



OT WEEK

HAND TREATMENT for the 90s

INSIDE:

*LMB Celebrates 20 Years in Business
Cystic Fibrosis Research
Fabricating a Static-progressive Splint*

Lois Barber Turns Purpose Into Thriving Business

By Barbara Harrison Wohlstadter

"I guess my early fascination with the hand has helped shape my life," mused Lois M. Barber, OTR, FAOTA, founder of LMB Hand Rehab Products in San Luis Obispo, Calif. "As a 10-year-old girl I enjoyed carving figures out of wood. I would spend hours constructing detailed miniatures—always with delicate and intricate hands."

That fascination and the results of a college interest inventory test led Barber to San Jose State College for a degree in occupational therapy.

Today, Barber looks back with pride on her more than 35 years as an OT and with surprise at her more than 20 years as a successful businesswoman.

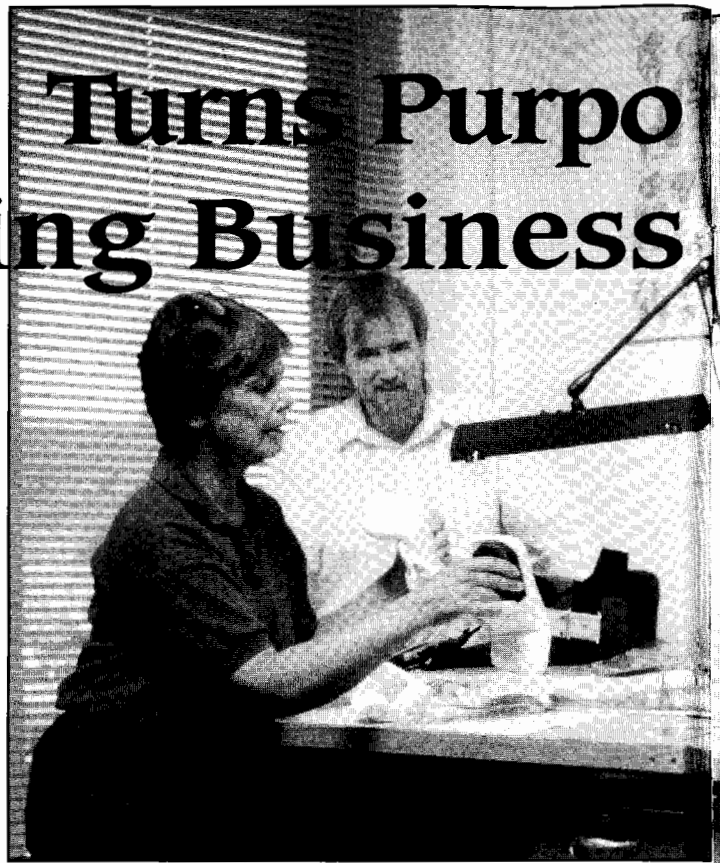
"I never considered myself a businesswoman," she confessed. "In fact, I never thought I had a head for the competitive aspects of the marketplace, and I was right. What I did have—and still do—was the conviction that the concept of combining wire and foam for orthopedic appliances has great potential. When I had the idea for a wire and foam splint, I became almost obsessed with making it available."

That was in 1973 when Barber was codirector of the Upper Extremity Device Research and Patient Engineering Service at Rancho Los Amigos Hospital in Downey, Calif.

"A friend had asked me to make a splint for an in-service training meeting and I didn't want to use traditional thermoplastic," Barber recalled. "I was wheeling a cast cart down the hospital corridor when containers of wire and foam caught my eye. I guess a light bulb just went off," she laughed. "From that moment on, I was passionate about the idea of using wire and foam to make splints."

Janet Waylett-Rendall, current president of the American Society of Hand Therapists, and Beverly Bruce, both OTs at Rancho, assisted her in the product evaluation. Today, her Wire-foam™ concept is trademarked, patented, and available to the industry.

"But I had no desire to go into business," Barber insisted. "I tried to interest orthotists, vocational rehab people . . . anyone who might appreciate the advantage of putting a splint on a patient and shaping it immediately without the inconvenience of special tools or hot water. Even though no one shared my enthusiasm at first, I saw the potential and could not let go of the idea."



Lois Barber works with staff at LMB to develop new products. They have resulted in a successful business celebrating 20 years in

Eventually, Barber's boss at Rancho Los Amigos Hospital, Janet Stone, head of the occupational therapy department, suggested she start her own business. Dr. Vernon Nickel, head of orthopedic surgery, encouraged her and the hospital gave her complete freedom to develop the concept. Barber remains grateful for the support Rancho gave her.

Barber then structured her life to incorporate another dream—to work exclusively with patients with hand injuries—by teaming with Dr. Garry Brody to start a hand therapy center at Downey Community Hospital, Calif. At the same time she started LMB Hand Rehab Products in the garage of her home.

"I worked about three-fourths time at Downey and three-fourths time at LMB," she laughed. When she couldn't afford to have work done by others, she spent Saturdays using presses and tools at a nearby factory. The first month she sold about \$200 worth of splints that she made at home and dropped off at customers' offices on her way to work.

Barber remembers working at the Downey Hand Center, the first hand center on the West coast, as the highlight of her occupational therapy career. "We created a free, flexible, ebullient atmosphere that both patients and therapists responded to and that spawned numerous innovations.

"In fact, many of the hand and finger splints LMB



Photos courtesy of LMB Hand Rehab Products Inc.

Barber's fascination with the hand and her interest in inventing the industry.



Since her company was acquired by Rehabilitation Technologies Inc., Barber is free of administrative duties and enjoys the time to follow her inventions through production.

sells today were developed to solve patient problems at Downey," she continued. "Additionally, our other innovations included the weight well, which is used at virtually every hand center in the country, and the three-phase desensitization test and treatment, which Dr. Elizabeth Yerxa, then at the University of Southern California, helped us validate."

Over the years Barber has also patented finger flexion and extension splints, open-air splints for wrist and thumb, and dynamic spring wire splints for nerve injuries. She also supports colleagues who have developed devices by having LMB manufacture and market them. Lisa Adams, OTR, developed the Desk-rest™, Chuck Brown, OTR, developed an elbow splint, and orthopedic surgeon Roy Meals developed the Dr. Meals Hand Stand.

When LMB outgrew Barber's garage, she moved the company into facilities in both Compton and Atascadero, Calif. By 1981, her salary at LMB was comparable to her salary at Downey, and Barber wanted out of the hectic Los Angeles environment.

"When I moved the company to San Luis Obispo, a whole new world opened up to me," remembered Barber. "I was particularly awakened to the beauty of the earth."

Apparently that beauty so impressed her that she resolved to preserve it when Pacific Gas and Electric Co. built a nuclear power plant very near an earthquake fault

in her area. Her passions again aroused, she became an activist on the issue and later, with the Cold War brewing in the early '80s, headed up the Corita Billboard Peace Project, which erected billboards proclaiming, "We Can Create Life Without War" throughout the United States.

For her efforts, Barber received the Broad Street Pump Award from Physicians for Social Responsibility and was chosen Woman of the Year by Cuesta College, San Luis Obispo, Calif. Today, she remains active with Mothers for Peace and an array of environmental organizations.

While devoting her extracurricular time to political issues, Barber continued her efforts at LMB, which was thriving in its new home. By 1988, LMB Hand Rehab Products employed 30 people, with sales well past the million dollar mark. Her company was well-known and respected in the industry when Barber was approached by Rehabilitation Technologies Inc. (RTI), based in San Diego. Barber liked the opportunities RTI opened up for increased production and distribution of LMB's products and was content that LMB would stay in San Luis Obispo and not suffer major personnel disruptions.

Today, as her company nears its 20th year in the industry, Barber is happy to be free of administrative duties so she can spend time inventing. "I still love to tinker," she confessed, and is currently developing various new products for LMB.

"Looking back, I would say that my years in contact with patients were the most important part of my life," Barber said. "I learned so much about the human spirit from those people. But I feel especially blessed to have been able to blend working with people in the therapeutic setting with working with others in the business world.

"I would encourage any OT with an idea to pursue it. Along the way you may meet some opposition, but you'll be uplifted by the many who support your dream." □

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