



Angeline Loh
Otago Polytechnic

NZAOT Graduate Award winners

2010



Karen Reynolds
AUT University

The New Zealand Association of Occupational Therapists' Graduate Award is awarded annually to one graduate from each undergraduate occupational therapy programme for the highest level of achievement in completing the occupational therapy programme.

Congratulations to AUT student Karen Reynolds, and to Angelina Loh who graduated from Otago this year.

"After each placement I decided that I had a new favourite area of practice!"

Karen Reynolds, AUT NZAOT Graduate Award Winner 2010.

"We need to get ourselves out there explaining what we have to offer."

Angeline Loh, Otago NZAOT Graduate Award Winner 2010.

We asked Karen and Angeline to let us know what led them to study occupational therapy and advice for current students of occupational therapy and those of the future.

Karen Reynolds, NZROT, MNZAOT

Thank you to the NZAOT for this award. It came as a complete shock to me- I think when I was told, my response was along the lines of "Are you sure?!"

I was encouraged to enter the world of occupational therapy by my mum. As a nurse, she had observed occupational therapists out in the field and obviously saw something in me that she thought would fit. At the time I was at a cross-roads in my life - two young children, and having just become a single mother, I needed something to aim for, something that would give me hope, belief in myself and my ability to provide for my children in the future - what I now know to be meaningful occupation! I looked into the occupational therapy course and was inspired but it was a few years until the time was right. When I signed up for the full time course there was no looking back.

Karen and her two sons at her graduation.

The greatest gains for me over the three years at university have been on a personal level - I have learnt so much about myself and those around me. I had incredible support from my family and friends and I couldn't have done it without them. My kids were very supportive of my study and I feel that my journey has been an example to them that learning is a lifelong endeavour.

"I loved going out on placement; a chance to be in the real world, to get a hands-on idea of how occupational therapists do things and to develop my own style of practice. My first placement was in an Assessment Treatment & Rehabilitation Unit and I absolutely loved it; following this I had placements in community mental health, an acute neurological ward and a paediatric special school. After each placement I decided that I had a new favourite area of practice!"

My parents offered practical support (babysitting and meals when deadlines were looming!), and never-ending moral support, enabling me to juggle the demands of study, children and work. My new partner and my friends outside of university all understood when I needed to study - they helped with looking after the kids when I was on placements and put up with my moods! I'll always be grateful to them for helping me to do what I needed to do. In the first year of university I made two especially good friends and our friendships developed quickly over the shared challenges of studying and balancing family commitments - we laughed and cried together and I know we will be friends for many years to come. I'm hoping for more laughing than crying in the future!

My advice to first-time students either out of school or later in life is time management. I lived by my diary and it was the only way I managed to get everything done. Oh, and make sure you make time for your own enriching occupations along the way too!

The future for me as an occupational therapist feels uncertain at the moment. My goal has always been to gain a role at a hospital to consolidate my knowledge and gain practical clinical experience, and eventually to work in private practice. Despite applying for several positions I have yet to gain an interview with the local hospital - it appears that recent changes (in particular to ACC funding) mean that many experienced practitioners are returning to the hospitals and filling these roles. I need to be earning and contributing financially to my family, so I am currently employed in another field. I know this is a reality for other graduates too, and while it is disappointing, in a sense I feel that perhaps I am at another cross-roads and am currently considering how I may combine the skills I have gained from university with the work experience I had prior, to create a new, non-traditional role for myself.

Angeline Loh NZROT, MNZAOT

Winning the Otago NZAOT Graduate Award was unexpected because I wasn't officially graduating, having gone on to do honours this year. I feel hugely honoured and blessed to

have received this award.

People always ask me what led me to study occupational therapy. I have a degree in communication studies, and also a work history in stage management, but I have always wanted to do more humanitarian/mission work. When I came to New Zealand and decided to review my chosen vocation, I looked to see what would be the most useful - it came down to teaching, healthcare, or sanitation.

Thinking it might suit me, my husband (who is a doctor), asked me if I'd heard of occupational therapy. I hadn't! Didn't have a clue! So I went to find out more and spent a day with some lovely occupational therapists in Christchurch (where I was living at the time), and thought, yup I want to do this! I would love to use my training as a means to serve other people as that is what Jesus called us to do.

During occupational therapy training, there were so many highlights, although it is probably only in looking back that I really appreciate them. We had lots of fun and I definitely learned to be adaptable (thanks to travelling all over the country for placements), and now I know I can cope with anything that crops up! I enjoyed the programme very much - it wasn't a narrow theoretical training programme - I definitely broadened my understanding of human occupation and picked up several new meaningful leisure activities from my classmates!

Our cohort is absolutely wonderful. We were a relatively small group (or it felt so) and we were cohesive, and supportive of each other. It wasn't all competitive although there was a healthy dose of that on quiz nights and things like that, but overall we just strived towards being the best we could be, and to help one another out.

Placement supervisors and lecturers of course contributed to my learning greatly, both providing guidance and wisdom but also giving me space to pursue my own interests and be self-directed which I think will equip me for ongoing learning.

I've always thought occupational therapy is a great field for people with a bit of life experience - people revocationalising like myself, or just coming back to study.

The core philosophy is so subtle, it's easy to miss. We talk about common sense, and things of the 'every day'; that does not mean it is less important than one-off big-occasion activities. It takes a while to realise that it's the little things that count, and that they build up to create whole meaningful lives.

I think a key challenge for students of occupational therapy is to make the connection personally between what you study and what you actually do in your lives which creates meaning. Our programme gave us lots of opportunities for new activities; some classmates are particularly good at organising events and getting people to come along to things. These activities helped the theory to "click" for me, to grasp what all this meaningful occupation

stuff is. When that link was made I think it all came to life, and it was no longer just theory or what someone else says it is. It has become a core philosophy in my own life.

Jobs are scarcer now than when we started the programme, but I believe it will improve. I truly believe recognition of the importance of occupational therapy will increase - we just have to get ourselves out there and promote what we contribute.

Recently a statement was released by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians titled 'Work is Good for Health', to which the NZAOT were signatories, as were GP, medical, nursing and other bodies. Well, we know occupation is not just a job (as most people think), but work is an occupation, and we always knew occupation was good for our health didn't we! We have so much to offer - I know occupational therapists find it hard to articulate what we do and why. The link between health and occupation is our niche. Occupational is subtle but powerful - we need to get ourselves out there explaining what we have to offer.

I don't think occupational therapy is deliberately undervalued by health staff who know what occupational therapy is about, but it is generally low in profile. I guess it partly has to do with community ignorance - unless you have personally come across an occupational therapist, you are unlikely to have heard of the profession from the media or in fiction, films - it is not common.

Thanks and glory first and foremost to God, whose strength I rely on everyday. Then to my husband, my wonderful classmates, lecturers, supervisors, and all the clients I've met and learned from along the way.

"If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." Tolstoy

I like this quote because it sums up the importance of living in the present and enjoying and making the most of every bit of it.