

From USMC to OT

Beth Fisher '19G focuses on helping others

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BETH FISHER '19G © BRIAN S. KELLY

Life doesn't always turn out exactly as we plan. But sometimes, out of unexpected change and painful losses, something positive is born.

That's what happened for Beth Fisher '19G, who speaks candidly about one such difficult time: a year that included the death of her father, dissolution of her marriage and destruction of her belongings in a fire. "I literally lost just about everything I had," Fisher says. "It was a time of real introspection. I had to ask myself what I wanted to do with the next chapter of my life."

With her mother living in Methuen, Massachusetts, Fisher decided it was time to move from Utah back to New England. She began looking at graduate programs that would match her desires to work with patients through their recovery processes and be closer to her family. Enter UNH's Master of Science degree in [occupational therapy](#) (OT).

Even as she recalls the pain of that year, her optimism and strength win out. "UNH has a beautiful campus, a beautiful location and a great occupational therapy program," she says. "As a disabled veteran myself, I wanted to work on behalf of veterans' causes and with all people with disabilities. And [UNH Military & Veterans Services](#) is excellent. They knew what they were doing and helped me through the process."

Fisher explains how her path to becoming an occupational therapist was anything but typical. She received her bachelor's degree from Cornell University in 1997 as a member of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). "Through ROTC at Cornell, I learned about the Marines," she recalls, smiling at the memory. "I wanted to be the best of the best." She went on to become one of the first female pilots in the Marine Corps in 1998, and as a UH-1N "Huey" helicopter pilot, she was recognized for her superior flying and leadership abilities, earning the prestigious weapons and tactics instructor designation as a subject matter expert of her craft. Fisher was also interested in "the science of safety" and pursued formal training and certification in aviation safety management and risk analysis through the Navy Postgraduate School.



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In 2006, she began working in the private sector, flying medical and rescue helicopters in the mountains and deserts of Arizona, Utah, Idaho and Wyoming and remaining in the Marine Corps until June 2018, when she retired with 21 years of service.

"OT was something I became very interested in from my work as a helicopter emergency medical services and helicopter air ambulance pilot. I would see patients in their moment of crisis and not know how their stories ended," she says. "Through my work in OT, I get to be a part of their recovery."

During her graduate studies in UNH OT, Fisher had clinical internships in an inpatient acute setting at Wentworth-Douglass Hospital in Dover, New Hampshire, and a day-programming setting at the [Kremple Center](#) in Portsmouth. She also worked as an assistant to [Therese Willkomm](#), clinical associate professor at UNH's [Institute on Disability](#). In that capacity, Fisher traveled to India to provide assistive technology training and solutions to therapists, medical students and individuals with disabilities. She has also worked as a personal support specialist for [Aging Excellence](#).

“OT is about the whole person,” Fisher says. “It’s not just how their limbs are moving.” If a patient is struggling with anxiety around a specific exercise, for example, Fisher focuses first on the stress that is getting in the way of their progress. “We’ll take a moment, and I’ll ask them to talk to me about what they’re feeling,” she explains. “The goal is to give them the tools to deal with the anxiety in that moment.”

The hard work paid off: Fisher is now an inpatient OT at Northeast Rehabilitation Hospital.

Fisher may be finished with her UNH courses after earning both her master’s degree in occupational therapy and graduate certificate in assistive technology, but the newly minted licensed occupational therapist and certified aging-in-place specialist is hardly cutting ties with the university. She still works closely with her UNH contacts on research evaluating the benefits of a group gardening program she developed called Fit to Garden, set to begin this winter in nearby Newmarket, New Hampshire. The accessible gardening program is for seniors with and without disabilities and will involve current UNH OT students as well as other connections from across the university.

“We want to make it possible for any senior to get out into the garden, to do something they love and make it fully inclusive. It’s not just good for them physically but can also improve mental health,” Fisher explains. “We want to help people realize they can do the things that they love. It’s our job to give them the tools and education to make that possible.”

[Learn more about UNH's OT program.](#)

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