

Full circle gratitude

An appreciation for UIC motivates alumnus to establish scholarship for OT students.



Although it's been five decades since William Frey '71 BS OT first stepped onto the UIC campus, he can recall details of the occupational therapy program with vivid clarity.

"I had patients on the burn unit and in the Alzheimer's unit; I had patients in the acute psychiatric area," Frey says. "I remember one man who had drunk a bottle of olive oil. No one could figure out why, but I discovered he was from a very conservative church, and it was his attempt to anoint himself."

These early formative experiences helped prepare Frey for a fulfilling career spanning clinical work, hospital leadership, higher ed administration and faculty positions. In recognition of his accomplishments, the College of Applied Health Sciences honored Frey with the Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award in 2016.

"I've often thought about how fortunate I was because the breadth of knowledge I got in the OT program served me so well," Frey says.

Frey's appreciation for his undergraduate education helped spur his decision to establish an endowed scholarship for OT students. The Jackson-Frey Scholarship for Occupational Therapy also honors Frey's late wife, Carol Jackson '71 BS OT, whom he met in the program.

"Carol was an exceptional clinician, and wherever we relocated, she found significant work and ways to

contribute to the profession, including chairing the Department of Occupational Therapy at the Children's Hospital in Columbus," Frey says. "We were very much partners, and the marriage was a loving partnership for 42 years until death parted us."

Finding the right focus

When Frey established the endowed scholarship in 2017, he wanted to provide support for veterans like himself. During the Vietnam War, Frey joined the Army Medical Specialist Corps, earning the rank of captain.

But when it became clear over the years that few students qualified for the scholarship based on those criteria, Frey changed course.

Today, the scholarship includes a secondary focus on OT students with financial need whose life experience or identity adds to the diversity of the profession.

"It's important that minorities or other people who are less represented in the profession see themselves in therapy roles," Frey says. "The more we can encourage these students, the better."

Frey hopes potential donors understand they can work with AHS to create a scholarship that matches their own philanthropic passions, while recognizing the benefits of broadening the scholarship's scope if necessary. By being flexible with his giving priorities, Frey stayed true to his overall goal of helping OT students graduate with the skills and knowledge they need to enhance the field.

The power of immediate impact

The college offers many different ways to support scholarships, including scholarships funded through an individual's estate plan, but Frey is grateful his scholarship is being disbursed now.

"Often, people hold onto their money until they die, and then someone benefits through their will," he says.

"I feel privileged to hear from these students while I'm still living. To have people tell you how you've impacted their lives—it's really quite profound."

The endowment usually funds two \$2,000 awards annually. Each year, Frey receives letters from the recipients.

He gets to know students like Esmeralda Montelongo '23 MS OT, a queer woman of color raised in a low-income household. Montelongo decided to study occupational therapy after watching her father struggle with the physical and mental effects of dementia.



Esmeralda Montelongo



"This scholarship is easing the financial burden so that I can focus on my fieldwork placements during my last semester of school."

Sarah Weldy '23 MS OT

Scholarship recipient Sara Weldy '23 MS OT, who identifies as disabled, says enrolling in the OT master's program was the best but most expensive decision she's ever made.

Frey is pleased his fund is making an immediate impact. At the same time, by creating a scholarship through an endowment, his generosity will continue in perpetuity.

Donors can write a personal statement to share with scholarship applicants. For clinical professor emerita Gail Fisher '17 PhD, '80 BS OT, who recently established a scholarship for OT students, building this bridge between past, present and future was important.

"As a potential donor, it was appealing knowing that not only my name would live on, but also my story," Fisher says. "I wrote about how my grandparents didn't finish high school;

my parents didn't go to college. But I had these educational opportunities, and I wanted to give back. I wanted to give students a message of encouragement. It helped me feel like 50 years from now, I'm not some random name. Students will have access to my story."

An invitation to change lives

When Frey and Fisher decided to create scholarships, they intentionally followed in the footsteps of donors they admired like the late Barbara Loomis, associate professor emerita.

"Anytime I see people giving back, it's an inspiration," Frey says. "It's something we should all take note of."

During her 34 years at UIC, Fisher saw firsthand how support from alumni like Frey made a difference to students.

She was thrilled to do the same for future OT practitioners.

"Scholarships help students feel seen," Fisher says. "They may feel less pressured to get a job while they're on full-time fieldwork. They have a little bit of a cushion, knowing their loan debt is reduced with that scholarship."

Frey hopes to motivate other alumni and friends to give back to UIC because, no matter the amount, it's the cumulative generosity of all donors that transforms students' lives. He urges graduates from any AHS program to consider the legacy they would like to leave—and remember the educational experiences that contributed to their own personal and professional success.

"At a certain age, you realize it's time to give back and help someone else along," he says. "Because I would not have had the confidence to explore and choose opportunities that came my way without the foundational education I got at UIC."



William Frey and Barbara Loomis in her home, October 2016.