

Vote of confidence

Gail Fisher's new scholarship fund supports first-generation OT students

A quick glance at Gail Fisher's resume reveals an impressive list of educational and career accomplishments. PhD? Check. Countless articles and book chapters? Check. Celebrated clinical professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy? Yes.

But there's so much more to Fisher's story. "I actually dropped out of college," she says. "Things don't always go according to plan."

During her 34 years at UIC, Fisher '80 BS OT, '17 PhD met many OT students who faced challenges of their own. Financial struggles, health issues and unanticipated life changes sometimes derailed students' goals. That's one of the main reasons she established the UIC OT Gail Fisher Scholarship Fund.

While she hopes the scholarships will provide a financial cushion to each recipient, Fisher also envisions her fund as a message of moral support.

"I want students to feel seen by this scholarship," she says. "I know it's hard, but stick with it. I did it, and you can, too. Most of all: I believe in you."



Raised to achieve

The first people to believe in Fisher were her parents, Shirley and Leonard. The children of immigrants from Latvia and Germany, they took their family responsibilities seriously.



Fisher's first official photo as a UIC faculty member in 1989.

"My dad would have loved to go to college, but he had to support his family, so he became a watchmaker," Fisher says. Her mother worked outside the home during an era when that was unusual; she had a part-time job in high school and continued to work after her children started school.

"Even though they never went to college, my parents were very smart and determined," Fisher says.

One thing they felt strongly about was that their three children would earn college degrees, ideally at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Its stellar reputation and in-state tuition made it the most appealing option.

Fisher discovered the OT program while flipping through her older sister's course catalog. At the time, OT students spent three years in Champaign, then 18 months at UIC completing clinical OT courses and fieldwork. "Undergraduate courses included psychology, crafts, anatomy and physiology," Fisher says. "I was interested in all of it." Her parents told her to go for it, seeing their own drive reflected in their daughter.

The power of mentors

After Fisher's junior year, she withdrew from school due to changes in her family situation.

"I had every intention of going back," she says, but life threw some curveballs her way. She

was readmitted two more times in subsequent years—and had to turn those offers down.

Eventually, Fisher moved back to Champaign and applied one final time. She later learned that some faculty felt she'd been given enough chances. However, department head Barbara Loomis rallied other faculty to advocate for her readmission.

"I feel such a debt of gratitude for that," Fisher says. "It easily could have gone the other way. I needed someone to believe in me. And they did."



Fisher (right) with Barbara Loomis (left) during 2013 AHS Alumni Weekend.

Thus began Fisher's second journey toward

an OT degree and a fulfilling career. In 1988, she joined the OT department faculty at UIC—and stayed until she retired as clinical professor emerita in 2022. In the late Gary Kielhofner, then department head, Fisher found an encouraging mentor and colleague.

"Gary saw more in me than I saw in myself," Fisher says. "He got me started writing and presenting at the national conference. My roles kept changing over time as he gave me more opportunities to grow."

Kielhofner applauded Fisher as she embarked on a PhD from the School of Public Health while working full time. That endeavor took 11 years and wouldn't have been possible without the support of Fisher's husband, Eric Davis Gyllenhaal, and their two sons.

Fisher also credits Kielhofner's successor, Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, and AHS associate dean Renée Taylor for facilitating her career success.

As an expert on Kielhofner's Model of Human Occupation, Fisher has made a positive impact on students and therapists through courses, books, presentations, case studies, resources, assessments and more. In semi-retirement, she is collaborating with a former student, Jarrett Wolkse '17 MS OT, '21 OTD on the book "Re-envisioning Kielhofner's Conceptual Foundations of Occupational Therapy: a Multi-Model Approach."



Fisher with Gary Kielhofner at a reception honoring his 20 years of service as OT department head.

A lasting gift

Throughout her years in the OT department, Fisher oversaw admissions, a role that gave her an inside look at the needs and dreams of future practitioners. She witnessed changes that might surprise older alumni.

“Students take on a lot more debt today, knowing that they’re going to be in a field that doesn’t necessarily pay as well compared to some other fields,” Fisher says. She notes that many students work two or three jobs to stay afloat while pursuing their degrees.

At the same time, alumni of all ages can empathize with the motivation that drives students to obtain their OT degrees. “They want to problem-solve together with their clients and patients, they want to collaborate with them,” Fisher says. “They are committed to helping people.”

So is Fisher. Her scholarship fund is designated for first-generation college students and those with financial need. The scholarship announcement intentionally includes Fisher’s story.

“Applicants can read that my parents didn’t go to college; my grandparents didn’t graduate high school,” she says. “But I made it through with a lot of hard work and people supporting me. If I can do it, so can you.”

Fisher was inspired by the scholarship fund established by Loomis, who retired in 1981 as associate professor emerita.

“One of the things I appreciate about this opportunity is that it’s a lasting legacy,” she says.

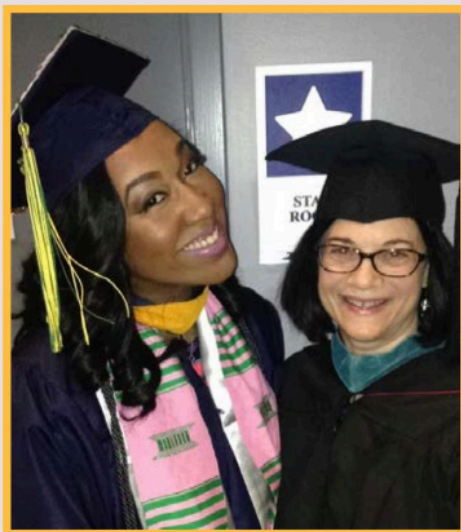
“Your commitment to the students and the department is known in perpetuity; furthermore, it’s a legacy in honor of your mentors and your family.”

For students, scholarships represent financial stability, educational opportunity, a connection to those who came before and a vote of confidence.

“When students see the list of donor-funded scholarships, it speaks to them because they know there are people investing in their generation,” Fisher says. “I hope my story encourages other alumni to support the future of our field.”



Fisher with former student Megan Win '18 MS, '19 OTD at spring 2019 commencement. Fisher, who was Win's adviser, continues to serve as a career mentor.



Fisher congratulates Brianna Bonner '16 MS OT who gave the student response at 2016 AHS commencement. Bonner is now an OT faculty member who is working with Fisher on a publication.

Hear Gail Fisher describe how she hopes her scholarship fund will help shape the careers of occupational therapy students, the practice and her legacy: go.uic.edu/GailFisherScholarship.

In December, Lejla Jakupovic '22 BS RS received the inaugural scholarship from the Gail Fisher fund. A first-generation student born to Bosnian immigrants, Jakupovic navigated the undergraduate college application and financial aid process largely on her own. She majored in rehabilitation sciences, with minors in psychology and disability and human development.

Now a first-year student in the entry-level occupational therapy doctorate program, Jakupovic enjoys being a teaching assistant, learning theory and serving as an ally for fellow first-generation students.

Jakupovic was excited—and her parents were proud—when she received notice of the scholarship award.

“I am immensely grateful for this opportunity,” she says.

“Student loans are scary; scholarships really help. This scholarship makes me feel like I can do anything.”

Jakupovic hopes to follow in Fisher's footsteps, both as an educator and as someone who leads with generosity.

“She’s made such a big impact in OT,” Jakupovic says. “It sounds cheesy, but I chose OT because I want to make a difference in people’s lives, too.”

