By Laurence Hammack | The Roanoke Times | Posted: Thursday, May 8, 2014 7:18 pm

Sitting on the floor, surrounded by colorful foam building blocks, Jessica Lumsden seeks the fleeting attention of a 4-year-old.

She stacks one block on top of another. “Copy,” she says. When Connor Munt repeats the simple task, it’s an accomplishment worthy of a fruit gummy reward.

Connor is autistic, and needs almost constant and specialized care.

Lumsden is a soon-to-be graduate of Jefferson College of Health Sciences, where she learned to provide that care.

Today, Lumsden will receive her associate degree from the Roanoke school, joining 141 other graduates as they make the transition from students to health care professionals.

Students will receive their master’s, bachelor’s and associate degrees during a 10 a.m. ceremony at the new amphitheater in Elmwood Park. It’s a different and fitting venue for the commencement, just across Elm Avenue from the hospital building that houses the school.

For Lumsden, the degree will allow her to become an occupational therapy assistant.

Ever since she started working with autistic children several years ago, Lumsden has wanted to hone her skills in helping people with physical or developmental impairments live more functional lives.

“That’s where it came from,” she said of encounters like her recent session with Connor at Roanoke’s Williamson Road Branch Library.

“I wanted to be able to provide as many tools as I could to these children.

“The children are so special,” she said. “They can succeed, but you need the right tools for them.”

After getting her bachelor’s degree in social work from Radford University, Lumsden worked briefly in foster care and then as a phlebotomist before finding her niche at Jefferson.

The occupational therapy assistant program at the Carilion Clinic-owned school is the oldest active one of its kind in Virginia.

It was created in the early 1990s, after an assessment found a high need for occupational therapy practitioners in Southwest Virginia.

In recent years, between 80 percent and 90 percent of the program’s graduates have found jobs before graduating, according to Jefferson spokesman Mark Lambert.

Lumsden is one of them. She has a part-time job at the Connections Achievement & Therapy Center,
working with adults and children, and also will work at ABC’s of Applied Behavior Analysis and Virginia Autism and Behavior Consulting.

She plans to take a state exam to become a certified occupational therapy assistant.

“I feel so fortunate to have recognized my passions and to have the opportunity to realize them,” Lumsden said.

She credited the small class size in Jefferson’s occupational therapy assistant program (an average of 20 to 25 students) with giving her the individual attention she wanted.

Growing up in rural Halifax County, Lumsden experienced health care as a way of life. Her father is the CEO of the county’s hospital, and her mother worked as a registered nurse at a nursing home.

Lumsden was soon volunteering at Red Cross blood drives and in nursing homes. She decided early in life that she wanted to make a career out of helping people.

Her choice of Jefferson, which came after she decided to become an occupational therapy assistant, was made easier by the fact that her mother is a graduate of the school.

“Ever since I was a child my mother and father always told me my decisions and attitude about life will create my legacy,” Lumsden said.

“It doesn’t matter ... how hard something might seem, if you find what you love and try to live with passion and hope, then doors will open.”

*Staff photographer Stephanie Klein-Davis contributed to this report.*