

Work in Social Entrepreneurship (W.I.S.E.)

Interview with Iris Kimberg MS PT, OTR

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Tell us about how your business and how you got started in social entrepreneurship?

My consulting business and segue way to social entrepreneurship started the same day, on 9/11/2001, the day of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center occurred in NYC. Years before, I had sold my rehabilitation company and was just finishing the last months of my non-compete agreement. As a long-time downtown NYC resident and business owner, I knew the impact 9/11 would have on the 14 PT and OT practices located in the vicinity would be significant. Within days, I started the *Downtown Therapists Assistance Project*, raised money, and gave ongoing support to the practices, all of whom were shuttered and/or destroyed.

I have been going strong ever since then, consulting to physical, occupational and speech therapists across the country, to help them create, strategically grow, and eventually sell their private practices. From the start, I emphasize to all my clients that they should create a practice that embraces social entrepreneurship as a cornerstone of their core mission. This has proven over and over again to be a key to success. They quickly learn that the door must swing both ways. In order for any community to support your practice, you must support your community. That can be anything from sponsoring a sports team, to participating in career day or a local street fair. Directly

related to that, I always discuss ways to incorporate Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs and Cause Related Marketing (CRM) into their practices. Being philanthropic and promoting volunteerism is good on every level. There is no better form of publicity for the practice, especially when you can tie any public service to a practice and piggyback on those ideas to develop a program that leverages their expertise to address societal issues. Additionally, and especially in a time where staffing shortages are real, being a socially responsible practice helps you develop the “feel good factor” that inspires loyalty and engagement among staff.

How does your business contribute to the prevention of illness, injury and disability for underserved populations?

As a consultant, I am fortunate enough to get to pick and choose the projects I work on and the therapists I work with. I pride myself on making myself available to work with therapists in every single state in the country. Although I am a Native New Yorker and very in tuned with “big city” practices, I have become equally proficient in working with practices in rural communities and inner-city areas, where there are both unserved and underserved clients. I keep my hourly rates affordable. I have no minimum time commitment or long-term contracts so that my services can be accessible to as many therapists as possible. My accessibility to therapists in turn has led to their accessibility to clients. For many practices, we work on ways to reach more clients, especially in the time of COVID, and telehealth has played a pivotal role. I help therapists navigate nuances among

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Figures 1 and 2. Smiles for Speech donated over 500 therapy tools, two laptops, and assessment books valued at over \$20,000.00 to the Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences at the School of Allied Health Sciences (SAHS) in rural Ghana.

insurance companies, how to make sure their clients get the coverage they are entitled to while they get the payment they deserved, getting services through Network Gap Exceptions and create Financial Hardship Waiver programs when appropriate.

I co-hosted a webinar in 2021 on how therapists can create a Non Profit Organization to complement the services already provided, particularly with the incentive to reach clients and families who otherwise might not be able to afford services. It was very well received, jumpstarted some programs, and I look forward to hosting it annually.

How has the financial success of your business allowed you to have a social impact in your community (Discuss a nonprofit, foundation, scholarship or other ways that you have been able to have social impact secondary to having a successful business).

Because I have been in the industry for so long (my podcast is called *40 Years and Counting – What Matters Most*), I have developed a deep-rooted network of colleague and therapists across the country that I call on frequently when social needs arise. One of my most meaningful examples of this occurred in 2017. A NY Speech Therapist set up a consultation with me to discuss how she might be able to take her small practice to the next level. I noticed immediately in the salutation of her email that there was a link to a group called smilesforspeech.org (Figures 1 and 2). When the consult was ending, I went off the clock, and asked her about it. It turned out that she had started this fledgling Non-Profit Organi-

zation with the mission of bringing speech therapy services and training to unserved parts of the world including Ghana Jamaica and Peru. We started talking and I mentioned how I thought an Occupational Therapist could be a valued team member for her projects. She agreed wholeheartedly but said she had no real professional OT contacts. That was an easy fix on my end. I spread the word about her group through my contacts and database and am thrilled to announce that now 5 OTs have participated in her overseas programs to date. I look forward to continuing to work with the organization to help enhance and grow the depth and breadth of what they offer.

Sometimes the causes I choose to get behind are even more personal in nature. There was a therapist I consulted with, a young OT from the Philippines who came to this country and wanted to start a pediatric practice in NY. We worked together on and off for over 20 years. He grew to combine his passion for film with his OT background and founded *Inspire Change Films* in 2007. Combining his OT background with his film making to enhance his connection to people and their stories, in 2010 he directed and produced "The Mountain Thief". This film told the story of the people of Patayas, one of the Philippines largest dumpsite towns. He masterfully told the story of the people of the town who live off the mountains of trash in dumpsite towns but manage to retain their dignity and thankfulness for life. The film had a hugely successful film festival run, won the Special Jury Prize at the San Francisco International Asian-American

Film Festival, The Prix Du Public at CCIFF, France and the George C. Lin Emerging Filmmaker Award in Washington DC. And when he tragically died in 2020 of COVID, I set up a scholarship fund in his memory with the AOTF.

What advice would you give others who want to become social entrepreneurs?

The best advice should be advice that is easiest to follow and implement. I tell therapists to try to create a virtuous cycle versus a vicious cycle in their practices. Simply put, a vicious cycle is one which has a negative impact whereas a virtuous cycle is one which has a positive impact. When you do good for your employees, your clients, your community, you inevitably do good for yourself as well. When you do something, make sure it is not only for you.

What factors have contributed to the financial sustainability of your business?

I try to follow my own advice (see above) and act in truth and transparency in everything I do. At times I have been told to stop preaching and “get off my high horse”, but honesty, that is sometimes where you have the clearest and truest view.



Iris Kimberg

Iris Kimberg MS PT, OTR has worked in the non-clinical aspect of therapy for 40 years. She transformed a one person solo practice into a multimillion dollar rehabilitation agency that she later sold to a public entity. She now consults with therapists in all phases of practice development from start up and expansion to exist strategies and acquisitions.

Iris shares her expertise through workshops, seminars and private consultations. She was on the faculty of the DPT program at Columbia University, teaching marketing and entrepreneurship for 12 years. She was the featured business columnist for ADVANCE, and is often a featured writer for the PPS IMPACT magazine. She has been the featured speaker at several APTA conferences and often does webinars for the Private Practice Section on business related topics. Iris has helped over 1000 therapists nationwide in various stages of starting, growing and selling therapy entities.

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