2007 Valedictorian Address by Julia Blood

Thank you for coming University of Toronto Occupational Therapy class of 2007, family, friends, professors, and departmental staff. I would first like to say how very surprised and honoured I was to be chosen by you, my classmates, to be your valedictorian, and to represent you at this reception, the culmination of all of your hard work and effort. It has truly been a pleasure to get to know all of you over the past two years.

When faced with the challenge of addressing you today and trying to represent our experience together, I felt nervous and a bit overwhelmed. In order to try to settle down and organize my thoughts I decided to focus on a few simple questions…what is at the heart of occupational therapy…what was at the heart of our class?

Meaning is something we all contemplate and aspire for in our lives. One of the central tenets of occupational therapy is that occupation brings meaning to life…that it isn’t just something we do but it’s also something we experience. After reflecting on our last two years together I have come to appreciate that there is no better example of meaningful occupation than that of the occupation we have all just successfully completed, that of the Master of Science in Occupational therapy. For through this occupation we have experienced many things above and beyond that of simply an educational degree, and that, in combination with the many amazing attributes of our class, has contributed to rendering our time together meaningful.

Through this occupation we have experienced meaningful connections with others. One of the most significant things that stood out for me about our class was the supportive, nurturing and empathetic environment that our class fostered for each other. Whether it was sharing with everyone a useful resource that someone had found, challenging someone’s opinion in class in a respectful and sensitive manner, sending out a funny and supportive email prior to an exam, or reaching out to one another during difficult professional or personal life experiences, we were always there to help each other with friendly faces. One significant example of this thoughtfulness was when one of our classmates Kevin, with the help of a few others, took the time right before our final exam to put together a wonderful slide show of our class. This slideshow put meaning into an end of class experience that otherwise would have passed uneventfully. No one had asked them to do this but they knew this would be meaningful for everyone and so they sacrificed their time for the benefit of others, something that many people did in their own way over the last two years.

This program has also meant meeting great friends. Even though after the first few months of the program most of us settled into our regular seats or sections in the classroom, we still managed to move beyond the friendships we made with those seated around us and built close connections with others, accepting everyone for who they were and embracing the originality of each person. I know the connections we’ve made will last way beyond this program.
Through this occupation we have been inventive, inquisitive and pioneering. We researched and found community resources and shared our newfound knowledge with our classmates and most importantly our clients. We designed innovative and original devices to enable individuals in the community to increase their independence with meaningful occupations, for example the “Helping Hand” an adapted eating utensil for children with Cerebral Palsy living in India and the “Silent Whistle” a vibrating wristband for athletes with hearing impairments. We completed ground-breaking research in the area of occupational science and occupational therapy, contributing to resources for evidence based practice and also lending further support to the legitimacy and importance of enabling occupation with those in need, many of us disseminating our research at different venues including to the clinical community and at conferences across North America.

Through this occupation we have furthered our personal development. Professionally we learned a great deal both academically and clinically. We became more comfortable (or slightly more comfortable) with the never ending response from our professors “what do you think?” which at times drove us crazy but also pushed us to challenge ourselves to be more independent, reflective and thoughtful when addressing challenging questions.

Personally, our class ensured that humour and life enjoyment were ever present during our two challenging years, contributing to the important work life balance we learned so much about but all struggled to maintain. Whether it be a joke to make light of a frustrating time or the loud frequent clapping from the back of the room (thanks to Renny) after someone spoke up in class, the vital sense of humour that many of you brought to our class succeeded in lightening the mood through laughter, which we all know can be very helpful in stressful times. Several of you have also undergone some exciting personal changes including getting married and starting families and we have all greatly enjoyed sharing in your celebration. Other fun events over the years have included meeting everybody during orientation week and at the camping trip, relaxing and having fun at each other’s houses and out in Toronto and attending several semi-formals together…many people’s amazing dance moves being revealed at some or all of these events. Many of you also participated in numerous sporting events including the OT/PT games, ultimate Frisbee and Dragon Boating where this year the OT team “strokin’” came in first and second in their races. Many also enjoyed their time abroad on placements or attending conferences making sure to find the time to enjoy themselves while using occupational therapy related skills such as their observational skills while whale watching and getting “screeched” in Newfoundland or their reasoning skills while negotiating packed train rides through India.

Through this occupation we have also broadened our awareness, fulfilled our passion for helping others, and advocated for change. Through meeting and working with clients in numerous capacities we have gained insight into the challenges they face. Not only was our class very involved in the Toronto community but also internationally. In fact, our class has had the most ever students away
on international placements at one time, 22 students, in locations including Africa, India, Trinidad, Scotland, Australia, and the Netherlands. Our classmates brought back with them their experiences and shared their broadened awareness to help enlighten others. Furthermore, our class challenged issues and advocated on every level. On a theoretical level, members of our class challenged existing theories and concepts, an important step in ensuring the growth of our profession. On a political level, members of our class promoted our profession with politicians from the provincial government at Queen’s park and increased our notoriety with those making institutional decisions. On an educational level, members of our class worked to bring about positive change to better enable the learning of future students. On a professional level, members of our class fought to enlighten both the public as well as other health care professionals on the role and value of occupational therapy in interdisciplinary teams. Finally and most importantly on a clinical level, members of our class advocated for the rights of clients on our placements, out in the community and beyond, for example raising awareness and funding through events and groups such as the Rick Hansen Toronto Wheels in Motion event, fundraising events for women’s health issues, initiatives through the International Centre for Disability and Rehabilitation and the Kenya and Trinidad Working Groups.

As you can see, our time together throughout this program was meaningful for many different reasons. Not simply because we have succeeded in attaining our Masters designation but also due to everything that we have experienced while pursuing it. I’m sure all of us can relate to particular reasons why this program was of value to us, many which have most likely not even been mentioned today. Regardless, it was no doubt the meaningfulness that we attributed to this experience that has in some way contributed to our success.

Through using our experience in this program as the ultimate example, I hope that in our careers as occupational therapists we can take with us not only the importance of occupation in one’s life but the importance of meaningful occupation and all that can result through experiencing it, for as the occupational therapist and scholar Betty Risteen Hasselkus said “it is in the experiencing of occupation that our own well being and development and that of our clients are nurtured”. I hope we have also learned that for something to be meaningful it does not always have to be easy and enjoyable but often involves overcoming challenges along the way. Furthermore, I hope we keep in mind that what makes an occupation meaningful for one individual may be different from another and hence the importance of really taking the time to listen and get to know our clients, who they are, and what they value. In turn, allowing us to incorporate this meaning into the development of our interventions to better enable occupation. Finally, by getting to know the experiences of our clients, whose ideas of life meaning may be turned upside down due to their illness or disability, we may be better able to facilitate the process of meaning transformation through occupation, helping in whatever way we can to enable hope and empowerment.

Thank you very much to our family and friends who have supported us through all of our hard work and stress, always reminding us that we could do it especially when we thought we couldn’t. Thank you to our professors who while teaching us so much also
taught us to think for ourselves. Thank you to our clinical supervisors, mentors and lab facilitators who showed us how to apply the information we’ve learned and work to develop meaningful and effective therapeutic relationships. Thank you to the departmental staff whose assistance helped make our lives that much easier. And importantly, thank you to the many clients who have allowed us into their lives, you truly have taught us so much. I know personally that I have grown immensely throughout this program, achieving feats and overcoming challenges I never thought I could, and that it has been in large part due to the support, belief and genuine care from those around me.

In closing, what makes a good occupational therapist? Someone who is client centred taking into account the needs and values of others, caring about their well being and working with them, without need for a power differential, to enable their occupational success. Someone who is resourceful and innovative who is knowledgeable regarding community initiatives and contributes to the design of original solutions and the production and dissemination of research to further their practice and better serve their clients. Someone who has a passion for life and who realizes that in order to help others they also need to take care of themselves through work life balance. Someone who is an advocate on many different levels, not only for their profession but most importantly for their clients who may not be in a place to advocate for themselves. Notably, reflecting back on the memories I have recounted in my speech today, these are all qualities that we, the class of 2007, have demonstrated over the past two years and as a result I am confident that as we embark on our new career we will all be very successful.

Congratulations Master of Science in Occupational Therapy, University Of Toronto, class of 2007...I hope for all of us very meaningful professional and personal life experiences in the years to come.