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## Community Service Its Importance and Significance to Educational Therapy

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### INTRODUCTION

Community Service has been a principled commitment of our association since 1982, when educational therapists started volunteering to serve the juvenile justice population. As members of this association, we have been encouraged to serve a diverse clientele and offer reduced fees or *pro bono* service to those in our communities who might not be able to otherwise benefit from a broad range of services through educational therapy. We view this work as ethical and best practice.

As I begin this article on a cold day in March, we face the challenges of being a nation at war; our economy continues to suffer; and a significant "neighbor" has been lost as we learn of the recent death of Fred Rogers, a celebrity who spent his career, through television, teaching the practice of community service to his young viewing audience by being amazingly knowledgeable about his neighborhood and simply being a good neighbor.

It seems especially important at this pivotal time in our 25-year history as an influential educational organization that we take a closer look at our neighborhoods and the communities for whom we provide a full range of service. I invite you to professionally show your community the many faces of educational therapy and reach out through voluntary service to children, families, community organizations, other allied professionals, boards of related educational organizations, and neighborhood schools, right where you live and practice. In being a good neighbor, Mr. Rogers made the art and ethic of humanitarianism easy; we can too, as we build upon the strong principles that guide our association. As we make our works visible—locally, nationally and internationally as we continue to increase our member base—our community service should also become more viable and public.

The Many Faces of Educational Therapy: Giving to Communities project premiered at last year's national convention in Chicago. The project culminated in an impressive display board representing good voluntary and reduced-fee works throughout many communities of our membership, and consisted of samples of interesting narratives and telling photographs that were gathered from educational therapists throughout the year. These good works continue, as does the project display. The honoring of these good works has become a celebratory event at the annual AET conference luncheons. These significant and simple acts of voluntary professional service over and beyond your rigorous practice can counter the social/political/economic challenges we've felt this past year impacting all neighborhoods. Certainly, as children's family members continue to go off to war, or peace-

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keeping, further challenges impact the volatile conditions of emotions and learning.

I would like to remember Mr. Rogers as an exceptional “educational therapist” in his own right who also performed “community service” in his neighborhood. So, join me in his gentle mantra: “Won’t you please, please won’t you please—won’t you please be my neighbor.” I predict that a growing commitment to give back to the community we serve will increase our connectedness despite our differences. It will make a tremendous educational impact across the country.

### THE FACES AND STORIES OF EDUCATIONAL THERAPY

Following is a sampling of narratives from the 15 members who received recognition last year. They represent exemplary community service. These small and grand acts can be models for what we might pursue as we explore where educational therapy can answer a need in the communities where we live. I offer the following framework of questions for you to consider as you read and reflect upon the multiple benefits of educational therapy volunteer service for the particular segments of our population that otherwise have limited access to our services:

1. Does your clientele represent a broad socioeconomic spectrum of the community in which you practice?
2. What funding sources in your community could be tapped for financial donations to assist children with reading difficulties to reach their potential?
3. What other local and national associations do you collaborate with on a regular basis that also promote community service?
4. How could you naturally develop a mentoring project for current students needing additional practice—provided by previous, older students that have benefited from educational therapy services?
5. Do you have a natural community of learners through your local AET study group membership that would like to work collaboratively, lending a small amount of time to make a difference collectively for an otherwise forgotten segment of your community?
6. What bridges could you build within your local schools—how could grant funding improve that relationship?
7. As IDEA—“leaving no child behind”—becomes reauthorized, how could the incentives being offered influence a community service project in your neighborhood?
8. Does the community service you provide continue to help define the practice of educational therapy?

*Adrian Whitchelo-Scott from Los Angeles, California writes:*

Again a family was faced with hardship due to the husband losing his job, this time as a result of the September attacks, which led to financial uncertainties in the stock

market and unforeseen layoffs in his company. To avoid discontinuing the much-needed service I agreed to continue seeing their child at no cost for the remainder of the year. I have done so and have continued to provide services for the family with their existing time slot with the agreement that I will not expect them to begin paying again until they both secure employment and catch up with their bills. The important point is that at no point was there an interruption in services. I continued to work with the teachers at the schools to ensure the student was being adequately supported in every area. Both the student’s emotional well being and his most recent report card demonstrate the fact that the additional support paid off and that is all the payment I need!

*Patty McBratney, from Seattle, Washington writes:*

In 1998, with tremendous help and support, I started a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization called Literacy Education. Our mission is to establish early identification of reading difficulties and preventative research-based reading methods in our local schools. To achieve our mission, our organization provides scholarships in research-based, multi-sensory structured language-based assessment, theory, and instruction methods for K, 1st, and 2nd grade classroom teachers. The nonprofit has evolved over the past four years. After two years of fund-raising, we had earned sufficient funds to provide six \$5000 scholarships. We awarded our first three scholarships in the summer of 2001. The results of this community service project is that classroom teachers will take on more responsibility for best reading and literacy practices, and fewer children will be referred to special education for failure to learn to read. My community service commitment is to actively implement early identification and prevention of reading failure in my community. Each member of the founding and current boards has dedicated vast amounts of volunteered time, energy, and personal funds to help achieve our mission of early identification and prevention. No one has ever received remuneration of any kind from any source for this project. (To learn more about Patty’s worthy project, go to [www.literacyed.com](http://www.literacyed.com))

*Elaine R. Lieberman from Mission Viejo, California writes:*

Besides my practice as an educational therapist, I am a co-director of the children’s creative festival, *Fun with Chalk*, now in its fourth year. We have art workshops for children at no charge. These workshops are heavily attended. We had between 12 and 15 thousand adults and children attend in the two-day period last year. The most wonderful aspect of this festival is the creation of 2 feet by 2 feet art squares by the children on an asphalt parking lot. Each child goes home with a Polaroid picture of its art as a keepsake. Different elementary and high schools in our school district provide the entertainment. Some professional talent is available if we can get it at a low enough cost. We also have strolling violinists, face-painting, and balloon art. Each square is sponsored by a business, private party, or corporation. The funds from this enormous effort go to teachers who have written grants to support fine arts education in our school.

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The money is distributed for items such as puppet stages, flutes, and music for the orchestra. Up to now we have donated a total of \$60,000 to the Capistrano and Saddleback School districts. (The festival was held in early June last year; contact Elaine for a beautifully descriptive brochure of this year's project.) Last year's brochure quotes Eyvind Earle, 1916-2000, internationally acclaimed American artist: "Art is another word for life, and life is infinite beyond understanding. Seeing, we call it painting. Hearing, we call it music. Reading, we call it poetry, and living, we call it life. So art is an attempt to capture life."

These "snapshots" from members committed to upholding the principles of our association are examples of the many good works in our association. Two standards from the Association of Educational Therapist's *Code of Ethics* seem especially evident in the works cited:

1. Educational therapists recognize that the relationship of home and community environmental conditions affects the behavior and outlook of the client.

2. Educational therapists maintain effective interpersonal relations with colleagues and other professionals, helping them to develop and maintain positive and accurate perceptions about the profession of educational therapy.

These narratives also exemplify best practice applications that leading national educators and professionals are advocating for—ensuring increased competence in and out of the classroom. As example, Dr. Mel Levine, author of the popular book *A Mind at a Time*, writes: "Service can be a great equalizer; kids with all kinds of minds can collaborate in assisting where they are needed. Community service in one form or another should be a part of an educational plan. Volunteer work in a hospital, teaching, tutoring, or coaching younger children, and rehabilitating poverty sites are common outlets for kids' basic but often hidden drive to be helpful to others" (p. 326).

These projects described, like the humanitarian works viewed by so many of us as we stepped into Mr. Rogers' neighborhood, are the real stuff of "homeland security" for children and their families. I look forward to learning about your neighborhood and I hope to meet you in Berkeley, at the national conference this fall. I welcome your enthusiastic response to The Many Faces project. Won't you be a good neighbor?

## REFERENCES

- Association of Educational Therapists. (1999). *Code of ethics*. Burbank, CA: Association of Educational Therapists.  
Levine, M. (2002). *A mind at a time*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Judith VanDeWeghe is a professional educational therapist and reading specialist in a collaborative private practice in Evergreen, Colorado. The practice's mission statement states: "We value families, the challenges of childhood development, and the opportunity to facilitate children's success in their communities." She has served as Community Service Director on the Board of Directors of AET for three years.