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Introduction to Deni Elliott and Catching Sight

University of South Florida, St. Petersburg

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Good Afternoon and Welcome to the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library,

My name is Frank Biafora, and it is both an honor and a personal pleasure to welcome my dear friend and colleague, AND book author, Dr. Deni Elliott.

I have known Deni for close to 20 years. In fact, she was the very first person I met when I visited St. Petersburg back in March of 2007 as a candidate for the position of Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Deni was serving on the search committee, and I remember sitting down to dinner that evening (it was the Pacific Wave) having no idea that I was about to meet someone who would become one of the defining figures in the history of this campus.

Deni served USF St. Petersburg in countless ways—as professor, department chair, campus ombuds, vice chancellor for academic affairs, mentor, advisor, advocate, and friend. We worked so long together that there were years when Deni called me “boss” - until her next promotion when I respond the same - Hey Boss.

She held the Eleanor Poynter Jamison Chair in Media Ethics and Press Policy and helped build a world-class journalism program whose graduates continue to distinguish themselves across the nation, if not the globe. She was also a nationally recognized scholar in ethics, authoring and editing numerous academic books and hundreds of publications throughout an extraordinary career.

But if you ask around what made Deni so special?...most people wouldn't begin with her titles or accomplishments. Instead they would talk about Deni the person and the culture she helped to create.

Deni certainly elevated the spirit of collegiality on this campus. She had a remarkable ability to make people feel welcome, heard, and valued. At a time when universities can sometimes feel large and impersonal, Deni helped make USF St. Petersburg feel more like a community, if not a family. A place we looked forward to coming to work.

And, of course, no story about Deni would be complete without mentioning her best friend and companion - Alberta.

Many of us came to know and love Alberta, Deni's guide dog, who became every bit as much a member of the campus as Deni herself. Alberta had an uncanny ability to brighten a room simply by being present. Students adored her as did the faculty and staff.

One of my favorite memories from my years as dean involved Alberta becoming the face of the campus 50th Anniversary fundraising campaign where she achieved celebrity status as the model for Bayboro Beach Blonde Ale. When Alberta was nearing retirement, Deni hosted a celebration at her home that I along with my family was fortunate to attend. My children and I joined others in inking Alberta's paws and creating paw-print keepsakes on Beach Blonde posters. It was a joyful and surprisingly emotional moment—one that captured how deeply Alberta, and by extension Deni, had touched our community.

Today, Deni comes back home to share with us a story that is both personal and universal. Her new memoir, *Catching Sight: How a Guide Dog Helped Me See Myself*, explores not only the relationship between a guide dog and her human partner, but also larger themes of identity, vulnerability, trust, resilience, and self-discovery. As with so much of Deni's work, it invites us to see the world—and perhaps ourselves—with greater clarity.

Please join me in welcoming home - a treasured colleague, a beloved member of the USF St. Petersburg family, and now the author of a remarkable new memoir - Dr. Deni Elliott