

Unlocking Inner Joy

By Mercedes Aguirre, SPT

It was a clear summer morning, just after her breakfast, when Mrs. S was wheeled into the skilled nursing facility's rehabilitation room by one of the nurses. Her fingers were decorated with rings; her blue knitted sweater was complimented by the butterfly necklace she had won at bingo.

Before I embarked on my journey as a physical therapy student, I used to volunteer at a skilled nursing facility. My role was mainly to observe and learn as much as possible from the physical therapists, but occasionally I was asked to give the patients some company. I introduced myself to Mrs. S and asked if I could sit next to her to talk for a few minutes. "I see that you have a big smile on your face, you must be having a great day!" I said as she motioned me to sit on the stool next to her.

"I really do enjoy being here," she began to explain, "Gymnastics is my favorite sport!"

I giggled at her response, "I love gymnastics too! Did you watch the Summer Olympics?"

"Yes! I enjoyed every minute of it. It reminded me of how I used to play with my sisters," her eyes beamed as they looked up at the ceiling and then toward me.

Memories

Mrs. S began to tell me about her childhood experiences in New York, where she lived in a cozy apartment with her sisters and both of her parents. In order to protect herself from the unforgiving winds of the city, she would put on a long and warm dress, delicately made by her mother, which had been worn by all of her older sisters. After clothing them in love, her mother would give Mrs. S and each of her sisters a slice of toast for breakfast and send them off to school. "My parents didn't have a lot to give us," she recalled, "but I never noticed because we had each other and that was enough for me."

Mrs. S leaned in to reveal a secret: sometimes, when her older sister left for work early, she would raid her sister's closet. "She was able to buy herself some lovely dresses with the little money she had. I was always so envious," she smiled at the memory. Even if the dress was too long in the sleeves, Mrs. S would roll them up and tip-toe her way out of the house with a big sweater on in case her mother caught a look before she left. On their walk to school, Mrs. S and her sisters would giggle as they passed their lunches and books to each other to take turns practicing their cartwheels and handstands. Through Mrs. S's words, I could see them walking along the edge of every curve, balancing their

lunches with their arms raised out in the open.

Painted by the Mind

Today, our everyday life can be captured by the touch of a screen. However, many of our pictures get buried within the depths of our social media accounts, and nothing can beat a beautiful memory painted by the mind. Mrs. S had a beautiful glow to her when she described in such detail her childhood filled with freedom and laughter. At first glance, I would have never guessed that Mrs. S used to practice gymnastics, but I started to view her in a different light after listening to her story. Even though Mrs. S and I were separated by a full generation, I felt as though we weren't as different as I had initially thought. For starters, we both had loving parents and we both had to walk to school on winter mornings. From this single story, I was able to relate to her in ways I didn't expect; there are probably hundreds of other stories that could have removed the years between us as well.

“You know, Dr. D,” she said as she turned to the physical therapist who was ready to walk her, “I really do miss being able to walk like I used to.”

“I heard that you used to be a gymnast. Let's work on that balance now, shall we?” the physical therapist said

while holding on to Mrs. S as they began to walk.

“Alright, I have a big tournament tomorrow and I need to be in tip-top shape!” she laughed as she slowly made her way through the long hallway of the skilled nursing facility.

Keys to Healing

As I rolled the wheelchair closely behind Mrs. S and Dr. D, I realized that even though she was using a walker and could no longer do handstands, her youthful spirit was still there. Dr. D, who exhibited creativity and thoughtfulness, was able to unlock that inner spirit by relating Mrs. S's precious memories of gymnastics to her interventions. As soon as the physical therapist did that, Mrs. S's treatment benefited greatly, because she was able to look fondly at her past and bring that happiness to her present.

From that single experience of meeting Mrs. S, I learned that, with just a few minutes of conversation and a dash of imagination, a patient's rehabilitation experience can be well-improved and personalized.

About the Author



Mercedes Aguirre is a first year Physical Therapy student at Rutgers School of Health Professions (SHP) in New Jersey. She is the Secretary of the American Physical Therapy Association New Jersey student assembly and the Rutgers SHP Student Governing Association. In her spare time, Mercedes enjoys reading, painting, and cuddling with her dogs.