

Retired hospital nutrition scientist savors new challenges as an art museum docent

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Carol Porter was conducting a docent tour in the American collection of the deYoung Museum when a married couple of Iranian descent, recent emigres, asked her a question. â??What is the difference between Protestants and Catholics?â?•

She answered the question to the best of her ability, trying to keep it concise in deference to her other tour guests. Afterwards she reflected on how thrilled she was to live in a place where such a discussion was welcome.

â??The biggest joy to me of being a museum docent in San Francisco is to be able to have these kinds of discussions with diverse groups of people,â?• said Porter



Carol Porter trained for two years to become a docent with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Photo by Jan Robbins

She started thinking about becoming a docent towards the end of her career as director of Nutrition and Food services for the University of California San Francisco Medical Center. â??The favorite part of my job was teaching and the people,â?• she said, along with research, and outside of work, travel and art â?? all important factors for a successful docent.

She was accepted into the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco docent program in 2011, after waiting five years from retirement for a new training program to start. â??The program is a two-year study of art history and culture, including weekly seminars and lectures, with papers to write and oral presentations

to give for evaluation.â?•

The two-year intensive covers ancient, European, American, Contemporary art as well as art of the Americas, Oceania and Africa. Following the two-year core, there is an additional year of specialty training in decorative arts, photography, works on paper, porcelain or textiles and training for school group tours.

People in her class came from all backgrounds. A few had art history backgrounds but most came from careers in education, medicine, law, technology, business and finance. Some were still working. â??What they had in common was an interest in art and a desire to translate it in a way that would appeal to the public,â?• said Porter. It was a rigorous program, but few were deterred. â??In my class we had 100 people accepted into the training program and 70 completed it,â?• Porter said.

Porter has been one of the seminar leaders in the current class of docents â?? for the American & Contemporary Art semester. She called it â??paying backâ?• for all of the time the other docents had spent training her.

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Porter, 78, grew up in Iowa City, home to The University of Iowa, where her father was a professor of microbiology. â??It wasnâ??t as liberal as Berkeley, but it was relatively moderate on the left side of things â?? different than most everything around it.â?• Porter went through high school and college there, earning Bachelor and Master of Science degrees, both in nutrition.

After completing her clinical training at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, Porter accepted a position as a research dietitian at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. After two years, she moved on to a similar position at Hammersmith Hospital and Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London. â??It was experiencing Londonâ??s ethnically diverse population that convinced me that I wanted to permanently live in that kind of city.â?•

When Porter was offered a job as a clinical nutritionist at UCSF in 1969, she was thrilled. â??In addition to being in an interesting place to live, I also wanted to be in a more moderate climate, and San Francisco was it.â?•

It was towards the end of her 40-year career at UCSF that Porter thought about what she would like to do in retirement. She assessed her likes and skills. â??I always loved art. I was curious about other countries and their cultures.â?• With all that, and her love of teaching, being a museum docent fit the bill.

â??The training was a wonderful experience. They brought in great lecturers from California universities and sometimes from other places in the country who shared their knowledge about art and the history of the cultures where it was created.â?•

For hands-on learning, trainees were organized in seminars of 12 to 15, led by two docents. â??We wrote one paper every other week where we focused on the elements of the art (line, color, perspective, etc.), the medium used, the narrative, how the work of art fit into the period of history when it was produced, and the artistâ??s background.â?• Trainees then had to present the most important information in an engaging way to the rest of the group, often within a strict time limit.

In addition, Porter collected fun facts. â??When I was putting together my presentation for the Early Rubens special exhibition, I kept noticing the same silly dog in his paintings and I thought that had to be Rubenâ??s dog, so I pointed that out.â?•

Porter said the key element to becoming a successful museum docent was learning to engage the people in her tour group. â??The mistake novice docents make is to try to memorize a complicated script and regurgitate tons of information. You can just watch peopleâ??s eyes glaze over.â?•

Docent trainees are taught communication skills to help them make the educational experience come alive. They are encouraged to ask their tour guests questions such as: Step into the picture â?? can you imagine being there â?? what would that feel like? If the artist had used this color rather than that color, how would it change what you see? What emotions do you see in the facial features? How does the artist foster communication between his subjects?

â??My job as a docent is to get my participants to come back to the museum, educated in a way to see things in the art they wouldnâ??t otherwise see,â?• Porter said. â??I want them to be independent viewers who can look at works of art with a critical eye.â?•

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By mid-training, the would-be docents start leading half-hour tours, focusing on three or four art pieces. Gradually, they work up to 45 minutes, which includes the amount of art seen on a regular tour. Docents work in both the cityâ??s fine arts museums â?? the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park Ââ?? giving tours of the permanent collections and those of the special exhibitions.

Docents are required to conduct 24 tours a year. About half occur in in the permanent collection, where they guide adults or school children in addition to specialized tours, such as those for people who speak different languages, or people with early dementia, or difficulty hearing or seeing.

Then there are the special exhibition tours, guided in-house. But some docents give talks in the community about the exhibition, encouraging people to go see for themselves. Porter also brings her friends to the museum for one-on-one tours, a secondary benefit of being a docent.

Both the tours and the Art Talks take a considerable amount of time to prepare. Most recently, Porter did one for the Early Rubens exhibition at the Legion of Honor. â??I started working on it three months in advance. The first month I worked 10 hours a week, the last two months, I worked almost full-time.â?•

For these talks, docents must learn about the artist, the time period of the work and the most interesting way to describe the art. They must find good images and put together Power Point or Keynote presentations that have a theme and make sense to the audience. â??I was familiar with this process and the technology from my career, but if a docent is not, we assign mentors and work with them to learn how to do this in the most effective way.â?•

The Fine Arts Museums has about 100 clients for outside talks, including libraries, senior programs and retirement communities, businesses, and menâ??s and womenâ??s groups. â??We go all the down the peninsula to Cupertino, up to Sonoma and over to the East Bay.â?•

Porter is not intimidated by challenges. She had plenty climbing the career ladder at UCSF while being married and raising twin daughters. â??I got married in 1970 and that lasted 13 years.â?• Being divorced, she wanted a better income, so she set her sights on a Ph.D. in Nutritional Sciences at the University of California-Berkeley. It took her 10 years.

â??I took prerequisites at night at City College San Francisco for three years, and then I studied seven years at Berkeley to earn my doctorate.â?• During that time, she also took a five-year leave of absence. â??My grandmother left me some money which really helped get me and my daughters get through financially.â?•

During the last two years of her doctoral research, Porter went back part-time to UCSF and resumed full-time in 1987 at age 37. In addition to directing the provision of nutrition services and food services to patients on all of the UCSF campuses, she taught in clinical training programs for nutritionists and pediatric fellows in the schools of Medicine and Pharmacy and participated on doctoral committees in the School of Nursing when studentsâ?? research topics included nutrition.

Having studied science all her life, Porter felt she had cleaned the rusted wheels of her brain when she switched to the humanities and art. â??It was a challenge, but a wonderful challenge.â?•

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The docent program is self-governing with its own by-laws and governing board. The museum provides administrative support and some funds for programs. â??We as docents work hard to be â??good citizensâ?? of the organization and support its goals and strategies for change,â?• Porter said.

She said she has a full life that sometimes seems busier than her work career. She sings in a church choir and takes â??every chance I get to dote on my beautiful grandchildren.â?•

But, living alone in a single-family home, she began worrying that she would have difficulty moving if she waited too long. And her friends were beginning have trouble with the 54-step climb to her front door. They werenâ??t visiting as much. So, four years ago she moved into The Sequoias retirement community in San Francisco.

Porter said she didnâ??t realize how solitary she had become until she moved and found a real sense of community. At age 75, she still felt young enough to make friends easily. â??I was pleased to find there was a group of interesting people to share my life. People are friendly, but they donâ??t invade your privacy.â?•

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