

# A Therapeutic Experience at **The Ceramic Garden**

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## PLAY WITH CLAY

### Therapeutic benefits as observed by an occupational therapist

Bethany Garofala

“By virtue of our biological endowment, people of all ages and abilities require occupation to grow and thrive; in pursuing occupation, humans express the totality of their being, a mind-body-spirit union. Because human existence could not otherwise be, humankind is, in essence, occupational in nature.”

-Hooper & Wood (2014, p. 38, as cited in American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014, p. 53)



**Mind-Body-Spirit-Clay** The Ceramic Garden utilizes the occupation of leisure with a holistic approach to revitalize the mind, body, and spirit through Play with Clay: Pottery Wheel & Sculpture. First time clients encounter an unrealized opportunity to grow while returning clients participate in a satisfying experience of grounding, connecting with the Earth’s natural clay through direct and sustained skin contact. The tactile sensation of throwing and shaping this soft, earthy, mineral based clay allows for an opportunity to let go and release any feelings of tension. The soft whir sound and vibration of the spinning pottery wheel provides a calming auditory, tactile, and visual experience guiding the nervous system towards a state of equilibrium. Those who prefer the visual stimulation of this activity engage in visual motor skills and eye-hand coordination while those with closed eyes and focused breathing facilitate enhanced body awareness, the mind’s picture of the body parts working together. The movements used in a coordinated manner by the hands develop fine motor skills and the hands working together in bilateral coordination fosters the integration of both sides of the body and brain. This integration is necessary for self-regulation and increased awareness. Muscle groups surrounding the joints co-contract, working together at the midline of the body to provide stability. Maintaining a stable body position while manipulating the clay aids in a balanced distribution of one’s energy known as centering. Centering is an essential step to the even distribution of the clay and is the result of a balanced body and mind. The process of handling the clay while throwing and sculpting provides a self-directed therapeutic opportunity to adjust one’s state of alertness with one’s occupation, revealing a greater sense of emotional, mental, and physical responses leading to improved self-organization. Being in this state of increased mind-body awareness connects humans to spirit, stimulating expressive life force, enabling enhanced overall well-being, and providing the power to experience growth and transformation. Every individual who finds a way to access this state regularly and manifest a better life creates a ripple effect on the lives of those around them. This

ripple effect caused by the experience of uniting the mind, body, and spirit can foster a healing process through which human beings connect, show love and compassion towards self and others, and generate healthier, happier life experiences for all.

**Opportunities to Grow & Thrive** The owner of The Ceramic Garden, Christine Terranova, has been providing the local community with a safe, creative learning environment for 19 years. This studio is a place where children and adults of all skill levels are able to meet while creating original art, producing functional take-home designs, and connecting with others who share similar interests. It is a unique space where the busy-ness of everyday life can be left at the door allowing the client to enter a world of limitless possibilities. Participating in the clay programs at The Ceramic Garden, such as Pottery Wheel and Handbuilding/Sculpting with Clay, aids in self-regulation, bringing one's mind-body-spirit into a unified harmonious whole. Over a short time, clients appear to be very comfortable and eager to share about themselves and their learning process during the clay sessions, proving Ms. Christine's commitment to providing an open, encouraging, safe and non-judgmental space where all can be who they are and witness who they can become.

#### References:

- Wilson, S.A., & Landry, G. (2014). *Task Analysis: An Individual, Group, and Population Approach* (3rd ed.). Bethesda, MD: American Occupational Therapy Association.
- Hooper, B., & Wood, W. The philosophy of occupational therapy: A framework for practice. In B. A. Boyt Schell, G. Gillen, & M. Scaffa (Eds.), *Willard & Spackman's occupational therapy* (12th ed., pp. 35-46). Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. (2014, p. 38, as cited in *American Occupational Therapy Association*, 2014, p. S3).

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**Bethany Garofala**, OT, completed her Bachelor of Science degree with a minor in Human Services in 2003 at Elizabethtown College. She passed her Board Certification Exams in October of that year. Her fieldwork includes working in both inpatient and outpatient mental health facilities with young adults and adults, adult and geriatric short-term rehabilitation, and pediatric early intervention in a special education preschool setting. Clinical focus includes working with preschool and school-age children, who have developmental delays, physical disabilities, and sensory processing disorders, in both the school and home care settings.

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