

# Anything but Bland

Despite disability, teacher defeats stereotypes, exceeds expectations

KELLYSTARK | Copy Editor

Photo by ISABELLANGUYEN | Photographer

English teacher Marilyn Bland laughs a lot. She cracks jokes. She volunteers in foreign countries. She has raised three children. She has traveled the world. She is a published writer and poet. She is a community college professor and high school teacher. She is fluent in more than five languages. She has been blind for almost 40 years.

"It's like being on a journey," Bland said. "I have a destination. It is just the way I get there is different from the way everybody else gets there. It has had its challenges, but I've learned to do things that otherwise I maybe wouldn't have done if I had been sighted."

Bland, born in South Africa, has faulty retina, but could see for most of her childhood. As she grew up, her retina stayed the same size. She has had eye surgeries to try to correct her retina, but none thus far have provided her with sight again. Bland has had to re-learn everything she could do while sighted and then some. When her first child was born, she had already lost her sight so she had to learn to care for a child while blind.

"There were the same ups and downs with children, they grew ill, and they attended school," Bland said. "I was dealing with the same issues that sighted parents did. And then of course when friends came home, they would say to my children, 'Oh let's do this,' and 'Let's have another cookie, your mother won't know because she can't see.' My children wouldn't dare, because they knew I would know."

Her children are older now and out on their own, but she still continues to look after teenagers and kids. Aside from teaching high school and college, Bland also volunteers in northern Uganda in Gulu, teaching orphans in the wake of the genocide and hunger that has affected Uganda.

"What struck me about the teaching this time I went there, was these students had no notion that the earth was round," Bland said. "So we took a blow-up globe, and they were incredulous because they didn't realize. They put their arms around the world and figured

out where they were on the map. So this was a really new way of learning for them."

Bland also has made several lasting impressions here. English teacher and Bland's close friend, Karen Scanlan, is inspired and motivated by Bland's strides and positive spirit. For Scanlan, Bland is not just a colleague. Both classrooms are joined by a small storage space, so they often talk and interact several times a day.

"Ms. Bland is an amazing person who has been through a lot in her life," Scanlan said. "Out of all the students and adults that make excuses, this is a woman who never makes an excuse. She does not use her disability as an excuse."

Scanlan is also inspired by Bland's compassion and deep concern for students. In her 13 years at North, Scanlan says such care and emotion is hard to come by.

"It's just amazing to watch her on a daily basis," Scanlan said. "She wants [her students] to be so successful because she knows they can be. If you look at her and all the things she's accomplished, our students can do it, just like she can do it. I think Ms. Bland is a perfect example for even when you have struggles and constraints and restrictions, it is possible to overcome them."

Bland has a master's degree in Language and Literature and is currently going to school for her Ph.D. in Literature and Translation at the University of Texas at Dallas.

"We're given a textbook as a student, even for a master's degree or anything in higher education," Scanlan said. "You can't get most of these books in Braille, so she has to scan every page so that her computer can read it to her. That's a very time consuming process. A lot of people don't think about the time it takes to do stuff like that."

Despite the processes she has to go through to live normally, Bland's positive attitude never falters. She continues to learn and grow as a person through her experiences, struggles and her contact with people and students, not only around the world but



in the States too. The biggest thing she has learned though, is to cope with doing things a different way.

"I don't want people to think I don't have bad days," Bland said. "Everyone has bad days. I keep very busy and I always have projects that are engaging and that are meaningful to me. And by sharing these and being involved with other people, and reaching out to them, it kind of helps me realize that I'm not the worst off. There are other people who are much worse off than me, and I hope that in a small way I can maybe help somebody else not to feel they're the worst off."

Bland enjoys interacting and learning from and with students from all over and hopes they do not misunderstand her disability.

"I hope they don't have a phobia of having a blind teacher," she said. "One doesn't know how students will react when they first come to you, but I hope that students don't have a fear or an inhibition. I hope they soon learn that I am a person before I am a blind person."

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