

Occupational Therapy

Caroline Thompson Recalls History of Occupational Therapy Program



In 1945, Caroline Thompson became the director of the University's occupational therapy (OT) program. She served in that capacity until 1976 — an amazing 31 years. After serving as director of the program, she returned to a faculty position and retired three years later with emeritus professor status. Throughout her career she influenced thousands of occupational therapists and continues to maintain an active interest in the field.

We recently had the opportunity to speak with Professor Thompson about her career, her memories of the University and its occupational therapy program, and her life in retirement. This is the third in a series of conversations with retired faculty of the School of Education.

School of Education News: When the University began its OT program, was occupational therapy still considered a new field?

Thompson: I think so, yes. There were very few practitioners, and the field was growing slowly. Very few people knew of it. There were only five or six training programs in the United States — it just happened that two of them were in Milwaukee.

News: Was OT new to Madison?

Thompson: No. There was a prospering clinical program at Wisconsin General Hospital,

which had been running since 1926. Its work was highly regarded by the hospital and the University. In fact, the hospital's staff was well equipped to train occupational therapists, but they were too busy. They already had several students interning from two programs in Milwaukee (Mt. Mary College and MilwaukeeDowner College).

News: What factors influenced the growth of the field?

Thompson: I think doctors were the ones who saw that patients needed more than drugs and exercise. They saw we were producing results. And, as doctors worked with occupational therapists to reduce patient recovery times, insurance companies took notice. Once the funding was there, the field really started to grow.

News: In the early days, what was the OT program like?

Thompson: Even early on, it was very academic and solidly based in science. We had a small number of instructional staff, but they were highcaliber and very cooperative. The original curriculum was planned around existing academic courses in related fields. It included courses in arts and crafts, science, psychology, occupational therapy, history, foreign language and English.

News: Were the OT students a closeknit group?

Thompson: Yes. They were small in numbers, maybe 30 to 35 students per class. They saw a lot of each other and their teachers. Looking back, it is easy for me to remember my early students. I remember their maiden names, what towns they came from; in some cases, I even remember who their sister was. Some of my early students are now reaching retirement age. I frequently talk with their parents, some of whom live with me here at Oakwood Village — a retirement community in Madison. It's fun to stay in touch.

News: Did the OT program grow over the years?

Thompson: Oh yes. It ballooned, especially after World War II. There was a time when so many students wanted to become occupational therapists that they were sleeping in cars in the driveway. They wanted to be first on the doorstep to sign up for the courses they needed to graduate. At that point, the University provided more money which allowed us to double the number of students we could admit to the program.

News: What kind of changes have you seen in the program through the years?

Thompson: It became much more solidly based on research. Studies of which methods accomplish the best results provided much more detailed and scientific information. And, as the field became larger, there was room for people to spend their full time in one specialty.

News: Has there always been a high demand for OT graduates?

Thompson: Yes, through the Depression, boom times, war time, peace time — it never lapses. It is a steady sort of occupation. It has had hard times, but it has never vanished from the scene.

News: How did the lecture series named in your honor come about?

Thompson: When I retired, the staff decided there was nothing I would like more than to have an occupational therapist from a different part of the world come to campus each year and consult with the students and faculty. They were right.

It is so important to continually meet new people in the field. It ties you into a network of resources. The people who come give very serious consideration to what they are going to say. They are people who have been outstanding in their field. Editor's note: The

Caroline Thompson Lecture Series was established in 1976 to honor Thompson for her many years of service to the department. The series is supported by alumni contributions and donations from the University of Wisconsin Foundation.

News: Which aspect of your career did you enjoy most?

Thompson: The administration part of it was very challenging and interesting. It was like conducting a lot of different events, and making them all fall into place. I always kept my eyes open for the discovery of new material. Personally, I enjoyed that. I liked looking around for resources and finding information that was right out there for the having if you identified it.

News: When you look back over your career, what are you most proud of?

Thompson: The opportunity to build and develop a program from available resources that prepared young people to work in this profession successfully. The reputation of the School too, because it was very well thought of.

News: What have you been doing since you retired?

Thompson: Mostly traveling, but I also enjoy playing the piano, singing and taking pictures. I've always loved to travel, and now I have the time. In the last few years I've done quite a bit of wilderness traveling on boats, floating down rivers in western Canada. I've also been to the northwest territories in Canada, up to the Yukon and in the southern Canadian Rockies. Actually, I go to the Canadian Rockies every summer with a friend. It's so much fun when you can get into the undeveloped parts. It's not easy, but you can do it.

Before coming to Wisconsin . . .

Professor Thompson graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar College in 1930 with a major in English. From 1931 to 1934, she studied semantics at Cambridge University in England and in 1937, she studied sculpture in New York City. She entered the Philadelphia School of Occupational Therapy in 1938, where she was taught by Clare Spackman and Helen Willard, pioneers in the field of occupational therapy. Just prior to moving to Wisconsin, she spent five years practicing occupational therapy in Connecticut and helped establish the New Haven Curative Workshop.

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