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## Insight out of doors At Perkins center, blind students embrace nature

By Ann Butler, Globe Correspondent | November 2, 2006

Kara Voiland must have passed by the towering horse chestnut tree more than a thousand times over the past decade, but until a few weeks ago she had no idea that it was there.

"Ten years I've gone by it and didn't know!" Voiland said, stroking one of its satiny chestnuts, her face beaming with the thrill of discovery.

Voiland, 19, and Deanna Powers, 17, were getting a lesson on trees at the Perkins School for the Blind.

The Watertown school was established to prepare blind and visually impaired students to lead independent lives. It sees its role as more than teaching academic subjects and vocational skills.

"An appreciation of nature, plants, and flowers is part of the enjoyment of life for everyone, sighted or not," said Barbara Castleman, a spokeswoman for the school, adding that horticulture has been part of the studies since the school moved to North Beacon Street in 1912.

Were it not for the tree lesson, Voiland might never have discovered the soaring chestnut unless she accidentally bumped into its trunk. Even the lowest branches vault overhead and out of reach.

Encouraged by their teacher, Deborah Krause, the students sidled up as close to the tree as they could. Powers, having stowed her collapsible white cane in a coat pocket, gingerly skimmed the bark with her fingers. Voiland, who gets around by wheelchair, pressed her free hand against the massive trunk.

Krause, a horticulture teacher at the Perkins for 25 years, knows how to tap her students' imagination: "This tree is as tall as Howe," she told the students, referring to a four-story building on campus.

"Wow!" they said.

"'Feet' and 'height' are abstract. But going up to their bedrooms on the second floor of their cottages, or to piano lessons on the top floor of Howe -- they can physically relate to that," Krause said.

The Perkins campus is a cozy, compact collection of mostly neo-Gothic brick buildings with slate roofs. They are laid out geometrically, making it easy for students to find their way around. Its most famous alumna, Helen Keller, attended the school when it was in Boston. She would have appreciated the horticulture class.

"Few know what joy it is to feel the roses pressing softly into the hand, or the beautiful motion of the lilies as they sway in the morning breeze," Keller wrote in her autobiography.

### Feast for the senses

Krause said she approaches the horticulture course as she would other subjects.

"It all starts with awareness," she said. "We encourage and foster interaction with the world with the remaining senses -- touch, hearing, fragrance, taste."

Indeed, a walk through the school's new Thomas and Bessie Pappas Horticulture Center -- where the tree tour began -- is a feast for the senses -- velvety lamb's ear, feathery asparagus fern, spicy lavender, trickling water fountains.

The horticulture class meets twice a week, weather permitting. The two students -- a typical class size at Perkins -- plant, harvest, and explore the gardens and grounds.

Krause recalled a previous class when the students picked gomphrenia flowers -- small, reddish-purple pom-poms that grow in pots just outside the horticulture center and are made into gift bouquets.

"Kara was new to picking flowers," Krause said, demonstrating on a nearby bloom. "I showed her the flower is up here, and to feel down the stem until you feel a bump... here... then pull down."

When Powers was asked if she liked to garden, she acknowledged, "I don't like touching dirt."

"But remember how you were when we first started? You've come a long way," Krause said. And Powers agreed.

"Some tactile experiences are just too overwhelming," Krause explained. "They take getting used to."

The 38-acre campus is dotted with dozens of remarkable specimen trees. There's the celebrated yellow wood, a tree that usually sports white, wisteria-like flowers but spontaneously started blooming pink in 1963. Cuttings of the tree have since been propagated under the cultivar name Perkins Pink and are available at nurseries nationwide.

"This is where the kids hang out," Krause said as she sat on a low granite wall under the famous tree. "They gobble up their lunches to have extra time to hang out, be with friends like all teenagers."

"It's very fragrant," Sonia Baerhuk, who manages the grounds, said of the yellow wood. "Alums, when they come back to campus, talk about the smells."

## Signs of fall

Graduate Cafer Barkus, who supervises Perkins's educational leadership program, said just because the blind and visually impaired may not be able to appreciate fall's brilliant colors doesn't mean they don't notice other aspects of the season.

"I'm aware of temperature changes, sometimes warm, sometimes cold," Barkus said. "The sound of the trees in the wind is definitely different, drier. When people are mowing the lawns, it doesn't smell the way it does in spring. It's a drier smell. I smell smoke more."

"As I walk along, I step on dry leaves, twigs, and acorns. The squirrels are more active. I hear them chirping and scampering. Fall is made for walking."

Barkus said he can even tell when birds are migrating. "The direction of the sound is different," he said.

"I'm very aware of direction. I loved geometry in school. I have a geometric or geographic memory," he said. "I'm the official navigator when I'm out in the car with my wife. If she misses a turn, I say, 'Don't worry, I'll get you back there.' I'm like MapQuest."

But Barkus is quick to scoff at the notion that blind people have special ability. "Blindness only categorizes your visual acuity; in other areas, we are as different to one another as any group of people you could assemble."

## 'Feels like a spider'

The next stop for Krause's class was a majestic S cotch pine. As they stood under its umbrella like canopy, the young women explored the evergreen's scaly bark. "Rough and bumpy," Voiland reported.

"What's this?" Krause asked as she guided Powers's hand to a small plaque on the tree. Her fingertips scanned the Braille letters as she read each letter aloud: "S-C-O-T-C-H P-I-N-E."

Krause reached up to bend down a branch bristling with 3 -inch pine needles for Voiland to touch: "Feels like a spider!" she said with a laugh.

"What's this?" Krause asked as she placed Voiland's hand higher up on the branch.

"A pine cone."

"Open or closed?"

"Closed."

"That's right. It's closed. It hasn't dropped its seeds yet."

Krause then engaged Powers: "Deanna, there's something all around your feet that fell from this tree. Feel around. They're everywhere."

Bending down, Powers's hands swept back and forth, hovering just above the ground, but settling on nothing.

"Keep trying," Krause encouraged. Again, Powers's hand passed over pine needles, pine cones, and manicured blades of grass.

"We'll cheat a little today," Krause said as she curled the student's fingers around a small object she plucked from underfoot.

"What is it?" Krause asked.

Powers fingered the delicate, slightly prickly item. Then, after passing it under her nose, she said: "A pine?"

"A pine cone," Krause said.

## **Overcoming fear**

Bark -- shaggy, smooth, and papery -- was the subject when Perkins's other horticulture teacher, Marion Myhre, took students out on a tree tour.

"When I said this tree is shaggy, which has an abrupt feeling, they were hesitant to touch it; if I said smooth, they'd go right at it," Myhre said. "They were also hesitant to touch white paper birch, which made a sound. Our maple is papery and shaggy and they were really resistant, afraid of hurting their fingers."

Myhre explained: "They're used to bumping into things and become protective. Think about yourself: Would you hesitate to touch something if it's in the dark, inside a bag, the haunted house trick?"

So, one of the goals of teachers and therapists of blind and visually impaired students is to build trust.

"I might place my hand under their hand and say: 'Help me put this soil in the pot, or put my hand on this tree,' " Myhre said. "And they're like, 'This is kind of OK,' and eventually they might touch it, too."

"On the other hand, some of my students love the feel of the prickly strawflowers and seek out that sensation. It's very individual." ■

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