

A Blind Canadian Senior



by Thelma Fayle, August 2020

Editor's note: This article is written by my friend who inspired me as a fellow writer. Thank you, Thelma, for your encouragement and support over my six-year university journey.

In 1965 James Brown released a raucous tune called Papa's Got a Brand-New Bag. Most North American boomers likely remember dancing to the rowdy number. The Grammy-winning lyrics are about an old man, brave enough to get out on the dance floor of a nightclub. He decided to show a few younger people that he still had some good moves. Brown's song concludes that Papa was "out-a-sight" – very cool – in the hippie-lingo of the 60's.

The interpretation reminded me of *The Blind Canadian* magazine editor Doris Belusic. In her 60s, Doris graduated in 2019 from the University of Victoria with a BA, majoring in writing – 40 years after she learned that she would go blind with an eye disease called Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP).

Since my friend decided to go back to school as a mature student, I have heard several people comment: "what a waste of time – why bother with going back to school when you are in your 40s or 50's or 60s" – or at 88, as my mother was when she took her first UVic class. As if an education has no value to a person late in life; or worse, offers no value to society.

Over six years of classes, I have watched Doris, a quiet woman who spent most of her career as a hospital unit clerk, go from being nervous about memorizing a campus route from the bus stop to the classroom of her first Writing 100 course – to skilfully writing a moving poem about the tragedy of a lucrative industry centered around the cruel shearing of shark fins used to make a sadly sought-after, hoity-toity soup.

At the beginning of every term, she fretted over unfamiliar and intimidating university procedures and feared she might not be able to do the course work. "The requirements are high level," she often noted as she checked out each new syllabus. She felt she wasn't as bright as a

few of her much younger classmates. She never compared herself to the larger number of students who produced less interesting work than hers.

But slowly she began to explore. She became a reader, she thoughtfully listened to the perspectives of her classmates and her professors, and she broadened her thinking. After sixty years of being on this earth, her evolving ideas led to an entirely new worldview. She learned to get comfortable reciting her poetry at public events and she began to write powerful articles on a variety of issues. She learned to be able to say: “I am a poet” and “I am a writer”. She also learned that she is smarter than she knew. Doris never mentions it herself, but the woman pulled off several A’s.



Doris with UVic Chancellor, Shelagh Rogers and Thelma Fayle.

She steadily persisted and mastered the campus environment – as a high-functioning and confident blind woman.

It was fun to see a mature student work so hard to accomplish her goal. I observed the value in having the courage to learn at any time in life. A mature student doesn’t need the credentials to earn a living – the learning exercise is not for commercial benefit. It is learning purely for the sake of challenging and enriching one’s own point of view. It seems a more useful choice than chalking up three hours a day on Facebook or Twitter.

How can a person lose – at any age – by choosing a path that leads to owning a better set of critical-thinking skills? I have a feeling there are poems and articles and even books in the new graduate that could take the house down if she decides to write them.

As I watched my friend do the hard work entailed in earning her degree, I was frequently reminded of entrenched oppressive attitudes among the sighted when it comes to misunderstanding the potential of blind Canadians. Many people simply don't know any blind people and consequently often underestimate a blind person's capacity.

Not only did the mature student learn more about our world through her course loads, but in her strong and gentle way, she left a wake of fresh and friendly understanding about blindness issues with the UVic students and staff she encountered. My determined friend dispelled more than a few stale societal notions en route to earning her BA. That seems a stellar value from a late-life education.

Doris Belusic has got a brand-new bag.

end