



It Shows

Establishing yourself in a successful career while caring for three children as a single parent is a daunting task!

Terri Barrett knew that education for a career was the best way to provide a good future for her family and made the sacrifices to become a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant. “It’s totally worth it.” says Terri as she thinks about her new career and comments on the sacrifices she made to get there.

Penn State in your career—it shows.



“It was time for a change. The environment we were in was not good for my children or for me. I was tired of going back and forth with different jobs and only earning minimum wage. I needed to make a change.” That’s how Terri Barrett describes her decision to go to college and earn a degree.

Terri is quick to point out that she has faced and dealt with challenges all of her life. She dropped

out of high school before graduation. She became a single mother at 15, worked a number of different jobs to support herself and her son, finished her GED, married and became the mother of two more children. “I have a long resume of jobs that I have held - housekeeper, cashier, photographer. There were not a lot of people who were ‘supportive’ of me, but I knew I wanted something different than minimum wage jobs throughout my working life.”

The relationship and the environment in which Terri found herself and her children was not what she wanted for them. “I knew I had to make a change. I woke up and decided I had to pursue the change NOW. An interest questionnaire narrowed careers, in which I might be interested, to 5 choices; occupational therapy was one of the choices. I can’t remember all of the others, but I know that English teacher and physical therapist were two of the others.”

“Going to college was a difficult decision to make. I spent one summer filling out paperwork to secure grants to enable me to go to school. I almost gave up because there was so much paperwork.”

Becoming an OTA ... the Penn State DuBois experience and beyond

“I started the associate degree program in 2003-04 and found that I was not the only non-traditional student in the occupational therapy classes. Some of the people in my class had been out of school a while. One of my classmates had her job terminated and found herself in school to prepare for a new job.

I knew I was taking time away from my children, but that it would be beneficial for all of us eventually. I had a very flexible babysitter who helped me care for my children; in the summer, when I wasn’t in school, I worked for her taking care of kids.

Besides classes in mathematics and English, I completed classes in anatomy and physiology, psychology and occupational therapy. My kids and I were both going to school. They thought it was cool to help Mom out. I taped pictures over them to help me with the anatomy class - they were my visual aids.”

Terri completed her classes, finished the clinical experiences and worked in a drop-in center for mental health before going to work at Mt. Laurel Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. She is now a Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant at Mt. Laurel.

“I began as a PRN (an OT that can fill in on an as needed basis) and then was hired part time. I have the opportunity to work with many different diagnoses - knee and hip replacements, stroke, general weakness. Recently, I worked with a

client who had been in an automobile crash, suffered a hip fracture and came to Mt. Laurel for therapy.

OTAs can work with children, geriatric clients, or individuals injured on the job. We could go into work environments and educate people on the job site about what they can do to help decrease injuries. The range of things we help clients with is amazing - bathing, dressing, pill management, balance, strengthening, cleaning, completing laundry - and many more.

Often I get the chance to co-treat with physical therapy assistants and become familiar with other areas of expertise. If Penn State DuBois ever offers a master’s degree in occupational therapy, I will definitely go back to school and become an OTR. ” A registered occupational therapist (OTR) screens potential clients for services, recommends OT services, does evaluations and sets goals for the client. Occupational therapy assistants assist the client in achieving the stated goals.

When asked what she likes about being a COTA, Terri replied, *“I like everything about it. I like getting up in the morning and knowing that I’m going to work to help somebody. It’s very rewarding. I pinch myself every morning because I still find it hard to believe that I made it. I can see myself being a COTA until I retire. Every sacrifice my kids and I made was totally worth it.”*



Terri instructing a client in the use of a “reacher”