

Art-Reach at Scott Arboretum

Art-Reach held its 2nd annual program celebrating Earth Day on April 23rd. The [Hearing Loss Association of America \(HLAA\)](#), an Art-Reach community partner, [Associated Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#) (ASB), a long time Art-Reach member agency as well as Art-Reach staff, donors and I embarked on a sensory tour of [Scott Arboretum](#).

Sensory tours are generally given for people who have sensory disabilities. Elements of exhibits, shows or in this case the garden are made available to touch and smell in order to heighten participants' experience of the event. For people who are blind and receiving descriptions of the place they visit, these tours enhance the narrative and place the descriptions into context of a tangible object.



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Scott is a 300-acre arboretum located on the grounds of Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, PA. Becky Robert, the Member and Visitor Programs Coordinator, was our knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide. The tour began at the Scott Entrance Garden whose plants and layout change every year. Becky passed around clippings from a shrub with a twisty vine. We learned that when the leaves die in the winter, the vines add interest to the garden.

Touching the plants was a new way for some of us to experience the garden but it was old hat for our friends from ASB. This organization serves people who are blind or visually impaired and ASB is an active member of Art-Reach. Visiting museums and attending performances year round, this group actively seeks sensory tours where tactile elements are incorporated into the experience offering a far more intimate understanding of the featured activity. In this same manner ASB has visited the Philadelphia Zoo, InterAct

Theatre Company, Arden Theatre Company and Enchantment Theatre Company, to name a few.

When we walked over to a majestic pine tree and felt its deep ridges or furrows, HLAA member Diana told me it was “very interesting to feel the flakiness of the bark.” HLAA provides assistance and resources for people with hearing loss and their families to learn how to adjust to living with hearing loss. They have also been an integral community partner in the [Independence Starts Here Campaign](#), bringing many new audience patrons to enjoy the arts in the Philadelphia region.



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Our next stop on the sensory tour brought us to a wooden trellis and Becky passed around some Daphne flowers. Mary Ann, who is hard-of-hearing, said she liked “flowers and anything visual” the best. Lavera, one of our blind guests, rubbed the flower in between her fingers and smelled her hand instead of smelling the flower directly. This helped her to “get the scent better,” she explained.

The group then trekked over to a beech tree that was a gift from the Swarthmore class of 1881! The gigantic tree was nearly 20 feet in diameter. Betty, a guest from ASB said the bark felt “all rippy, like when you drop a pebble in a pond.”

Acorns crackled beneath our feet as Becky led the group to a red oak tree and then to a sawtooth oak tree. I felt how the sawtooth oak got its name: it has leaves with serrated edges.

“I love lilacs,” Gladys, another ASB member, exclaimed as we got to a cluster of lilac plants. They were the first official plants at the Arboretum. Lavera echoed that they were her favorite plant of the day. “It smelled like the most pungent hint of lilac from my childhood,” said Betty.



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Sensory tours are also highly enjoyable for anyone with a keen interest in better understanding an artistic art medium. Donor Albert Olenzak, both a supporter of Art-Reach and of Scott Arboretum, agreed with Gladys sharing that he especially enjoyed the portion of the tour where he was able to feel and smell the lilacs. “I’m an outdoors person,” he shared. “I thought it [the tour] was great. It was the best time of the season to smell the lilacs and was beautiful.”

We crouched down to feel a green plant nicknamed Lamb’s Ears, which, according to Betty, felt “better than velvet.” The final two stops on the tour were a dwarf white pine and a traditional pine.



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The day ended with a reception at the Wister Education Center. Cosmic Catering provided organic goodies and we all enjoyed each other's company. Al Olenzak commented that he had not been to Scott for a while and enjoyed seeing the Wister Education Center. "It was a very pleasant event," Al shared. "I enjoyed the sensory tour, it was very relaxing and beautiful, but I especially enjoyed meeting the folks participating because they were all very interesting." For Art-Reach members, donors, staff and ambassadors alike, this event was indeed a relaxing way to end a one-of-a-kind nature experience.

~By Danielle Bullen

Danielle is a [Special Projects Ambassador](#) in the Art-Reach [Ambassador Program](#).