

SCIENCE / WOMEN

Bondar: one of today's most versatile and creative thinkers



Dr. Roberta Bondar stands over a satellite map of the Bras d'Or Lake region at the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site on July 22, shortly after receiving an honorary doctorate degree from Cape Breton University. Photo by Andrew Brooks / The Victoria Standard.

Famed Canadian astronaut, neuroscientist, author, photographer inspires many during trip to Baddeck

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Dr. Roberta Bondar slept through the T-storm over eastern Cape Breton in the wee hours of July 22. Not surprising given her remarkable schedule of appearances with the Roberta Bondar Foundation, founded in 2009 to promote environmental education. And after ascending to outer space at 18,000 mph while “strapped to a bomb”, thunderous light shows are nothing to lose sleep over.

It was 25 years ago that Dr. Roberta Bondar entered the nation's collective memory as Canada's first woman in space. An historic moment for the nation and a breakthrough for Canadian women. It was a pivotal moment for Bondar, in the sense that it marked many new beginnings for the artist, author, astronaut, physician, environmentalist and educator.

“People say my spaceflight is the absolute pinnacle of my life. Altitudinally, maybe, but it wasn't necessarily the ultimate moment in my life that changed things,” stressed Bondar during a July 20 interview at the Inverary Inn in Baddeck.

Bondar was in Baddeck to provide the text component of the multi-media choral performance, “High Flight: Song of the Stars”, in partnership with the Elmer Iseler Singers, the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site (AGBNHS), the Alexander Graham Bell Foundation, Musique Royale and Cape Breton University. On July 20, Bondar also opened her photographic exhibit *Light in the Land – The Nature of Canada*, on display until August 9 at the AGBNHS. Her visit concluded on July 22, when Cape Breton University

presented Bondar with an honorary doctorate at a special convocation at the AGBNHS.

Flight has been a recurring theme in Bondar's artistic and scientific pursuits. As a child, she assembled plastic model rockets looking up from earth at the night sky over Lake Superior in her home town of Sault Ste. Marie.

During her spaceflight, she peered, not down at the planet, but deliberately at its edge.

“Being able to see the edge of the planet is really what it's all about, being able to see that it is a planet. It's being able to look away from the planet and see the stars that don't twinkle, and see this deep, what I call, light-sucking black of the universe, the depth that never ends.”

Bondar's fascination with bird flight also began in childhood. Their ability to fly independent of technology

impressed her. These days, she is researching the migratory pathways of birds. She is now working with NASA as a principal investigator to obtain space imagery of these pathways to better understand how climate change and human activity affect bird habitats.

Emblematic of Bondar's affinity and appreciation for birds of flight, she was bestowed an eagle feather by Associate Vice President, Indigenous Affairs & Unama'ki College, Stephen Augustine during the special convocation. Following the ceremony, she reflected on its deeper significance.

“It was a huge honor to be given an eagle feather. It represents the environment. It represents our history in Canada too. I'm second generation Canadian and my grandparents picked this country to come to so I'm basically a much younger generation person than the People that had given me the feather. It made me feel the strength of my own family as we grow in our society now, that we are also a part of a culture that has been here many, many years before and I was being honored by that culture. That's like having a grandparent come. It's being embraced by the land that I was born in.”

Bondar sat still with eyes closed during one of the convocation's musical interludes sung by the Elmer Iseler Singers. She said later

would have been very proud.”

Bondar considers her parents her greatest mentors and credits them with instilling her, and her sister, with strong basic values.

“I look at these two individuals that brought up these two young girls at the end of World War II and tried to make sure they were included in a society that was just trying to come to grips with women in the workforce and gender equality. These two people were mentors in the sense of trying to make sure that our world was enlarging, not shrinking.”

Bondar has looked at our world through microscopes, telescopes, camera lenses and the window of a space ship as it circled the planet, making her one of today's most versatile and creative thinkers.

“I think of all the things I've done in my life, they provide this range of ability to slide across the scale, to scale up or scale down according to the situation without difficulty. It's a fluid movement that I make from one to the other. I don't partition.”

Being a lifelong explorer involves risk, something with which Bondar has cultivated a healthy relationship. Thanks to this, she has, like her greatest mentors, enlarged the world for women and girls across the world.

“At the end of the day, one must decide whether one is going to be a pioneer or not, whether one is going to accept the fact that you could go into



Chancellor Annette Verschuren, OC, (left) and Acting President Dale Keefe (right) of Cape Breton University present Dr. Roberta Bondar (centre) with an honorary doctorate during a special convocation at the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site on July 22. Photo by Andrew Brooks / The Victoria Standard.

that her mind travelled to other uplifting moments of her life spent with family and recalled her late mother's love of chorale music.

“My mother and father

this rocket and never return. It's not even what the risk is itself. It's the attitude toward what that risk is going to mean for that individual and for society at large.”