

# Making an Impact

## UNH occupational therapy students put skills into practice

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UNH OT GRADUATE STUDENTS DEB MAGALHAES AND MAUREEN MULLEN WORK WITH RESIDENTS OF BAGDAD WOOD IN DURHAM

Amy Malhoit, a resident of [Bagdad Wood Senior Apartments](#) in Durham, looks forward to participating in the weekly Senior Health Promotion program led by UNH [occupational therapy](#) (OT) students in the class Enabling Participation in Community Groups. Each week, with the facilitation of OT students, Malhoit works on crafts and other creative projects, shares lunch and discussions with fellow residents and takes part in an exercise session tailored to her fitness level. After lunch, she can set her own goals in a

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one-on-one session with a student.

“What I like is that they include those of us who use a wheelchair. When they do leg exercises, they choose a different exercise for those of us who can’t use our legs. Whether it’s a different arm exercise or stretches,” she says.

Malhoit lives with a disability that makes her eligible to reside at Bagdad Wood Apartments. Since 2015, she has joined the program each semester it has been offered by the UNH OT department, and it’s become a regular part of her schedule. Another bonus: Through her connections with UNH, she has been able to hire students who work part-time as personal care assistants and aid her in performing daily tasks.

“It’s encompassed more than just the OT program,” Malhoit says. “UNH is wonderful.”

The class is required for completion of a master’s degree in occupational therapy at UNH and is comprised of OT undergraduate seniors and graduate students. It introduces them to the principles and skills of planning and delivering occupation-based groups in the community with various populations.

“Forging strong connections between UNH OT students and members of the community is a focal point of this service learning experience,” says occupational therapy clinical assistant professor John Wilcox, who took over teaching responsibilities for the class in 2013.

In the 12-week service-learning class, students address community health through program development, experience the role of providing occupation-centered,



RACHEL MCHUGH '19G IS

activity-based groups in a community program and learn how to work with clients, their families and other community

**MOTIVATED BY HER PASSION TO HELP OLDER ADULTS STAY HEALTHY AND ACTIVE AS THEY AGE.**

stakeholders. In addition to the weekly onsite work, students meet for weekly lectures, Wilcox says. Each student is assigned to a group and learns how to assess a client's needs and goals, plan and facilitate groups and adapt activities and the environment so that all may participate at their own level.

“Students learn how to create client-centered programming, adapting and modifying activities to address the various physical, social, cognitive challenges of their group members,” Wilcox says. “They also recognize the impact of the environment on group members to help them engage in life to the fullest. Most importantly, students learn about themselves and their potential. They learn how to turn their empathy for their group participants into programming that will help bolster community engagement.”

Anastra Madden, the resident service coordinator for Bagdad Wood and a UNH alumna, says that the Senior Health Promotion program brings a positive energy to the 40-unit Durham apartment building, primarily occupied by residents older than 62. Even though many residents have signed up for the program more than once, they always get something new out of it, she says.

“The students who come here are the cream of the crop,” Madden says. “They are smart, they have a good sense of humor and they are very respectful and attuned to this generation. I hear the residents laugh a lot — they are having fun and learning at the same time.”

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Paige Lee '19G, who led the creative expression segment of the Senior Health Promotion group during the

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fall semester, is a first-year graduate student who chose to major in OT because she wants to help people living with disabilities. Originally hoping to work with students with learning disabilities, Lee discovered she was more interested in working with older adults. She chose a placement at Bagdad Wood because she believes in the science that backs productive aging and wants to make lasting changes with the residents she works with. Her experience has prepared her to run

groups in a rehabilitation setting that yield therapeutic results.

“Each week we focus on a different leisure activity or healthy living strategy to help seniors feel more satisfied and fulfilled by what they do daily,” Lee says. “People are just becoming aware of how influential everyday activities can be on a person’s health and wellbeing.”

Rachel McHugh '19G oversaw the movement and healthy living segment of the program with fellow student Molly Mullen.

Together they created group sessions that focused on education and participation in physical fitness. McHugh’s motivation stemmed from her passion for ensuring that older adults remain active as they age. Although she enjoys discussions about fitting exercise into daily life, her biggest takeaway from the experience has been getting to know residents on a personal level.

“We learned so many life stories,” she says. “From these conversations, I learned other interests and concerns that members had about their health. I learned firsthand that listening and getting to know my clients is an extremely important aspect of

the person-centered practice of occupational therapy.”

## Other OT Community Outreach Collaborations

Many organizations and sites give students the opportunity to put into practice what they've learned in the classroom.

Stroke Survivor Group, a stroke rehabilitation program, offers post-therapy skills-building opportunities to stroke survivors in the surrounding communities. The group meets weekly on campus to engage in stroke prevention education, activities to promote neural plasticity, fall prevention, exercise, assistive technology use, food preparation with adaptive equipment and leisure skills in a supportive group format.

[Krempel's Center](#) provides community-based day programming for people living with acquired brain injury. OT students run various health promotion groups with students from other majors, including speech therapy and recreation management and policy.

[Portsmouth Regional Hospital](#) serves as the setting for OT students to work with people living with post-concussion syndrome. Since 2014, students have facilitated the group, working with supervising occupational therapist and UNH alumna Joanne Pennington '89 OTR/L.

UNH OT Life Skills Program/[ECHO Thrift Store](#): OT students who facilitate this group meet weekly with adults who have intellectual and developmental disabilities and wish to strengthen their life skills. Exposing these adults to purposeful activities supports growth of independent living skills and fosters natural collaborations and problem solving among group members. Students help participants focus on exercise, money management, technology use, social communication, health living, leisure and vocational skills.

At the [Portsmouth Senior Activity Center](#), OT students run a falls-prevention group to help seniors decrease falls and fear of falls

through activities that address strength, balance and flexibility. The group has worked with the New Hampshire Falls Task Force and participates each spring with the UNH Age of Champions event to screen/educate seniors in the community regarding falls prevention.

WRITTEN [Krysten Godfrey Maddocks '96](#) | College of Liberal Arts | [krysten.godfreymaddocks@unh.edu](mailto:krysten.godfreymaddocks@unh.edu)

PHOTOGRAPHER [Jeremy Gasowski](#) | Communications and Public Affairs | [jeremy.gasowski@unh.edu](mailto:jeremy.gasowski@unh.edu) | 603-862-4465

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