

forces

The OT's OT



Winnie Dunn, BHS-OT '72, says she was born to be an OT. From the moment she steps in front of a group to present material or teach, it's easy to see why. Animated, glib, determined, she makes you feel you've known her for years and you're all that matters. For an occupational therapist, what better tools could one possess? Couple those skills with developing what is considered to be the model for sensory processing, and it's easy to understand why she's been dubbed "The OT's OT."

Dunn may be a Jayhawk now, she chairs the Department of Occupational Therapy Education at the University of Kansas Medical Center, but her roots remain at Mizzou. She visited the School of Health Professions in December to meet the OT class of 2009 and give the featured lecture for the fifth annual OT Research Synthesis Project Presentations.

"One of the jobs of new graduates is to see that our core beliefs are enacted with new evidence," she told the students. "Be open always to letting old things go and encouraging the new ways."

Her own work was one of those "new ways" as she started a career that now includes over 100 published articles and books, being named a Kemper Teaching Fellow and receiving the highest honor in the OT field, the Eleanor Clarke Slagle award.

In 1997 she proposed a model based on the nervous system and personal regulation. The intersections of these characteristics became what Dunn labeled low registration, sensation seeking, sensory sensitivity, and sensation avoiding. From the person who seems uninterested in what's going on around them (low registration) to those whose senses are so highly

acute they may need a certain texture to their clothes to function comfortably in everyday life (sensory sensitive), Dunn found a logical way to help structure environments and routines to ease coping skills for people with various patterns of sensory responses.

Although her early articles were about persons with Asperger's syndrome, Dunn's theories make good sense for everyone to consider in their everyday life. Since her highly successful commercial book on the topic, *Living Sensationally*, came out in hardcover in 2007, Dunn has been sought out to comment on the subject in a variety of ways. From talking about it in terms of sexual relationships with *Cosmopolitan* magazine to helping London's Harrods stores with a spring marketing campaign that emphasized the senses, Dunn's model is in demand.



living
Sensationally

This month, *Living Sensationally* comes out in paperback. Don't be surprised if you see Dunn making the talk show circuit to discuss the practical nature of the model. She says the media attention, wonderful as it is, shows something bigger. It indicates people "get" what she's talking about.

"One of my goals in writing this book was to make the information about individual differences in sensory processing common everyday language, 'kitchen table talk' if you will," Dunn says. "I believe that when everyone in a community knows about seekers, avoiders, sensors and bystanders, there will be more amusement than irritation with each other."

Take the family holiday dinner, for example. Dunn says replacing the traditional "children's table" with the "avoiders" and "seekers" tables could make everyone more comfortable.

"Families that have members with more distinct sensory processing patterns will feel more included than excluded," she says. "After all, it isn't just people with Asperger disorder who are precise about how their socks and underwear need to feel on their skin every day. When everyone can understand the variety of interesting ways that each of us experiences food, spaces, clothing and recreational activities, we won't have to marginalize people anymore."

That individual preference was the cornerstone of Dunn's remarks to the OT graduate students. "If OTs can't translate the stuff we know to everyday people, who can?" she asked. "Keep your focus on

life, not the techniques. OT is not about disability, it's about living. If we focus on that, what will your practice look like in 10 years?"

Dunn's star in the OT world is indeed bright. Diana Baldwin, former chair of the SHP Department of Occupational Therapy, sums it up simply: "Winnie Dunn is great. She is, you know, our (MU OT) greatest star. She's an OT's OT."

Dunn says she's beginning to recognize the intensity she brings to life affects the people around her and she tries now to mindfully harness that intensity to be of service to others. "I was born to be an OT," Dunn says. "I have such a reverence for the routines of a person's life, and how they make meaning for themselves, sometimes amid challenging circumstances. Knowing how to see the threads of meaning and adaptability is a gift from OT that enriches my everyday life."

Story by Cheri Ghan