

# NEWS-Line

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**EVEN MILD  
ALZHEIMER'S  
LEADS TO  
DRIVING-TEST  
ERRORS**

**HUMANS ARE  
"INEFFICIENT"  
RUNNERS**

Enhancing  
**Function**  
while Improving  
**Penmanship**

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# Enhancing Function While Improving Penmanship

By Esther Martin



**A**fter having spent 30 years as an occupational therapist, I am more impressed than ever with the variety of skills and knowledge that goes into the work,” states Sandy Purvis, OTR/L, founder and owner of HandRIGHTing, Ink in Ardmore, PA. “We work to help restore seemingly simple everyday tasks that most people take for granted, but these tasks rest on foundations that are anything but simple.

"An occupational therapist's educational background includes neurophysiology, medicine, psychology, sociology and an understanding of how these fields are interrelated," she continues. "We use this understanding to break a task into its components in order to understand and address the roots of the difficulty. I am simply in awe of the significant impact our expertise can have on improving the quality of a person's life. And the best part of it all is that the work is such fun! I get to use every part of myself, every day: my intellect, my personality and my observation skills."

Purvis was inspired to study occupational therapy after volunteering at a psychiatric unit near her hometown in Connecticut during high school. She realized she wanted to work with people in a healing capacity that would incorporate both her scientific and artistic interests.

"It takes creativity and ingenuity to make the therapy not only effective, but interesting and motivating as well," says Purvis. "Sometimes, sustaining a patient's interest is as simple as feeding them. High school boys for example, need to be fed constantly. They get bored easily, and in addition, are feeling a lot of pain over the challenges they need to overcome. With this population, I keep the conversation light and encouraging while raising the bar every 15 minutes — and feeding them — until they get to a certain level. Once they reach a

certain level of proficiency, they see the benefits of what we are doing and become self-regulatory. I enjoy the challenge of relating to people of all ages and understanding their complex drives and behaviors. This, along with the ability to re-invent my career to stay current and involved in the present, is the reason I feel so



Sandy Purvis, OTR/L, teaches pre-schoolers to identify wooden shapes by name.

passionate about my work. It is all about being creative in the moment. Creativity never gets dull. Creativity is always fun."

Purvis began her long and varied O.T. career doing pediatric work at the Nat Polinsky Rehabilitation Center in Duluth, MN, where she evaluated and treated school-aged children in areas of fine-motor and gross-motor coordination, sensory integration, reflex integration and activities of daily living. Purvis went on to become self-employed in the Springfield, MO, area as a contract therapist working with pediatric and adult patients with a variety of diagnoses. Purvis developed pro-

grams for Missouri State Schools (Department of Mental Health, Adult Training Centers), and private boarding homes for the multihandicapped. She provided occupational therapy services in the rehabilitation and general medical departments of St. John's Hospital in Springfield, MO. She has worked in the public school

system with elementary school students with learning and developmental disabilities, using functional and sensory-integration approaches.

Drawing on her extensive experience, Purvis even owned and operated a residential care facility for 11 geriatric women for a time. Her facility was designated a "model operation" by the Department of Aging.

Upon relocating to the Philadelphia, PA, area, Purvis continued to explore a wide range of practice settings. She spent five years working for Jefferson Health Systems, serving the Paoli and Bryn Mawr hospitals in outpatient hand clinics, on general medical floors, in pediatric and home health departments. Next she provided treatment for multihandicapped children and adults at a large, private residential community in nearby Berwyn.

In the residential setting, Purvis got a chance participate in equine therapy in addition to providing more traditional O.T. services. She saw how adaptive horseback riding helped disabled children develop

postural control and sitting balance. When Purvis moved on, this time providing occupational therapy to grade-school children in a large public school system, she found that many youngsters were referred to her for handwriting difficulties. She based her treatments on the Handwriting Without Tears™ curriculum, and maintained student attention using sensory-regulation strategies. She became so successful at treating handwriting deficits that she began presenting lectures and handwriting workshops for educational and corporate professionals around the country. Among these presentations were daylong workshops for Jan Olsen, the founder of the Handwriting Without Tears™ method.

So great was Purvis' ability to effectively treat handwriting cases that she launched her own service corporation, HandRIGHTing, Ink, six years ago. The company has studios in two locations: one in nearby Ardmore, PA and the another in Berwyn. The mission of HandRIGHTING, Ink is to help improve penmanship in clients aged four years to adult. Purvis employs O.T. professionals and assistants to assist clients in after-school and summer group classes. She enforces a 2:1 ratio of students to teachers. Children can also get individual sessions at either of the two studios or in private schools.

Purvis also offers individualized adult instruction. HandRIGHTING,

Ink offers handwriting clinics for physicians at hospitals on a contract basis. Professional workshops for educators are also available on a variety of topics, including: Pre-Writing Skills for Early Learners; Foundation Skills for Handwriting; and Regulating Your Student's Ability to Focus and Attend, among others.

"Handwriting is not an easy task for a large number of people,"



*Purvis instructs a kindergarten student in printing lower-case letters. A lollipop can boost a child's ability to focus.*

explains Purvis. "There can be ocular, perceptual, grip, attention, bilateral or postural difficulties involved. Our role is to uncover the underlying problems and help our clients build the foundation skills they need to become legible and efficient at handwriting."

"Most of our clientele are school-age children, but we also work with a number of adults," she adds. "We offer group sessions as well as one-on-one sessions. However, whether a client is seen in a group or alone, we diagnose each person

as an individual. During a diagnostic session, we look at each aspect of the task to locate the source of difficulty. We look at the physical aspects: how the person is gripping the pencil, whether they use three or five fingers, for example. We look at the visual perceptual aspects: is the individual reversing 'b' and 'd,' or confusing '5' and 's'? Another aspect includes ocular motor skills: does the client have trouble maintain-

ing eye focus at close range? Often, we see this difficulty in young children who have a lazy eye, or for whom each eye focuses in a different direction. We have simple exercises to help us spot these types of issues, which can be subtle. If we do spot such a difficulty, we then refer the child to a developmental optometrist.

"We look at children's attention span and their ability to stay on task. A number of children have issues with these abilities that may or may not be

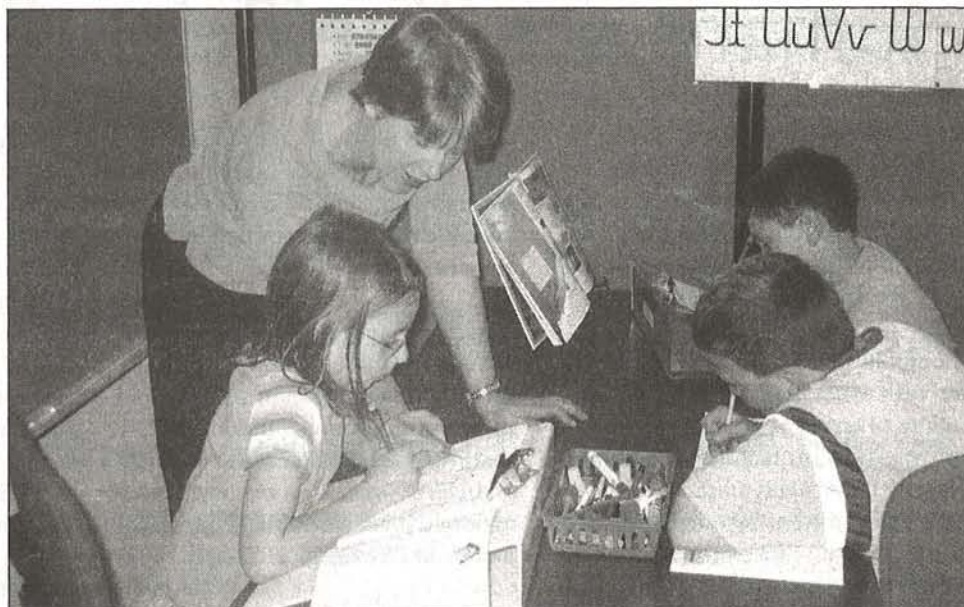
related to attention-deficit disorder or dyspraxia. We look at the strength of the fingers and the movement patterns. Some people have difficulty with slow sustained motions and work in ballistic patterns, or concentrated bursts of strength. Sometimes a person will write using whole-arm motions, but when asked to move their fingers in isolation, they cannot generate the strength. Other times, people can have difficulty with their mind-body connection: they have a hard time slowing down their minds so that their bodies can catch up. We look at whether the client's dif-

difficulties stem from postural problems or from a need to move. Some people's nervous systems are lulled by motion.

"After the diagnosis, we provide opportunities for our clients to work on their own particular challenges," continues Purvis. "We try to make these activities fun. For example, we may give a child a lump of silly putty in which they must dig for treasure using their pinching muscles to strengthen their fingers. Another example may be to teach them a penny-flipping game to help them with their fine-motor skills."

One client for whom Purvis' resourcefulness proved most beneficial was a five-year-old who received treatment at home. He was having a hard time with letter formation, and would make huge capital letters using whole-arm motions. Purvis listened carefully as the boy's mother described some of the other difficulties he was experiencing. Apparently, this child was very particular about clothing and would wear only specific fabrics: although he was five years of age, the boy not only did not dress himself, but also fought being dressed or undressed.

Purvis had just attended a program on sensory integration conducted by Bonnie Hanschu. During this seminar, she had become acquainted with the Wilbarger technique, a brushing technique in which the therapist or parent uses a soft brush to firmly massage the child's arms, back and legs, using sweeping strokes and avoiding the stomach and face. With his parents' permission, Purvis tried this technique on the boy, along with employing



Purvis guides a cursive handwriting group.

special joint compression to all his joints. This combination of therapeutic techniques helps enhance body awareness while providing a focused and quiet sense of stability. This promotes an increase in sensory connections from the skin to the sensory cortex of the brain.

Purvis taught this two-pronged treatment to the boy's parents, who went through the regimen with him every two hours during the day for one week. After only one week, the child was getting dressed independently without a fuss. He also showed significant improvement in his fine-motor development: he could color in a coloring book and stay almost completely within the lines.

"We received a lovely thank-you note from this boy's family," recalls Purvis. "They wrote that the treatment was like a miracle, and that they will never forget what we were able to do for their son."

HandRIGHTing, Ink has also had dramatic successes with adult clients.

"Adults are always a lot of fun to work with," says Purvis. "They are highly motivated and work very hard."

"We can often achieve big changes in as few as four hours. One physician made a joke that after his session with HandRIGHTing, Ink, the pharmacist was going to think someone stole his prescription pad!"

*Sandy Purvis, OTR/L, earned her bachelor of science degree in occupational therapy from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She is jointly certified through the University of Southern California and Western Psychological Service as a Sensory Integration Certified Therapist. She is also a Certified Interactive Metronome Provider. In 2003, her company, HandRIGHTing, Ink, received Philadelphia Magazine's "Best of Philly" Award for Best Summer Camp, Pre-Med.*

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