Flanegan is blind and has been since the age of 16, when a car accident broke every bone in her face, crushed a vertebra in her neck and left her with a damaged optic nerve in her left eye and a detached retina in her right.

The Dodge, Neb., native had always dreamed of being a veterinarian. As a multi-sport standout in high school, she had the notion she could do anything. But when she lost her eyesight, she didn’t know what she would do with the rest of her life.

“I didn’t even know how I was going to get from the couch to the bathroom,” the now 26-year-old Flanegan recalled.

Following her high school graduation, Flanegan pursued a bachelor’s degree at Peru State College in Peru, Neb. It was there that she met her husband, Sean, and discovered her passion for counseling.

But passion wasn’t enough to get her hired as Flanegan soon found out.

“It is so tough to find work when you are visually impaired,” she said, noting potential employers were hesitant to hire her due to concerns about accommodations.

A friend recommended Flanegan join the AmeriCorps program at the University of Nebraska Medical Center’s Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI). Similar to the Peace Corps, members commit to one year of service, working between 300 to 1,700 hours, and in some cases complete a second year of service.

The mission of MMI’s AmeriCorps program is to promote and enhance community awareness and inclusion of individuals with disabilities and their families.

“AmeriCorps represents an opportunity for people with and without disabilities to show that they have valuable skills and are productive citizens,” said Stacy Bliss Fudge, Ph.D., AmeriCorps coordinator at MMI. “It gives them a chance to add real-world work experience to their resumes and receive recommendations from employers who can speak to their job skills and eliminate future employers’ concerns about hiring people with disabilities.”

MMI has helped Flanegan complete her advanced practicum for a master’s degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha by putting her counseling skills to use in group therapy sessions at UNMC’s Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation as well as family therapy sessions at MMI.

While some might see Flanegan’s inability to observe patients as a hindrance, Flanegan, ever the optimist, views it differently.

“Sometimes people feel more comfortable and are more at ease when they find out I can’t see because then no one is judging them,” she said, adding that she uses her sense of hearing to pick up on things that others may miss due to visual distractions.
Prior to the formation of MMI’s AmeriCorps program, few people with disabilities were employed at MMI. Now, three former members are working in programs and positions begun during their AmeriCorps service.

Kathleen Egbers, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, is one example. She recently was hired by the MMI Psychology Department as a customer service specialist. Egbers is the first person people meet when they call or check in. She helps clients make appointments, contacts psychologists and provides weekly reminder calls to patients. Egbers brings a cheerful attitude to the job and has increased productivity in the department. She is currently learning Spanish so that she is better able to communicate with Spanish-speaking patients.

“One of the things we are most proud of is our success at increasing the percentage of people with disabilities who work at MMI and on the UNMC campus,” said Joe Evans, Ph.D., founder and director of MMI’s AmeriCorps program.

This year nine out of 19 AmeriCorps members have a disability. Four work at UNMC; the five others provide services in community agencies including Girls Inc., YWCA, Apollos School and the Nebraska Humane Society.

Though Flanagan practices in the city of Omaha, the MMI AmeriCorps program serves people statewide. Funded by a grant from the Nebraska Volunteer Service Commission, the program has placed members in Nebraska urban and rural communities to increase the quality of services for people with disabilities in underserved areas.

Each member is required to participate in a minimum of five volunteer/community service activities and five leadership and personal development trainings per year on topics that relate to people with disabilities.

In exchange for their service, members receive a monthly living allowance and an education award that can be applied to existing student loans, current school expenses or future education costs.

But perhaps the most valuable take away for those with disabilities is the self-assurance that they can prove themselves when given a chance.

“Once I can show people all I can do, they realize I don’t need extra help,” said Flanagan, who plans to pursue a career in counseling. “But some of us first need the opportunities provided by AmeriCorps.”