

NM LEND Fellows: The Leaders of Tomorrow

By RoseLynn Otero, MOTS

Benjamin Franklin wrote, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." I found that to be true when, in my second semester of the Occupational Therapy graduate program, I heard about a traineeship called New Mexico Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (NM LEND).

I applied right away, because I wanted to learn as much as I could about developmental disabilities. NM LEND is federally funded by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau as a program within UNM's Center for Development and Disability. It offers leadership training to graduate and post-graduate professionals, as well as family members and self-advocates.

Fellows learn the values of family-centered and culturally competent practice, interdisciplinary services and best practices in the field of developmental disabilities. The leadership training is aimed at improving the systems of care for children, adolescents and adults with neurodevelopmental and related disabilities and their families. The training program enlists professionals early in their careers, so they become leaders in their respective professions.

Through NM LEND, I had an opportunity to attend the 2015 Disability Policy Seminar in Washington D.C. I attended seminars on federal legislation affecting people with disabilities. I visited the Capitol with fellow NM LEND fellows, professionals and self-advocates to express our concerns to New Mexico's senators and representatives.

During this visit we had coffee with Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich. Afterward, we met the staff of Representatives Michelle Lujan Grisham and Ben Ray Lujan, and Senators Udall, and Heinrich. We discussed with important issues, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization, the Affordable Care Act, and federal funding of Social Security Income. It was an amazing experience to see disability policy in action.

Closer to home, my fellow NM LEND classmates and I had an opportunity to visit Santa Fe to shadow state senators and representatives to expand our knowledge of how policy affects health care in our state. I shadowed Sen. Jacob Candelaria and sat in on his committee meetings. I was even introduced by him on the floor of the Senate.

I saw how hectic the New Mexico Legislature is when in session because of all the different committee meetings and bills being presented. Advocates only had five to 10 minutes in between committee meetings to inform



NM LEND fellows and advocates with Martin Heinrich

state legislators about their cause. If they were not concise, their message might not make an impact on the state legislator.

An additional learning opportunity made possible through my connection with NM LEND was my ability to attend the 2015 Southwestern Disability Conference in Albuquerque. This was a national conference, attended by self-advocates and professionals, offering a variety of informative sessions about different disabilities, resources, disability rights, mental illness and more. I attended one session that described an initiative where people with disabilities were gaining job skills through an internship program at the Rhode Island Department of Health.

Another intriguing session led by Ken Collins, a self-advocate who suffered a traumatic brain injury, examined the role of the limbic system in traumatic brain injuries. Collins has been promoting strategies such as mindfulness meditation training and Emotional Freedom techniques based on his own success. It was powerful to hear someone's firsthand experience on how to manage the effects of a traumatic brain injury. Engaging with self-advocates was priceless because I was able to hear the needs and wants of individuals with a disability.

I also got to attend a Newborn Hearing Screening Initiative in the summer of 2015. The initiative supports the New Mexico Department of Health's efforts to improve the the number of newborns are screened and referred for hearing loss.

Hilary Maez, a NM LEND comrade, worked with me under Envision New Mexico during this initiative. We

learned how to solve small problems to help eliminate the bigger issues. We did this by first delving into the grant timeline, so we could identify the issues, such as loss in follow-up, that were being addressed by Department of Health.

Once these issues were identified, we made a process map that showed how a newborn was referred for hearing loss. Then the grant timeline and process map were cross-referenced so common issues or lingering questions could be identified.

Next, Envision New Mexico organized a stakeholder meeting to present findings to every profession involved in the referral process: audiologists, case managers, midwives and child medical services. The goal was to have the professionals discuss how the referral process could be improved, and to organize the next steps to the initiative.

Through this initiative I came to understand the importance of structure in a health care system, interdisciplinary collaboration, grant organization and newborn screenings.

NM LEND offers all-day seminars every Friday that are a part of a thoroughly thought-out curriculum. During the spring and fall semester I receive a schedule that details what each seminar will entail. The seminars that have intrigued me the most are interdisciplinary, family-centered and culturally competent practice.

I never really understood what interdisciplinary practice was, but I have learned that it is a collaboration between different professions to meet a common goal. I have seen this in practice at NM LEND seminars.

Recently, the Early Childhood Evaluation Program let NM LEND fellows observe a team evaluation of a child with a developmental disability. The team consisted of a physician, psychologist, occupational therapist and speech pathologist.

The team members first came into the classroom and explained what each professional was going to concentrate on during the evaluation. Then we observed the evaluation via webcam. Afterward, the team explained their findings to the classroom, and then we watched them present the findings to the family.

After seeing a clinical evaluation I now not only understand interdisciplinary as a collaboration between different professions, but I can envision what the practice should resemble.

I have also enjoyed seminars that have allowed me to further understand family-centered practice. I have become especially aware of and sensitive to the impact of disability on family.

During a seminar NM LEND organized a panel of siblings who have a brother or sister with a disability. They

talked to us about their personal experiences. It was eye-opening, because I realized how care for one child can affect the family as a whole.

NM LEND also pairs each fellow with a family who cares for an member with a disability. I have gone to several functions with my family, such as prom dress shopping, the Buddy Walk, a jazz concert and Zoo Boo. Spending time with this family has made me want to practice family-centered care, because I have glimpsed into their lives. I have seen first-hand that their lives are similar to mine, so I need to provide interventions that are realistic for both the family and the child.

Learning how to provide family-centered care will make my therapeutic intervention more effective, because the family is the center of a child. I cannot make an impact on a child's development if I can't obtain the support of the family.

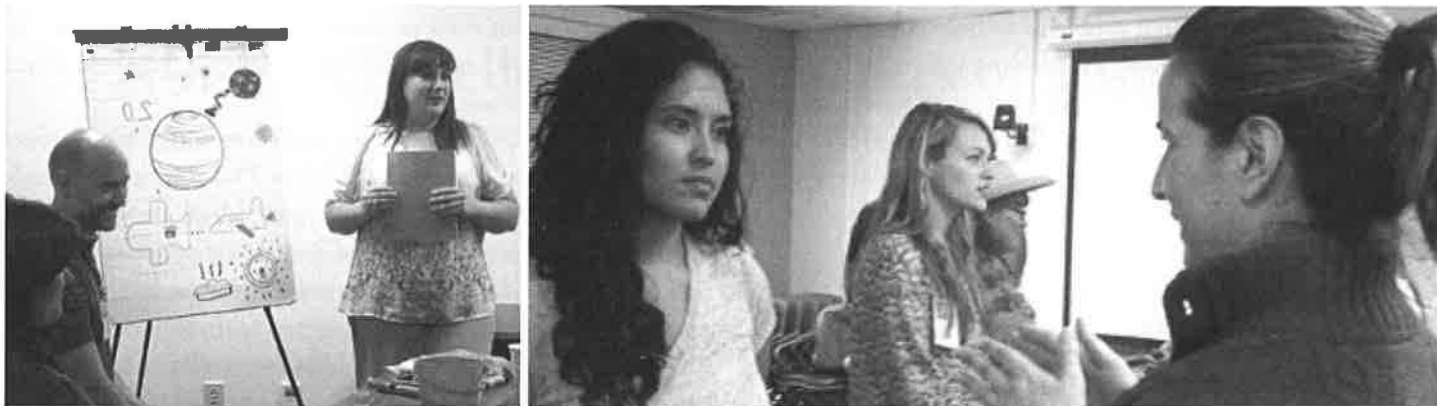
The NM LEND program has also given me a chance to explore my own cultural biases, and those of others. Through this program I have learned about culture through books, guest speakers and interactions with my classmates. It has been interesting to explore culturally competent practice with my classmates, because we all have such diverse backgrounds.

During one seminar we were required to complete two assessments, the Cultural Competence Checklist and Implicit Association Test. The checklist was developed to create awareness in how individuals view clients from culturally and linguistically diverse populations. The Implicit Association Test is used to identify hidden biases.

We discussed our results in small groups. This opened my eyes to the diversity of the people in my group. As we discussed our own cultures and upbringing, I realized that culturally competent practice should not only be practiced with our clients, but with colleagues as well. These seminars have made clear to me what interdisciplinary, family-centered and culturally competent practice entails. I no longer think of these forms of practice as decorative terms.

This experience has also taught me the importance of networking. I'm able to hear the perspective from an individual who lives with a disability or who is a caregiver for someone with a disability. I can hear firsthand experiences and opinions from the people I will be working with as an occupational therapist. The mixed group of nurses, social workers, teachers, therapists, psychologists, self-advocates and parents in NM LEND has given me confidence when interacting with others in a professional setting.

The leadership workshops are where I learned the most about myself as a professional. I've never seen myself



NM LEND fellows at fall leadership workshop

as a leader, and didn't understand my own leadership style. During these workshops we explore different leadership activities such as The PATH, in which images are used to describe what one hopes to achieve in five years. It is an interesting way to set personal goals when they are visualized in this way, because it makes them more palpable. One classmate even expressed a goal to the whole class that she had never said out loud to anyone.

Another self-assessment tool used during a leadership workshop was The Strength Development Reemployment Inventory. It comes in the form of a packet, and it is done in specific stages. It helps people understand their self-worth and how they relate to others.

Another activity was True Colors, which starts with a worksheet that identifies your personality as a color. Then you're grouped with others that have the same personality, and you have to plan a trip. As each group presents their trip to the class it comes to represent the group's personality type. At the same time the whole class starts to understand the need for different personalities in a group, so the end product isn't so shortsighted.

The Path, Strength Development Inventory and True Colors have allowed me to discover strengths and areas of needed growth. This has made me more confident when presenting, conducting meetings and participating in group discussion.

Given the many different professions in this program, I have had to advocate for my discipline, occupational therapy, during activities and discussions.

During seminars we are given case studies where we have to come up with recommendations, interventions and resources for a client. I have used the skills I have learned through the leadership workshops to advocate for occupational therapy by explaining how it helps people to participate in meaningful activities that will improve their quality of life.

These could range from improving an infant's ability to crawl so they can play and learn to improving a

person's coordination and balance after an injury so they can safely navigate their environment.

I also used my leadership skills to advocate for my profession in Journal Club, where a fellow brings in a research article of interest. As we discussed these articles in small groups, I often had to interject occupational therapy perspectives into the discussion.

I distinctly recall one article about the usefulness of everyday materials to stimulate creativity and play in children. I was in a group with a statistician who didn't understand the need for play. I was able to explain to him how play affects development in children.

During the same session the statistician explained to me the purpose of the different statistics used to measure the results in the research article. My leadership training has taught me how to advocate for my profession, as well as how to appreciate the role of other professions.

It has helped me grow as a future occupational therapist by providing unique learning opportunities and by increasing my knowledge in concepts relating to the profession. The program has also allowed me to network and build upon my leadership capabilities.

I believe NM LEND fellows will be more competitive in the job market than their peers, because they will be equipped with a wider skill set. The program promotes professional growth by motivating their fellows to be skilled professionals who are both knowledgeable and experienced. □