAL FOR IMPROVING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

This past spring, a team of clinical faculty members representing the USC Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice delivered Lifestyle Redesign® training at Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal's largest polytechnic (i.e., non-doctoral degree granting) institution, often referred to as P.Porto.

Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Rebecca Cunningham** MA '15, OTD '16, Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Tracy Jalaba** MA '14, OTD '15 and Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Chantelle Rice Collins** '07, MA '08, OTD '09 provided a two-day, in-person training to 12 P.Porto faculty on utilizing *Lifestyle Redesign* for college students. Topics included sleep hygiene, physical activity, healthy eating, healthy coping and time management. Cunningham, Jalaba and Rice Collins also presented alongside P.Porto faculty at a conference titled "Transforming Futures: Redesigning Youth Mental Health and Lifestyles."

Portugal has one of Europe's highest self-reported depression rates, and a recent national study conducted by the Portuguese Directorate-General of Education found that more than one-third of Portuguese students experience symptoms of distress including sadness, irritability, anxiety and social-emotional skills deficits.

"The international recognition of the value of Lifestyle Redesign, especially for the college student population, demonstrates the potential for significant impact of this unique occupational therapy intervention framework," Rice Collins said. "Throughout the training, it became clear that the challenges college students face internationally are significant and require comprehensive solutions, and occupational therapists are uniquely qualified to address the health and well-being of students on college campuses."



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY TRACY JALABA



PHOTOS BY CHANTELE RICE COLLINS

NEW STUDY TO EXAMINE HOW INPATIENT REHAB THERAPY TIMES IMPACT STROKE OUTCOMES

Assistant Professor **Alison Cogan** MA '12, PhD '17 is the principal investigator of a new study evaluating how rehabilitation service time gets allocated across occupational, physical and speech-language therapies for adult stroke survivors within inpatient rehabilitation settings, and how various distributions of therapy times are linked to patients' functional outcomes.

She will also investigate real-time ways in which clinicians and administrators make clinical decisions about "appropriate" therapy times and activities. With a better understanding of the relationships between therapy time distribution and functional outcomes, Cogan aims to improve the precision and personalization of post-acute rehab services.

"The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in this study will allow us to understand how decisions about therapy time are currently being made, as well as what the outcomes of those decisions are for patients," Cogan said. "I'm excited to see what we learn and how we can apply the findings to optimize functional outcomes for adults with acquired brain injuries during inpatient rehabilitation."

The KL2 training grant is funded by the National Center for Advancing Translational Science via the Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute, and will run until 2027.



OLYMPIAN ALUM KALEIGH GILCHRIST

USC alum **Kaleigh (Gilchrist) Gehret**, who earned a minor in occupational science in 2014, represented the United States as a member of the USA Water Polo women's national team at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. Although the team fell short in its bronze medal match, Gehret had previously won two Olympic gold medals with USA Water Polo in the 2016 and 2020 Summer Games.

After returning from Paris, she announced her retirement from competition.



KATIE JORDAN NAMED NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF AOTA

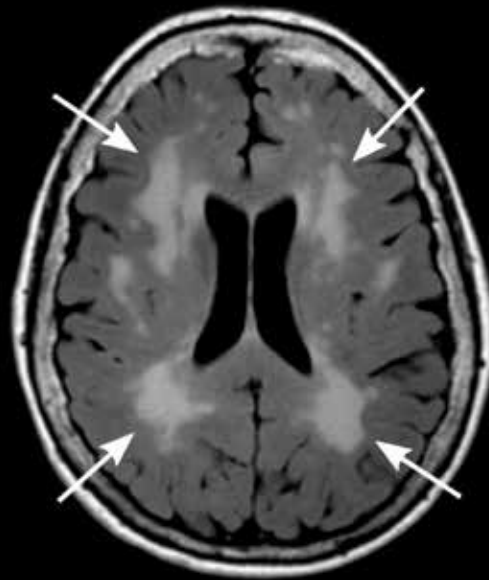
Katie Jordan MA '03, OTD '04, became executive director of the American Occupational Therapy Association in August 2024. In this role, Jordan provides strategic leadership of the national professional association in partnership with the AOTA Board of Directors on behalf of more than 230,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy

assistants and students nationwide.

Jordan was previously a USC Chan faculty member of 17 years, and is recognized among the profession's premier experts on reimbursement, regulation and policy.

"I wish Dr. Jordan all the best on her next journey," said Associate Dean and Chair **Grace Baranek**. "I know she will continue to make great contributions to the profession of occupational therapy."

ARROWS POINTING TO WHITE MATTER
HYPERINTENSITIES AS THEY APPEAR ON MRI,
IMAGE COURTESY OF JENNIFER FERRIS



WMHs (J. Ferris, 2024)

NEW STUDY REVEALS AGE-RELATED BRAIN CHANGES INFLUENCE RECOVERY AFTER STROKE

New results of a study by a global research team led by Associate Professor **Sook-Lei Liew** MA '08, PhD '12 reveal that areas of age-related damage in the brain relate to motor outcomes after a stroke — a phenomenon that may be under-recognized in stroke research. The study was published earlier this year in *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

A stroke often leads to motor impairment, which is traditionally linked to the extent of damage to the corticospinal tract (CST), a crucial brain pathway for motor control. Signaling along the CST is involved in a variety of movements, including walking, reaching and fine finger movements like writing and typing. However, stroke recovery outcomes aren't fully predicted by damage to the CST, suggesting other factors are at play.

The observational study from the Enhancing Neuroimaging Genetics through Meta-Analysis (ENIGMA) Stroke Recovery working group examines how one such factor could be white matter hyperintensities (WMH) — areas of age-related damage in the brain's white matter, which represent vascular dysfunction and are known to impact cognitive functions.

The study analyzed data from 223 stroke patients across four countries and found that larger WMH volumes were associated with more severe motor impairment after a stroke (e.g., difficulty moving or using their arm for daily tasks), independent of CST damage. WMHs are related to chronic hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol and smoking, among other factors and conditions, and have been strongly related to cognitive impairment, but not extensively studied in the context of motor impairment. Interestingly, the relationship between CST damage and motor impairment varied based on WMH severity. Patients with mild WMHs showed a typical relationship between CST damage and motor impairment, while patients with moderate to severe WMHs did not have this relationship. Instead, motor impairment was related to WMH volume, not CST damage.

These findings suggest that WMHs, indicative of cerebrovascular damage from a variety of sources, could provide additional context to understand an individual's potential for recovery post-stroke. Therefore, assessing WMH volume could improve predictive models for stroke recovery. —Sidney Taiko Sheehan

Read "New study reveals age-related brain changes influence recovery after stroke" at keck.usc.edu/news/new-study-reveals-age-related-brain-changes-influence-recovery-after-stroke.



TWO TROJANS EARN PSYCHIATRIC OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ACTION COALITION SCHOLARSHIPS

Two Trojans were awarded annual scholarships from the Psychiatric Occupational Therapy Action Coalition, an advocacy group that supports psychiatric OT practice through education, information and advocacy for consumers, providers and the community.

Tania Herrera MA '23, OTD '24 received a Kim Apselund Memorial Scholarship, which aims to foster mental health practice by supporting students interested in working in this practice setting.

Jessica Frausto MA '23, OTD '24 received an Anne MacRae Memorial Scholarship, which supports occupational therapy practitioners interested in a community-based mental health career.

Learn more about the Psychiatric Occupational Therapy Action Coalition at potac.org.

PROFESSOR SHARON CERMAK'S RETIREMENT CAPS ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER SPANNING MORE THAN FIVE DECADES

After 55 years in occupational therapy, Professor **Sharon Cermak** officially retired from academia at the conclusion of the 2023-24 academic year. A *festschrift* — the German word for “celebratory writing” — was held in her honor at the 2024 American Occupational Therapy Association conference featuring remarks and speeches from longtime colleagues and friends.

Cermak earned her bachelor's degree in occupational therapy from The Ohio State University in 1969; her master's degree in occupational therapy from Boston University's (BU) Sargent College in 1971; and her Doctorate of Education degree in Special Education and Teaching from BU in 1981. She began her academic career at BU in 1973, and earned tenure as a full professor in 1994. In 2009, Cermak joined the faculty of the USC Chan Division, with a courtesy joint appointment in the Department of Pediatrics at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

Cermak is among occupational therapy's most prolific researchers studying developmental disorders in children and the sensorimotor impacts upon children's occupations in play, academics and family life. This research line began with her earliest work in sensory integration, and progressed to broader issues and contexts impacting motor development, children's occupations and social participation.

Since 1973, Cermak has published more than 150 peer-reviewed journal articles — nearly 100 as lead or senior author — 123 of which are catalogued in Web of Science, the rigorous citation index that serves as the standard dataset for calculating impact metrics. Those Web of Science articles have been cited more than 5,000 times in high-impact journals across rehabilitation, developmental psychology, pediatrics, special education and neuroscience. According to Google Scholar, her work has been cited nearly 14,000 times.

Cermak secured \$6.9 million in career funding as principal investigator or program director. She published 31 book chapters, 29 trade publication articles, three proceedings papers and a handwriting assessment tool. She has delivered 19 invited keynote and plenary lectures, and has given more than 450 papers, panels, posters, workshops and short course presentations across the nation and world.



FESTSCHRIFT SPEAKERS AYELET BEN-SASSON, SHARON CERMAK, TERESA MAY-BENSON AND LEAH STEIN DUKER



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MIKE MCNULTY

News Briefs



Lectures, grants, awards — there’s always so much going on at the USC Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy. Keep your finger on the pulse with these division news briefs:

FACULTY MEMBERS TAPPED FOR CLINICAL LEADERSHIP ROLES





Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Chantelle Rice Collins** '07, MA '08, OTD '09 has been named the division’s interim associate chair of OT clinical services. Rice Collins will continue serving as director of the USC Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice, the division’s private clinic where occupational therapists deliver lifestyle-based interventions. Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Lucy Hosoda** MA '16, OTD '17 has been named director of occupational therapy and speech therapy at Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Cancer Hospital. Hosoda was previously the clinical manager of occupational therapy at Keck Hospital of USC.

PYATAK REPRESENTING OT ON NEW FDA INITIATIVE TO IMPROVE AT-HOME CARE




Associate Professor **Beth Pyatak** MA '04, PhD '10 was handpicked to represent the American Occupational Therapy Association on a steering committee working to implement a new Food and Drug Administration initiative. The FDA’s “Health Care at Home Initiative to Help Advance Health Equity” aims to better position the FDA to address health care needs as care increasingly moves into home settings. Pyatak studies innovative lifestyle interventions that can enhance health, well-being and quality of life for individuals who have chronic conditions.

STUDY FINDS AEEG WITHIN THE FIRST 72 HOURS OF EXTREMELY PRETERM INFANTS IS RELATED TO COGNITIVE OUTCOMES IN CHILDHOOD



Associate Professor **Bobbi Pineda** published new findings in the *Journal of Perinatology*, one of only a handful of studies on executive functioning measures in extremely preterm infants. Pineda — a renowned expert in neonatal occupational therapy — and her research team enrolled 64 preterm infants (28 weeks maximum gestation) within the first 24 hours of life. The newborns were then monitored using two-channel amplitude integrated encephalography (known as aEEG) until they were 72 hours old (as compared to traditional EEG, aEEG requires fewer electrodes applied to the scalp in order to measure real-time brain activity in preterm infants). Standardized neurobehavioral and feeding assessments were conducted at term, and parent-reported outcomes were later collected once the children reached 5–7 years old. Lower aEEG scores were found to be related to infant, medical and environmental factors. Lower aEEG scores were not found to be related to infant feeding outcomes or sensory processing measures. However, lower aEEG scores were also linked to lower global executive function, inhibition, working memory, material organization, metacognition and behavioral regulation once the children reached 5–7 years old. The study results are a significant contribution to the literature on executive functioning in extremely preterm infants and associated longitudinal outcomes.

LA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH UPDATE RECOGNIZES OT’S CAPACITY FOR DIRECTING INTERPROFESSIONAL CLINICAL TEAMS



A recent bulletin update issued by the L.A. County Department of Mental Health formally recognizes occupational therapists as qualified clinical team leaders for providing and coordinating mental health treatment and case management within the county’s public care system. “This new bulletin is like a door becoming unlocked,” said Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy **Shelby Surfes** MA '04, OTD '06, director of occupational therapy at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles’ Community Behavioral Health Program. “There’s still some administrative and policy work in order to push it wide open, but unlocking the door is a necessary step to doing so.”

POST-DOCTORAL SCHOLAR RECEIVES THREE-YEAR NIH POSTDOC AWARD



Post-doctoral scholar **Ryan Walsh** was recently awarded an F32 post-doctoral fellowship grant from the NIH National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities to study social determinants of health and health disparities in emerging (i.e., non-standard) work contexts. The project will use quantitative and qualitative data to learn how the effects of emergent work intersect with workers’ ability to lead satisfying, meaningful and productive lives in their communities. The project also lays the groundwork for future investigations to address health disparities in minoritized worker populations who disproportionately experience chronic disease burdens. Walsh will manage a nearly \$224K award over a three-year period from now until Sept. 2027.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY A CORE DISCIPLINE IN NEW \$1 MILLION AHRQ GRANT EXPANDING LONG COVID CLINIC

Occupational therapist Jamieson Wilcox is a co-investigator on a grant to establish the Keck COVID Recovery Clinic, Optimal Outcomes for Patients in a Comprehensive Assessment and Management Program.

BY MIKE McNULTY MA '09, OTD '10

A new grant from the Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality (AHRQ) will expand Keck Medicine of USC's COVID Recovery Clinic, an interdisciplinary care clinic that has included occupational therapy on its collaborative team since its establishment in 2020.

The nearly \$1 million award will establish the Keck COVID Recovery Clinic, Optimal Outcomes for Patients in a Comprehensive Assessment and Management Program, referred to as the Keck CO-OP CAMP.

The Keck CO-OP CAMP will expand and optimize clinical care of Long COVID, increase access to Long COVID care for underserved populations, establish USC as a regional and national hub for clinician education and increase the collection and dissemination of patient outcomes data.

"We've learned so much in the past four years about how occupational therapy, as part of an interdisciplinary approach to patient care, can improve the health and quality of life of people living with Long COVID," said Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy Jamieson Wilcox MA '13, OTD '14.

Wilcox is a co-investigator on the grant led by Principal Investigator Caitlin McAuley, clinical assistant professor of family medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and a family medicine specialist with Keck Medicine of USC who treats patients at the Keck Medicine COVID Recovery Clinic.

Research suggests that Long COVID affects somewhere between 15 and 30 percent of people infected with COVID-19, meaning at least 1 million people in Los Angeles County have experienced or are currently experiencing Long COVID symptoms. Fatigue, fever and respiratory issues are frequently experienced. Some research points to more than 200 possible symptoms, which may also include cardiac, neurological, digestive and vascular issues. Long COVID symptoms can persist for years, and if they significantly disrupt a person's daily function and occupations, are considered a cause of disability.

A "booster" for care management

Depending on a particular patient's needs and experiences, a range of specialists can be available as part of their care plan. In addition to occupational therapists, Keck CO-OP CAMP providers include cardiologists, neurologists, nurses, rheumatologists, behavioral health specialists and social services.

Upon intake, patients typically first meet with a nurse navigator who elicits a symptom history. Patients are then paired with a primary care physician who leads the collaborative, multidisciplinary care team to develop an initial workup and start designing a comprehensive, personalized care plan. Outpatient visits are coordinated with specialty providers as part of the integrated plan.



The approaches of the Keck CO-OP CAMP align with current understandings about best practices for Long COVID care management. The project aims to optimize and update Keck's current care model by expanding dedicated staff time and roles, creating and adapting clinical workflows, improving care coordination, establishing mechanisms for oversight and utilizing data collection and analysis. The Keck CO-OP CAMP will create additional consultation services, both in-person and virtually, connect with third-party clinics that may benefit from USC's resources, add a support group, and improve patient, caregiver and health care worker education. It will also create multidisciplinary resources for educating internal and external providers, including clinical workflows, educational materials and resources. It also aims to implement consistent and standardized data collection on patient and clinic outcomes, regularly assess that data to improve care delivery and disseminate findings.

"The Keck CO-OP CAMP will accelerate our ability to deliver effective interventions, reach more people and share best practices and outcomes data with other practitioners, including occupational therapists," Wilcox said.

"Keck COVID Recovery Clinic Optimal Outcomes for Patients, a Comprehensive Assessment and Management Program" (PI: McAuley, C.) is supported by AHRQ (1U18HS029950-01).

GenNext

MEET THE TROJANS PUSHING OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY FORWARD.

INTERVIEW BY MIKE McNULTY
MA '09, OTD '10

HUMBERTO MAZARIEGOS OTD '26

Age: 33

Hometown: Los Angeles

Previous studies: B.S. Exercise Science, California State University, Los Angeles

Meaningful occupations: Cycling, reading, spending time with family and trying new foods.

Describe occupational therapy in one sentence: Helping individuals at all stages of life improve their quality of life.

How did you discover occupational therapy?

As an athlete my entire life, physical therapy was always speaking to me, and I set up my path in that direction. I took an exercise rehabilitation course during undergrad at Cal State L.A.. On the first day of class, the instructor, Connie Wong, asked us, “Who wants to go into physical therapy?” About 90 percent of the class raised their hand. Then she said, “In PT we focus a lot on gait, but what’s the point of walking again if you can’t even put your pants on?” It was like a grenade went off in my head; I had never thought about that. So I started putting myself in different settings to see what OT is all about, and I quickly realized that occupational therapy really speaks to who I am as a person.

What were some of those settings?

At the time, I was working as a resource assistant at Cedars-Sinai, which was my first job in health care. I was really young, about 20 years old. I would deliver miscellaneous items to patients, help them with their belongings, check the temperatures of room refrigerators, do any customer service things I could help with. In the hallways I had access to a whole slew of health care professionals. I still work part-time at Cedars — I’ve been an employee there for 14 years — on the transportation team. Hopefully I can return as a clinician after grad school.



PHOTO BY MACKENZIE GARCIA

What was your first year in the Entry-Level OTD program like?

I’m a little older than most of my peers, but it’s been really refreshing to be in the classroom with folks who are very like-minded despite the age gap. I’m learning a lot from them, and I hope that when I share my own experiences, that they learn from me too. I’m a true Angeleno, born and raised in L.A., not too far from ’SC. Growing up, I had some negative experiences with USC that reminded me I *wasn’t* a student. But being in this program reframes everything. I have my student badge and I’m proud to be a Trojan. One of the last real conversations I had with my father before he passed was that I was going to get into this program. I actually applied to USC the year that he passed away, and I didn’t get in. Fast forward seven years, and here I am. With all those experiences, it’s pretty cool to feel like I belong.

What occupations have helped you manage the school-life balance?

I love cycling. Around 2019, I was sidelined with a foot injury for the better part of a year, and my podiatrist suggested low-impact sports. Cycling has honestly become my meditation. And even though it isn’t necessarily easy, it really put things in perspective. Cycling is very representational of life. Times are going to get tough, and sometimes you just have to keep moving. When you’re cycling up a mountain — I just rode up Mount Wilson — you may want to stop. So you have to conserve yourself, find a new gear or position that helps you just keep on pedaling to your destination.

Summertime and the Livin' is OT

During the past decade, USC's Summer Occupational Therapy Immersion program has graduated more than 500 students, changing their lives and careers while building an internationally-connected Trojan family.

**BY JAMIE WETHERBE
PHOTOS COURTESY OF DANNY PARK**



In 2015, a quick online search changed the personal and professional trajectory of Valentina Vera Carrasquero MA '19, OTD '20. Originally from Caracas, Venezuela, she moved to Colombia to study occupational therapy.

"In South America, there aren't many schools that teach OT," Vera Carrasquero says. "Even though I felt my education was good, I was craving more."

Vera Carrasquero — who works with children with ADHD and autism alongside her mother, a speech therapist — wanted to focus on sensory integration as part of her practice.

"I have sensory issues," she says. "I'd have been very much a candidate for this type of OT when I was little."

With internationally renowned experts on sensory integration and processing, Vera Carrasquero saw USC as the epicenter of this line of research.

"I was Googling 'summer OT immersion,' and SOTI was the first thing to pop up," she said. "I couldn't believe it existed; I knew immediately I wanted to do it."

The SOTI she's referring to is USC's Summer Occupational Therapy Immersion, a four-week summer program designed for international professionals, with or without occupational therapy expertise, who are interested in learning about OT practice, education and research in the United States.

Vera Carrasquero completed the program in 2015.

Each summer, SOTI students attend seminars and lectures with a wide swath of faculty members, and visit clinical sites throughout the greater Los Angeles area. That educational piece is balanced by a range of cultural and social activities, from sporting events to beach trips.

"USC Chan is such a huge institution with such diversity and expertise," says Danny Park MA '09, OTD '10, associate professor of clinical occupational therapy and director of USC Chan's Global Initiatives, who founded and developed SOTI more than a decade ago. "Through this program, we have the opportunity to share these resources with the world, while just as much seeking to learn from the wealth of wisdom represented in the SOTI community."

A global community

Since SOTI's start in 2014, Park and his team have recruited 517 international participants across 50 countries, from Australia to Zimbabwe.

"I think the best part of the program is the global community we create," Park says. "People who'd never have had the chance to meet each other are all at one table."

Since many SOTI students have yet to complete their undergraduate studies, Park and his team strive to create a caring, supportive environment.

"For many participants, it's their first time traveling to the U.S. or even traveling alone," he says. "Being in this caring environment gives them a sense of confidence to do something special, something different — that might include coming to USC."

The program is equally designed for practicing professionals who want to expand their skills.

"SOTI had a huge impact on me because it taught me ways we can intervene in the care of our patients," says Marthe Gabriele, SOTI Class of 2023. Gabriele is one of the first occupational therapists to graduate from a rehabilitation education program in Haiti. "We don't have a lot of these resources in Haiti, and now we can use these materials to treat patients with neurological problems."

A family member's experience inspired Gabriele to pursue occupational therapy.



2023 SOTI PARTICIPANTS VISIT MYCHAL'S LEARNING PLACE, A NONPROFIT SERVING YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN HAWTHORNE, CALIF.

"My aunt had a stroke, and it was difficult to find a medical professional," says Gabriele, the director of a nonprofit pediatric clinic in Port de Paix. "I said to myself, 'I must learn OT to participate in the evolution of the practice in my country.'"

Each day at SOTI brings something new. For example, a recent agenda included a site visit to elementary schools throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District, a trip to the hand therapy clinic at Keck Medical Center of USC, followed by a lecture on pediatric mental health in the U.S. The day was capped off with small group discussions in which students can reflect on their experiences.

"The curriculum is designed so participants can learn from one another," Park says. "The profession is a global one, moving well beyond just one specific perspective or cultural point of view, and we're intentional about making time for that."

This built-in exchange of ideas was a highlight for Yufei Wu OTD '25, alum of the 2021 SOTI class.

"The shared inspiration happens so organically because we're all excited about what we're learning," says Wu, who's originally from China. "Everyone has a different culture and background, so to hear the distinct takeaways put a bow on top of my learning experience at the end of each day."

In addition to emphasizing diversity of ideas, SOTI aims to be aspirational. Through seminars and site visits, participants are introduced to many facets of OT — from ocean and surfing therapy techniques to developing inclusive makeup and beauty products to addressing human trafficking.

"We want to present a big, ambitious, creative vision of occupational therapy, and highlight specialized areas our students haven't thought about," Park says. "I really value being able to see the participants grow and change over the course of the program. They experience the possibilities of what OT can do — and many discover, or rediscover, the power of this profession."

Ripple effects

SOTI has certainly had a ripple effect on the lives and career aspirations of its alums: scores of participants have gone on to pursue graduate occupational therapy programs around the world, with many becoming leaders and proponents of the profession. Nearly 40 former SOTI participants, including Vera Carrasquero and Wu, have returned to USC Chan to enroll in degree programs.



2024 SOTI PARTICIPANTS VISIT CENTURY VILLAGES AT CABRILLO, A NONPROFIT 27-ACRE SUPPORTIVE HOUSING COMMUNITY IN LONG BEACH, CALIF.

“SOTI was a domino effect of all these great things for my career,” Vera Carrasquero says. “The experience was life-changing.”

Through SOTI, she met Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy Erna Blanche, a renowned clinician–researcher who has received awards recognizing her contributions to developing Sensory Integration in Latin America.

“[Blanche] is a Sensory Integration goddess, and she’s also from Chile, so we had that South American connection,” Vera Carrasquero says.

In 2017, Blanche accepted Vera Carrasquero’s proposal to do her fieldwork at Therapy West, Inc., a Los Angeles-area private clinic that Blanche co-founded.

This experience during her post-professional master’s degree led Vera Carrasquero to return again to USC for her doctorate of occupational therapy degree, during which she completed her residency alongside Associate Dean and Chair Grace Baranek, another internationally renowned expert on the sensory features of autistic children.

“I really believe I wouldn’t have gotten as far as I have without SOTI,” Vera Carrasquero says. “Danny [Park] has poured his soul into this program, and it’s touched so many — he’s so humble about all the work that goes into this.”

Now back in Venezuela, Vera Carrasquero and her mother are on the verge of opening a pediatric clinic that will offer sensory-based interventions.

“We’re trying to simulate clinics in the U.S., with a large gym space; clinics in Venezuela aren’t like that,” she says. “I want this to be an open space where children can learn how to focus without having a closed door.”

Vera Carrasquero also teaches at Universidad Monteávila in Caracas, sharing her knowledge with future educators.

“Teachers aren’t always aware that sensory integration can affect learning,” she says. “I teach the basics of sensory integration, developmental milestones children need to meet and when a child needs a referral to a specialist, like an OT.”

For Wu, it was experiences with SOTI’s facilitators and faculty that led her to enroll in USC Chan’s clinical doctorate program.

“[The faculty] really invested the time and energy into my learning experiences — that was huge for me,” she says. “The program was so intentional and comprehensive. It felt like a preview of my life as a student at USC.”

Another draw for Wu was the university’s connection with her home country. USC Chan has partnered with Peking University Health Sciences Center, one of China’s top institutions, to operate a dual-degree graduate program in occupational therapy.

“In China, OT is not a very formulated concept yet — very few people know about it,” Wu says. “USC has given me a clear path to my long-term career goal to actively contribute to the greater OT community, and help develop the practice in China.”

The big idea

The inspiration for SOTI came shortly after USC Chan established Global Initiatives in 2013. The office, which supports international students and fosters relationships with the global community of occupational therapy practitioners, had organized a handful of social gatherings and networking events. Then, Park asked his team of two to think big.

“I said, ‘why don’t we each think of one ambitious, grand idea and pitch it,’” Park says. Postdoctoral master’s student Kate Lee MA ’15 came up with a summer program for international OT students, and the concept was well-received.

In July 2014, USC hosted its first SOTI cohort with 11 students hailing from seven countries.

“It was really special because it was such a small group, so we got to know the students very personally. I’m still in close touch with several of them,” Park says. “That’s what I love, seeing the friendships and relationships continue over the years.”

While SOTI has grown, the connections remain close, in part, because the students have the opportunity to all live at USC Village,

(continued on p. 19)

SOTI BY THE NUMBERS 2014-2024

TOTAL SOTI
PARTICIPANTS

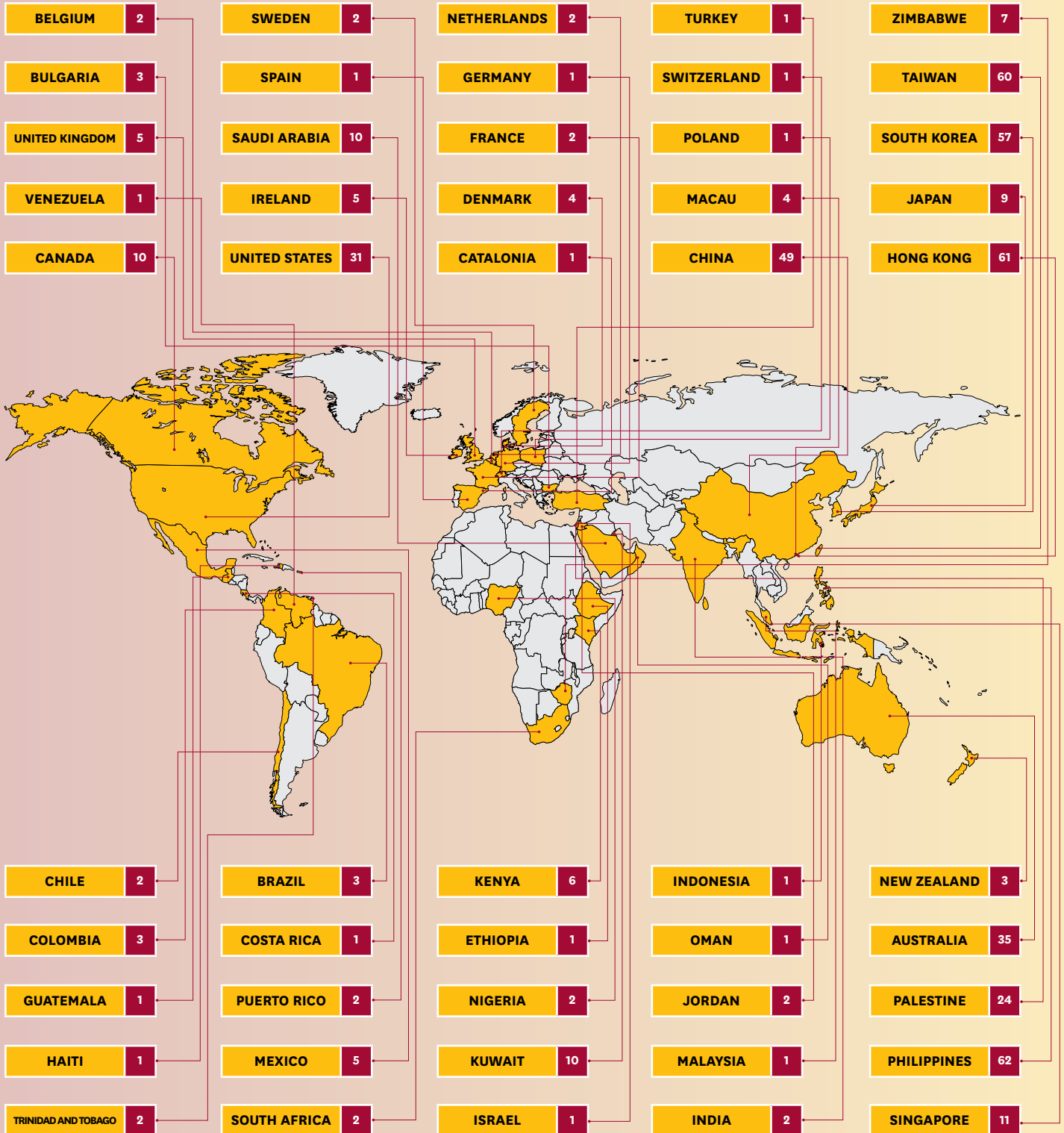
517

SOTI ALUMNI WHO LATER ENROLLED IN
USC CHAN DEGREE PROGRAMS

37

COUNTRIES
REPRESENTED

50





2018 SOTI PARTICIPANTS PAUSE FOR A PHOTO OP WHILE TOURING THE USC UNIVERSITY PARK CAMPUS



(continued from p. 16)

a 15-acre mixed-use development adjacent to the USC University Park Campus, which gives SOTI students an opportunity to live and learn in a prototypical American-style residential college experience.

“My class was tightly knit because of that,” Vera Carrasquero says. “I met my best friend in SOTI; she’s from Canada. And I’m still close with several other people.”

Over the past decade, the program has evolved to become increasingly diverse and global, recently welcoming students from countries like Ethiopia, Indonesia, Turkey, Malaysia and Palestine, which Park attributes to the development of a robust scholarship program.

“Initially, our students were coming from developed first-world countries, mainly Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Australia and Canada,” Park says. “I would like to continue to see larger representation of participants from parts of the world whose voices continue to be underrepresented in occupational therapy.”

In SOTI, expertise flows in both directions. Ideas and challenges originating from the Global South can filter into aspects of USC Chan’s core curricula.

“I think a perfect example of this is some of our friends in Zimbabwe have involved OTs in addressing climate change, and in the U.S. that’s something many OTs haven’t really considered as deeply,” Park says.

To help share this perspective with the USC community, Park has invited Sidney Muchemwa, SOTI Class of 2021 alum from Zimbabwe and a current PhD student at the University of Cape Town, as a guest lecturer in his courses to share about his occupation-based work in environmental sustainability and climate change management.

“We really benefit from this global network to teach all of us,” Park says. “Students say that experiences like this have been the most powerful part of their education.”

Wu sees how that focus on the international OT community extends from SOTI into USC’s OTD program.

“Unlike other universities I looked at, USC has the means and the vision to facilitate an international presence, including options for fieldwork abroad,” says Wu.

“Danny [Park] and everyone at the Global Initiatives office have been instrumental in making this a reality for me.”

Park sees these efforts as part of USC’s commitment to be responsible global citizens.

“We all have rights as people who belong to this planet,” he says. “In order for us to become the type of [academic] department we want to be, we need to live out our values through genuinely participating in this global community. That’s what sets USC Chan apart.”

2014 was a memorable year for Park in another way.

“On a personal note, my daughter Mattea was born in April 2014, so she’s exactly as old as SOTI,” he says, with a laugh. “It’s like they’ve grown up together.”

As for anyone who is considering SOTI, Wu advises to just jump in.

“It’s the experience of a lifetime; you’ll make valuable connections with practitioners, educators and others who share your passion,” she says. “It’s the place where either you can find your spark, or refine your spark, for occupational therapy.”

Learn more about USC Chan’s Summer Occupational Therapy Immersion (SOTI) program at chan.usc.edu/education/soti.

GOLDEN GOALS

After receiving a heart transplant at Keck Hospital of USC, former NCAA soccer player Courtney Shoda is relearning how to play the game of life.

BY MICHELLE MCCARTHY
PHOTOS BY HANNAH BENET

As a lifelong and highly skilled soccer player, Courtney Shoda had performed the maneuver countless times: gain position, stop the ball's momentum with her chest, let it drop to the ground, then send it flying into the back of net. But during a routine practice with her Sonoma State University team in 2017, a freak accident forever changed her life as she knew it.

"The impact of the ball hitting her chest stopped her heart," explains Dorene Crist, Shoda's mother. "It's called commotio cordis. It's super rare and usually happens to baseball players."

Shoda collapsed face down in the grass. When her coach rolled her over, her eyes were glassed over and her face was turning a cyanotic blue.

After receiving lifesaving CPR from her coaches, Shoda was medevacked to a hospital in Humboldt County, where she underwent a battery of tests.

"She was awake the next day and seemed perfectly fine," Crist recalls.

Shoda graduated in 2018, moved back home to Torrance, Calif., and got back in the groove of a seemingly typical post-grad life: working as an EMT, exercising at the gym and once again playing soccer in a recreational adult league. After the scare, everything looked like it was back to normal.

But in March 2021, tragedy struck again.

"She came home from the gym and went upstairs to shower," Crist says. "My husband Peter and I were cooking. Her friend called me on the phone and said, 'There's something wrong with Courtney, and I need you to calmly go upstairs right now. We ran up, and she was lying on her bed on her back with her feet on the floor. She had fallen backward while FaceTiming with friends.'"

Once again, Shoda's heart had suddenly stopped. Her family called 911. She was unconscious for approximately four to six minutes. Over the days that followed before getting stable, she coded 16 times. (For better or worse, Shoda has no recollection of the incident.)

"I'll never forget it," Crist shares. "This woman walked up to me and my husband in the ICU and said, 'Hi, my name is Sylvia, I'm from heart transplant.' I just lost my mind. I said, 'What are you talking about? She doesn't need a heart transplant.' This is a person who could jog from our house down to the beach. She was strong."

Even so, Shoda's heart had experienced severe and irreparable trauma. At Keck Hospital of USC she was placed on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) — a medical device that takes over

lung and heart function for a patient by resupplying the body with oxygenated blood — and kept in a medically-induced coma due to a number of complications. Then began the wait for a donor heart.

Going to extra time

In April 2021, Shoda underwent heart transplant surgery. Once stable and placed in the step-down unit, she was back at square one.

"When I met Courtney, she was in critical condition," recalls Elyse Peterson, associate professor of clinical occupational therapy who treats patients at Keck Medical Center of USC. "She had suffered multiple intense cardiac arrests and was on ECMO. The first step for our OT team [including USC Chan faculty members Stephanie Tsai and Lucy Hosoda] was to get her to open her eyes. It took a number of skilled therapists and nurses to keep her safe, because she was confused and moving her arms and legs a lot, which is very dangerous for people on ECMO support. It really was a team effort."

Everyday activities that many take for granted — sitting safely at the edge of a bed or in a chair, brushing your hair, dressing yourself — were challenging for the former all-star athlete.

"She couldn't even hold her arm out and touch her nose with her finger," Crist recalls.

To help restore her functional skills, such as sitting upright, regaining awareness of her hands and arms and relearning how to move them with functional control, Peterson, Tsai and Hosoda met with Shoda every day for a month. Some best practices used by the faculty OTs included monitoring her hemodynamic stability during therapy sessions; progressing her mobility and independence with activities of daily living; safely managing medical lines; building strength, endurance and activity tolerance; and monitoring her respiratory, cardiac and neurological status.

Since Shoda had difficulty coordinating her movements, including control of her head, the OTs had to get creative during therapy sessions.

"When we would have her sit on the edge of the bed, her head had a lot of extra movement, which is not safe considering she had a tracheostomy and multiple lines in her neck," Peterson explains. "So we put a neck brace on her for a little while. We would position our hands and use our bodies as therapists in different ways. We built up the chair using pillows and blankets to allow her to sit in a supportive way."



COURTNEYSTRONG20



For her part, Shoda remained focused and motivated throughout. The same competitive drive she brought to her sports career was put to work in post-surgical rehab, inspiring those who were by her side.

“She has always had a great work ethic, be it playing soccer, at school or at the jobs she had,” says Peter Crist, Shoda’s stepfather. “She has applied that same work ethic to her recovery; She amazes me every day, and I am very proud of her.”

“Courtney always wanted to work hard, even on those challenging days,” Peterson says. “A lot of our work was about establishing a connection and acknowledging, ‘Yes, this is hard. Let’s see what we can do today to still make it a good day.’ When patients are able to realize, ‘Hey, there can be a future after this; I can take care of myself again; there’s a light at the end of the tunnel’ — those are some of the best days.”

A winning attitude

After four long months, Shoda was cleared to leave Keck Hospital of USC in July 2021.

More than three years later, she’s still on the road to recovery, building her expressive speech skills and still participating in weekly outpatient physical and occupational therapy.

“Courtney’s continuing to learn, and there are still a lot of things she cannot do. But she learned how to put her mascara on real quick!” her mother says, laughing. “She braided her caregiver’s hair the other day. And I was told she just was able to jump for the first time.”

Shoda echoes her mother’s perspective.

“I’m like a 3-year-old who gets super excited about being able to do things like tying my shoe, zipping up my jacket or putting my hair up in a ponytail,” Shoda says.

And as harrowing as the entire experience was, the family now looks back on their time at Keck Medical Center of USC with gratitude.

“Keck was absolutely amazing,” Dorene Crist says. “We’re still friends with the people who took care of her — they were sweet, kind, patient and personable. They always came in the room with a positive and happy attitude.”

For patients like Shoda, Keck clinicians’ attitudes and expectations can also make a world of difference.

“They didn’t treat me like I was disabled,” Shoda says. “They treated me like every other patient.”

Her recovery continues to progress with time. And while she says she’s still figuring out what her purpose is in life, she’s grateful to be here.

“She wakes up every morning and says, ‘It’s a great day to be alive,’” Dorene Crist says.

While she’s had a long journey, now it’s Shoda’s own attitudes and expectations that are propelling her recovery.

“In life, everyone has two options: you either do it, or you don’t,” Shoda explains. “Growing up, I always lived by, ‘I have to at least try it.’ That’s my mentality, especially playing soccer for so long. It’s really hard and competitive — that definitely made me a lot tougher. I’m not going to give up, because I know that I can do things. And if anyone ever says I can’t do something, I usually do it.”



COURTNEY STRONG 22

JOIN THE CLUB:

FACULTY MEMBER JOY AGNER MOBILIZING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE CLUBHOUSE MODEL TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

BY KATHARINE GAMMON

Before she found Sheldon House, life seemed to be a constant challenge for Leasa Holton. Managing a major mental illness led her to repeated hospitalizations over two decades. But when she discovered the so-called “Clubhouse” in her area, a place where she could go every day to work and socialize, it was a game changer.

“I came into Clubhouse because it was a safe space for me,” Holton says. “I can do work here, be involved here, and I’m always welcome from the minute I come in right until the time I leave.”

Clubhouse International is a nonprofit organization that helps communities create programs for people experiencing mental illnesses via a network of more than 350 Clubhouses around the world. These non-residential spaces offer a safe, welcoming environment in which people with serious mental illness can work, socialize and actively participate in their own recovery.

That’s what Holton found. And as a Clubhouse member, she’s now helping the organization gather stories — qualitative data, if you will — behind the everyday work that Clubhouses are doing.

Data is also at the heart of what Joy Agner, an assistant professor at USC Chan, does every day. Agner specializes in community-based participatory research, which means she works hand-in-hand with the people whose lives she’s researching. In this case, it means Clubhouse members and staff are empowered to formulate the questions that matter most to them, and help conduct the research that will generate answers. Agner knew that Clubhouses rely on external funding, but she didn’t always have the data to objectively tell the entire story about members’ successes. Some research is out there, she says, but it was often frustratingly hard to access, locked behind paywalls or filled with academic jargon.

So in addition to doing her own research, Agner put together a comprehensive review of the existing research literature about Clubhouses in a user-friendly, graphics-forward format. *Transforming Lives: Clubhouse Impact Report* integrates findings from 15 peer-reviewed studies conducted between 1999 and 2021 that together demonstrate what she calls an “integrated theory of change” that explains how and why the model works.





Clubhouse members at Stepping Stone, a Clubhouse International-affiliated organization in Brisbane, Australia, which describes itself as dedicated to suicide prevention and to ending social and economic isolation for people living with mental illness. Photo courtesy of Clubhouse International.

CLUBHOUSE IMPACT

**SOCIAL
FUNCTIONING**



EMPLOYMENT



**BELIEF IN
ONESELF**



STIGMA



Some findings show the direct impact that Clubhouses have on their members. For example, research shows Clubhouse members are much more likely to be employed after six months of attendance, as compared to groups who didn't have access to a Clubhouse. Members' quality of life is also much higher, with people experiencing fewer psychiatric symptoms and less hospitalizations over time — which means lower total costs of their care.

Many people experiencing mental illness have nowhere to go during the day. Without occupations to engage in, they often report a sense of isolation, separation from their community and feelings of stigma, all of which can cascade into a variety of other health problems. For people with existing health conditions, it becomes increasingly difficult to successfully manage their symptoms and care.

Clubhouses change that. At the center of it all, Agner says, is a community-based approach.

“Our findings show that Clubhouses improve social connection and functioning,” she says. “They treat mental illness through community, and that community is developed through occupation.”

The model is relevant both for national efforts to reduce isolation and to treat mental illness, and it does so with a focus on occupation — what people actually do to occupy time during the course of a day.

Agner and her collaborators created a modifiable slide deck that can also include personal stories of members, stories that Holton has been helping gather for her Clubhouse. The report is a tool, Agner says, “for engaging the base and developing a collaborative research agenda, and putting this knowledge to work and making some actual impact with it.”

Often, research produced at universities can remain stuck there. But mobilizing the evidence — putting it into action for those whose lives might actually benefit from it — is a goal of Agner's.



LEASA HOLTON, PHOTO COURTESY OF CLUBHOUSE INTERNATIONAL

“Knowledge mobilization means getting research into the hands of people who can use it, including those making decisions about where tax dollars should go for different types of health services,” she says. “We also need to think creatively about how we can support this kind of work on a systems level, at USC and other places.”

Moving the needle

Sometimes shortened to “KMB,” knowledge mobilization is a term used to describe the non-linear, flexible process of knowledge generation, uptake and impact. The term is a rebuke to more traditional concepts portraying a linear, uni-directional “dissemination” of research flowing out of the ivory towers of academia.

THEORY OF CHANGE

PHYSICAL HEALTH



QUALITY OF LIFE



PSYCHIATRIC SYMPTOMS



HOSPITALIZATIONS & COST OF CARE



Joy Agner, Yongshi Wang, & Elizabeth Bau, 2023

To help conceptualize KMB relationships and interactions, a team of USC Chan faculty have developed a new visual model specific to occupational science and occupational therapy. The model shows a four-phase process of generating, spreading, grasping and using knowledge, all of which is centered around stakeholders' shared priority(ies). These four phases interact in dynamic, fluid and unexpected ways, and yield impacts that can ripple within the contexts of people's everyday lives.

Agner hopes that putting rigorous research into the community work that Clubhouses are doing actually moves the needle on funding. California's Medicaid program, Medi-Cal, is considering funding the work of Clubhouses. At the federal level, there is a move underway to further analyze the organization as a model of effective mental health treatment. Taken together, reducing social isolation, raising mental health visibility and moving towards community drivers of health signal a shift in consciousness on a broader level, Agner says.

"People are looking to alternative models, knowing that a purely biomedical model is not working."

Product development partners

The approach that Agner and her USC Chan occupational therapy students took in partnership with Clubhouse was fundamental to their success, says Lee Kellogg, a program officer with the nonprofit. By working with Clubhouse International's research committee to solicit feedback and generate ideas, the relevant needs of all partners were woven into the process and final product.

"It's really giving those Clubhouses tools to speak more confidently and more articulately in a way that stakeholders want to hear," Kellogg says. "The stories resonate to convince stakeholders that we need Clubhouse funding, and they want to see the evidence and research. So that's of huge value."

Tying peer-reviewed data to members' own stories can make them even more powerful, says Patricia O'Brien, with the Clubhouse Coalition of California.

"Joy [Agner] has an amazing level of insight and vision — she understood how people were going to need to use this material and distilled it down to a level where really everyone can use it," O'Brien says.

In the future, Agner is looking to gather more research ideas from the community and from her own work. Future questions might focus on the rehabilitation processes that happen within a Clubhouse; how housing impacts Clubhouse members; and the effects upon caregivers and family members when someone with serious mental illness has a safe place available to go.

For Holton, the resources offered by her Clubhouse are vast: educational support, employment support, a culinary unit, phone answering and assistance with banking and money management. All of it, she adds, is designed to meet real needs within the community. For example, if a member is stuffing envelopes with papers, it's not just to stay busy, it's to send newsletters to friends and colleagues about the great things happening at that Clubhouse. In the end, she says, the occupation-centric aspect is what makes the Clubhouse model unique. And it's making a difference — Holton has not been hospitalized since she started coming to the Clubhouse.

"It's meaningful work. It's important; it's not busy work," she says. "And while doing that, I'm increasing my connections. I'm increasing opportunities to build meaningful relationships. I'm building skills. I'm having a sense of purpose, a reason to get out of bed."

To access Transforming Lives: Clubhouse Impact Report, visit clubhouse-intl.org/impact-report.

CAN SENSORY ADAPTATIONS EASE CHILDREN'S DENTAL FEARS AND ANXIETIES?

New \$5.5 million NIH-funded study led by Leah Stein Duker extends research line begun in 2011.

BY MIKE McNULTY MA '09, OTD '10

A new study funded by more than \$5.5 million in NIH grants will test whether a Sensory Adapted Dental Environment (SADE) — a novel intervention that provides soothing visual, auditory and tactile input within the dental clinic environment — can reduce anxiety and fear experienced by the general pediatric population during dental treatments.

The project, led by Assistant Professor Leah Stein Duker in partnership with Children's Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA), will be the first full-scale, randomized controlled trial of a sensory-adapted intervention in the dental environment for typically developing children. The NIH National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research grant is the largest, by total dollar amount, to have ever been awarded to a USC Chan faculty member serving as principal investigator.

Previous SADE studies dating back to 2011 led by Professor Emeritus Sharon Cermak explored the intervention's effectiveness for autistic children. Those studies demonstrated that SADE significantly reduced anxiety in both autistic and typically developing children, prompting further questions about its widespread potential for the general population.

"As a mother myself, I know firsthand how fear and anxiety can permeate kids' experiences at the dentist's office," Stein Duker said. "As an occupational scientist, I want to better understand the degree to which simple, cost-effective and scalable modifications to the sensory environment can improve components of the patient experience."

Research shows that dental fear and anxiety (DFA) affects up to 42 percent of the general pediatric population. DFA is often manifested as disruptive behaviors during dental exams and procedures, and leads to higher rates of general anesthesia, inconsistent attendance at dental appointments and, ultimately, poorer oral health.

Research also suggests that up to 33 percent of children experience sensory over-responsivity (SOR), which can be manifested in the dental clinic as intense reactions to stimuli like bright lighting, abrupt sounds or noxious touch in and around the mouth. Although SOR can occur independently of DFA, it is often a contributing factor to DFA and causes children to react to sensory stimuli in similar ways to DFA.

"Anybody who's ever felt that tinge of anxiety or trepidation while sitting in the dentist's chair knows how uncomfortable that can be," Stein Duker said. "For some people, that feeling is so salient that it turns into behaviors that negatively impact overall oral care and outcomes."

To pinpoint effectiveness, study will test four intervention conditions

The study will enroll 312 children, aged 6-12 years, equally split between those with DFA and those without. Stein Duker and her team will primarily be recruiting participants from CHLA, and collaborating with the Ketchum-Downtown YMCA, located in Downtown Los Angeles, and the Boys and Girls Club of Metro Los Angeles to recruit and provide care to underserved children. These diverse participants will undergo two dental cleanings 4-6 months apart. Participants will be randomized to receive care according to two of four different interventions: SADE alone, video-based modeling alone (VBM),



PHOTO BY HONG LE

SADE combined with video-based modeling (SADE-VBM) and the "regular" dental environment (RDE). (VBM is a method by which patients are shown a video of a cooperative model patient undergoing dental treatment in order to familiarize them with the dental setting and the specific steps involved in the forthcoming procedure.)

The study's goal is to assess how these interventions affect children's physiological anxiety and behavioral distress during dental cleanings. By examining variables like electrodermal activity and behavior, the researchers aim to understand which method, or combination of methods, most effectively alleviate participant's DFA.

Another of the research team's key objectives is to determine how DFA and SOR uniquely contribute to dental anxiety and distress. Researchers will conduct exploratory analyses to examine these factors and assess the degree to which physiological anxiety mediates the effect of the SADE on behavior, and whether or not DFA and SOR moderate the effect of SADE and other strategies. Secondary outcomes, including quality of care, patient satisfaction and cost implications, will also be studied.

Depending on results, Stein Duker anticipates that the SADE approach could be trialed in the future across multiple sites in order to determine its effectiveness in various clinical settings. She also says she's optimistic about what this trial can do for the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of American children who dread going to the dentist.

"We're looking forward to seeing what the data says, because we think that SADE has the potential to revolutionize the ways in which pediatric dental clinics across the nation and world offer more comfortable, positive dental experiences to kids who deserve quality dental care."

"Sensory Adapted Dental Environments to Enhance Oral Care for Children with and without Dental Fear and Anxiety" (PI: Stein Duker, L.) is supported by NIH NIDCR (UH3 DE031222; UG3 DE031222).

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT: DEANNA MANNARELLI OTD, OTR/L

BY MIKE McNULTY MA '09, OTD '10

Assistant Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy Deanna Mannarelli OTD '21 is the division's director of fieldwork and coordinator of the entry-level OTD program's doctoral capstone, the culminating experience of third-year OTD students before graduating. Here are five more things to know about Mannarelli:

1 She discovered occupational therapy through a very personal illness experience — her own. Mannarelli was diagnosed with a form of muscular dystrophy during her first year of college at the University of California, Irvine. She used a wheelchair for several weeks while trialing different medications, and at the urging of her physician, attended a support group. "Everybody there was absolutely raving about how great their occupational therapist was, but I hadn't had OT yet. As soon as I got back to my dorm room, I went to Google and searched "occupational therapy." That's when it hit me, like, 'Oh, that's *exactly* what I should do for a career.'"

2 For the first time ever, USC's fieldwork team just successfully matched every third-year entry-level OTD student with a fieldwork-to-capstone site. As part of USC Chan's innovative curriculum model, every year more than 150 entry-level OTD students will be placed with sites for a 12-month fieldwork-to-capstone experience. Previously, fieldwork students were typically on-site for only 12 weeks, which Mannarelli says was challenging for students and sites alike. "Now, sites can tell students, 'You've made it, stick around and do something amazing.' I'll be honest, when we heard whispers of this potential model we thought it would be impossible to find enough sites willing to take students for an entire year. But after a lot of meetings, we convinced sites of the benefits, and that wouldn't have happened without our truly exceptional fieldwork team. As we like to say, 'At USC, we make the impossible possible.'"



PHOTO BY MACKENZIE GARCIA

3 Moving from clinical practice to academia helped her realize that students are at the center of what she loves. Prior to her current faculty position, Mannarelli worked in acute care and rehabilitation at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Huntington Hospital in Pasadena and Keck Hospital of USC. She's realized that it's the student interactions that keep her driven. "As a clinician, I loved taking fieldwork students; they kept me on my toes. I was worried about losing a lot of that when I transitioned to academia. But it's still the interactions with students that really fuel me. Even though we're at a desk in my office rather than in a patient's hospital room, I enjoy supporting students as they learn about a field I've come to love."

4 As a busy mother, she knows "what's love got to do with it." What are Mannarelli's favorite occupations off campus? "Being a mother consumes my spare time, but

I enjoy living vicariously through my young daughters, getting to relive life experiences with them. Some favorites include bike riding and playing with our family's new dog. I also love singing karaoke — anything by Tina Turner is a go-to."

5 Her Latina identity and heritage inspire her everyday efforts to make graduate education more accessible. Mannarelli uses her married name in professional circles, and names can be deceiving. "Students are often surprised to learn that I am Latina. As a grad student, I remember feeling very intimidated to approach faculty members. So I identify and empathize with our current students who had harder upbringings, or who have traveled further distances to get into grad school at USC. Now as a faculty member, I try to break down barriers so that students see me as approachable and accessible."

Research Buzz

ON BOARD WITH OFFLOADING

Can Lifestyle Redesign® occupational therapy improve care practices and outcomes for diabetic foot ulcers?

BY STACEY SCHEPENS NIEMIEC POSTDOC '13

*Associate Director for Lifestyle Redesign® Strategic Partnerships,
and Associate Professor of Research*

More than 38 million Americans have diabetes, and nearly 100 million Americans have high blood sugar levels considered prediabetic, according to the American Diabetes Association. One potential complication of diabetes is decreased or absent sensation in the feet, which can result in foot deformities and abnormal pressure points, especially during weight-bearing activities. Patients with diabetes can develop serious foot wounds — known as diabetic foot ulcers — which are the leading cause of leg amputation in the U.S. Managing diabetic foot ulcers is difficult, takes months to heal and costs the health care system around \$9 billion annually.

Most patients with diabetic foot ulcers need offloading treatment in order to reduce pressure on their wounds to promote healing. Offloading treatment may involve wearing a non-removable cast or a removable device, like a specially designed shoe or boot. Unfortunately, fewer than 40 percent of patients get proper offloading care, and only 60 percent of those who do will actually follow the offloading treatment prescribed by their doctors.

From an occupational therapist's perspective, current care plans are riddled with gaps, and overlook important factors about patients and their lives. A person's ability to manage foot self-care, the social contexts in which they are embedded, the impacts of offloading upon their daily routines and the emotional dimensions of people's lived experiences are all linked to delayed healing.

Non-removable offloading options like casts are shown to be most effective, but are less frequently accepted by patients. Removable devices have a wearing schedule that can be difficult for patients to follow, can be uncomfortable and interfere with daily activities like getting around at work, doing chores or running errands. Patients with diabetes may also feel that offloading is not as urgent as other medical needs that they have to juggle, like controlling blood sugar or properly taking medications.

Our new interdisciplinary research project looks to tackle the problem of diabetic foot ulcers as part of a pilot study funded through the Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute. Occupational therapists from USC Chan are joining the diabetic foot ulcer care team at the Keck School of Medicine of USC's Department of Surgery to integrate Lifestyle Redesign® occupational therapy into care processes.

Lifestyle Redesign is an occupation-focused program that helps patients better understand the connections between their daily activities, the particular challenges posed by those activities and their health. Although *Lifestyle Redesign* has shown promising results in primary care settings and for patients with diabetes more generally, the approach has not been studied yet in diabetic foot care and offloading treatment self-management.



PHOTO BY JOHN LIVZEY

We have two main aims for our study underway. The first is to create a tailored *Lifestyle Redesign* OT program for patients with diabetic foot ulcers who are prescribed offloading treatment. The second aim is to explore if *Lifestyle Redesign* is practical, acceptable to patients and leads to meaningful improvement of their diabetic foot ulcers, particularly in terms of self-care and offloading management.

What makes our study special? Today, most diabetic foot ulcer medical teams consist of surgeons and podiatrists. By adding occupational therapists who are experts in lifestyle management, we can fill important gaps in the current health service processes and care teams. Additionally, *Lifestyle Redesign* occupational therapists can customize the intervention to meet the unique needs of each patient they see. This might involve interventions like adjusting daily routines, exploring emotional supports and guiding patients to enhance daily activities for improving their overall health.

We are hopeful that *Lifestyle Redesign* for patients with diabetic foot ulcers will significantly change the ways that typical offloading treatment is provided by health care teams, and in the near future, lead to better health and well-being for people experiencing diabetic foot ulcers.

"Developing a Lifestyle-Focused Self-Management Intervention for Diabetic Foot Ulcers Offloading," (MPI: Tan, E., & Schepens Niemiec, S.) is funded by the Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute.

In Print

IN PLAIN SIGHT: BELONGING AND CAMOUFLAGING WHILE BLACK, FEMALE AND AUTISTIC

To what extent can a person truly “fit in,” when fitting in requires hiding parts of one’s authentic self?

That question and more are explored in a new conceptual article published in *Autism in Adulthood* by a team of USC researchers and students from the Disparity Reduction and Equity in Autism Services, or DREAmS, Lab. The first author is Occupational Science PhD candidate **Marshae Franklin** OTD '21, PhD '26, and Assistant Professor **Amber Angell** PhD '16 and members of the DREAmS Lab’s Autistic Lived Experience Collaborators (ALEC) are co-authors.

In recent years, camouflaging has increasingly gained attention in research literature and among autistic communities. Also referred to as “masking” or “passing as neurotypical,” camouflaging is a strategy that neurodivergent people may use to hide their neurodivergent traits so that they might gain acceptance by others, or to feel safer in a neuronormative society that upholds certain standards, expectations and ideals as the so-called “right” ways to function. The topic of camouflaging, however, has not yet been addressed in any occupational science literature.

Franklin wrote the article with a group of autistic and allistic (non-autistic) co-authors, some of whom are the Autistic Lived Experience Collaborators, a group of neurodivergent co-researchers who support research in the DREAmS lab. The authors offer perspectives based upon their own diverse life experiences and areas of expertise, with the aim of empowering autistic women with language and words that might better describe their personal experiences, including how camouflaging may have caused occupational disruptions in their lives.



The article also critiques the ways in which Black autistic women have been largely ignored by researchers. The authors use a Black Feminist Disability Framework to highlight the unique experiences of people with intersecting marginalized identities based on race, gender and neurotype — what Franklin calls a “triple bind” experience of marginality.

By centering Black autistic women who may camouflage or “mask” their autistic traits for survival while simultaneously putting their own health at risk, the authors call upon occupational science to more fully embrace belonging and authenticity.

“An occupational science contribution to camouflaging scholarship: Centering intersectional experiences of occupational disruptions” (Franklin, Taylor, Florindez, Guzman, Lawson, Rios, & Angell, 2024) is available at doi.org/10.1089/aut.2023.0070 (access may require institutional or individual permission).

Rebecca Aldrich MA '06 authored “Uncertainty and occupation,” published in the *Journal of Occupational Science*, the print version of her 2023 Townsend and Polatajko Lectureship delivered to the Canadian Society of Occupational Scientists.

Yasi Amanat MA '15, OTD '16 and **Stacey Morikawa** MA '11, OTD '12 are co-authors of “Occupational therapy practice guidelines for adults living with and beyond cancer,” published in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Yousef Babish PhD '29 is the lead author of “The effects of culture and gender on occupational therapy practice for adults: From Palestinian therapists’ perspective,” published in *Occupational Therapy in Health Care*.

Grace Baranek is a co-author of “An observational study of parental language during play and mealtime in toddlers at variable likelihood for autism,” published in the *Journal of Child Language*.

Erna Blanche MA '88, PhD '98 is the lead author of “Experiences of adult play,” published in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Alison Cogan MA '12, PhD '17 is a co-author of “Interpreting change in disorders of consciousness using the Coma Recovery Scale-Revised,” published in the *Journal of Neurotrauma*.

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Alison Cogan and **Pamela Roberts** are co-authors of “Using electronic health record data for occupational therapy health services research,” an invited commentary published in *OTJR: Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*.

Ylenia D’elia PhD '29 is the lead author of “Impact of mindfulness-based and health self-management interventions on mindfulness, self-compassion, and physical activity in older adults with subjective cognitive decline: A secondary analysis of the SCD-Well randomized controlled trial,” published in *Alzheimer’s & Dementia: Diagnosis, Assessment & Disease Monitoring*.

Miranda Donnelly PhD '24, **Aisha Abdullah** MA '23, OTD '24, **Stuti Chakraborty** PhD '27 and **Sook-Lei Liew** MA '08, PhD '12 are co-authors of "Pre-implementation analysis of the usability and acceptability of a poststroke complex telehealth biofeedback intervention," published in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Yiyang (Sunny) Fang '19, MA '20, OTD '21, PhD '26 and **Shawn Roll** co-authored "Work and industry occupational therapy career pathways: Understanding an underrepresented practice area," published in *OTJR: Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*.

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Julie McLaughlin Gray MA '95, PhD '06, **Ling Yu (Elena) Meng** OTD '19 and **Grace Baranek** are co-authors of "Applying concepts of curriculum design and cultural adaptation: Collaborating on a dual-degree occupational therapy program in mainland China," published in *Occupational Therapy International*.

Bethany Gruskin PhD '26, **Marinthea Richter** OTD '20, PhD '25 and **Amber Angell** PhD '16 are co-authors of "Expertise gained during the COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring ethical implications through practitioners' narratives," published in *OTJR: Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*.

Ashley Halle MA '11, OTD '12 is a co-author of "A community-based geriatric interprofessional education experience and its impact on post-graduate collaborative practice," published in the *Journal of Interprofessional Care*.

Sook-Lei Liew is the lead author of "Recovery of function after acquired neurological injury," an editorial published in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Julia Lisle MA '21, OTD '22 and **Bobbi Pineda** are co-authors of "Neonatal therapy staffing in the United States and relationships to NICU type and location, level of acuity, and population factors," published in the *American Journal of Perinatology*.

Katie Loomis MA '12, PhD '25 and **Shawn Roll** are co-authors of "Current and future utility of ultrasound imaging in upper extremity musculoskeletal rehabilitation: A scoping review," published in the *Journal of Hand Therapy*.

Tessa Milman MA '08, OTD '09, **Sarah Bream** MA '96, OTD '09, **Celso Delgado** MA '05, OTD '10 and **Deborah Pitts** PhD '12 are co-authors of "Putting on our people lens: Lived experience as pedagogy," published in the *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*.

Madeline Parga PhD '27 and **Shawn Roll** are co-authors of "Differences in self-rated worker outcomes across stress states: An interim analysis of hybrid worker data," published in the *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting*.

Madeline Parga and **Shawn Roll** are co-authors of "Sonographers and vascular technologists offer potential solutions to promote the health and well-being of their workforce," published in the *Journal of Diagnostic Medical Sonography*.

Bobbi Pineda is a co-author of "Oral motor interventions used to support the development of oral feeding skills in preterm infants: An integrative review," published in *Early Human Development*.

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Bobbi Pineda is a co-author of "Item-level psychometrics of the Neonatal Eating Outcome Assessment in orally feeding infants," published in *OTJR: Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*.

Bobbi Pineda, staff member **Polly Kellner** and **Bethany Gruskin** are co-authors of "Organizational barriers to and facilitators of the successful implementation and sustainability of the Supporting and Enhancing NICU Sensory Experiences (SENSE) program," published in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Marinthea Richter, **Amber Angell**, **Polly Kellner** and **Bobbi Pineda** are co-authors of "Infant and parent outcomes related to NICU-based co-occupational engagement," published in *OTJR: Occupational Therapy Journal of Research*.

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Ryan Walsh Postdoc '25 and **Shawn Roll** are co-authors of "Work systems factors associated with burnout in sonographers working in the United States and Canada," published in the *Journal of Diagnostic Medical Sonography*.

A DEEPER MEANING

HOW FULLY EMBRACING ONE'S AUTHENTIC SELF — AT HOME, AT WORK AND IN THE CLASSROOM — CONTRIBUTES TO ONE'S REASON FOR BEING.

BY ASHLEY UYESHIRO SIMON MA '10, OTD '11

Director of the Minor in Occupational Science Program and Associate Professor of Clinical Occupational Therapy

What is your *ikigai* — your reason for being? As occupational beings, we can spend our entire lives looking for our purpose, ascribing meaning to events and choices, creating stories in our minds about ourselves regardless of accuracy (for me, a Netflix series starring Awkwafina), and then acting upon them.

I grew up in Hawai'i, where the "Aloha spirit" is a real phenomenon based on mutual respect for people and land. My incredibly supportive family taught me to value hard work, kindness and service.

But palm trees and sunshine can't prevent middle- and high-schoolers from *Mean Girls* tendencies. Like many others, I was frequently bullied, even into high school, causing a lot of self-doubt, loneliness and misery. I told myself it was because I was really awkward, or maybe I didn't know how to make friends.

I arrived at USC as an undergraduate student, getting a fresh start to rediscover who I was and the adult I wanted to become. I tried on different identities, experimented with what I liked and found myself building confidence as I got to know myself better. I majored in psychology, found a passion for step aerobics, nearly failed "Introduction to Cinematic Arts" and fell in love with occupational science thanks to the incredible faculty members (Kate Crowley and Kim Eggleston) who taught the OS minor courses.

As I learned about the power of occupation to shape the way we see ourselves and society, I felt empowered to reclaim my self-concept and self-narratives. Could I be self-conscious and socially outgoing at the same time? Could I be simultaneously sexy, Asian and awkward? Could I be fully, authentically "me" without sacrificing peer friendships? As my self-confidence and self-understanding grew, I became more comfortable with being authentic in the various spaces I occupied. I was able to connect more deeply and easily with people through the shared vulnerability of social imperfection, and I realized that being myself could be an act of self-care, authenticity and resistance all at the same time.

Then came the birth of my first daughter, Kennedy. It was 3 a.m., I was breastfeeding, I was in pain (from breastfeeding and birth), I was sleep-deprived and convinced I wasn't parenting right, which triggered a lot of shame and anxiety. The house was a mess. I was guilty about loose ends at work I didn't tie up before taking parental leave. But in the midst of this overwhelming physical and emotional chaos, as I put Kennedy down in her crib, I gazed into her tiny little face and felt immense clarity about my *ikigai*.



PHOTO BY ANNA GLENN

A former student in my *OT 100: THRIVE* course once said that each of us begins life as a little baby, just like Kennedy, deserving of all the love in the world. We recognize the inherent value and worth of that baby unconditionally. But as that baby grows, they hear another message: if you don't get good grades; if you don't get into a good college; if you don't land that internship or job or salary range; if you don't have poreless, flawless skin; if you aren't in a leadership position; then somehow you are less worthy. What's worse? At some point that baby will grow into an adult, look into the mirror and repeat those false narratives back to themselves.

That moment with Kennedy; the bullying; the reclaiming of self-concept; through these moments I have realized that my *ikigai* is to help people understand their inherent worth, reclaim some power over their life narratives and create meaning through occupation. As a faculty member, I am educating the leaders of tomorrow (and my children's future bosses!), and I want my students to know that being themselves and feeling intrinsic value are important components of success, both individually and societally. And as we each make these journeys of *ikigai*, I hope we all find others who will walk alongside us and teach us what it means to thrive.

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