



2017

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## Recommended Citation

Folkens, Haley and Roberts, Emily, "Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Maggie Lesher" (2017). *Oral History Student Papers*. 14.

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Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of *Maggie Lesher*

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### Abstract

A life history of Maggie Lesher, a successful occupational therapist practitioner, was completed as part of a larger project with the purpose of gathering information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy (OT) in North Dakota and Wyoming. An in-depth interview with Lesher revealed a number of descriptive experiences and first-hand reflection. The data collected, following transcription and analysis, summarizes Maggie Lesher's emphasis on the fundamentals of OT, as well as the emotions and growth that accompany an experience such as hers.

### **Introduction**

This life history is one of 29 life history interviews which are a part of a larger project, *Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) in North Dakota and Wyoming*. The purpose of the project is to gather information about the history and evolution of occupational therapy (OT) practice in North Dakota and Wyoming through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT in these two states. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information. This study is intended to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice in North Dakota and Wyoming.

An in-depth phone interview with Maggie Lesher, MA, OTR/L was conducted by two student researchers and both the student researchers and Maggie Lesher were in their homes at the time the phone interview took place. Maggie Lesher is a highly successful occupational therapist and is the founder of Children's Theraplay - a home based agency with locations in Plymouth and Maplewood MN. Maggie has worked in multiple states and practice areas making the interview rich with information regarding occupational therapy practice.

The findings of this study will be archived and made available on the University of North Dakota (UND) OT website. Informed consent was obtained by the student researchers prior to completing the interview with Maggie Lesher. Careful consideration of the Kawa Model was kept by the researchers throughout this process to root the focus of the study on the overall life experiences of the participant (Teah & Iwama, 2015). Emphasis was placed on the barriers the participant experienced, her personal attributes, and the physical and social environments that surrounded Maggie Lesher (Teah & Iwama, 2015).

### **Literature Review**

The student researchers completed a review of existing literature to gather information pertaining to significant events relevant to Maggie Leshher's time becoming and practicing as an occupational therapist. Information regarding the study design was also gathered. According to Wicks and Whiteford (2006), utilizing a life history design in a study "preserves the integrity of individuals and accepts their experiences as credible as well as being philosophically compatible with humanistic values and assumptions of OT" (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006, p.99). This concept aligns with the purpose of the study. During her career, Maggie Leshher experienced the change in practice brought on by the passage of the IDEA part C. Part C of the act proclaims support of the education department's commitment to preparing more children with needs, by providing the foundation needed for success inside and outside of school (idea.gov, 2017). This act altered the services the children ages birth-3 received, and likewise expanded the ability of health care professionals, including Maggie Leshher, to serve such populations.

The movement of occupational therapy from being a Master's entry level profession to a clinical doctorate is another event currently bringing change. Previously, occupational therapy was referred to by some as a "semiprofession", and it is claimed that the movement to the doctorate level will allow for more credibility, keeping the profession up to date with many other health professions that now require such education (Brown, Crabtree, Mu & Wells, 2015). The Accreditation Council of Occupational Therapy Education mandates that the entry level degree for an occupational therapist will move to a doctorate by July 1st 2027. This topic is also relevant to Maggie Leshher's life and she is supportive of the change.

### **Description of Participant**

Maggie Leshner is a highly successful pediatric occupational therapist currently practicing in Minnesota. Maggie is an alumni of the University of North Dakota Occupational Therapy Program and has endowed the Matt and Katrin Hjalmarson Scholarship in honor of her parents. This scholarship was created for students who are in need of financial assistance while pursuing a degree in Occupational Therapy at UND. The scholarship is awarded to a student who demonstrates leadership in the profession and the community as well as a commitment to AOTA's centennial vision.

Maggie Leshner first became interested in OT practice when she learned about the "science" aspect of OT. She then became hooked after discovering the "art" of occupational therapy as well. Maggie has over 20 years of experience with an early childhood special education team with 18 of those years being on a birth-3 year old team. Maggie has many additional certifications beyond her occupational therapy degree including but not limited to a Master of Arts in Early Childhood Special Education, a level I and II mentorship with the STAR Institute and SPD Foundation with Dr. Lucy Jane Miller, SIPT certification, reflex integrations, and an SOS approach to feeding certification. When not working as an occupational therapist, Maggie enjoys spending time with her children and grandchildren. She is also actively involved with an Icelandic-American Hekla Club, playing piano, and riding her bike.

## **Methodology**

### *Study Design*

A qualitative research design using a life history approach was used for this study. This approach allowed the focus of the study to be on the participant's involvement in the evolution of

occupational therapy practice in North Dakota and Wyoming. A semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the principle investigators; the questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all the individuals interviewed as part of the larger project. The researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.

### *Participant Selection*

Purposive sampling was done by the course instructors and the participant was selected from the compiled participant list. The student researchers were then given the name and contact information of the participant they were going to interview for the study.

### *Data Collection*

A single phone interview was conducted by the student researchers with Maggie Leshner. Leading up to the date of the interview, the students did some preliminary research to gain background knowledge on Maggie Leshner before the actual interview occurred. Maggie provided a resume, and referenced the student researchers to her Children's Theraplay website which contained personal information as well as details about her practice. The interview lasted about 1 hour and 30 min; additional information was gathered after completion of the interview via email from the participant.

### *Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness was established using triangulation with the verbatim transcription and data analysis. Use of multiple researchers and a reflexive journal also increased the validity of the study. Credibility was established using triangulation to gather information from the interview with Maggie Leshner, her business website, and follow-up email conversation via email from the participant. To increase transferability, the data was analyzed into codes, categories, and themes

making the data easier to reference with similar populations. Lastly dependability and Confirmability were ensured through the data collection process including a thorough reflection from the student researchers on weekly basis in the form of a reflective journal. Verbatim transcriptions were also used to ensure the true meaning of the interview was captured.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, the student researchers first transcribed the audio recording of the interview verbatim. The transcription was reviewed and codes were identified. These individual codes can be referenced in the appendix of this paper. No inclusion or exclusion criteria were used in the coding process, as the students wanted to simply identify common topics that emerged throughout the interview. This connects to the use of the Kawa model as a foundation for this project, as the student researchers wanted the codes identified to truly reflect experiences of the participant (Teah & Iwama, 2015). In compliance with the Kawa model, codes were representative of barriers, attributes, and contexts that surrounded Maggie (Teah & Iwama, 2015). After codes were carefully identified, the student researchers formulated three categories in which the codes fit, the categories being the fundamentals of occupational therapy, emotions, and growth. Seven thematic statements were then formulated, three under the category of fundamentals of occupational therapy, two under emotions, and two under growth. Finally, one assertion was developed that captured the essence of the interview with Maggie Leshner.

### **Findings/Results**

The student researchers created 3 categories (growth, emotions, and fundamentals of OT) that encompassed all 20 codes, these categories being fundamentals of OT, emotions, and growth. The following paragraphs describe the analysis that took place with each category.



Within the first category, fundamentals of OT, were the following codes: theory/models, sensory-based, collaboration, activity analysis, promoting OT, pediatrics, research, legislation, observation, activity-based, and unique. Throughout the interview Maggie Leshner continually had statements representing the essence of occupational therapy and what it is made up of. For example, Maggie stated, “there was this historical identity, this connection to activities which is more holistic than ya know doing a set of exercises” when talking about what was unique about OT and the history of the profession. Two themes were developed from this category and are as follows (1) The participant’s experience as an OT practitioner has remained rooted in the fundamentals of occupational therapy and (2) The foundational elements of the profession such as being evidenced-based, holistic, and client-centered have remained important to Maggie throughout her career. The first theme was developed after hearing Maggie talk about occupational therapy related terms such as observation and activity-analysis. For example when Maggie stated, “I keep going back to the observation piece” and “activity analysis to me is a kind of core thing, it’s always been there and it’s still as important as when I first learned about it.” Maggie was passionate when speaking about how she has remained ingrained in the fundamentals of OT practice. The second theme arose from statements Maggie made about occupational therapy being unique and holistic. When speaking about the profession Maggie stated that, “this connection to activities which is more holistic than doing a set of exercises,” “occupational therapists use activities,” and the “need for more evidenced-based research.” It was obvious throughout the interview that Maggie was spirited about the distinct value of the occupational therapy profession.

The second category the student researchers identified was emotions. The codes of fear, honored, emotional, nostalgic/memories, and family supports fell under this category. Maggie

experienced many emotions throughout her occupational therapy career and reflected upon these when stating, "It was just so lovely, and ya know as I said I learned so much from their parents- I feel I got more back than I gave sometimes." The themes that emerged under this category included (1) many years in the field of occupational therapy can hold with it a number of emotions, and (2) reflecting back on her career, Maggie experienced a variety of emotions including feelings of nostalgia, honor, and grateful for her personal supports. As the student researchers asked Maggie to reflect on her time as an OT she had many stories of children she had worked with that brought about a number of emotions. Maggie was particularly emotional when talking of a young girl that she had worked with for quite some time. When reminiscing about this therapeutic relationship Maggie stated that the girl had said to her, "You're my Annie Sullivan" [instructor and lifelong companion of Helen Keller] and that this was a memory she would never forget. Another emotion Maggie indicated was honor. When asked to describe what being an OT means to her she replied with "I would say honored." Maggie felt strongly about how the occupational therapy profession has given her many opportunities including meeting many "people who were going through very difficult circumstances," and that being an OT has "put me in contact with families and children who taught me, really inspired me so many times." The second theme identified under the category of emotions revolved around Maggie's statements of a variety of emotions that she felt throughout her time as an occupational therapist. When speaking of her personal supports Maggie stated, "I want to be sure to state that they - my husband, Tom, my daughter, Kristin, and my sons, Michael and Daniel, as well as their significant others and my 3 grandchildren -- have been far and away more important than my professional successes." Maggie expressed a lot of gratitude towards her family and how they have been an essential part to her success as an occupational therapist.

The third and final category identified by the student researchers was growth. The codes that compiled this category include personal growth, professional growth, involvement, leadership/mentorship, cultural roots and pivotal points. Under the category of growth, three themes emerged with the first being, as her time as an OT, Maggie has reflected on many areas of growth that she has undergone over the years. When speaking of how she has developed as an OT Maggie stated, “ya know, I learned different skills at different places, and I would say when I started my private practice it all came together.” The second theme that emerged was, Maggie underwent personal growth many times throughout her OT career including birth of her own children, getting back to her icelandic roots, and discovering the “art” of the profession. When describing her cultural roots Maggie explained that it was a “sense of history, roots and belonging...that actually became a supportive element for my decision to take a risk and shift from my small home-based therapy practice to a potentially larger clinic-based practice.” Remaining true to her family’s history and rediscovering her Icelandic culture was instrumental in Maggie’s growth as a person. Lastly, the third and final theme under the category of growth is as follows, professional growth was experienced through mentorship under Dr. Lucy Jane Miller, getting involved at the state and national level, and becoming a leader for others in her practice. When speaking of how she has grown as a professional, Maggie mentioned that, “I had two levels of mentorship with Dr. Lucy Jane Miller,”[levels not specified] and “later on went to get certified to do the Sensory Integration and Praxis Test (SIPT).” Maggie has undergone professional growth in a number of ways including taking on mentorships, leading others in her clinic, and becoming involved at the state and national level of the profession. Maggie Leshner asserts that throughout the course of one’s occupational therapy career, it is important to remain

rooted in the fundamentals of the profession. Additionally, several emotions can be expected to be felt as well as growth on a personal and professional level.

#### **Discussion/Conclusions:**

Comments made by Maggie Lesher, combined with evidence from the researcher's literature review, together formulate a context of the time in which Maggie Lesher received education and practiced as a therapist. The passage of IDEA part C as well as the transition to the entry level clinical doctorate, are both happenings that are relevant to Maggie Lesher's time in practice. In the interview, Maggie expressed the change that the passage of IDEA part C had in her career, as it allowed her to access a new base of clientele within her pediatric practice. Additionally, Maggie Lesher made mention to her support of movement to the entry-level clinical doctorate as she believes that it will allow occupational therapists to become even more credible and give occupational therapists a chance to participate in discussions with other doctorate level professions (BRown, Crabtree, Mu, & Wells, 2015).

The Kawa Model was carefully considered throughout the life history project in an effort to capture the participant's life flow (Teah & Iwama, 2015). The Kawa model was used as a guide for development of additional interview schedule questions, formulation of codes, categories, and patterns and themes. The student researchers felt it was important to get a holistic picture of the life of Maggie Lesher as an occupational therapist and used the Kawa model's concepts of barriers, supports, contexts, and life flow to highlight various aspects of Maggie's career. Lastly, the development of the final assertion was based on the previous codes, categories, patterns and themes to show how change has occurred throughout Maggie Lesher's life as an occupational therapist.

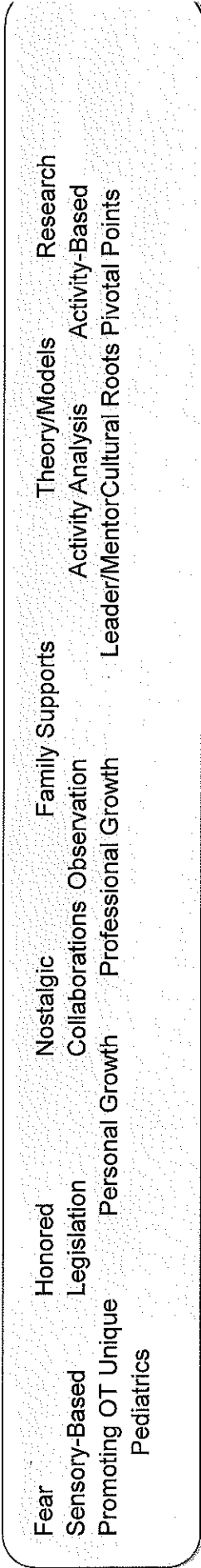
This research project was part of a larger project, that has a purpose of forming a snapshot of the evolution within the occupational therapy profession in North Dakota. The life history of Maggie Lesher contributes to this larger purpose in that it provides a detailed case to illustrate the history of her experience with the profession. It adds to the professional body of knowledge in that it reflects organized themes that may be used to generalize within the larger study. The life history of Maggie Lesher contributes to the evolution of occupational therapy practice in North Dakota as it paints a picture of what remaining true to the profession while also growing with the OT profession can look like. Maggie's personal and professional growth represents changes that she has undergone throughout her career as an occupational therapist, and her story is just one account of many reflecting how occupational therapy as a whole profession has evolved in the state of North Dakota.

### References

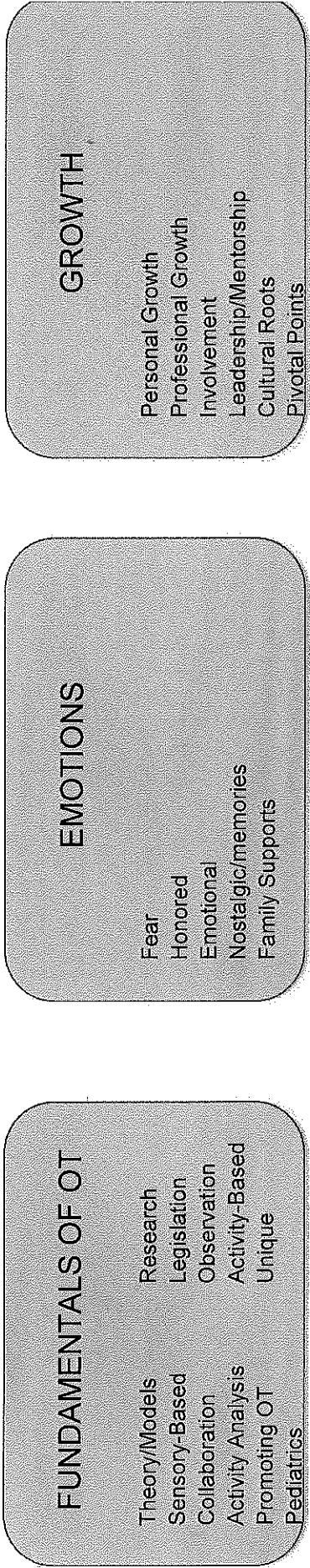
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# APPENDIX

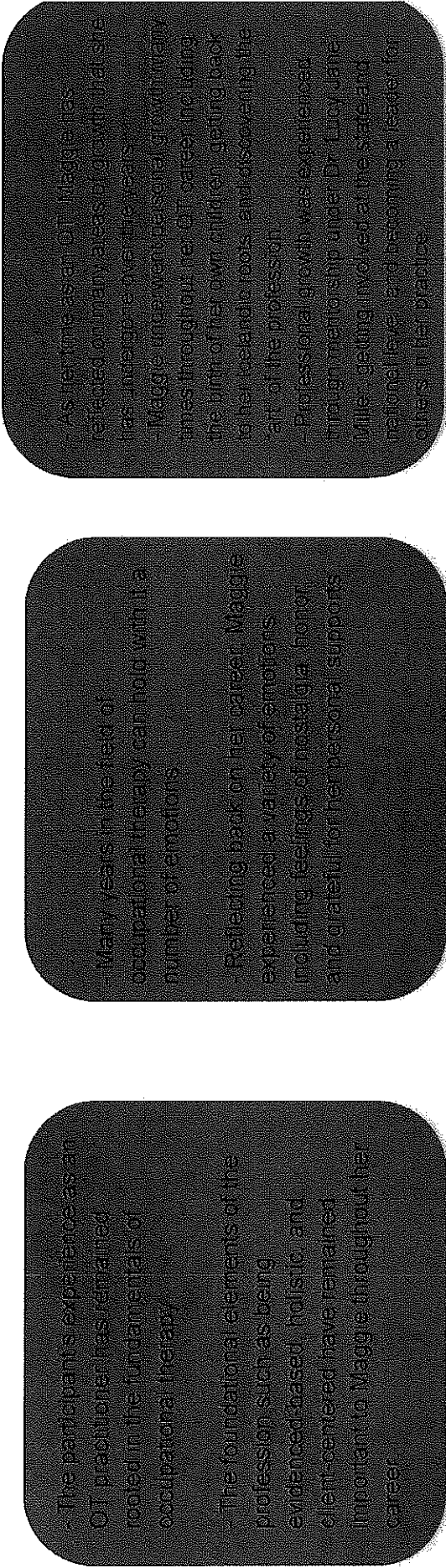
**Life History of Maggie Lesher; Visual Data Display**  
**By: Haley Folkens and Emily Roberts**



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**CATEGORIES**



**THEMES**

