

# Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: The Life History of Tammy Olson, COTA

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## Introduction

### Purpose

The life history of Tammy Olson was one of 31 life history interviews conducted for a larger project, *Life Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) in North Dakota and Wyoming*. The purpose of this study is to gather information about the history and evolution of OT practice in North Dakota and Wyoming through life histories of individuals who have been influential in developing OT in these two states. This study will provide current and future generations of occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants a view of the history and how the profession has evolved from its inception to current practice in North Dakota and Wyoming. The life history of Tammy Olson will focus on her experiences as a certified occupational therapy assistant (COTA) in rural practice.

## Literature Review

The focus of this literature review was to develop an understanding of the evolution of the COTA profession.

- The occupational therapy assistant career began in the 1940s after there was an increased demand for more occupational therapy services in psychiatry (Salvatori, 2001).
- In 1957, the AOTA Board of Management approved a plan to develop occupational therapy assistant training programs for psychiatry, which were later expanded to include general practice settings in 1960 (Cottrell, 2000).
- In the 1970s, a written certification exam was developed for all graduates of an accredited COTA program, and COTAs were granted full rights as members of AOTA (Cottrell, 2000).
- The OT profession experienced issues regarding role confusion and conflict between COTAs and OTRs (Brooks, 1982; Salvatori, 2001).
- In the 1980s, COTAs advocated for their role in the profession and the importance of improving the OTR/COTA relationship. (Brooks, 1982; Salvatori, 2001).
- The North Dakota State Board of Occupational Therapy was established in 1983, which allowed COTAs to become licensed practitioners in the state (Archives-State Agencies-Board of Occupational Therapy Practice, n.d.).
- In the 1990s, AOTA published documents which further defined a COTA's role in the profession and described the OTR/COTA supervisory relationship (Salvatori, 2001).
- In 1992, the Northland Community and Technical College developed new health and science programs, including an Occupational Therapy Assistant program (Haymond & Linquist, n.d.).
- In 2014, The North Dakota State Board of Occupational Therapists revised supervision guidelines for COTAs and OTRs (North Dakota State Board of Occupational Therapy Practice, 2017).

## Description of Participant

Tammy is an experienced COTA who has been working in rural practice for over 20 years. She was one of the first students to graduate from the Occupational Therapy Assistant Program at Northland Community and Technical College in East Grand Forks in 1994. Tammy strives to provide OT services in the communities around her and help individuals of all ages achieve function and independence. One of her professional accomplishments includes modifying shoe tying for many children and young adults. Tammy was nominated by her coworkers for COTA of the year in North Dakota in 2014.

### Current Position:

- COTA at Northwood Deaconess Health Center and Health Dimensions Rehabilitation Inc.
- Practice settings include acute care, skilled nursing facility, outpatient rehab, pediatrics, and home health.

### Past Positions:

- Instructor at the Northland Community and Technical College for the Therapeutic Media Lab, including ceramics, loom weaving, and leather work.
- Continued to serve in the role as a guest lecturer to speak about OT in the school system.
- Altru Hospital in acute care, psychiatry, and the rehab center
- Provided pediatric services in Warren Alvarado Oslo Public Schools for 12 years as a COTA.

### Licensure:

- Licensed COTA in Minnesota
- Licensed COTA in North Dakota

## Methods

This was a qualitative study using a life history approach. Participants were assigned from a list developed by the project directors through purposive sampling.

- Initial contact with the participants was made by the project directors.
- No gatekeeper issues were identified.
- Informed consent was given prior to interviewing the participants.
- One face-to-face interview was conducted with the participant, which lasted approximately one hour.
- The interview took place in a small conference room in the North Dakota School of the Blind.
- A semi-structured interview format was used to guide the interview process. The questions were prepared in an interview schedule provided by the project directors. The questions were designed to be used with all participants included in the study.
- The Kawa Model was used as a guide to modify questions that addressed key turning points in the participant's life and practice (Teoh & Iwama, 2015).
- Additional data was gathered through the participant's Curriculum Vitae.

## Data Analysis

The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded with 23 codes. Three categories with themes emerged from the codes.

- The Kawa Model influenced the data analysis process by serving as a guide to focus on the opportunities and challenges that emerged in the participant's professional and personal life (Teoh & Iwama, 2015).
- Multiple data collection strategies were included.
- The researchers established trustworthiness by audio recording the interviews with two separate devices and developing a reflective journal to document their experiences and biases.
- Triangulation was achieved by having two researchers analyze the transcription separately.
- The categories that emerged from the codes were rural practice, interventions, and COTA practice.
- These categories were analyzed to discover themes that emphasized Tammy's experiences as a COTA.
- From these themes, a final assertion was developed.

## Categories and Themes

### Rural Practice:

- Rural practice has provided Tammy with a variety of different work experiences in the community.
- Rural practice has allowed Tammy to develop innovative interventions and teach others in the community.
- Working part-time has presented opportunities and challenges in maintaining a schedule and workload, this has impacted her professional and family life.

*"It's not very common that you find people that are going to do what I do and drive 60 miles to go to work, but I, I found the fit there and it's just continued to work for me."*

### Interventions:

- Tammy emphasized the importance of being client-centered when helping clients achieve their goals.
- She developed a technique to teach shoe tying to individuals of all ages.
- Tammy is passionate about helping people achieve function and independence.

*"It has been a perfect fit for me in working with people of all ages and helping them find the little things that make their life better."*

### OTA Practice:

- Communication among health care professionals is imperative to ensure timeliness of documentation is met.
- Tammy emphasized that education and promotion on the role of a COTA should be a priority for the profession.
- Interpreting supervision between OTR/COTA as teamwork was important to her in current and past work settings.

*"It's hard for me to even think of the word supervision because where I've worked and who I've worked with, it's always been, felt more like a team."*

## Discussion

### Final Assertion:

- Tammy Olson has been influential in rural practice due to her commitment and passion for enhancing and promoting functional independence in the lives of others. Her experiences throughout her career have empowered her to become an educator and advocate for the COTA profession.

### Conclusion:

- The interview provided the researchers with insight on the opportunities and challenges Tammy experienced as an occupational therapy assistant in rural practice in ND and MN.
- After graduating and being a part of the first COTA class at the Northland Community and Technical College, Tammy has contributed to her profession by developing innovative interventions that promote functional independence.
  - Through major turning points in her professional and personal life, she stayed grounded and true to the foundation of OT to remain client-centered.
  - This led her to become an influential practitioner, inventor, and advocator of the profession.
  - Tammy believes her career has been a perfect fit for her life and cannot imagine herself doing anything else.



## References

Reference list available upon request.