

Podcast transcript

Career conversations: Natalie Knight and Simone Welch

Hannah Spencer:

Hi everyone and welcome to this podcast recorded and produced by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists.

This is one of a series of podcasts which really focus on hearing and sharing the career narratives of our diverse workforce and highlight a whole range of possibilities in occupational therapy.

My name is Hannah Spencer and I'm an occupational therapist that's had the absolute pleasure and privilege of facilitating and capturing these conversations with members of our occupational therapy community.

In this episode, I'm joined by two occupational therapists; by Natalie Knight and Simone Welch.

Let's start with some introductions. If you just wouldn't mind giving us a brief introduction to yourself and your current role or roles?

Natalie Knight:

Hi, I'm Natalie Knight and I'm an occupational therapist that's worked for many years across multiple services in mental health. And I'm currently the Race Equality Ambassador for Public Involvement in Research at Keele University.

Simone Welch:

Hi, everyone. My name is Simone. I'm also an occupational therapist. I'm currently a specialist stroke team lead occupational therapist in London. I've also done some guest lecturing on EDI topics and I also run an EDI incident reporting quality improvement project as well.

Hannah:

So I guess let's start at the beginning. What drew you to occupational therapy?

Simone:

In the beginning, it's probably good to highlight that I didn't actually know what occupational therapy was. So I was longing for a very kind of patient facing career; I didn't quite know what that meant or what that looked like. I did an undergraduate degree in cognitive neuroscience but wasn't really sure how one gets a career after that. So I took the decision after my degree to do some volunteering and also work as a rehab assistant, just so I could kind of understand the breadth of roles that were available within the NHS. And from that I came across lots of different roles, like physio, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy. But drawing on kind of what my experiences were... Doing a cognitive neuroscience course felt that occupational therapist was probably more closely aligned to what I was interested in because it had that element of cognition and it was very

patient facing. So I just took the chance to apply and then, luckily, I was accepted onto a master's program at Brunel University.

Natalie:

So my journey started many moons ago, and I guess I was in a similar position to Simone in that I was exploring careers but at the time, I was looking at working with people with learning disabilities, specifically children. And I think I was thinking of teaching or speech and language therapy, and I was looking at the two. My mom became very ill with chronic rheumatoid arthritis in such a short space of time, she became quite debilitated, an occupational therapist came to visit us and help us with her care. We were young carers as well at that point, for some years, and I think at that point she sort of really came and opened up this world to us of helping us get navigate and help my mom become more independent. And that was the sort of spark, really. But what was the real spark for me was she was lovely, she was great and fantastic, and our lives were changed by her, but she didn't understand my mom's culture and she didn't understand some of the cultural nuances in discussing all the bits and bobs that she was providing. She was pulling out wonderful things like long arm sponges. This is stuff from the old days. Long arm sponges and long handled combs that were very long at that point. And she'd bring in all these wonderful things, but then couldn't understand why we said, well, we won't be able to use that, or maybe that wouldn't be appropriate. And that really sparked my interest and I thought to myself, oh, this is a really interesting job, but how comes she doesn't know much about the culture? And does that mean that there's not a lot of black people doing this? And I kind of then started to do some investigating and I looked at it in line with teaching and other professions and I kind of thought and then when I visited the mental health department, I was like, okay, now we're talking. There was a lovely department. And I thought, great, this is amazing. This career seems more interesting than teaching. And I stopped in my tracks and decided to take a year out, study biomedical science and do it at foundation level to get the access to go into health care and change my course and become an OT.

Hannah:

And I guess you've both kind of pinpointed where it all started and it kind of sounds like you've pulled together lots of strands and found OT. Would you agree with that?

Simone:

Yeah, I think it's like understanding what aspect you're really interested in. And I think it sounds like it's that really kind of interpersonal skills that you're able to engage with people and how they live that I guess, kind of draws us both together in why we took that career path when we were at that fork in the road.

Natalie:

And I think the thing is, I think that's most common as well is that we didn't find it through career development or through other means of educational approaches. It wasn't flagged up at those stages. And I think at that point I'd had numerous career discussions different ways through college, through school. And so at that point it was more of a self discovery thing than being directed, I think. And that's quite common, I think. Yeah.

Simone:

And I guess as well, like you're right.

I also went to a lot of career advisors and no one when I was much younger kind of in high school in

6th form I did consider going into a career in psychology because I think at that stage you kind of have a narrow thought where if you want to be in a kind of clinical career, it's like nursing, doctors or psychologists. And I think for me, the one key thing was I was thinking about working towards becoming a psychologist. And as I did my research, I found there was a lot of barriers to becoming something like a psychologist. And as I researched it more, I didn't actually really understand what being a psychologist really meant. In reality, you kind of think, you know, but when you look into it, you're like, I'm not really sure. And also through that I happened through volunteering, just to be introduced to an OT. He was like, well, what is it about psychology that you want? Or what did you want out of a career in psychology? And I was explaining I was interested in people's thinking skills and their mood and how they do things. And they were like, OT is not psychology, but there are aspects of that career that are kind of included. And I think that was the biggest selling point about OT is when I was looking at all the options psychology, physio or speech therapy, I just felt like OT had that flexibility as a career path to kind of explore and specialise in different areas that might be of interest. And I guess all professionals are very different, but I feel like OTs have a very big range. So like, mental health OT is quite a different role from like a physical health OT or even like a paediatric working in schools or social services. It's just got that nice kind of broadness that allows you to kind of explore within the profession.

Hannah:

You talked a bit about barriers there of barriers that you might have perceived when you were considering psychology. Have there been barriers in the way of you becoming an occupational therapist or during your career?

Simone:

I guess when I was exploring becoming a psychologist, what I did feel is that I knew the program was very kind of limited in the spaces it had. And I did hear that it was slightly harder if you were someone of a black or minority ethnic background especially. I think it's a bit different now, but back then I heard a lot of whispering that it can be a bit difficult, and it kind of put me off. I'd heard a lot of people really try and could spend like ten years, but the competition is just really high and it almost felt like it was a bit of a lottery. And there was also some rumours that people were paying their way in, but there was also that social economic barrier. And I was just like, I don't really want to be involved in this.

And I think because I didn't know about OT, I think I was very naive when I went into it. I didn't really know it as a career or profession, just the kind of small interactions that I had as a rehab assistant and volunteering, which were all very positive. So it was only as a rehab assistant, when I was talking to other rehab assistants that they were like, oh, you've become an OT. And it was often other black rehab assistants who were like 'that's for white people'. And I didn't actually know because I didn't know what an OT was. And they were like, 'yeah, that career is for white people'. And this was after I had applied. So I was like, well, I'm in it now, and luckily I was successful at interviews, so I just thought, I'd see how it went. But maybe to apply in those first stages, for me, there was less barriers because I almost didn't know the rumours, so I kind of went in a bit naively.

Hannah:

And Natalie, what was your experience? Similar?

Natalie:

No, as I said, the discovery that maybe it wasn't inclusive was from my experience, and that was just me sort of all of us sort of sat after going and chatting and thinking, which was nice, but she

doesn't really quite understand, you know, and that was more of me triggering... So I knew it was probably a space, and because I'd never heard about it, that sort of my 18 year old, 19 year old self kind of sort of knew that, what is this? So it kind of I knew that it was a space that potentially, and I could tell from her accent, she was quite middle class sounding and sounded, I thought, well, maybe something wasn't attainable. But when I realised that I just needed to do this step and that step to get there, it was kind of like, well, I'll just get there. But I kind of knew that was the environment I was going into without it being said. So although it wasn't a rumour I'd heard, I kind of knew I was going into a white space. I'd gone into the department and all the nurses on the wards were black, but the department was very much white. So effectively, I knew that potentially this was a career that I never knew any other person had done before, that I'd known in my circles or in my community. So I knew I was going to be one of a few, and I was I was one of two that was black on my course at the time, of the 70 people.

Hannah:

Do you think things have changed now?

Simone:

I definitely think things have changed now. I'm quite similar to Natalie. When I joined, I think my course had there was more black and minority ethnic people, I guess I should say that, but in terms of black occupational therapists, there were less black occupational therapists than there were black and minority ethnic, so there was a few from other minority ethnic backgrounds. But I don't know about you, Natalie, I've grown up in a quite a white majority area within London. So where I went to school, I was always in the minority within my school, within my area. So I think it's something that I kind of got accustomed to and never really noticed that much, maybe because I've just had to experience that all my life. So being in the classroom it just kind of felt like normal because actually what I was used to was actually being in a space where most people were very white, very middle class. That's kind of what I was used to. And I just remember being in the class, I think it was in like I think it was second year and the teachers mentioned something about them and for this cohort we really focused on increasing the intake of black and minority students. And then I thought I didn't even realise because I wasn't even thinking of it as a thing, that was kind of one thing that I noticed that they're actually actively trying to recruit and I think that was kind of the start of where things started to change. But definitely I think doing a lot of work for students there, I do see a lot more diversity coming through and I guess working I've been qualified for five years, there's only been one time in my whole career that I've worked alongside another black OT and that's working in London as well.

Natalie:

So that's interesting because I was in London for eleven years of my career, so I've worked up north, I've worked in the Midlands and I've worked in London and I've been qualified 20 odd years. So in the early days I worked in Birmingham, so I particularly went to urban areas, but I trained in Sheffield, so in Sheffield during my training that's when I realised I was different in the respect of possibly I knew I was going into environments that were going to be challenging. So I think I was in a tiny little hospital in Derbyshire, you might even know it, a tiny little hospital in rehab hospital in Derbyshire. And I remember it was at that moment I thought, okay, this might be where I need to maybe do things a little bit differently or think... It made me think that was the first time it made me sort of think sort of coming from Birmingham in city and kind of thinking, right, I'm going into... and I was raised in a white majority area, but there were no other ethnic minorities on my course. So at that point it was myself and one other, and there was no other Eastern European, no other race, no other group other than the two of us at that point. So I knew I was going into spaces that possibly would be challenging in my role.

So I was first of all always thought to be OT student, was thought to be a nurse, I was a nursing student, or I was a social work student. No, I'm the OT. So that was the first kind of barriers that I would face that I would be seen as not potentially coming from this particular AHP profession, that I was potentially another sector. And that's probably because maybe if I was in non-uniform, that would make it challenging. So if I was in uniform, people would know who I am because I'd have my uniform on, green trousers, tunic. But if I was in spaces where it was not clear and it was non-specific, there would always be the assumption, 'oh, you're the OT'. And I would face that on a regular basis. But I didn't see that as a barrier, but more as a sort of like, okay, yeah. Okay, I'm here, and I am going to talk on the discharge here in the ward round. Yeah, that's what I'm here to do. And I found it quite empowering at first. And I think in those early days, it was a little bit empowering. I knew that I was making change by being there. And I think that was something that I turned it around in my head to be, was that I was there to make change. I was there to say that actually, we're in this space and actually I have something to say that's going to be impacting this case. And I think at that point, I saw myself very much as an advocate going into ward rounds and kind of having an opinion and talking about discharges and things like that. And that was empowering.

So I think my journey at that point was a little bit easier. I think boulders would probably come later on. For me, early career wise, I guess I was a novelty. I was very outspoken, quite, and I was good at my job and I knew that and I could bring something to the space. So it was very empowering, I think, at that point, being one of a few.

But I relished working as part of a more multicultural and multi diverse, inclusive environment when I worked in London. So I came to London and worked very much in spaces that were a lot more I was one of three from all over. We were like a multicultural OT department and that was fantastic. And that was in North London. The conversation was rich and full and people were open minded and really sort of so that kind of really was probably where I grew the most. And that's the important thing about this thing. The more diverse the environments, the more you grow, the more that you do feel that you can find a space that you can belong. And I think that's where the belonging comes in. And I felt like I really belonged in that space and I didn't know I needed that until I got into that space. And that's when I was probably the most progressive, the most dynamic in my thinking. I was probably the most challenged and also did the most good work.

I think at that point, when we dispersed as a department and they had to close the department and the OT department was left and I was the only one left. I had all that history to then build it back up and build those relationships and do quite well. So yeah, I'm probably taking another direction, Hannah but no, I was just thinking what the difference can be to having been in that space and being the only one to be in a space where you belong and you find people that have kindred spirits and minds and thinking...

Hannah:

How has the environment enabled or restricted your journey?

Simone:

I think the environment and the social are two very important things. Like I said, my career journey maybe in terms of ethnic diversity might have been slightly less particularly at the beginning, but because of positive interactions I had still with supervisors, I've actually had less barriers in career progression. So even though my teams might not have been as diverse, maybe the thinking of the team wasn't so restricted or they didn't put those stereotypes on. Like I wasn't kind of seen as... I know I hear a lot of people who, in their career journey have come up with big barriers because of the colour of their skin, what they look like, what they believe. But I don't know if it's like diversity of

thought or inclusiveness of thought of the supervisors that I have had which meant that when I have been very I've been not loud, but I've had the space and the environment to be open about what my wishes are within career development and I haven't really come up to many barriers or boulders that have opposed that. The people have been very supportive of me going for different kind of promotions and exploring different we talked about the pillars of development. I've had space to explore across those pillars, whether that's quality improvement, whether that's research I've been allowed in those spaces and have those opportunities.

That doors haven't necessarily been closed for me personally. But what we know is just because you are under black and minority ethnic, even within our group, we all have very different experiences. And where I did a lot of work with students, what I was also hearing is there is also one it's your team and your environment, the social and the environment, but also there are those personal factors that differ. So for example, I'm British born, I'm black in the skin colour, but I'm British in my culture. I have a very British culture, I do have my Jamaican background that has its influences, but generally in school and the way I understand British culture and rules because that's the culture I've grown up in. Whereas I guess others who haven't grown up in British culture in their person, in their personal aspect, they differ slightly to someone who is British born. And people with accents, I find, also come up with slightly more barriers than you might do in that personal factor. If we're looking at it kind of holistic.

Hannah:

I didn't realise how early you were in your career Simone!

Simone:

Yes, five years qualified. So I was just speaking to one of my previous supervisors and she was like she said the same thing. I didn't realise how early, you've only been five years. But it's positive. And why I've also been quite involved in these kind of topics is to kind of there are a lot of barriers and negative stories. But just through representation I like to speak and say under the right circumstances you can have positive career progression. But recognising the barriers and try and fight that so more people can have similar experiences I think is important.

Hannah:

Absolutely. And I guess a little bit of that notion of kind of if you can see it, you can be it.

Simone:

Yeah, that's what a lot of people are saying. It is possible.

Natalie:

You were talking about the person factors versus the environment and social factors. I can so relate to Simone's journey. I've often said this and when I do a lot of equity conversations, I say I don't represent those that are migrating communities. Migrating communities have had a different experience. Accents, I think, are really important. I think I am more palatable at times because I have got that understanding of the culture and my voice, my tone, all of that makes a difference. And because I was also raised in those I was schooled in England and I've been schooled in a multicultural school. So I understand things a little bit more than some might do that have the nuances that may be reading the room a lot easier. And all those things make a difference. And I don't have that against then my clinical skills, trying to put them into play as well. And I think that can often make a difference with patients and with people.

So, yeah, I haven't faced all the issues. But of course, you know, those issues are there and you're still challenging them. I think that I am a bit of both... its environment and I think what's key to a person's career is management, is supervision. Supervision and management. They are key to anyone's career progression and development within a department. And that's where I have won at every level. I've never won because of who I am, just alone. I've had great supervision and I've had great guidance. People have seen my talents and they've said, okay, even when I couldn't see them myself, they were seen by the people and they were added to my aims and objectives. Can you imagine having your own having what you call the career progression things?

Simone:

PDR?

Natalie:

Yeah. You have your PDR and you have someone going why don't you do this and why don't you do that? There's a difference. Those were my early experiences in my career. So when I got to maybe a challenging supervisor or a more challenging manager, I was able to go, well, actually, this is my responsibility and my right to do this, this and this. If you don't have those early experiences where you've been empowered, you're in a different position when you're challenged. So when I was ever challenged and something was written in my PDR that may be sort of challenged, that was maybe questionable or maybe I was being judged or prejudices were being applied or biased, then I could actually challenge it in a formal way and always use my supervision because I had such good supervision where it was good and solid and gave me those skills and confidence. When you don't have that, you're in a land where you're just subject to the leader or the team and the service that you're in, where your ideas aren't encouraged. I mean, having supervision where your ideas are being encouraged, why don't you try and give that group a go? Then you've got chances to then progress and say, well, of 'I've done this in my department and...

Simone:

Off the back of that, the other thing, Natalie, I just wanted to add to what you said, which I think has also been very instrumental in my career progression. It's not only similar to what you said, but each of my supervisors have also really pushed me to go for the next promotion. And not only pushed me, but they prepped me. I was taught by great supervisors to interview well and also had the kind of foundation and skills and experience to kind of bring to the interview. But not only having that, I had great support in knowing what people want from you in an interview. So someone was literally like, when they're asking you these types of questions, this is what they're looking for. So having all of that prep and experience made me very successful at interview. And I know if you don't have that, you've not got someone on your side saying like, this is where you're going wrong in interview, this is why you're not getting those and being explicit about it, then you're already at a disadvantage because a lot of people, without people realising are having that support. And if you're the one who's not, that's why. Maybe there are some things where some people have more experience than you in interview, but what you want to know is, regardless of whether you get the job or not, you gave a good interview. Sometimes you're just not the best candidate, and that's okay because you want the best candidate to be hired in the situation. But if you could have been the best candidate, but you just didn't really know the interview process, or you struggle with the interview process, that can sometimes mean that your talents aren't kind of being highlighted in the way that they should be.

Hannah:

I love that without kind of prompting it, you've both mentioned the importance of good supervision.

Do you feel that you've been able to be or to bring your authentic and best self to occupational therapy? And do you think that authentic and best self has been nurtured in the spaces that you've worked in? And I'm hearing yes from both of you. I don't know. Natalie, you disagree? Go for it.

Natalie:

No. Yes. Okay. Because I've worked in a lot of environments... My environments I've worked in are varied, so in some spaces that has been the case. Ultimately, I've been able to show up as my authentic self. But to be honest, was I truly my authentic self at those stages? I don't know if I was I was speaking about this before. I think I'm now at the stage where I show up as my authentic self. Now, that could be maturity in my profession, maturity in my age. The fact that I'm now 20 odd years down the line. That could be the case. But I feel I show up now very much as my true self, and I don't do anything that doesn't feel authentically me. And I create a space and environment for others to do that as well. I want to be that example to others as well. And I think, did I do that? I probably did that well; created environments very well for my supervisors or any of the staff that I worked with or supervised myself. I think I've done that over the years. But was I showing up as my authentic to self? I don't think so.

Through the years it's took to this stage to get to that point and a true sense of belonging, that was never always the case. I might have felt more comfortable, but to feel truly like I belonged and I was worthy and I was in that space in my own those years really make that difference for anybody with any personal characteristic. I think that is where I've arrived to. There was glimmers of that through the years, but I think I'm there now.

Simone:

The issue is what is authentic self? And I guess that is the first question of all, because is that talking about your authentic work self or your authentic social self? Because I guess they are two different things. And the question is, which I guess everyone will have a different answer to is do they actually need to be the same or do they not need to be the same? That's still something that I think about and reflect about quite regularly. So, yes, I feel like I can be me. I feel like I can speak and I can say. But I guess there is always kind of like an act, but like not a performance. But I guess we all kind of perform in the workspace, if that makes sense. We're all kind of performing, which means maybe no one is 100% their authentic self.

And I think generally, being from I mean, I can only speak about my own experience, like from black and minority ethnic groups, not just about the workplace, but I guess kind of living as a minority ethnic in Britain, you learn to have that performance, maybe as a thicker skin. You're kind of taught about this is a situation and in certain situations people might judge you differently or you're always told when you go, you have to kind of push yourself a bit harder because you might get overlooked. Or when you go to the shop and the security guard is following you because you're the black person in the shop, it's all those experiences that generally affect how you present yourself in any situation. I don't think it's necessarily just a workplace issue, but then when you're with your friends and friends in the background, you can all kind of relax and bring down the mask a bit more. But I don't think that's necessarily a workplace issue. I think that when we talk about the wider institutional issues that happen, that might be a bigger influence as to why maybe I'll be as much as my authentic self as right now I feel comfortable being not because of the workplace, not because of my colleagues, but just because of how the world is.

Hannah:

What do you wish you'd known as an early career OT or prior to joining the profession? Kind of what would you say to your early career self now?

Simone:

I guess it's about believing in yourself, kind of. I think I've done it and I think I've been fortunate that maybe a bit of me, a bit maybe chance and opportunity fell in my lap a little bit. But I would say to others in their early career that just take the opportunities. And actually one thing I would say is I feel like... I don't know if it's just me, I may be a slightly anxious person at baseline anyway, but I always felt like I needed the black and white answer. And actually, as I grew in my career, I realised I felt more comfortable in the grey. That actually the book or the guidelines isn't going to tell me the recipe for what to do, but it was only going to give me suggestions. I think that's the biggest learning point, actually, if I look back on it, is I was really seeking the definitive answer but we work with human beings and human beings are complex. So the guidelines and the research can't give you the recipe for the right answer, but it's about utilising your tool belt and just being confident to give it a go and being confident to ask of your senior the things that you might want to try but might not have the confidence to do.

Natalie:

So well, I think if I... earlier on, I was reading my dissertation, so if I found it I was looking for something and I found it and it was on cultural competency and I kind of was starting to read. And it was my colleagues I interviewed and researched at the time. And I was looking at it and I was thinking, oh, my gosh, all these themes are still relevant.

What would I tell my younger self? It's not as bad as you think you are. And I didn't think I'd be coming back and we'd be in a space where we could talk so openly about all of these things because back then I wrote that piece of... it is brilliant, by the way. I thought it was great because it really pulled together all the themes, the very themes were thinking about currently. And I wanted to conquer the world at that point and as I did and my younger self, I would say stay as you were. Because I think one thing I always did is I never stayed where I wasn't wanted, I never did what didn't feel right for me to do and I always made sure that I did things from a place of heart and humility and I think I've stuck to that.

So what I would probably tell my younger self than anybody else starting out is be try to be as much of who you are in what you're doing because that comfortableness will enable you to see things in a way that will keep you in a safe space, but also keep you being you. And then you'll see that it was you that got you where you are. The only way that I can describe that is because I kind of feel like if I'd have been anything other than myself, I probably wouldn't be where I am. And I can see that narrow down the line that there's something in you that got you in this space, the passion, the desire and the interest and it's that thing that will carry you through the process. And so I would probably urge my younger self to continue to show up, to continue to do the work and be diligent, be professional, be all the things that you were striving to be and know that that will carry you through and remember why you started in the first place.

Hannah:

Like staying true to you.

Natalie:

Yeah, because I think a lot of us think we have to be something else to get where we need to go then actually the right people, your tribe, the people that see the good in you, the work, all of that will come when you are you and you show up. So that's probably what I would advise my younger self. Yeah, just keep going, keep on keeping on.

Hannah:

What's been the most important or helpful thing for you in your development or progression as an occupational therapist?

Simone:

Just having a go at different things. I think obviously you've got your day job, which you kind of do every day. But what's really kept me interested in looking for me was looking at kind of other aspects of the day job that wasn't just about kind of the caseload, the caseload management. I think I really grew in myself when I worked on neuro rehab. And maybe it's because the way neuro rehab kind of staff and instruction is set out, but it kind of just has the space to really explore and look at kind of why the patient development, quality improvement projects, doing more things, just really like when things came up and they were like, oh, any volunteers? I was like, yeah, like, I have a go. Not always. Some people I think, feel like, oh, I can't because I don't have experience or I've never done this before, but actually in the right team and under the right structure, that's the best place to be is actually doing something with someone who does have the experience. Because that's how you learn. You'll never get the experience unless you kind of give yourself that exposure and then that eventually developed into when I had my own ideas, I could then be like, actually guys, this is what I want to try. And I had more confidence because I took those kind of earlier steps where I just kind of gave things that go under the support of other people and then eventually started to kind of put the question forward myself.

Hannah:

I love that, to kind of put imposter syndrome in a box and just say yes.

Simone:

Just say yes. Give it go. If it's only if it's something that interests you though and I think aligned with your value, with your values, if it's something that interests you, just give it a go. And even if you're like you just want a shadow or you just want to see something, just give it a go if it's something that peaks your interest because you just don't know. I saw I found in life in general, you just don't know where things might lead you. That might not be your end point that you are thinking about, but just by getting...

The Kawa model that you speak about, Hannah, is about the journey and it's not just about the endpoint destination and getting to the end, it's about how you enjoy the journey. So doing these things is what makes the ride a bit more interesting than just kind of like only focusing on oh, this is where I want to be and if it's not to do with that, I'm not interested. But actually other things just gives you other networks and other exposure and just thinking a bit more broadly, definitely the networking definitely coming out of your box, trying things new.

Natalie:

I would concur with all those things they do that they make a difference.

One of the things I would speak to is the relationship. I think in that then you build relationships, other team members, wider team members, wider opportunities will come through networking opportunities, through exploring, you will meet other people, you'll see other ways in which sometimes you can get bit tunnel visioned. You can also try different things to give you different opportunities.

I think if I didn't do the variety of things that I've done, I don't think I'd be where I am now. I've kind of dabbled in lots of different areas and kind of got those skills together and it's helped me to shape, well, what is my direction? what is my focus? what I really want to do. And I think also about a little bit about challenging the status quo.

Simone:

And like you said, Natalie, if it doesn't fit in your values, there can be other teams where their values align with you. It's small things. Like, for example, there is sometimes a culture where, for example, band fives can't have students and all of that. And some people are very rigid in their thinking about band fives can't have students. But I was put in the team as a band five and given students, and I was given a lot of support with that student. I didn't just do it on my own. But like I said, where your interest lies, don't let status quo tell you that, oh, you can't do this because you haven't done this many years or you haven't done this. It's about finding that team that actually says, okay, maybe generally this is what we suggest, but if you want, if it's something you're interested in experiencing, let's try it and speak enough about what opportunities that you kind of want, regardless of where you are in your career.

Natalie:

Yeah, I don't think you can sit and just wait and rely on your manager or somebody to sort of make a difference. I think you've got to do some of that work. And I know that's tiresome, but actually, you do you do kind of have to sometimes say, well, that opportunity is there, and make suggestions and things. And when you're up against barriers, well, okay, how do I get around this boulder? How do I get it out of the way? How do I then shape it? If I'm not going to be supported in this way, how do I then do it where I'm not supported and try and do it for myself and maybe take those opportunities that way? But, yeah, I think that definitely stepping out of your box.

And also thinking about it is not just linear. There are so many variety of us; we're all doing different things. I've worked in the private sector; I've run my own business as an occupational therapist; I've worked in health service, I've worked in private. The variety of opportunities, there's just not one one way pathway. God love the NHS, and it's great. There are lots of opportunities within the NHS, but there are also lots of private OTs working independently, working in business within other sectors, working in education, in training. The variety of career options, especially if you are looking for something and maybe you're not progressing where you are thinking about trying those other opportunities and taking those risks elsewhere. I mean, I've come back to OT, I don't know how many times I've boomerang back and come back into the profession in many different guises and that's the beauty of it. Once you've got it, oh, my goodness; the world is your oyster.

Hannah:

I love the enthusiasm in both of you and just that one of the questions I had was, has there been points where your journey has kind of changed course in a way that's not been anticipated? And I think for both of you, it's definitely yes. Because I've just grabbed opportunities when they've come my way, but I've also not just waited for them to land in my lap, I've made them for myself as well.

What's next for both of you?

Simone:

So, for me, I am currently... so at the moment, I'm in the NHS, I'm working as a specialist stroke OT, one of the band sevens. So I am looking to expand my more leadership skills within the NHS, so looking at some of the more, like, leadership positions that might be a little bit more strategic. So I'm

looking for experience in those kind of avenues, something a little bit different from kind of what I've been used to. But I love a challenge, I love exploring different elements. And just like Natalie says, OT is a boomerang career, so I'm going to give it a go and see where it takes to.

Hannah:

Natalie, what's next for you?

Natalie:

Yeah, I love that. Currently, I'm an apprenticeship lecturer at Keele so I'll be continuing my journey of education and being an educator. I'm also currently working in race equity and the EDI space and also taking those streams and the current work done doing around the framework into the all kinds of Echelons and areas. As I'm having discussions and networks now, I'm also really enjoying a lot of the work of being an OT in other spaces.

I do a lot of voluntary and community work. I'm enjoying my community work and bringing the flavour of OT into that community work and the empowerment programs that we're developing for the young people that I work with in Birmingham. And I think that there's just really that's just the variety in itself.

I just love that I'm at the stage where I can just stretch my wings and I'm doing what I enjoy in lots of different ways, but yes, so I'm not too sure where it will all take me, but that's where I am right now and loving it.

Hannah:

Both of you, is there anything else either of you would add to anything we've discussed today?

Natalie:

I would just say I was just thinking of one of the big boulders that I faced when I first started and I qualified and within six months, I was pregnant and my life changed. So I've done this as a mother, a single mom, a mother with a family. I've done this all the way through my own personal journey and I just want people to get the feel that potentially boulders will come. I think that was the biggest boulder I faced. I just qualified as an amazing job. I was doing really well, and yet it felt like it could have been a boulder, but it actually was just another addition to me to give me passion and a reason to and I was able to move direction. And the flexibility within this career really does make a difference. And that all the skills that we have as OT are so able to be transferred that although it might seem like a boulder can come your way and you can be challenged, you can also make a maneuver around as an OT and learn and move in spaces that will enable you to adapt to your lifestyle. So just don't feel like you're ever stuck in a situation.

Hannah:

Simone, anything that you'd add?

Simone:

I was just going to kind of say a similar thing about kind of boulders in your kind of journey and not kind of get too downhearted about them. I know in the time many of us have had boulders in many forms and we just thought, oh God, I just don't know how to get through this, but really kind of breaking it down and understanding what is it in front of you. And once you understand what the

boulder is, then you can understand what your options are and really understand your options and utilise them. And what Natalie speaks about so eloquently is about how that fits with your values. Engaging in difficult times and challenges is actually experience and it is something that you can utilise and develop your skills with, although not comfortable. And we all hope for an easy free sailing life, and we'd love it, but it doesn't happen in any aspects of life. But just don't let it stop you from dreaming big or dreaming about where you want to get to.

And there is no timeline. Some people do things quickly, some people want to take their time. Some people divert because of unforeseen circumstances. As long as you're working towards and achieving your goals, it doesn't matter when it happens. Do it at a time.

The flow of the river has to be the flow that's right for you. Don't look to other people and be like, oh, but they did this in this time, or they did this in this time. You need to be in the swimming lane, the correct swimming lane for you. And as long as you get to the end, it's an achievement. It doesn't matter that you are in the slow lane, the medium lane, or the fast lane.

Hannah:

Quick fire finish question. Finish the sentence. Being an occupational therapist is...

Simone:

Great.

Natalie:

I believe it's life changing.