

# perspectives

for PTs and PTAs in the first 5 years of their careers

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**Bringing  
Diversity  
Into Focus**

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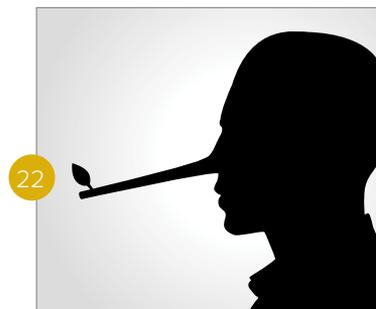
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# Passion and Purpose Drive Pro Bono Service

Let your passions drive your commitment to giving back to the community, either locally, nationally, or internationally.

By Katy O'Grady

Two days after the baby boy died, doctors finally discovered his diagnosis—and it had been a treatable condition. His physical therapist (PT), Mary Elizabeth Parker, PT, PhD, found herself deeply angry and considered quitting practice. Instead, she focused the anger into a passion for undiagnosed and rare disorders, making a volunteer commitment that transformed her practice, research, and dissertation direction. “There’s more that we could do. We couldn’t save him, but I bet there are others we can save,” she said. Partnering with 2 women who had lost children to undiagnosed causes, she founded U.R. Our Hope, a nonprofit that supports families coping with undiagnosed and rare disorders. Parker is a board-certified clinical specialist in pediatric physical therapy and in neurologic physical therapy and is on the faculty at Texas State University.

Service to older adults is the passion driving

Nileshkumar Soni, PT, DPT, a board-certified geriatric clinical specialist. The source of that passion is Soni’s family—his children, who follow his example and volunteer themselves, and his parents, especially his mother. Her dedication and service to others “is an inspiration to me and



Mary Elizabeth Parker,  
PT, PhD







Nileshkumar Soni, PT, DPT

a guiding light to respect other human beings,” he said. It led him to take on leadership and fund-raising roles in 2 senior-focused volunteer organizations. He also founded a nonprofit called Being Strong, through which he gives health lectures in the community and fitness screenings for older adults. As a component of Being

Strong, he engages PTs and physical therapist assistants (PTAs) across the United States to volunteer their time in similar service in their own communities, for which he provides organizational training.

Of course, not all PTs begin pro bono work by creating their own organizations. A friend invited Marne Iwand, PT, to assist with the Healthy Athletes Fun Fitness program of Nebraska Special Olympics. That was 12 years ago, and Iwand, who has an assistive technology professional certification and works at Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) in Omaha, Nebraska, has now served her fifth year as the program’s coordinator. Her work with people with disabilities has expanded into a seat on the board of Gotta Be Me, an organization promoting community inclusion, and volunteering weekly with its choir. She also participates with ride-along program Team Triumph and serves on the medical staff at a 1-week summer camp for children with muscular dystrophy. There, she advises for and teaches transfers, helps keep the kids safe, and works on the equipment when it breaks down.

Summer camps can provide a great way to get your feet wet doing pro bono work. “I used my PT knowledge

this summer at Catholic Heart Work Camp to teach some of the teenage boy volunteers appropriate lifting mechanics when we were rebuilding a retaining wall,” said Alice Fasnacht, PT, DPT, of Springfield, Minnesota.

APTA’s Code of Ethics for the Physical Therapist and Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant specify that APTA members provide pro bono physical therapy services and/or support organizations that meet the health needs of people who are economically disadvantaged, uninsured, or underinsured. Whatever the spark that lights the path to pro bono work—a mother’s inspiration, anger after a patient’s death, or a simple invitation to participate—giving service provides personal and professional fulfillment and growth. “You get a great education, and you come out very prepared, but now you’re on a new learning slope. Work has become the learning, and it’s continuous learning, both about yourself, your patients, and your practice,” Iwand said.



Marne Iwand, PT

## Learning From Service

Years of volunteering with disabled people of all ages have shown Iwand just how much a PT or PTA can learn from broader connections with patients. “When you only treat people in a clinic situation, you don’t always see all the impacts,” she said. For example, in evaluating a patient’s needs in the clinic, “sometimes you miss things if you don’t get in that home to assess the equipment needs or the community needs.”

Iwand’s pro bono service has evolved from representing MMI at event booths to helping patients do things in the community they’ve always wanted to do, whether that means an assisted half-marathon or performing on stage for an enthusiastic audience. Volunteer work has also enhanced Iwand’s professional communication skills and given her clarity about questions when evaluating patients for equipment needs. Now, instead of asking why patients don’t do a specific exercise, she takes a more holistic, functional focus, asking, “What do you like to do, and what do you think is impacting you not being able to do it? OK, if you love fishing, let’s figure out what’s holding you back.”

For Parker, founding U.R. Our Hope radically changed her life. “I feel like I landed where I was supposed to be,” she said. Seeing her students’ interest in undiagnosed and rare disorders blossom gives her particular satisfaction. She also values her role as



an educator for professionals, giving talks to other clinicians about how to refer back for further diagnosis and how to get networked into research studies, especially if patients lack funding. In 2018, Parker received APTA's Societal Impact Award for her work with U.R. Our Hope.

Giving back provides energy and a boost for Soni. "The biggest thing is the self-respect in the eyes of people I love. I'm doing it because I feel good, I can stand in front of the mirror and look at myself. I'm not a saint, of course, but I'm someone who is a little good for society," he said. Volunteering to support older Americans also connects him with colleagues across the country and to local health care professionals outside of physical therapy. In a mentoring capacity, he advises on conducting health fairs, giving back, and "how to keep your sanity in spite of all the distractions when you're trying to do good," he said.

Iwand has also experienced additional connections with colleagues through the nonprofit she started with her husband, which involves refurbishing and loaning out therapeutic equipment in the community. The program provides her with "a nice way to reach other therapists who reach out to me, and educate them as well as provide a service for them," she said.

## Passion and Priorities

Keeping sane and managing the work/life/volunteer balance certainly has challenges. "There are days I get frustrated and days that I just have to go, 'OK, today I can't answer anybody's emails and phone calls when they want it. It's going to have to be when I can do it,'" Parker said.

For Iwand, "My problem is saying no. I want to help everyone and sometimes that can be overwhelming, especially, when it comes to equipment," she said. Soni relies on support from family. "They understand that I'm intense when it comes to doing such things, but they understand why I want to do it," he said.

Parker also gets frustrated at a lack of awareness of what PTs and PTAs do and works to be sure her students don't leave her program thinking that they're "just" a PT. "I think that mindset is part of the problem," she said. She knows PTs and PTAs can be a vital part of a team and be strong advocates for their patients. "We are with our patients for lots of time. We are really keen observers of movement, of posture and function, and we get to know the family really well," she said.

To help stay balanced, all 3 PTs accept their limits and enforce their boundaries. "Learn to say no if you need to. It's OK," Iwand said. She has learned to keep an eye on the bigger picture of her commitments and cancel an



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MARNE IWAND, PT



activity if it's too much, which is especially important in a physically demanding field like physical therapy. "And now I don't feel guilty doing that; it took me a while," she said.

Soni sets specific goals for his commitments. In 2015 and 2016, for example, he dedicated Fridays from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm solely to his volunteer work. He also emphasizes "being the cause in spite of." This means continuing to be the cause of the change in spite of all the distractions, and he has found this skill helpful in both charity and professional work. Parker encourages PTs and PTAs to pick 1 thing they like, do it well, and not spread themselves too thin. "Don't just volunteer to volunteer because your office thinks it's a nice thing to do. Go out and do something you're passionate about," she said.

## Pursuing Pro Bono

Following your passion can help early-career PTs and PTAs make a stronger impact. Like Parker, Soni advises choosing 1 area in which to volunteer. "Stick to it, and center all your efforts back to that particular cause. When you look back over 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, you'll see that you made a sizeable dent in an area," he said.

Mentorship and professional connections from volunteering can also be beneficial. Parker encourages PTs and PTAs to connect with their local group within APTA right away. "Get to know the other clinicians there, and see what they're doing. Be part of the organizations and find a niche for yourself," she said.

Initial forays into pro bono work may be as simple as



## Guidance for Going Forward

APTA provides extensive resources and information about getting started with pro bono physical therapist services, including basic considerations, settings for services, and identifying and evaluating charitable organizations. Visit [www.apta.org/ProBono/](http://www.apta.org/ProBono/). And if passion and purpose motivate you to go beyond the US border, opportunities abound to serve people around the globe. Read more and see APTA's list of international organizations with pro bono opportunities at [www.apta.org/ProBono/International/](http://www.apta.org/ProBono/International/).

Iwand's early approach of joining a fundraising walk for Down syndrome or muscular dystrophy. "Have a booth, or maybe join a patient's team and do the walk. You could make it a family event by having your spouse or children come with you, and that way you're educating your children," she said.

Soni has done just that. His son, now 16, started shadowing him and volunteering at health fairs 8 years ago. Soni sees influencing his children positively by his actions as 1 of his biggest achievements.

For students and early-career PTs, existing programs such as the Special Olympics Fun Fitness screenings provide valuable exposure to a large client population that may be unfamiliar. "It's a great way for students and young PTs and PTAs to learn how to engage people with disabilities if they haven't had that opportunity," Iwand said.

Calvin Cook, PT, DPT, based in Phoenix, Arizona, concurs about the benefits of volunteering with an already-established program. "I, along with several other colleagues, was able to participate in a community outreach event focusing on triathletes," he said. "I chose to volunteer my time to this cause because I was a student athlete and didn't understand the positive effects physical therapy could have until I was done competing. This community outreach provided me with the opportunity to spread knowledge about the positive impact physical therapy can have."

Some PTs and PTAs have entered the profession specifically because of their volunteer work. Gail Bachman, PT, DPT, said, "It was actually volunteer

activities that caused me to pursue a profession in physical therapy. I served as a Peace Corps volunteer for 3 years in Ethiopia and during that time observed so many individuals struggling with physical disabilities, which limited their ability to work or participate fully in their communities. During PT school and after, I have tried to address the issues I faced in Ethiopia, not only in my own community but also in Tijuana, Mexico," said Bachman, who is based in San Diego, California.

Soni, Iwand, and Parker all say the joy and fulfillment of their pro bono work keeps them returning. Iwand finds fulfillment in making community activities available to people of all abilities. "I have the opportunity of seeing the lifespan and knowing what I'm doing at an early age may affect them in their adulthood," she said. She also cherishes "the smile on the faces of adults who for the first time are dancing at choir or participating in a play and having an audience clap for them." ■

