

A Journey with Jane Koomar

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I had the great honor of knowing and working closely with Jane for over thirty years as a fieldwork student, graduate student, master's thesis advisor, mentee, employee, friend, research collaborator, and colleague. I would like to tell you a little about Jane's professional life, the early days of OTA, and our journey together.

Jane's role as an OT professional was an important part of who she was and supporting the area of sensory integration was her professional mission. Jane started her career as an OT, graduating from Ohio State University in 1976. After graduation she worked for the Springer Educational Foundation in Cincinnati, Ohio, a school for learning disabled children and often cited her early experiences there as teaching her the importance of multi-disciplinary collaboration and parent involvement, tenants she would promote and value her entire career. Jane then taught for Ginny Scardina in the Cincinnati Public Schools. Ginny became Jane's mentor and she credited Ginny for much of what she knew about being a great mentor, including the importance of taking a personal interest in your staff, something Jane did with every student or staff member she worked with. Under Ginny, Jane worked with other of "Ginny's Girls" many of whom have become leaders in SI. Jane's friend, Susanne Smith Roley recalls that "Ginny encouraged all of us to pursue advanced degrees and Jane was one of the first of our cohort to do so." Jane then moved to Boston, where she graduated from Boston University in 1980 with her master's in OT.

I first met Jane as a fieldwork student in 1982, where she was working in the Cambridge Public Schools. There she developed an impressive program of sensory integration-based OT services including the building of several SI rooms in schools around the district. Now mind you one was in a closet, one was in a gym space we shared with the phys ed teacher and best of all, one was in the girls locker room...yes we were literally swinging in the showers! In spite of the less than optimal spaces, this was an impressive feat. Jane demonstrated to school administrators that children who received SI achieved more of their goals and spent less time receiving special needs services. She even convinced them that it was more time efficient to bus some children to a central treatment space in the high school than to have her travel to a school for only a couple children. This model of school-based services served as an inspiration and model for many school therapists for years to come.

In 1983, Jane became a faculty member at Quinsigamond College, teaching in their OT program and moved briefly to California to study with Dr. Ayres for 4-months at the Ayres Clinic. She later became a faculty member of Sensory Integration International and developed and taught one of the first courses on sensory integration intervention. Jane developed a close relationship with Dr. Ayres who had a profound impact on her intervention and teaching. Jane always said that every time she taught she paused a moment before beginning to ask Dr. Ayres' spirit to be with her and to help her be present for all of her students.

I first heard Jane speak on SI updates in 1984 to a packed audience of OT's at Mugar Auditorium at BU, where she had become faculty. It was a miserable, hot summer day with no air conditioning, yet, every therapist in the room, including me, was glued to her words and the thrill she exuded about SI. That day sealed my desire to make SI the focus of my career. During her time at BU Jane obtained a grant between BU and the Shriver Center to teach OT's in the schools. I and many other OT's in the masters program took several classes from Jane on sensory integration and school system therapy, including our SIPT certification, something not repeated at any other university. Jane mentored many thesis students at BU and as my thesis advisor and mentor, passed on to me the passion for gravitational insecurity she had developed from Dr. Ayres and got me hooked on research. Together we developed an assessment for gravitational insecurity. Also while at BU she wrote one of the first chapters on sensory integration intervention.

During this same time, Jane was part of an SI support/ study group of like-minded OTs. With several other members, including Lynn Jaffee, Linda Palmstrom, and Karen Spector, she founded Occupational Therapy Associates in 1983. OTA's first home was rented space on the second floor of a dance studio, Joy of Movement, in Watertown Square. Jane liked to relate how they would sometimes do therapy to the rhythmic beat of dancing feet clomping on the hardwood floors. OTA soon moved to a single suite in the Parker School Building in Watertown with the first space there consisting of a small entryway which served as a waiting room, a small room for a communal office, two treatment rooms and a closet for testing and fine motor activities. I remember Jane remarking how pleased they were to find a old beat up couch for the waiting area and Stacey Szklut recalling how excited they were to find pillows for the clinic for free! Those old couch pillows are still the favorite for the net swing by the way. Early mattresses for the clinic were extra long twins, rejects from a local university dorm. Boxes for crashing into were reused from packages we received and covered with recycled calendars. Many pieces of equipment were handmade with Jane sometimes creating things or tweaking equipment originally designed by Dr. Ayres. Staff meetings were held sitting on the mattresses in a treatment room.

By 1989 when I started at OTA office space was down the hall from the treatment rooms, in the area where the billing offices later were. We had numerous school contracts and Joanne Petito was hired as our one and only all-purpose admin staff. Lynn Jaffee and Karen Spector sold out their interests in OTA and Jane and Linda were the owners. They had a small office in the corner and all therapists shared a tiny room with a counter. That counter later became Peg Ingolia's desk in the large therapist room. Jane was torn about whether to bring that counter along to our new building this past fall but I don't think it made it! OTA grew with room configurations changing over the years. How many people now remember that the large treatment room was once Play Express? Jane and Linda opened an office in Wakefield and later divided OTA between them into OTA-Wakefield and OTA-Watertown. We all remember the years of searching for the "just right" space for a new OTA. OTA grew under Jane's leadership, always integrating new and exciting intervention techniques, and is now one of the premier OT-SI clinics in the world.

In 1996 Jane completed her doctoral work in developmental psychology where she studied dyspraxia, gravitational insecurity and temperament. We remember Jane burning the candle at both ends during her doctoral work, losing too much weight and Joanne practically forcing food into her. She was an active member of the American Occupational Therapy Association, serving on many committees and chairing the Sensory Integration Special Interest Section and later serving on the Mental Health Special Interest Section. She became a Fellow of AOTA and was the recipient of numerous awards for her leadership, research and educational expertise, including the Virginia Scardina Award of Excellence, the A. Jean Ayres Award and the Twiness Award from her alma mater Ohio State University, the only OT to have received it. However, Jane was most pleased with being appointed a Profession of Practice at Tufts University in 2010, a very prestigious honor. Jane also believed in recognizing the achievements of others and was a driving force in recommending many therapists, including me, for awards over the years.

Jane was committed to furthering research and education in sensory integration. She provided free overviews on SI and had all her staff hone their teaching skills doing the overviews. She created the SI treatment intensive training and mentored many of us into teaching SIPT certification courses with SII and WPS. Jane always saw the gifts of her staff and created opportunities for them to grow, thrive and use those gifts. So, in 1993, she created a Research Director position for me...2 hours a week...to conduct research on SI and in 2002, she and Anne Trecker formed the Spiral Foundation with a mission to furthering research and education in sensory integration. Over 20 years, Jane and I planned studies, implemented projects and wrote papers and posters. I will never forget our "research writing days", where we met at her house or mine and spent the day collaborating on writing articles; sharing our love of praxis and working with adults; and talking about life, OT, research and families.

In 2003, Jane and I became founding members of the Sensory Integration Research Collaborative (SIRC) along with many other leaders in sensory integration, including a number of her long time friends. Jane loved our annual SIRC meetings, not only the research work we accomplished but more importantly the fellowship with her friends and colleagues. Dr. Roseanne Schaaf, recalled fond memories of long walks on the beach discussing important conceptual developments and perspectives in child development and sensory integration. Jane believed in the mind body connection and emulated this in her personal and professional life. She enjoyed our group yoga sessions and reminded us all that a healthy soul is as important as a healthy body. Through her work with this group she made substantial contributions to the Ayres Sensory Integration® Fidelity Measure and through other efforts produced numerous research publications.

In recent years Jane's passion turned to helping children who experienced trauma and attachment problem through provision of a truly collaborative model of care encompassing psychology, the family and OT. She found a like-minded colleague in Dr. Daniel Hughes and, with him, began to develop the SAFE PLACE model of collaborative care for trauma and attachment. She was excited about teaching with Dr. Hughes and working with him on this model. Work on Jane's model of SAFE PLACE will continue through the Spiral Foundation as we strive to further her legacy with this program.

In closing, Jane seemed to get along with everyone, often navigating the many politics involved in sensory integration within and without OT with ease, a true feat among high-powered and opinionated professionals. Jane's passion for her work was genuine filled with deep emotion. Her interests were often in those that were underserved and misunderstood by the world at large. She cared deeply about her family, her friends, her community, her profession, and the well-being of children and families. She made time to listen and to be present for them.

Her friend and colleague Dr. Zoe Mailloux reflected on Jane, " I had the chance to experience several natural disasters with Jane. A hurricane. An earthquake. A storm of the century. In each case, Jane was calm and her sense of humor, combined with her quick wits, made the experience manageable, safe and even fun. When I thought about what I might say about Jane, my first thought was "We have lost a giant". In the next moment, I changed that thought to, "We have lost a lion." I thought this because Jane was lion-hearted; she was strong and brave. She was fierce and loyal."

Jane experienced the untimely loss of many of those she loved: her father, her mother, several close friends and her beloved nephew. She truly knew that life is short and fragile and I think she lived and loved all the more fiercely because of it. Now we have lost Jane far too soon. Even so, Jane touched many lives in profound ways that will live on. As I have received emails and donations at the Spiral Foundation these past months and talked with others about Jane's passing, I have been struck by the depth of her presence in the lives she touched. Each and every person who knew her has commented on how much influence she had on them. Personally, I would not be the person I am today without Jane's guiding hand behind me. She will be sorely missed by all of us, but I know her spirit will live on and always be with us.

I'd like to end with a quote that Jane always included in her intervention courses that I think embodies her well.

There is nothing you can nor have a right to do. For those who are unwilling to explore, you cannot coerce, you cannot nudge forward, you cannot threaten, you can only offer. And if someone says a tentative yes, then move gently and sweetly towards them. Offer to abide with them on their journey. Do whatever it is in the movement that you are requesting them to do and be ready to have them withdraw or fly forward at any given moment.

Jane, you have always helped us to fly forward. We will miss you and we will keep on flying as you have helped us to do.