

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY NOW

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Occupational therapist
embraces a **“year of yes”**
to conquer her fears:

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TORONTO OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST EMBRACES A “YEAR OF YES” TO CONQUER HER FEARS: AN INTERVIEW WITH MOIRA PEÑA

Kristin Harold



Back in 2019, Moira Peña took a leap of faith and signed up to lead her first professional development workshop. Just four years later, the Toronto-based occupational therapist, whose work focuses on neurodiversity-affirming, research-informed and evidence-based sensory-based interventions, is now one of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists' (CAOT) most requested facilitators and she's presented at events across Canada, the United States, and on the international stage. She sat down with *Occupational Therapy Now* to discuss her love of teaching and facilitating, how she's on mission to boost the confidence of occupational therapists in Canada, and what it was like to speak on the main stage at the Saskatoon conference.

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR CONFERENCE PRESENTATION. WERE YOU SURPRISED TO BE INVITED TO BE THE FEATURED SPEAKER AT THE CLOSING CEREMONY?

I was very surprised to be asked, but I had decided that 2023 was the year where I would say yes to everything that I wanted to do regardless of how uncomfortable it may have felt at first. Being the featured speaker at this year's conference was definitely the most nerve-wracking public speaking experience of my life, but I worked hard to prepare for it and my friends were there to support me. And I did it! I am now officially a keynote speaker, which is just an incredible milestone for me.

IS PRESENTING AND SHARING YOUR IDEAS SOMETHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO DO?

I'm very lucky to work at the Autism Research Centre at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto where I've had many wonderful opportunities to learn from world-renowned autism researchers. I was going to professional development courses in 2017 and 2018 and I'd always leave the workshops thinking about what I would have done differently to highlight the key role that we as occupational therapists can play to support our neurodivergent clients' engagement and participation in meaningful life occupations. I thought, "Well, I can sit here and think of all the things I would do differently in these courses, or I can do it myself." It was a question of if not now, when? Do I give it a try, as 'imperfect' as it may turn out to be? That's when I saw a call-out in CAOT's (OT Weekly) e-newsletter that said they were looking for new presenters. I filled out one of the professional development forms that CAOT sends out and Christina [Lamontagne, CAOT's Professional Development Manager] got back to me. I was full of doubt and not expecting anything out of it, but Christina gave me a chance. I'm really grateful for her support and coaching. And now it's become a big part of my career as the owner of Moira Peña Sensory Workshops.

WHEN DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN BECOMING AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST?

I came to Canada from Argentina when I was 14 with very limited English. I went to English as a second language classes and had to get used to a whole new culture in the vulnerable teen years, which is an experience I often refer to when discussing neurodiversity practices as this is exactly what we are being called to do: to adopt a new mindset by seeking to understand and respect different ways of being. It's interesting to me how my own lived experience of coming to a new country, learning a new language, and a new culture has influenced what I'm passionate about now.

After graduating from Queen's University with my first degree, I thought about going into teaching, but then I discovered occupational therapy. I graduated in 1999 from the University of Toronto, with an interest in working with people with eating disorders. I moved to London, England soon after graduating to pursue a job in an inpatient unit. One of my roles was running 'meal- cookery' groups — which my family says is very funny because cooking is definitely not my forte! My clients were bright people, but in my groups it would become immediately clear that they experienced significant barriers to participation in any of the tasks involved with making a meal — from meal planning and following the steps in a recipe to eating with their peers. This is when I saw the unique value of what we offer as occupational therapy practitioners: we are primarily concerned with the 'doing' involved in any occupation and it is through this 'doing' that we become more confident in whatever it is that we are trying to achieve. I also noticed that many of my clients could not touch, smell, or just be with the food. I began to develop a keen interest in the field of sensory processing and integration. This interest eventually led me to enrolling in the masters' degree program in occupational therapy at the University of Manitoba in 2017, where I completed my thesis on the role of Sensory-Based Interventions (SBIs) in supporting regulation in autistic children and youth.

HOW DOES LEADING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS IMPACT YOUR OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY?

My professional development courses are as interactive as my participants want them to be. I very much believe, that, yes, I am teaching, but we are all learning together. In every single course, I learn from amazing experienced or newly graduated occupational therapists and other health care professionals who are out there working in the field, and they learn from me. So, it becomes a co-created experience of mutual learning and reflection.

I believe that my strengths lie in being a facilitator and in creating a community of practice throughout the two days of my courses. I lead the sessions, but we are colleagues through and through. I really see my occupational identity as someone who identifies and amplifies the strengths that already exist within each group. Each course is never the same because it really depends on who joins us. That's why I love doing them — I equate this experience to spending two days in a wonderful state of flow and human connection.

DO YOU STILL GET NERVOUS WHEN YOU'RE PRESENTING?

Yes, for sure, but I've learned to expect the discomfort. I have probably done over 75 professional development events to date, and I get nervous every time. I will feel uncomfortable and impostor syndrome sets in.

The voice in my head says, "Who am I to be leading this?" But I've learned to expect that these thoughts and feelings will show up and then I push myself to step into action anyways — a strategy has worked well for me so far.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST OR AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST ASSISTANT IF THEY WANT TO START LEADING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS AND WEBINARS?

I think we, as occupational therapy practitioners, tend to undervalue what we do. I think we share a lack of confidence which I'm on a mission to change. We can start by sharing our knowledge and unique holistic insight on human development. What occupational therapists do is valuable for individuals, families, and organizations. We need to confidently advocate for the inclusion of our profession on every interdisciplinary team. If you have a message to share, then say yes to any opportunity that comes your way before deciding if continuing is for you. This journey has been such a gift of professional and personal growth for me — I am so very glad that I was brave enough to say yes!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristin Harold is the Director of Communications and Marketing with the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists.



WORKSHOPS AND ONLINE COURSES

A comprehensive introduction to sensory processing and autism: Towards the development of a strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming occupational therapy practice

This workshop presented by Moira Peña introduces you to sensory processing, recommended assessments, evidence-based sensory-based interventions and strengths-based coaching approaches that you can utilize with neurodivergent children, teens and adults who experience sensory processing differences.



Online delivery –
September 28 & 29, 2023;
March 21 & 22, 2024

Register for this workshop
caot.ca/workshop

