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Author And Artist Donna Williams To Speak At Autism Summer Institute

Living A Full Life With Autism

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Editors/reporters: To schedule an interview with Donna Williams, contact Matthew Gianino at 603-862-2300 or matthew.gianino@unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. – A best-selling author, a prolific sculptor and painter, a celebrated international speaker, and a highly sought after consultant on autism, Donna Williams insists that she's not unique. "I'm a personable character," Williams says. "I love fun. I love people. I love nature and art."

Williams will present a keynote address at the Institute on Disability's 9th annual Autism Summer Institute, August 13 – 16 at the University of New Hampshire. Williams's speech is Thursday, August 16 at 9 a.m.

Born in Australia, Williams showed signs of autism from infancy. She lived a tumultuous childhood filled with countless medications meant to treat undiagnosed food allergies and intolerances, blood sugar problems, nutrient deficiencies, and two primary immune deficiencies. "In a nutshell," Williams says in a brief biography, "I was highly erratic, distracted, impulsive...and was sick most of my early life. This meant I was unable to answer a direct question, to stay sitting in a seat, to hand in any work, or acknowledge what I did or didn't understand. I was labeled as emotionally disturbed."

At the age of 15, Williams's estranged family left her to fend for herself in a world of strangers when they could no longer cope with her condition. At 24, fortune finally arrived in the form of medical intervention and diagnosis after the complete collapse of Williams's health. During her long recovery, Williams wrote the bestseller "Nobody Nowhere," the first of nine books that she has authored and one of the first autobiographies written and published by an individual with autism.

Looking back, Williams agrees that, like many individuals with autism, her journey has not been an easy one. "I've experienced abuse based on the presumption that 'nobody was home,'" says Williams, "that I 'couldn't feel pain,' 'couldn't feel loss,' 'didn't understand,' 'couldn't tell,' and that basically I was seen as a liability, a burden, something awaiting institutionalization, often an 'it,' not a person."

"Perhaps that's what's important about my story, that it's mirrored by many people with autism around the world, many of whom have no access to alternative forms of communication or may not develop functional verbal language to tell their story. I think I give

a pretty human face to autism, and that helps people to humanize the condition and look beyond condition to personhood. People are more than a bunch of walking conditions.”

Joining Williams as keynote speakers at the Autism Summer Institute are Ros Blackburn, a lecturer from England living with autism; Jamie Burke, a Syracuse University student with autism and advocate for Facilitated Communication; and CarolAnn Edscorn, a New Hampshire artist and mother with Asperger Syndrome. The Autism Summer Institute is presented by the Institute on Disability’s Resource Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders.

The fee to attend keynote presentations is \$60 each. To attend the entire 4-day Autism Summer Institute, the fee is \$399. Discounts for families, students and self-advocates are available. For more information or to register online, visit www.iod.unh.edu or call (603)228-2084.

The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire was established in 1987 to provide a coherent university-based focus for the improvement of knowledge, policies, and practices related to the lives of persons with disabilities and their families. Its mission is to advance policies and systems changes, promising practices, education, and research that strengthen communities to ensure full access, equal opportunities, and participation for all persons.

