



Patsy Brilla helps her patients gain back their independence while finding her own confidence

Story and Photos by Melissa Kramolis

From Hope to Happiness

"I'm very blessed, very blessed," says Patsy Brilla of her life as a mother, grandmother and certified occupational therapy assistant. For the past decade, Brilla has been helping her patients develop, recover, and improve the skills they need for daily living by providing the therapy necessary to get them back on their feet or gain back their independence.

"I can really make a difference in somebody's life," says Brilla. "People want to be independent, they don't want to have someone doing everything for them."

Brilla chose to work in a nursing home setting and has been directly involved in helping her patient's gain back that independence since she graduated from the occupational therapy assistant (OTA) program at WITC-Ashland in 2004 with high honors.

"At first it was hard because I didn't want to see people die," says Brilla. "I would ask myself if I did everything I could to make that person's life better and if I can walk away at the end of the day and say, "yes," then that's all I need."



Brilla credits WITC for helping find her passion and the skills she needed to be successful in her career.

“WITC gave me confidence,” says Brilla. “We are all in our safe little box and it helped me to get out of that comfort zone so I could move and explore other things and without WITC, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Brilla, who got married and had a baby in her teens, dropped out of high

anybody to go to school, everybody has the ability to learn if you have the right push behind you and the right support group,” says Brilla.

AT WITC, Brilla learned the skills necessary to be successful in her career including compassion, flexibility, responsibility and proficiency with documentation, which she credits to OTA Instructor Mari Jo Ulrich.

“Mari Jo is an excellent teacher,” says Brilla. “I wasn’t the traditional



“Learning was addictive and in the right atmosphere, you wanted to learn,” says Brilla. **“Everybody at WITC was amazingly helpful, they would do anything for you because they want you to succeed,”** adds Brilla. “I left there with confidence which I never had before.”

school so she could care for her family.

“Somebody who doesn’t finish school doesn’t have a lot of self-esteem, and WITC really helped me gain that.”

With encouragement from her family, Brilla, who was a 39-year-old stay-at-home mom at the time, took the first step toward furthering her education and passed the HSED exam at WITC-Ashland.

“Once I got my HSED, WITC staff were great coaches and they encouraged me to apply for a scholarship and I got it,” says Brilla. “That was my golden ticket that started my future.”

Brilla went on to explore what career options were right for her by taking advantage of the career assessments at WITC.

“Everything led right to where I am,” says Brilla. “The glove just fit perfectly.”

For the first time in her life, Brilla became a college student and graduated from the OTA program at WITC-Ashland three years later.

“They make it very accessible for

student, I was older and she didn’t teach traditionally,” explains Brilla. “Occupational therapy isn’t structured, everyone’s life is different and so she really prepared me for thinking that way. We had to constantly think outside of the box.”

Without the encouragement from WITC-Ashland staff to continue her education after getting her HSED, Brilla says she wouldn’t be where she is today. WITC gave her so much more than a degree.

Since graduating from WITC 10 years ago, Brilla first worked as a COTA at Northern Lights Services, Inc. in Washburn, Wisconsin, and at Golden LivingCenter – Court Manor in Ashland. She is currently employed as a certified occupational therapy assistant at Ashland Health and Rehabilitation Center where she has been providing quality therapeutic activities to her patients since 2007.

“I love it,” says Brilla. “My patients offer so much and they have so much knowledge.”

Brilla has also been on the OTA Advisory Council at WITC since

2006. The college-wide committee made up of OTA professionals throughout the district is dedicated to supporting the program, solving problems, and finding ways to make the program even better.

WITC enriched Patsy Brilla’s life and for that, she is forever thankful. Brilla says it best when asked for a piece of advice for upcoming students and graduates.

“Trying to juggle daily life challenges of school, family, jobs and the unexpected can become overwhelming. Not one day have I ever regretted my choice to further my education and I will be forever grateful to WITC for guiding me to a profession where I can make a difference in someone’s life. I don’t believe without them, I would be where I am today. With WITC’s supportive staff and self-determination; you will succeed and anything is possible.” ■

For more information about the occupational therapy assistant program, [visit **visit witc.edu/programs**](http://visit.witc.edu/programs).