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Sharing nature's beauty through touch, smell and sound

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National and statewide awards honor EIC staff member and '15 alum Donna

Posont for her work as an inclusive naturalist educator and advocate.



Donna Posont, right, leads monthly bird walks for people with visual impairments once a month on UM-Dearborn's campus. Photo by Michael Solomon

Standing on a cruise ship deck recently, Donna Posont felt the wind in her hair, heard the crashes of the waves and enjoyed how the sun felt as it warmed her. Traveling with a group of nearly 25 friends, Posont says she did a lot of observing along the Canadian Atlantic coastline — and she credits her keen senses and a handy tool for giving her the ability to experience it differently than many others.

“Being a blind person, I don’t have the inconvenience of having sight dull my other senses. I’m lucky to appreciate things differently,” says Posont, who always has her white cane to help her navigate new and familiar spaces. Recalling her adventure, she then laughed: “Yes, I got lost on the ship. I should

have had the crew take me on a tour first so I got more familiar with the layout. But my sighted friends were lost all the time too, so I don't think it had to do with blindness."

"People are people and we just have differing abilities from one another. Some of us need to plan differently. Just because you can't see doesn't mean you have a lack of vision."

She's right. And many people have called her work visionary. Environmental Interpretive Center staff member Posont, a 2015 College of Arts, Sciences and Letters alum, is a winner of the 2024 National Federation of the Blind's Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award, which honors individuals and organizations that are a positive force in the lives of blind people. And earlier this month, Posont traveled to Grand Rapids to accept the Michigan Alliance for Environmental and Outdoor Education's Merit Recognition Award. She also was featured in the latest issue of Audubon magazine <<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/donna-posont-helps-blind-people-become-birders-and-whatever-else-they-want-be>>.



EIC naturalist Donna Posont

The second blind person in the United States to become recognized as a certified interpretive guide by the National Association for Interpretation, Posont started a birding program at UM-Dearborn for individuals with low-to-no vision in 2009. Birding by Ear and Beyond <<https://umdearborn.edu/environmental-interpretive-center/education-programs/birding-ear-and-beyond>>, an all-ages bird walk, takes place from 9 a.m. to noon on the second Saturday of the month and begins at the EIC. Posont says sighted friends and family members are also welcome to attend and learn ways to experience their environment without using vision.

"The warmth from the sun on your shoes tells you that you are walking into a clearing. You can identify plants by smell," says Posont. "You know a bird is a mourning dove by the way the wind whistles through their wings when they are taking off."

Posont, a retired social worker who supported school-aged kids with visual impairments for many decades, enrolled in college at UM-Dearborn in 2008. Posont says she always wanted to be a scientist. But in the 1970s, when she first attended a university in her home state of West Virginia with the goal of studying biology, the school could not accommodate her in science labs and classes. So she found a fulfilling career in social work. Experience taught Posont — who progressively lost vision beginning around age 8 due to retinitis pigmentosa — that she could appreciate science outside of a lab. She'd go the nature route.

While on hikes with a friend at the Environmental Interpretive Center prior to enrolling at UM-Dearborn, Posont — who can see light, so she knows if it is night or day, but does not have usable vision — experienced the campus and the natural environment it offers. It was also close to her Dearborn home, where she moved decades earlier when her husband's career transferred the family to Michigan. Learning about the strong environmental sciences programs <<https://umdearborn.edu/academics/program/environmental-science-babs>>, Posont knew UM-Dearborn would be the right fit for her.

She first got the idea to focus on birds when she was a UM-Dearborn student completing an internship at Camp Tuhsmeheeta, a west Michigan outdoor education facility established by the Michigan School for the Blind. To help the children experience nature, Posont got an idea: She'd use bird songs as an entry point. She ordered plush birds that played recorded sounds. They'd listen to bird calls together and she'd make them relatable by assigning English-sounding words or phrases to them. For example, a translated cardinal sound is "Wit, wit! Cheer, cheer cheer!"

Posont says her UM-Dearborn professors also inspired her. As time went on, they became mentors and then friends. Her field biology professor, Orin Gelderloos — or Dr. G as generations of students have called him — taught her about the differences in tree bark and Posont would feel every trunk. She, in many ways, modeled her teaching style after his go-out-and-do lessons. Later, as Gelderloos neared retirement, he and Posont worked together as a team. "He was my eyes and I was his ears. For example, when looking for birds with students, I'd tell the class what bird they were hearing because his

hearing wasn't as strong. He'd see it, point it out and tell them about it," Posont says. "We were a great team then and when I see him, we're still a good team."

Posont says she's proud of the connections she made on campus and her UM-Dearborn degree in environmental sciences with a naturalist concentration, and a biology minor. "Nearly 40 years later, I got that biology education I always wanted," she says. "I also learned that I am a teacher — I didn't realize that before — and how much I sincerely appreciate the beauty in our world."

But birding and the great outdoors is about much more than nature to Posont. It's a way to showcase blind people's unique abilities in a way that increases confidence through experience and education.

"Through the years, I have had the pleasure of witnessing people once inhibited by their unique abilities turn into scientists taking off down the path using their canes. There have been some people who have been afraid to touch new things. Then, all of a sudden, they would be shaping bird beaks with homemade play-doh. And I've seen people who were afraid of speaking in front of others eventually learn to write Braille so they could have notes and share information," she says.

Posont continues to explain that it's not just learning about the birds — it's about knowing what tools are available and becoming comfortable using them. "I always have my cane. I didn't want to use it when I began losing my sight because acceptance is a process. But once I did, I learned this cane is my freedom. It allows me to travel and to ask for help. People who see it are more likely to stop since they realize that I'm blind. I've been able to do so much because of what's available. I want others to know tools like canes aren't a sign of weakness — they are the way to independence."

Posont says knowing what's available — she started receiving the support she needed after joining the National Federation of the Blind in 1979 — and learning from others is essential. Once concerned about the safety issues that might arise with parenting, Posont, a mother of five, learned from her NFB peers how bells on shoes and ultra-specific communication make the job much easier.

Now the grandma of 14 watches her grandchildren and plays games like Braille Uno with them. “I just need to remind them that they need to use their words. I can’t see if they are shaking their heads yes or no,” she explains.

Looking at her life, her travels and the recent awards, Posont says she didn’t know what was possible when she started losing her vision. What she once saw as a disability she now sees as a sense enhancer. She acknowledges that not having sight is frustrating at times, but wants others with vision impairments — when they are willing and ready to accept it — to realize how much can be done without sight.

“The younger person I once was — who cried and cried and cried because she couldn’t fit in — would be amazed at where this difference in ability has brought us,” Posont says. “You can still get married and have kids if that’s what you want. You can identify birds. You can be a scientist. You can be a teacher. You can experience the world through your other senses. That young person I once was would be amazed at what was possible. And now it’s her turn to let others see what’s possible for them.”

Story by Sarah Tuxbury

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