

# STUDENT DOCTORAL Experiential Capstone Projects



WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY | **WNE**  
COLLEGE of PHARMACY and HEALTH SCIENCES

**EDUCATE.  
ENGAGE.  
EMPOWER.**

Dear WNE OTD Family and Friends:

We are excited to produce this fourth annual edition of EDUCATE-ENGAGE-EMPOWER to showcase our doctoral experiential capstone program around student projects. Our aim is to better familiarize you with our faculty, staff, and students so that you can continue to be a part of our endeavors.

The Doctoral Experiential (DEx) Capstone Project is a complex interrelated field experience and scholarly project that is coordinated by a student in collaboration with a university and community team. The purpose of the DEx Capstone is for students to apply the knowledge and skills gained during their OTD academic courses, labs, and fieldwork experiences in ways that challenge and perhaps transform the delivery of health, educational, and social services. Through designing and implementing a community experiential and a scholarly project that specifically responds to the needs of a population and setting, students experience the roles of reflective practitioner, transformative leader, and innovative designer.

Students complete 14 weeks of work with a community organization during the DEx Capstone. Community organizations include hospitals, clinics, schools, health care, social service, advocacy, or educational organizations. WNE OTD students work in small groups with a faculty mentor. Depending on the topic, population, and setting they choose, students collaborate with one or more "site mentors" or content experts. In a typical project, students learn about the population and setting, the organization's strengths and challenges, and they participate in daily activities. Students also conduct a scholarly project designed to answer a question generated from a needs assessment, literature review and partnership with faculty, site, and peer mentors. The intention of both the community experiential and the scholarly project are to establish a meaningful connection between WNE and the community, to improve health, education, and social services, and to explore potentially transformative roles for occupational therapists. The aim of the capstone experience is for our students to apply this concentrated knowledge, skills, and intrinsic development to emerge as OT practitioners beyond a novice level to impact communities in addition to individuals and groups.

The following pages offer descriptions of our Faculty Mentors, acknowledge our Community Partners, and illustrate our 2026 student projects. We are so very grateful to all who engage with our program as educators, mentors, reviewers, and consultants. Thank you for your support and contribution to the community and to the profession of occupational therapy.



Debra Latour, OT, OTD, M.Ed., OTR, FAOTA  
Doctoral Experiential Capstone Coordinator

## 2026 WNE OTD Faculty Mentors and Mentorship Groups



**Susan Agostine, OT, PhD, OTR**

Amanda Chaves, OT/s  
Hannah Whitehead, OT/s  
Alexis Ziegler, OT/s



**Alexis Morin, OT, OTD, MOT, OTR**

Katharine Buchanan, OT/s  
Anna Collier, OT/s  
Allyson Ferraro, OT/s



**Kim Geisner-Gross, OT, OTD, M.Ed.,  
CHT, CKTP, OTR**

Olivia Hall, OT/s  
Alyssa Lewandowski, OT/s  
Marcos Pena Veras, OT/s



**Erin Murray, OT, OTD, OTR**

Natasha Benosa, OT/s  
Lucas Totoro, OT/s



**Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed.,  
OTR, FAOTA**

Marisa Gabriel, OT/s  
Loredana Randazzo, OT/s



**Erin Wells, OT, OTD, MSOT, OTR**

Joviana Bagaglio, OT/s  
Jordan Pare, OT/s  
Caroline Travaglin, OT/s

# Thank you to our 2026 Partnering Sites and Site Mentors

Barclays Center/ BSE Global, Brooklyn NY  
Center for Human Development, Springfield MA  
Collaborative for Educational Services, Northampton MA  
Gandara Center, Springfield MA  
Groton Police Department, Groton CT  
Hospital for Special Care Aquatics Dept, New Britain CT  
Hospital for Special Care OP/IP Autism Dept., New Britain CT  
Inner Balance Psychotherapy, Remote in MA & RI  
Little Star Pediatric Therapy, New Windsor NY  
More to Say, LLC., Oxford, CT  
New North Citizens Council, Springfield MA  
Sunshine Village, Chicopee MA  
Therapeutic Behavioral Interventions, LLC., Agawam MA  
Wachusett Mountain, Princeton MA  
Westfield Council on Aging, Westfield MA  
West Springfield Veterans Services, West Springfield MA

Monica Lorenzo, MS, ATC, CES  
Jessica Levine, MS  
Vanessa Pashkoff, ECHM-E  
Jennifer Anderson, OTD, OTR  
Maria Nott  
Jenna DiGirolamo, PT, DPT, NCS, ATP  
Allison Souza, OT, MS, OTR  
Melanie Bagaglio, LMHC  
Isabella Saffioti-Shea, OTD, OTR/L  
Lindsey Heaton OTD, OTR/L  
Eva Gomez, CAGS, M.ED., CADAC  
Colleen Brosnan  
Marianne Joyce, OT, MA, OTR/L  
Bruce Gasco  
Michael Squindo, LCSW  
Marc Massey

## Thank you to our supportive staff

Justina Aubrey, Justin Eck

## Stay tuned for our upcoming projects!

[wne.edu/pharmacy-and-health-sciences/departments/occupational-therapy/dex-projects](http://wne.edu/pharmacy-and-health-sciences/departments/occupational-therapy/dex-projects)



# Occupy Your Life

BY JOVIANNA BAGAGLIO OT/S

“Overcoming abuse doesn’t just happen; it takes positive steps every day. Let today be the day you start to move forward.”

- Assunta Harris, *A Sheep Amongst Wolves*

For many survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), healing is not a single moment, but a series of small steps towards reclaiming their independence and rebuilding their sense of self. Occupational therapy was built from a mental health foundation, using the therapeutic properties of purposeful, meaningful activity to support holistic recovery. Today that foundation remains critical, as the most recent National Intimate Partner Violence Survey reports that 47.3% of women and 44.2% of men in the United States experience some form of IPV in their lifetime, highlighting the urgent and widespread need for accessible, effective mental health interventions (Leemis et al., 2022).

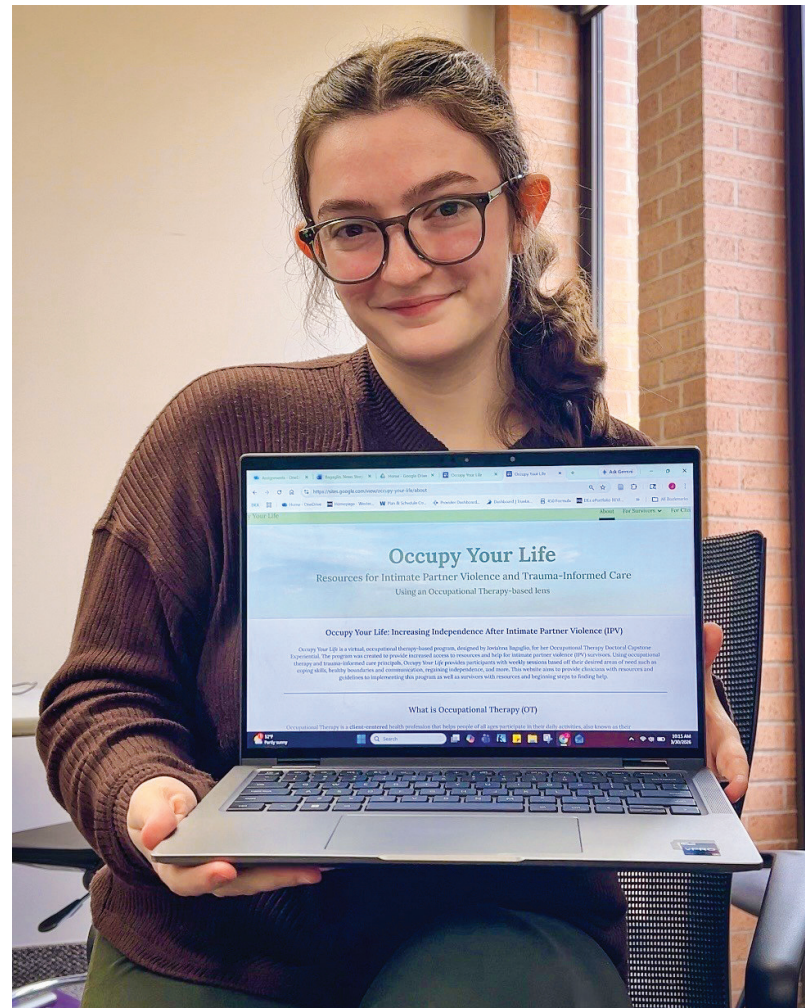
Recognizing both the prevalence of IPV and the importance of providing safe, accessible, trauma-informed care, doctoral candidate Jovianna Bagaglio, in collaboration with her faculty mentor Dr. Erin Wells, developed *Occupy Your Life: Increasing Independence after Intimate Partner Violence*. This program was intentionally designed to prioritize the key components of client confidentiality, emotional safety, and autonomy. Through a telehealth format, the program reduces barriers to access while allowing participants to engage within their chosen environment, helping them feel the most comfortable and secure.

*Occupy Your Life* focuses on structured but flexible sessions aimed at increasing perceived self-efficacy, independence, and emotional well-being. Participants engage in worksheets and activities that promote deeper reflection on personal boundaries, relationship expectations, values, and identity, all of which are areas often impacted by abuse experiences. These activities in combination with guided discussion, allow participants to process their experiences, develop healthy coping mechanisms, and begin to reconnect with meaningful roles, routines, and activities that foster a renewed sense of purpose and control in their daily lives.

To further the impact of this program, Jovianna also developed a website that serves as a guide for both survivors and clinicians to find resources aimed at abuse and IPV recovery. This focus on both participant and provider resources strengthens the continuity of care and promotes implementation of trauma-informed practices. Together, this program bridges a critical gap in care for IPV survivors by combining the core principals of occupational therapy with accessible, trauma-informed delivery. *Occupy Your Life* invites participants to heal, rebuild, and move forward with confidence, dignity, and a renewed sense of purpose.

## References:

1. Leemis, R. W., Jr., Friar, N., Khatiwada, S., Chen, M. S., Kresnow, M., Smith, S. G., Caslin, S., Basile, K. C., & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 Report on Intimate Partner Violence*. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs/nisvsreportonipv\\_2022.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs/nisvsreportonipv_2022.pdf)
2. Harris, A. (2014). *A Sheep Amongst Wolves*. Amazon Kindle. Accessed March 25, 2026



# Dancing Beyond Pain: An Occupational Therapy-Based Injury Prevention Program for Dancers

BY NATASHA BENOSA, OT/S

Behind the high-energy performances seen across stages, courts, and performance spaces, professional dancers push their bodies through intense physical demands -- often at the cost of their own well-being. Strength, endurance, flexibility, and control are required at an elite level, with long hours spent in rehearsals, classes, and performances. Over time, the repetitive nature of dance places performers at high risk for injury, chronic pain, and physical strain that can extend into everyday activities like sleeping, sitting, or working. For many dancers, especially those working as freelancers or in street-style communities, access to healthcare and recovery resources is limited due to inconsistent income and lack of employer-provided insurance. As a result, injuries are often ignored or pushed through, leading to long-term consequences and decreased confidence in performance. With nearly 80% of dancers experiencing an injury each year, the need for accessible, preventative support in the dance community has never been clearer (Komar, 2023).

Natasha Benosa, a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) candidate at Western New England University, recognized a gap in preventative healthcare resources for dancers, an issue she understands firsthand through her 15+ years of experience and personal history with injury. To address this, she developed and implemented an occupational therapy-based injury prevention and pain management program for performing artists in collaboration with the Brooklyn Nets Entertainment team in Brooklyn, New York, under the mentorship of Pro Athletic Solutions founder Monica Lorenzo. Working directly within a professional dance environment, Benosa integrated her program into rehearsals and game-day routines, bridging the gap between performance demands and healthcare support. "For dancers, their occupation is movement," Benosa shared. "By improving how they move, recover, and care for their bodies, we can help prevent injuries and support long-term performance." She hopes her work will contribute to greater recognition of occupational therapy in nontraditional settings and expand access to preventative care for dancers.

The program focused on equipping dancers with practical strategies to support longevity in their careers. Services included dynamic warm-ups, guided cool-downs, and education on ergonomics and body mechanics to promote proper alignment, joint protection, and efficient movement. Additional topics addressed mental health, stress management, and occupational balance, emphasizing recovery both physically and mentally. These strategies were integrated directly into rehearsals and game-day routines, allowing dancers to apply them in real time. At the same time, Benosa introduced dancers to the role of occupational therapy in the performing

arts—a setting where it remains underutilized—highlighting how OT can support performance, prevent injury, and promote long-term health. By addressing both physical and mental demands, her work filled a critical gap, offering sustainable strategies for pain management, recovery, and injury prevention often overlooked traditional dance training.

Dancers who participated in the program reported increased body awareness, improved recovery habits, and a deeper understanding of how to manage pain. Outcomes reflected not only in data, but in their own words. "Amazing job on the program! I feel more knowledgeable about occupational therapy, and I loved every part of it," one dancer shared, while another added, "Thank you for reminding us to take care of ourselves." Others emphasized the program's relevance, noting how essential this knowledge is given the physical demands they place on their bodies.

Many dancers expressed interest in continuing the program in future seasons, highlighting the lasting impact of Benosa's work and the need for ongoing occupational therapy support. Participants reported improved recovery with structured warm-up and cool-down routines and plan to incorporate these strategies into their regular practice. This underscores the value of occupational therapy in nontraditional settings and the importance of accessible, preventative care for performing artists.

## References:

1. Russell, J. (2013). Preventing dance injuries: Current perspectives. *Open access journal of sports medicine*, 4, 199–210. <https://doi.org/10.2147/OAJSM.S36529>
2. Komar, S. (2023). Dancers' wellness has become a higher priority, but there's a long way to go. *Columbia News Service*. <https://columbianewsservice.com/2023/10/12/dancers-wellness-has-become-a-higher-priority-but-theres-a-long-way-to-go/>
3. Whitaker, K. (2021). How to navigate health insurance as a self-employed dancer. *DancePlug*. <https://www.danceplug.com/article/how-to-navigate-health-insurance-as-a-self-employed-dancer>





## Flowing Forward: Adaptive Aquatic Recreation

BY KATHARINE BUCHANAN OT/S

In a warm-water therapeutic pool in New Britain, Connecticut, adults living with neurodegenerative conditions are redefining what recreation, rehabilitation, and community can look like. Flowing Forward is more than an aquatic exercise program – it is an adaptive, occupation-based initiative designed to promote movement, mental wellness, and meaningful social participation.

Developed by occupational therapy doctoral student Katharine Buchanan, OT/s, Flowing Forward was created to address a gap in accessible, community-based aquatic recreation opportunities for adults living with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), Parkinson’s

**Blending rehabilitation, recreation, and community, Flowing Forward reimagines how aquatics can support movement and mental wellness.**

Disease (PD), and Muscular Dystrophy (MD). The program serves individuals seeking a safe, supportive, environment where physical activity is intentionally adapted to meet fluctuating abilities while fostering connection and belonging.

Each structured group session integrates modified aquatic activities, mindful movement inspired by Ai Chi principles, gently strengthening, balance, postural control activities, breathing techniques, and light cognitive engagement through discussion and brain-teaser prompts. Sessions are intentionally designed to bridge rehabilitation and recreation – supporting occupational performance while promoting enjoyment and autonomy.

“The goal has always been to create a space where individuals feel capable, connected, and supported” Buchanan explained. “Living with a neurodegenerative condition can feel unpredictable. In the water, participants often experience stability, possibility, and forward movement.”

Participants are active collaborators in the program’s development. Through pre- and post- focus groups, reflection activities, and ongoing dialogue they help shape the pacing, structure, and environment of each session. One participant shared, “Through this program, I found the motivation and support to rediscover what’s possible in the water.”

Across program implementation, a consistent theme has emerged: the strong connection between movement and mental health. Participants frequently reported feeling emotionally lighter, more confident, and socially connected after sessions. The warm-water environment reduces joint stress and supports mobility, allowing individuals to move with greater ease than on land. Equally important, the social component fosters shared understanding among individuals navigating similar lived experiences.

Occupational therapy principles emphasizing meaningful activity, environmental adaptation, and holistic care ground Flowing Forward. Rather than focusing on limitations, the program highlights resilience, capability, and community engagement. By intentionally designing an adaptive aquatic recreation model, Buchanan’s doctoral capstone seeks to demonstrate how occupational-based programming can enhance quality of life for individuals living with progressive neurodegenerative conditions.

As each session concludes, participants gather in a circle – reflecting not only on the physical movements completed, but on the sense of camaraderie cultivated. In a healthcare landscape that often centers on decline, Flowing Forward centers on capacity. Through adaptive recreation and shared experience, participants continue – physically, socially, and emotionally – flowing forward.

# The Emerging Practice of Canine Assisted Therapy and Its Impact on Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

BY AMANDA CHAVES, OT/S

“I don’t want him to be concerned.... I want him to be open to everything, see different things and different cultures. I want him to be happy, be cool, and learn a lot,” shared the father of a 10-year-old boy with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), describing his hopes for his child’s growth and independence.”

This doctoral capstone experience (DEx) explored the impact of Canine-Assisted Therapy (CAT) on meaningful occupational participation in a child with ASD. By integrating CAT into occupational therapy (OT), the study highlights how this approach can empower children with ASD by promoting independence, community engagement, and overall quality of life.

The child was an ideal participant because of his strong interest in the therapy dog, Adele, which increased his motivation for goal-directed activities. The project was led by Amanda Chaves, OT/s, in collaboration with the child’s father, an occupational therapist, who was also the canine’s primary trainer, and a speech-language pathologist (another certified trainer), allowing for an interdisciplinary and individualized approach.

Chaves implemented the project at the Hospital for Special Care in the outpatient pediatric setting, specifically within a building serving children with ASD. It included a pre-interview with the father, three structured therapy sessions, and a post-interview. Interventions targeted both OT and speech-language goals, including toileting hygiene and use of his AAC device to support communication, articulation, and intelligibility.

An important aspect of the project was honoring the family’s cultural values. The family, who identify as Muslim, follows cultural and religious practices that limit close contact with dogs, particularly in personal space. However, they supported the child’s interactions with Adele in a therapeutic context. Gloves were used during sessions to ensure full participation while respecting these beliefs. This adaptation highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity in practice and was accepted and appreciated by the family.



Throughout her life and clinical practice, Amanda has seen the meaningful impact canines can have, bringing joy, comfort, reduced stress, and genuine connection. These experiences, along with stories from her community, strengthened her passion for advocating for CAT and exploring its use in occupational therapy for children with ASD.

Overall, this project demonstrated CAT as an innovative and meaningful therapeutic approach. By fostering communication, supporting self-care, and increasing engagement, CAT can promote greater independence for children with ASD.

# Connecting Minds: A Stroke Survivor Support Group to Promote Mental Health and Improve Quality of Life

BY ANNA COLLIER, OT/S

Anna Collier, Doctor of Occupational Therapy student from Western New England University (WNEU) in Springfield, Massachusetts, partnered with the Westfield Senior Center to implement a six-week educational stroke survivor support group called Connecting Minds. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), every 40 seconds in the United States, an individual has a stroke (2024). Thirty percent of stroke survivors develop post-stroke depression (American Stroke Association, 2024). Collier found her passion through helping with a student-led stroke survivor support group. After researching post-stroke gaps in care and with a passion for helping clients regain independence, Collier knew she wanted to run a stroke survivor support group.

Guided by one question: What support do stroke survivors lack related to mental health? Collier set out to increase stroke survivors' overall quality of life. Collier recruited participants over 50 and at least two months post-stroke from the Westfield Senior Center and surrounding towns. This group provided a space to share personal stories, learn about post-stroke care, and access mental health resources. Collier stated, "This program was designed for survivors to feel empowered and gain back a sense of independence. I wanted to support their mental health and quality of life."

Collier also trained staff and survivors to use everyday materials to create activities like "homemade air hockey" with a table, tennis ball, and tissue boxes. Colliers' goal was to create a successful framework that could bridge the gap needed for post-stroke recovery beyond her tenure at the center. She created a manual to allow future facilitators to run a stroke survivor support group. By delivering her manual to staff and future potential facilitators, Collier hopes that her group will continue to serve this population.

"The potential for Anna's work to have a lasting legacy within our center, and in the greater Westfield community makes me truly grateful that Anna requested to work with us on her capstone project" shared Michael Squindo, Executive Director of the Westfield Council on Aging.

## References:

American Stroke Association. (2024). Help and support. <https://www.stroke.org/en/help-and-support>



# Preventing and Reducing Substance Use Disorders in the Foster Youth Population: An Educational Program for Residential Staff

BY ALLYSON FERRARO, OT/S

Allyson Ferraro, a third-year doctoral student from Western New England University, had the opportunity to work with the Gándara Center. For her 14-week capstone project, Allyson worked alongside her site mentor, Dr. Jennifer Anderson, and spent time across three residential programs with foster youth ranging in age and gender.

Allyson created a six-week educational program for residential staff on preventing and reducing substance use disorders (SUDs) in foster youth. Staff who participated included occupational therapy practitioners, direct care staff, and clinicians. This program focused on the following topics: trauma informed care, harm reduction approaches, how to support youth with expanding their occupational repertoire, and burnout prevention for staff. Dr. Anderson stated, “Allyson’s project focused on how trauma can impact and influence individuals’ behaviors, attitudes, and thoughts. Her programs focused on peeling back the layers and highlighting the importance of asking ‘why’ rather than simply seeking to eliminate the behavior.”

Highlights of her project include creating a physical and electronic workbook of the educational modules to sustain the program, promoting and advocating for the role of occupational therapy in residential settings, and educating residential staff on strategies to help prevent and reduce SUDs. Allyson discussed the importance of recognizing and addressing staff burnout in this setting. She provided staff with resources and techniques to assist youth and themselves in reducing burnout symptoms. A clinician stated, “Allyson’s project assisted staff in giving us practical tools and real-life strategies we can implement with our clients to assist with preventing and reducing SUDs. This training felt very needed and made a significant difference on how we implement trauma-informed care, harm reduction approaches, and providing healthy coping skills.”



Allyson is passionate about working with this population, educating staff, and advocating for the role of occupational therapy in non-traditional settings. It is important to focus on different, healthy alternatives, the creation of meaningful relationships, and the identification of individualized coping strategies. Allyson focused on educating staff on multiple different coping skills and interventions to provide youth to assist with preventing and reducing SUDs. These interventions include mindfulness techniques, sensory modulation, physical activity, cognitive behavioral approaches, and motivational interventions. Allyson also worked with Dr. Anderson to implement groups to foster youth focused on life skills, healthy relationships, hygiene, leisure activities, and activities of daily living (ADLs).

# Aiding Our Heroes: Addressing Gaps in Care for U.S.A. Veterans with Disabilities in Low-Income Areas

BY MARISA GABRIEL, OT/S

“Humans don’t mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary. Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary. It’s time for that to end” (Junger, S., 2017, pg. xvii).

To truly “Aid Our Heroes” is to recognize and listen to their struggles and support their reintegration into society, helping them regain a sense of purpose and belonging. In 2022, it was recorded that 31% of veterans have a service-connected disability in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2024). Many veterans experience chronic pain, reduced mobility, sleep disturbances, and mental health difficulties that include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. These challenges often lead to social isolation and reduced engagement in meaningful activities (Meisler et al., 2023. Olenick et al., 2015).

Marisa Gabriel, a Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) candidate at Western New England University (WNE), partnered with the West Springfield Veteran Services to implement her capstone project, designed to support low-income veterans with disabilities. Under the mentorship of the Director of Veteran Services, Marc Massey, the program served veterans of diverse ages and abilities, addressing both physical and mental health challenges while promoting overall quality of life. Through an 8-week interactive support group held once a week for 60 minutes, veterans engaged in structured activities that encouraged peer connection, skill-building, and self-management skills. Sessions offered informational handouts on pain management, adaptive strategies, and guided exercises, along with a comprehensive guide to free or low-cost community resources, while creating a safe and accessible environment where veterans felt heard and valued. Gabriel reflects on her motivation for the program, “During my fieldwork, I noticed that many veterans were labeled as stubborn or uncooperative, but I realized that it was not resistance, it was a need for support adapted to their experiences and needs. Veteran participants often told me during my program that civilians just don’t get it as it is hard to explain your struggles if you have not served. That is why connecting veterans with one another is so important as peer support allows them to share experiences, strategies, and understanding in a way that civilians often cannot”.

The program was not just about education, exercise, or activities, it was about community. Veterans supported one another through hands on projects, collaborative problem solving, and sharing stories. Through initiatives like this, Gabriel is defining what it means to “Aid Our Heros”, showing that even small, locally led programs can create meaningful change by meeting veterans where they are and acknowledging the challenges unique to military life.

## References:

1. Junger, S. (2016). *Tribe: On homecoming and belonging*. Twelve
2. Meisler, A. W., Gianoli, M. O., Na, P. J., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2023). Functional Disability in US Military Veterans: The Importance of Integrated Whole Health Initiatives. *The primary care companion for CNS disorders*, 25(4), 22m03461. <https://doi.org/10.4088/PCC.22m03461>
3. Olenick, M., Flowers, M., & Diaz, V. J. (2015). US veterans and their unique issues: enhancing health care professional awareness. *Advances in medical education and practice*, 6, 635–639. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S89479>
4. United States Census Bureau. (2024, November 06). *New Report on U.S. Veterans and Service- Connected Disabilities*. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/service-connected-disabilities.html>



# Impact of Occupational Therapy–Led Education on Adaptive Snow Sports staff and Volunteers Working with Individuals with Diverse Diagnoses

BY OLIVIA HALL, OT/S



Since their inception following World War II by returning veterans, adaptive snow sports have continued to expand and become increasingly accessible to a wide range of participants (Langtree, 2020). These programs offer multifaceted benefits, including enhanced social engagement, improved emotional and mental health, and greater physical well-being (Lape et al., 2018). Despite these benefits, research remains limited on comprehensive education for adaptive instructors tailored to participants' diverse conditions and diagnoses. Addressing this gap is critical to ensuring that adaptive snow sports programs provide safe, effective, and inclusive experiences that maximize participant outcomes. The question then arises: how can this gap be effectively addressed?

Olivia Hall, an occupational therapy student (OT/s) at Western New England University, completing her Doctoral Experiential Capstone (DEx), explored the impact of OT-led educational training sessions for staff and volunteers as part of an adaptive snow sports program. Hall spent her time conducting her research at Wachusett Mountain within their adaptive program.

Hall stated, "Skiing has always been a huge part of my life, so being able to connect that passion with my future career in occupational therapy felt incredibly meaningful. Creating this educational program allowed me to bridge those two worlds and directly impact how participants are supported in adaptive snow sports."

Hall developed a comprehensive 2.5-hour educational session addressing a wide range of conditions and diagnoses, including physical, cognitive, intellectual, and developmental (I/DD), mental health, hearing, and visual impairments. To evaluate the effectiveness of the program, Hall utilized a pre- and post-survey design to measure changes in participant knowledge. In reply to a post-survey question, "What did you find most valuable from this educational session?" one participant stated, "The level of detail provided for each condition and diagnosis," highlighting the impact and depth of the work Hall developed.

In addition to this scholarly work, Hall contributed to expanding accessibility within the adaptive program by assisting in the development of brochures, flyers, and educational handouts. Hall also gained direct experience by observing and supporting a variety of adaptive lessons, including sit-ski instruction using bi-skis and mono-skis, snowboarding lessons for individuals with visual impairments, and sessions for participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities, among others.

As Hall approaches the completion of her capstone project and Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) program, she plans to disseminate her findings by submitting manuscripts to peer-reviewed journals and sharing her educational materials with adaptive snow sports programs nationwide to continue to bridge gaps in knowledge and accessibility within the field.

## References:

1. Langtree, I. C. (2017, December 19 - Last revised: 2020, January 24). Adaptive Skiing: General Overview. Disabled World (DW). Retrieved February 6, 2025, from [www.disabled-world.com/sports/snow/as.php](http://www.disabled-world.com/sports/snow/as.php)
2. Lape, E. C., Katz, J. N., Losina, E., Kerman, H. M., Gedman, M. A., & Blauwet, C. A. (2018). Participant-Reported Benefits of Involvement in an Adaptive Sports Program: A Qualitative Study. *PM & R: the journal of injury, function, and rehabilitation*, 10(5), 507–515. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmrj.2017.10.008>

# Holding On Tight: Exploring Occupational Therapy Strategies for Perinatal Musculoskeletal Conditions

BY ALYSSA LEWANDOWSKI, OT/S

Can early education help mothers prevent pain before it starts?

A doctoral research program developed by occupational therapy student Alyssa Lewandowski is aiming to do just that. "Holding On Tight" is a 90-minute telehealth session designed for mothers of children ages 0 to 5, focusing on ergonomic strategies to reduce the risk of common musculoskeletal conditions associated with childcare.

The program takes place entirely online, allowing participants to join from home. It includes 15-minute pre- and post-session surveys to measure changes in knowledge related to safe body mechanics, ergonomic tools, mental health resources, and self-treatment strategies. The goal is to determine how effective the session is in improving awareness and prevention.

During the session, Lewandowski educates participants on everyday movements such as lifting, feeding, and carrying that can contribute to pain over time when done with poor mechanics. She also educates on tools and devices, explaining not just what they are, but how to use them effectively.

Participants report gaining new insight. "This really opened my eyes..." one shared. Another added, "I feel like you're told all of these things you should get, but nobody ever tells you how to use them or what to use them for." Even occupational therapy practitioners who have participated have noted gaps in awareness, with one stating, "Even as a clinician, you don't think about these things and consider these changes in routines and positioning."

Lewandowski was inspired to create the program after learning about De Quervain's Tenosynovitis, often called "Mommy Thumb," during her didactic years. When she discovered there were no established preventative programs for new mothers, she saw an opportunity to fill that gap.

Her goal is not perfection, but awareness. "I don't expect moms to leave doing every strategy exactly," she explained. "My goal is to plant a seed so that during their daily routines, they may remember and start making small changes." By encouraging gradual habit changes, the program aims to help mothers prevent or better manage pain before it progresses. "If I can help even one participant," Lewandowski said, "I will feel accomplished."



# Move, Play, Thrive: Wellness Beyond the Service Cliff

BY JORDAN PARE, OT/S

At Sunshine Village, a new adaptive sports initiative is encouraging adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) to stay active, engaged, and connected beyond the “service cliff”, when most services end at age 21 years.

Jordan Paré, a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) student from Western New England University, is completing her doctoral capstone in collaboration with Vice President of Day Services, Colleen Brosnan. Through this partnership, Jordan has worked across Agawam and Chicopee day habilitation and community-based programs to develop and implement an 8-week adaptive sports program, including basketball, bowling, golf, soccer, and football. The goal is to promote social participation, physical activity, and overall mental health/wellness for adults with an I/DD after they transition out of traditional services.

Jordan’s inspiration for the program derives from personal experiences. “Throughout my lifetime, I have been emotionally drawn to the I/DD population, as my brother had spastic cerebral palsy but unfortunately passed away. That experience motivated me to advocate and bring attention to this population and increase support for individuals who need it most,” she shared. Additionally, her background as a former collegiate soccer player ignited her passion for combining sports and wellness to create meaningful opportunities for participation amongst this population.

Research indicates that adults with I/DD are particularly inactive, and experience poorer health compared to the general population. Furthermore, when physical activity is implemented for adults in this environment, multi-component community-based interventions tend to be most effective in improving physical activity levels. Multi-component interventions target not only the individuals’ environmental factors, but also individual needs to improve their overall well-being [1]. Participant feedback, currently being analyzed, was obtained through focus groups, ensuring that the participants’ voices are actively heard and valued. This is a client centered approach that allows their experiences, preferences, and feedback on the program to best meet their needs and interests. Additionally, staff have reported that participants have “gained team building & they challenged themselves. They really enjoyed the games.” Another staff reported individuals learned “more efficient ways to sleep and things not to do when trying to go to sleep.”



Jordan is working toward long-term sustainability of the program, including developing a website for staff and participants including sports within the program, materials needed, adaptation strategies, skills, and outcomes each activity targets. Jordan looks forward to making a lasting change on the I/DD population through adaptation, advocacy, and passion.

## References:

1. Greene, T., Taggart, L., & Breslin, G. (2025). A systematic review of community-based exercise interventions for adults with intellectual disabilities. *Healthcare*, 13(3), 299. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare130302993>

# Breaking the Silence: Examining Sociocultural Barriers Within the Hispanic Community Surrounding Sexual Health and Intimacy

BY MARCOS PEÑA VERAS, OT/S



Talking about sexual health and intimacy with young adults can cause discomfort for parents, many avoiding these discussions all together. Lack of communication on topics such as sexual health can be detrimental to the development, wellbeing, and quality of life of young adults that participate in risky behavior [1]. These discussions are vital, especially in Hispanic families where the rate of teen pregnancies is higher than any other ethnicity in the United States (U.S) [2].

Western New England University Occupational Therapy doctoral candidate Marcos Peña Veras explored the social determinants of health affecting Hispanic families in underserved communities such as Springfield, MA. Through his work, he identified sociocultural barriers that make discussions of sex and intimacy taboo within the greater community. When considered alongside disproportionately higher rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases among Hispanic youth, these findings highlight a critical gap in culturally responsive sexual health education.

Peña Veras recognized this gap in health education and chose to address this disparity through his doctoral capstone project. He also pays tribute to his grandmother, whose perspective helped shape his approach. Reflecting on her belief—“You can’t just tell your child ‘Don’t do this’ or ‘Don’t do that’—that’s not an effective way to communicate”—he centered his work on fostering meaningful, open communication.

With this focus, Peña Veras partnered with New North Citizens’ Council Youth Services (NNCC), where he collaborated with his site mentor, Eva Gomez, to develop and implement his capstone project.

Gomez was enthusiastic about bringing programming to the site focused on consent, disease prevention, healthy relationships, and communication strategies. Sixteen students participated in the one-time session, which incorporated interactive activities and games to engage learners.

The session addressed social determinants of health (SDOH), discussed cultural barriers, and practiced communication techniques, while also highlighting how these factors influence access to quality healthcare. Additionally, participants received education on sexual health, including safe sex practices, consent, and human intimacy in a culturally responsive and accessible format. Tapestry-Sexual and Reproductive Health Clinic supplied condoms and lubricants to the participants.

Through his research, Peña Veras discovered an association of sexual health perception with religious beliefs. More than half of the participants noted a religious influence on their beliefs and attitudes to sexual health and intimacy. “This is so important to talk about because we see how it affects young adults and their lives,” said Eva Gomez.

Marcos Peña Veras looks forward to continuing advocating and educating on this important and life changing topic that shapes the lives of many Hispanic families.

## References:

1. Mena, M. P., Dillon, F. R., Mason, C. A., & Santisteban, D. A. (2008). Communication About Sexually-Related Topics Among Hispanic Substance-Abusing Adolescents and Their Parents. *Journal of drug issues*, 38(1), 215–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002204260803800110>
2. Livingston, G. (2019, August 2). Why is the teen birth rate falling?. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/08/02/why-is-the-teen-birth-rate-falling/>

# Transforming the Future of Accessibility in Healthcare for the Hearing-Impaired Population

BY LOREDANA RANDAZZO, OT/S

“Are healthcare systems built to provide accessible care for individuals with a hearing impairment?” This is a question Loredana Randazzo, Occupational Therapy Doctoral student at Western New England University (WNE), considered when selecting a focus for her doctoral capstone.

Through a combination of reviewing evidenced-based literature, reflecting on personal family experiences, and conducting preliminary needs assessments, Randazzo identified a significant gap in healthcare related to the delivery of accessible and equitable services for individuals with hearing impairments. Specifically, findings revealed ongoing challenges in effective communication, limited provider awareness of appropriate accommodations, and inconsistent implementation of accessibility standards across clinical settings. Randazzo conducted a preliminary needs assessment to gather quantitative and qualitative data which guided program development and educational priorities. One needs assessment participant stated, “We need to be able to advocate for ourselves and not feel anxious about it. It’s hard to keep asking people to slow down, face you, and repeat themselves, especially in a busy office or hospital. It is the only way to get all the information sometimes.”

Recognizing the impact communication barriers have on patient outcomes and overall quality of care, Randazzo developed an educational workshop titled “Improving Accessibility in Healthcare for the Hearing-Impaired Population,” built to address communication barriers in healthcare and bridge the accessibility gap. This project was developed to advocate for inclusive care throughout healthcare settings and educate the next generations of healthcare professionals with tools and knowledge necessary to provide exceptional care for this population.

Throughout Randazzo’s doctoral capstone, she implemented six educational workshops held both in person for WNE students and via Zoom for external institutions. Session participants include students from WNE Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program, WNE undergraduate health studies students, and current healthcare students enrolled within Westfield State Nursing, North Greenfield University Physician Assistant, and Regis College Speech Language Pathology Program, which expands reach of the initiative beyond a single healthcare program.

A total of sixty-four participants attended the workshops and completed pre- and post-surveys to determine effectiveness of the educational contents. Results indicated substantial improvement across all four domains: knowledge and awareness, confidence in communication, use of accessible strategies, and attitudes towards patient-centered care. Participants’ feedback highlighted workshop value. One student shared, “This workshop was so beneficial. I’ve worked with individuals who had hearing impairments prior to OT school as a CNA but never received formal training until now.” Another student stated, “Throughout my four years of nursing school I never learned this content which is incredibly valuable as I transition into clinical practice.”



# Big Feelings, Small Brushes: Art as a Tool for Emotional Growth

BY LUKE TOTORO, OT/S

This spring, a new occupational therapy program at More to Say LLC in Oxford, Connecticut is using art-based activities to help children build emotional regulation skills. The initiative aims to educate clinicians on the connection between art and emotional regulation while also examining the effectiveness of various art-based interventions in a clinical setting.

The program is part of occupational therapy student Luke Totoro's Doctoral Experiential (DEx) Capstone Project—the culmination of his professional training as a future occupational therapist. While designed for the pediatric population, the strategies developed through this project may benefit anyone seeking to improve emotional regulation.

"I like the idea of emotional regulation through the use of art," shared one clinician participating in the program. "At More to Say, we currently use programs such as Size of the Problem, the ALERT Program, Zones of Regulation, Interoception Training, and our own emotional regulation approaches. However, we have not yet implemented a structured art-based program targeting these skills."

The program begins with an educational component. Totoro first delivered a presentation outlining the connection between art and emotional regulation and introduced his plan to develop an art-based activity booklet. This resource includes both foundational concepts and practical intervention strategies that clinicians can incorporate into sessions. "Clinicians genuinely seemed excited about the idea," Totoro explained. "I was able to recruit several participants, and it was encouraging to see how this could grow into something meaningful for the children we serve."



The intervention activities span a variety of creative approaches. Totoro compiled these into an accessible booklet housed on the clinic's shared drive. Activities include freehand drawing, "drawing your feelings," mandala coloring, and visual representations of the Zones of Regulation. Additional interventions already familiar within the clinic—such as slime-making, character crafts, and sensory art—are now being reframed through an emotional regulation lens.

By integrating art with emotional awareness, Totoro and the More to Say team are exploring innovative, client-centered strategies to support children's development. With each drawing, they are helping children take meaningful steps toward emotional understanding, self-regulation, and resilience.

# From Feelings to Function: An Occupational Therapy Perspective on All Things Regulation

BY CAROLINE TRAVAGLIN, OT/S

When children struggle with behavior, the underlying challenge is often not defiance, but difficulty with regulation. Social-emotional learning (SEL) supports children’s ability to manage emotions, build relationships, and succeed in both academic and everyday settings (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). While these skills are commonly addressed in schools, research highlights a gap in carryover to the home, where caregiver understanding and consistency can vary (Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2024; Atwell et al., 2017). Strengthening caregiver education and reinforcing strategies across environments can improve long-term outcomes, emphasizing the role of families and occupational therapy practitioners in supporting children’s development (Elias et al., 1997; American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020).

Doctor of Occupational Therapy student, Caroline Travaglin developed *From Feelings to Function: An Occupational Therapy Perspective on all things Regulation*, a caregiver education program focused on emotional and behavioral regulation and sensory processing in a pediatric outpatient setting. This online program aims to increase caregiver confidence and provide practical strategies that can be integrated into daily routines. The project included the development of caregiver-friendly educational materials, online resources, and structured learning modules. Pre- and post-surveys were used to evaluate changes in caregiver knowledge, confidence, and overall experience following participation in the program.

A central focus was helping caregivers understand behavior through a regulation-based lens. Caregivers were encouraged to recognize behavior as a form of communication and to consider underlying emotional and sensory influences. Content emphasized identifying emotional states, recognizing sensory needs, and using co-regulation, environmental supports, and routines to support participation in daily activities. Participant feedback reflected meaningful shifts in understanding. One caregiver shared, “My biggest takeaway was the shift from seeing ‘challenging behavior’ as a choice to seeing it as a sign of physiological dysregulation.” Another noted, “Small, everyday interventions by caregivers have a powerful impact on children’s ability to manage feelings and behaviors.”

This project reflects Caroline’s interest in advocating for the pediatric population, mental health, and family-centered care. By providing clear, practical strategies, *From Feelings to Function* highlights occupational therapy’s role in bridging the gap between emotions and participation in everyday life.





## Enhancing Development through Occupational Therapy

BY HANNAH WHITEHEAD, OT/S

A look at Hannah's recent work and upcoming initiatives in occupational therapy.

Hannah Whitehead has long been passionate about supporting children's developmental growth. During her fieldwork, Hannah noticed a significant gap in access to occupational therapy services, observing how long many children and families had to wait for support to help them navigate challenges in sensory processing, motor skills, and self-regulation.

Motivated to fill this gap, Hannah partnered with the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) over 14 weeks to implement workshops, classroom observations, and family consultations for children aged 0–7.

Her project aimed to integrate occupational therapy strategies into early childhood educational environments in a way that is practical, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of both educators and families.

To guide her work, Hannah conducted pre-surveys and needs assessments to identify key areas of concern, including sensory processing, motor development, self-regulation, and interoception. These findings shaped workshops, individualized consultations, and resource development, ensuring interventions were tailored to specific classroom and home contexts.

Interventions included movement breaks, heavy work, body-awareness, and interoception activities to help children recognize internal cues such as hunger, fatigue, or emotions. Educators and caregivers received structured guidance, visual handouts, and practical strategies to reinforce these skills.

Observations and feedback from consultations demonstrated meaningful improvements. Through her assessments and individualized guidance, Hannah found that children showed increased attention, engagement, and participation when sensory and body-awareness supports were embedded into routines.

Educators and caregivers reported greater confidence in implementing strategies, appreciating approaches that were low-resource, actionable, and adaptable to daily routines. Hannah also found that individualized consultation, supported by pre-survey and needs assessment data, was critical for identifying developmental needs that might not have been evident in standard group-based activities.

According to Hannah's site mentors at CES, "Hannah's capstone project works to strengthen and empower the collaboration between families and educators to support the positive and healthy development of young children while helping families identify early signs of developmental concerns. Her work provides concrete foundational knowledge of child development and sensory systems for educators and families."

# Enhancing Wellness Within Significant Others of First Responders

BY ALEXIS ZIEGLER, OT/S

Enhancing Occupational Balance and Well-being Among Significant Others of First Responders is a Doctoral Experiential Capstone project created by Western New England University Doctor of Occupational Therapy student, Alexis Ziegler, OT/s. Her project aimed to increase the well-being of an often-overlooked population, significant others of first responders. Working with the Groton Police Department, this project illustrated the benefit of non-traditional settings in occupational therapy.

The project consisted of virtual group sessions that brought together significant others of first responders to connect and share their experiences with each other and learn evidence-based wellness strategies. Group sessions focused on mental health education, coping strategies, ways to improve their occupational balance, effective communication strategies, and reframing loneliness as independence. Site mentor and Community Outreach Specialist for the Groton Police Department, Maria Nott, exclaimed, "This is awesome. People have been asking for something like this."

Ziegler stated, "I wanted to create a project to help people in an area where occupational therapy is not seen. When I was thinking of what that could be, I thought of significant others of first responders. I am a significant other of a first responder myself and have been surrounded by family and friends who have been first responders for most of my life. There are often resources to support first responders, but not their families. Significant others of first responders are on the frontline of supporting their first responder and deserve similar support as they navigate both their own and their partners' needs and mental health."

Ziegler recruited five significant others from law enforcement who participated in her six-week virtual group sessions. When asked to describe their experience being a part of this group, one participant said, "It was very validating and helped me really express everything I go through with having a significant other who is a first responder. Another participant expressed, "I loved it. What's the use of having knowledge and experience without sharing it?"

Prior to implementing her capstone, Ziegler conducted a needs assessment in the Spring of 2025, where she gathered responses from nineteen significant others of first responders across various fire and law enforcement departments. The needs assessment served to gather additional information on the needs of the population, as limited research was found about this population. Through her needs assessment, she found the needs of the population included stress, occupational balance, mental health education, and social support from other significant others of first responders. "I am very grateful for the support I have received to create this project," states Ziegler.

Ziegler hopes this project will bring awareness to first responder departments to encourage first responders to seek help and extend support services to the families as well. First responder families make many sacrifices in many different areas of their lives. Ziegler is happy to have had the opportunity to partner with the Town of Groton Police Department in her efforts to support and enhance the well-being of significant others of first responders.



# Parting Thoughts

**We hope that you enjoyed reading about our OTD student projects, and that perhaps their stories have provoked your own ideas and inspired you to partner with us on future efforts.**

Please reach out to us with your questions and ideas. We would love to hear from you!

Brittany Adams, OT, OTD, MS, OTR  
Associate Professor  
Program Director & Department Chair  
brittany.adams@wne.edu

Dr. Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR, FAOTA  
Associate Professor  
Doctoral Experiential Capstone Coordinator  
debra.latour@wne.edu

Department of Occupational Therapy  
College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences  
Western New England University  
1215 Wilbraham Road  
Springfield, MA 01119









**WESTERN NEW ENGLAND** | **WNE**  
UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE of **PHARMACY and HEALTH SCIENCES**  
DEPARTMENT of OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY