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UMD student's big heart outshines obstacles

Lauren Kotajoarvi

It's estimated that 5.8 million Americans who have vision loss aged 25 years or older have some college education, according to the American Foundation for the Blind.

One of those 5.8 million people is pursuing his college dream here in Duluth.

Sam McCurry is a 27-year-old student at the University of Minnesota Duluth—McCurry started college at UMD in the spring of 2010 and will be graduating this semester, December 2016, with a major in Communication and a minor in Special Education.

In fifth grade, Sam McCurry spent every week swinging at the playground with a boy named Thomas and his paraprofessional. McCurry was told that Thomas won't remember him or respond. Later in the year at parent-teacher conferences, Thomas's parents came looking for Sam because Thomas had been talking about his new friend he had made and not about the paraprofessional that had been with him for years.

"I had spent enough time with Thomas to understand and relate to him," McCurry said. "All of my experiences helped me understand I was meant to follow this path."

As a child in third grade, McCurry helped a kid with severe autism who wasn't developing speech despite being told that hanging out with him would be of no use.

McCurry also stated that losing his vision in 2005 cemented the idea that he was meant to go into Special Education.

At the age of 15, doctors found a brain tumor growing in his optic nerve hormone center. Throughout the duration of 2005, McCurry went through four brain surgeries and various rounds of radiation.

"The tumor was benign and I had various issues surrounding it, but for the most part you handle it," McCurry said.

As a result of the tumor, McCurry's vision started to deteriorate. McCurry is completely blind in his right eye and says the vision in his left eye is like looking out of a straw.

In the fall of 2009, McCurry came to Duluth to participate in adjustment to blindness training at Lighthouse Center for Vision Loss.

"I needed to learn more daily living skills, classes in braille, and I needed the blind transition to technology," McCurry said.

While in Duluth, the question of "what next" was raised. McCurry had planned on going to college but the tumor had put a major roadblock in that path. On an impulse, he toured UMD and absolutely loved it.

UMD is striving to be "disability friendly" with its wide hallways and inside connectivity within buildings. There are also an abundance of resources on campus to accommodate students with disabilities such as the Disability Resource Center.

"When I found out it was all connected it was kind of a deal breaker for me," McCurry said.

This semester, McCurry gets to go to an elementary school twice a week where he works and helps out in a special education room.

"Those days are the best days of the week," McCurry said.

After college, McCurry wants to find a place where he can work and help people with disabilities whether it's in a school or work setting.

"I just want to find a place where I can help people," McCurry said.

As a student at UMD, McCurry has been helping spread the word about people with disabilities.

McCurry is a four year executive member of Access for All. Access for All is a student group at UMD that's dedicated to promoting awareness of disabilities, disability issues, and dispelling the many misconceptions associated with disabilities.

Access to All is where he met one of his best friends and former student, Judy Breuer.

McCurry and Breuer's friendship started in 2008 and was mainly from Access for All.

"Throughout the years I've seen Sam mature and grow up," Breuer said. "He has become more calm, thoughtful and self-assured over the course of college."

"I've watched over the years as Sam has defined his goals and began taking action to pursue his career aspirations," added Emily Norenberg, the director of Disability Resources at UMD and the former advisor of Access for All. "In addition, it's fair to say that Sam has matured as an individual in a broad sense. It's difficult to describe exactly, but he's become more assured of who he is as an individual."

Faculty, friends and students have described McCurry as complex—in the best way possible—lighthearted, kind, outgoing, open, and intense.

Whether McCurry is in class asking whatever questions are on his brilliant mind or at the local elementary school helping young children with their disabilities, one thing is prominent—he brings joy to every situation he encounters.

Story originally posted by LakeVoice News.

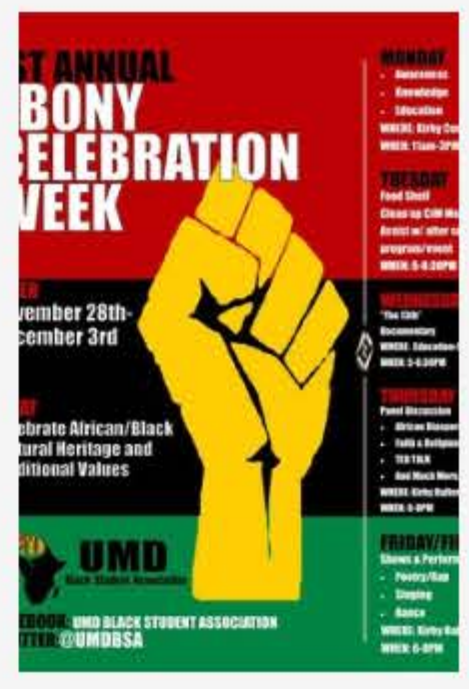


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