

Metro

		SECTIONS	
NEWS	▶	METRO	Q
ARTS	▶	BUSINESS	▶
SPORTS	▶	OPINION	▶
POLITICS	▶	LIFESTYLE	▶
MAGAZINE	▶	INSIDERS	▶
TODAY'S PAPER	▶		
LOTTERY	▶	OBITUARIES	▶
GLOBE NORTH	▶	GLOBE SOUTH	▶
GLOBE WEST	▶	GETTING IN	▶



INTERACTIVE QUIZ
Are you Mensa material?



STYLE
How to live in a Boston microunit



METRO
Revere mayor donations from to Wynn plan

Honors for UMass Boston graduate and his dog

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 30, 2014



REPRINTS PRINT

ARTICLE	PHOTOS	COMMENTS (5)	BACK TO TOP
---------	--------	----------------	-------------

William O'Donnell was born blind, but his family soon learned that his condition would hardly impede him. As a baby, he would clutch the outside railing of his crib, trust his instincts, and drop to the floor.

"That's Billy," said his sister Lisa Petitt. "He's fearless. The only thing Billy doesn't see are obstacles."

On Friday, O'Donnell earned a master's degree in public affairs from the University of Massachusetts Boston, a feat celebrated by his proud mother, four of his five older siblings, and the entire university community.

With graduation, O'Donnell is also saying goodbye to one of his closest companions over the past two years and his lone roommate in his off-campus apartment: his guide dog Marshall, who officially retired from his duties Friday.

Receiving his diploma was O'Donnell's latest inspiring act in a lifetime of many: playing baseball, skiing, inline skating, horseback riding, even helping his mother navigate as she drove around his native New York City. (He relied on his knowledge of the street grid and his acute hearing to gauge traffic.)

He said UMass Boston welcomed him and provided resources to make his life as a student easier.

"I've been able to do everything here that I've wanted," said O'Donnell, 31. "The only challenge I've had is the same any college student has, not having enough coffee to help me

Related

PHOTOS



William O'Donnell and Marshall

study.”

O'Donnell and his beloved Labrador-golden retriever served as marshals, leading graduates into the commencement ceremony on the Campus Center lawn.

Later, at the ceremony for the McCormack Graduate School of Public Policy and Global Studies, Marshall guided O'Donnell one last time. Both wore a mortarboard affixed with a tassel, and each received a diploma of sorts.

O'Donnell grabbed the standard paper kind; Marshall bit down on a rawhide bone made to look like a graduation scroll, his tail wagging furiously

“This is a time for new beginnings, but I don't want to leave here,” O'Donnell said afterward.

While his campus experience went smoothly, he acknowledged that his time off campus has been challenging. Others are not always understanding; he has nearly been hit by cars; and he struggled to find dog-friendly housing.

O'Donnell plans to pursue a doctorate. He wants to work to improve workforce inclusion for people with disabilities and to reduce their barriers to education.

Born weighing one pound, 10 ounces, it was a miracle he survived. A detached retina left him unable to see since birth. Still, he has rarely turned down an opportunity to try something new.

His sister Renee Inniss credits their mother: “She always told him, ‘There's no excuse — just do it.’ ”

Mom credits Billy.

“He's worked so hard for this,” an emotional Ruth Anne O'Donnell said.

William O'Donnell was in the spotlight as a record 3,994 degrees were conferred at the university's 46th commencement.

Keynote speaker Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, urged graduates to make thoughtful decisions, particularly toward creating a more sustainable environment.

“There is no greater power than the power of choice,” she said. “It is choice that defines the quality of your life.”

“Climate change is no longer a threat; it is your new reality,” she added. “Right now, at this very moment, mankind is deciding what kind of a planet you and your children are going to have, what kind of a world you are going to live in. You have a say in that decision. Do not take that power lightly.”

Figueres received an honorary degree, along with local activist Mel King, a former state representative, urban planner, and civil rights and community leader; and Feng Wu, a researcher on clean-battery technology.

Shaun O’Grady became the first in his family to graduate from college. He earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology and received the JFK Award, the highest honor for undergraduates.

Speaking to fellow graduates, he gave an emotional account of the many challenges he has endured.

Growing up in Lynn, his family struggled to make ends meet. Many of his hometown friends “are now dead or in prison.” He earned a GED and enlisted in the Marine Corps after 9/11.

While he was serving one of two tours in Iraq, a sniper fatally shot one of his best friends. Two weeks later, he learned that his grandmother had died and that his mother needed surgery for cancer.

Last fall, O’Grady’s father died, and his mother’s cancer returned.

“I almost didn’t want to come back here and finish my degree,” he said, pausing frequently to collect himself as he spoke in a trembling voice.

But he pushed onward, with support from the people on campus. For his honors thesis, he developed what school officials called “an innovative, nonverbal test for toddlers with autism spectrum disorders.”

“The relationships I forged here at UMass Boston have helped me reach this point,” said O’Grady, who plans to study for a doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley.

He praised his classmates for overcoming their obstacles.

“Today, many of us have defied the odds,” he said. “You put yourselves in those chairs.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).



REPRINTS PRINT

ARTICLE PHOTOS COMMENTS (5) BACK TO TOP

Learn more

[SUBSCRIBE](#) [BOSTON GLOBE INSIDERS](#) [EPAPER EDITION](#) [NEWS IN EDUCATION](#)

MY ACCOUNT

[LOGOUT](#)

 [MY SAVED LIST](#)

[MANAGE HOME DELIVERY](#)

[MANAGE ON IPHONE](#)

CONTACT

[HELP](#)

[FAQS](#)

[GLOBE NEWSROOM](#)

[ADVERTISE](#)

SOCIAL

[FACEBOOK](#)

[TWITTER](#)

[GOOGLE+](#)

MORE

[ARCHIVES](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[TERMS OF SERVICE](#)

[TERMS OF PURCHASE](#)

[YOUR AD CHOICES](#)

[WORK HERE](#)

© 2014 BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA PARTNERS, LLC
