

# CHANGING THE WORLD'S HEALTH

## Occupational Therapists in Retirement: Activists in Action

Roma Maconachie and Jacky McGarry

By Fern Swedlove

For occupational therapists Roma Maconachie and Jacky McGarry, retirement did not signify an end to their careers but rather an opportunity to further enable occupations. These two women met when they were on the CAOT board of directors in the 1980's. Both natural and passionate leaders within the occupational therapy profession, they forged a friendship that has endured over 25 years. The journey of these two women - both born in England, both now living in Canada for many years and both lifelong leaders - would eventually lead them to their present occupations. This is an inspiring story of how people continue to find fulfillment in their retirement years and the meaning of friendship.

Roma Maconachie's volunteer work takes place in a suburban 30,000 square foot warehouse in Winnipeg, Manitoba with the International HOPE (Health Overseas Project Education/ [www.internationalhope.ca](http://www.internationalhope.ca)) organization that sends discarded medical and therapeutic equipment primarily to third world countries. After retiring as program manager with Community Therapy Services in 1999, she began to work with this organization as director of volunteers, where she could apply her management skills and her occupational therapy knowledge. Roma Maconachie is now the vice-president of the organization. Not only is this unique organization meeting a huge need in these countries for medical supplies and equipment, but it is also helping the local environment; much of the donated items would eventually end up in the garbage as they are no longer needed or are obsolete.

International HOPE relies on donations from a variety of sources, such as hospitals and nursing homes throughout the country. The warehouse is stocked with items ranging from surgical supplies to walkers and wheelchairs. Some of the items are transported in suitcases by individuals traveling to work in these countries. But most of the items are sent by containers. The containers then



Roma Maconachie



Jacky McGarry

travel by "road, rail, sea, rail and then road" says Roma Maconachie to their final destination which to date has included the Ukraine, St. Vincents and Haiti. She attempts to make sure that the equipment will be suitable for the environment and there are the necessary supports in place to maintain the equipment at the final destination. "There is no point sending an electric wheelchair to a home that does not have electricity," she says.

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From January, 2001 to December, 2002 Jacky McGarry volunteered with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Malawi, Africa. Since 1986, she has also been the owner, director and clinician of London Occupational Therapy Services, a community based private practice. Prior to that she worked as the chief occupational therapist in the Children's Psychiatric Research Institute in London, Ontario. While in Malawi, she designed and established a Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) Program for people with disabilities living in the Bwanje Valley. As part of this work, she trained rehabilitation assistants

to continue the program after her term was finished. Jacky McGarry also helped with a number of administrative functions, such as supervising students, fund raising and working with other organizations to coordinate and improve services. This fall, she will volunteer with VSO again, this time in Guyana to help establish an educational program for rehabilitation professionals.

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Jacky McGarry is well aware of the challenges for a white person living in an African community. In addition to the two years with the VSO, she had also lived in Africa, her husband's and children's birthplace, before she moved permanently to Canada. Although she recognizes that her new position will require her to stretch her skill level as she has had no prior experience with needs analysis and curriculum development, she is willing to try. "Surely, there is some way that I can be of help," she says. As occupational therapists are trained to analyze activity, she feels that this will be a useful tool as she begins this new volunteer opportunity.

Even though one person was living in Winnipeg and the other was in London, Ontario and now Kelowna, these two women managed to stay in touch through phone calls, occasional visits and e-mails. As each of them speaks about their relationship, their voices express the sheer delight and admiration for their work and lives; their conversations sing the praises of each other's accomplishments and the valued support that they received over the years. But it was in Malawi where their lives would again coincidentally intersect through the arrival of a shipment from International HOPE for Dr. Steve Mannion, with whom Jacky McGarry was also working. Who would think that their paths would cross again in a sub-Saharan country in Africa?

Although their means of accomplishing their goals may be different, the motives of these two women and the end results are very similar. "Just knowing that there are parts of the world in desperate need for services" says Roma Maconachie "speaks to the importance of what we are trying to do." By providing this medical and therapeutic equipment which is carefully matched to the recipient's environment and

culture, the person's ability to perform their meaningful occupations is improved. For Jacky McGarry, she "believes that occupation is a vital aspect of a healthy life and when this is not possible, people become sick." Through her work in Africa, whether it is designing programs or educating others, enabling occupation is a core value. Ultimately, health is improved through the work of these two women.

As you listen to each of their individual stories, you are struck by the strength of their vision and dedication, as well as how their occupational therapy values have been an underpinning for their work. "Once an occupational therapist, always an occupational therapist," says Roma Maconachie. This is echoed by Jacky McGarry when she says that she "has always felt that occupational therapy is more than a job, it is a way of life." Neither of them sees retirement as a time to be idle; they both feel that they still have much to give. As these two women continue to enable occupation and facilitate the core values of the profession, they will leave a powerful legacy not only for their children and grandchildren, but also for the generations of occupational therapists to follow.