The Week the Deaf Community Made the Hearing World Listen:

The “Deaf President Now” Movement at Gallaudet University

Dashed Hopes

It was March 6, 1988, and a crowd was making its way to the Gallaudet University campus in Washington, DC in anticipation of a historic announcement. Finally, it seemed, the world’s only liberal arts college for the deaf would have a deaf president. Throughout Gallaudet’s 124-year history, it had only been led by hearing people – a painful irony for an institution that was not just a university for the deaf, but also “a beacon for deaf people [around] the world.”

Still, it was no exception to societal viewpoints “that hearing people are the normal ones and that they should take care of deaf people.” For years, deaf people had been stereotyped as “lonely, dependent, uneducated, often tragic figure[s],” rather than as independent and capable individuals. As a result, they had struggled against discrimination in fields ranging from education and employment to driving and adoption rights.

The appointment of a deaf president at Gallaudet, at long last, would show that deaf people were capable of leading themselves. All that remained was the official announcement from the university’s board of trustees. Two of the three finalists for the presidency – I. King Jordan and Harvey Corson – were deaf, and it seemed certain that the board would select
one of them rather than the lone hearing candidate, Elisabeth Zinser, who lacked any experience whatsoever with the deaf. “We were so positive that they [would] pick a deaf person,” one activist recalls.⁴

Upon arriving on campus just before the scheduled announcement, university alumni and employees were stunned to learn that a press release had been hastily passed out two hours earlier, declaring the selection of Zinser as president. The board had not even bothered to come to campus to make a formal announcement or engage with the university community. As one student recounts, “It was like…someone slapped my face.”⁵ Once again, the leadership of the heart of the deaf community had gone to a hearing person. “If a deaf person is not considered good enough to run the university,” one faculty member asked, “then what’s the point of having a university for deaf people?”⁶

This was a crushing resolution to months of hard work. After the previous president’s resignation in August, support for a deaf president had been steadily building. A group of six young Gallaudet alumni known as the Ducks (because the group was like a “close-knit family of birds”) had worked with university faculty, staff, and local and national deaf activists to lobby the board.⁷ Letters and petitions declared that “the appointment of a deaf person to head a University devoted for more than a century to educating deaf individuals is long overdue. We need a president…who…understands, exemplifies and advocates for the deaf, not just by rhetoric but by being a living example.”⁸ The campaign had amassed support from the local media and national political leaders from Senator Bob Dole to Vice President George Bush.⁹
However, Gallaudet students had been largely indifferent to the campaign, feeling that it made no difference to them who led the university administration. Many faculty members were also wary of getting involved due to fears of retaliation. However, a campus rally of over a thousand people organized by the Ducks and university students under the slogan “Deaf President Now!” was a turning point that won support from students as well as faculty and the Gallaudet Alumni Association. They were now not only actively engaged in the movement, they were ready to step forward and lead it. The Ducks and their fellow activists had laid the groundwork for a shift from passive acceptance of the board’s decision to a willingness to mobilize in protest.

An angry crowd made its way to the hotel where the board was staying, determined to make it clear that Gallaudet rejected the board’s decision. The board chair, Jane Spilman, responded with the soon-to-be-infamous comment, “Deaf people are not ready to function in a hearing world.” While Spilman would maintain that her statement was misinterpreted, it was reported nationwide, lighting the match for a movement for deaf self-determination that would make history. “Through the years, deaf people have been…made, shaped, controlled by hearing people,” one Gallaudet faculty member said. “It is high time that deaf people manage their own destiny.”

From a History of Discrimination to a Push for Change
For centuries, deaf people had been denied control of their own education. Through most of the 19th century, nearly all schools for the deaf used American Sign Language (ASL) as the medium of instruction. Though deaf students flourished at these schools, building a growing community and culture of their own whose cornerstone was sign language, two societal trends during the late 19th century created a drive to eliminate ASL and, along with it, deaf culture. As immigration increased, a nativist backlash held that growing cultural and linguistic diversity – including that of the deaf community – would threaten America’s
national identity. At the same time, a post-Darwinian evolutionary perspective led hearing people to believe that sign language was primitive and made the deaf akin to “lower animals.”¹⁴ From this perspective, deaf people were defective and “could be successful only to the degree that they could be trained to act like hearing persons” — that is, to lip-read and speak English so that they could assimilate with the rest of society.¹⁵

In 1880 a conference of educators, all but one of them hearing, decided that deaf students should only learn speech and lip-reading. This shift ushered in what some would call the “dark ages of deaf education,” a time when deaf students were punished for using sign language and when deaf teachers were almost entirely shut out of the education system. Training in speech and lip-reading often failed, and even when it did not, the years of intensive instruction necessary left deaf students lagging behind their hearing peers in academics.¹⁶

In the 20th century, hearing people would largely control the education of the deaf, including at Gallaudet.¹⁷ In 1988, no deaf person had ever been president or provost of the university; only 25 percent of employees were deaf, and a mere 4 out of 19 board members were deaf. Faculty and staff had become increasingly resentful of the administration, which they viewed as high-handed and unresponsive to the community’s concerns.¹⁸ In the mid-1980s, a group of deaf faculty and staff had formed the President’s Council on Deafness in order to advocate for the deaf community on campus.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the National Association of the Deaf had become more active in promoting the concerns of the deaf at large.²⁰ The American deaf community was feeling a growing pride in its heritage, which was now being documented by scholars, and strove to assert its rights.²¹ The time was ripe for change at Gallaudet.

**Deaf President Now!**

By the morning after the board’s decision, Gallaudet students had shut down the campus, and the story of their protest was already dominating local media. A group of students, faculty, staff, and alumni quickly met to develop a list of four demands: the appointment of a deaf...
person as president, the resignation of Jane Spilman as board chair, a 51 percent majority of deaf individuals on the board, and no reprisals against any students, faculty, or staff who took part in the protest.\textsuperscript{22} The board had agreed to meet with the Gallaudet community on campus that day, but after three long hours, Spilman categorically rejected any compromise, declaring, “A lawful, proper, and final decision was made.”\textsuperscript{23} Hundreds of students and faculty stormed out to march on the US Capitol, demanding, “We want a deaf president now!”

Students were determined to keep the campus closed down until their four demands were met. The next day, they notified faculty that they would be boycotting classes. They then announced that about 1,500 students out of a total student body of 2,300 were prepared to withdraw from the university for the spring semester, adding further pressure on the board.\textsuperscript{24} After all, how could Gallaudet function without the majority of its students? As the board and administrators scrambled to deal with a situation that was spinning out of control, the story was rapidly taking over the national media.\textsuperscript{25} The protest leaders soon went to Capitol Hill for a meeting with members of Congress, who were quickly won over; one of them later said, “As I listened and watched, I finally understood what the world would come to understand: the Gallaudet students could not lose.”\textsuperscript{26}

On the third day of the protest, the community realized the need for greater coordination and formed the 16-member Deaf President Now (DPN) council, composed of four students, three faculty members, three staff members, three alumni, and three representatives of the deaf community at large.\textsuperscript{27} For the rest of the week, most major decisions were made by the council. Meanwhile, a communications center was set up, with different individuals responsible for writing press releases, ensuring reporters were able to get interviews with protesters, handling the television media, and monitoring the telephone bank they were using to solicit donations from the deaf community.\textsuperscript{28}

But the board was still holding firm; Zinser flew to Washington, DC for a press conference where she stated, “I’m in charge, and I’m intending to carry out my function as president.”\textsuperscript{29} One of the deaf candidates for the presidency, I. King Jordan, also expressed
his support for the board’s decision. Undeterred, the Gallaudet faculty held a meeting and voted overwhelmingly in support of the DPN protest’s four demands. This was a “real blow” to Zinser, who knew that a university president could not succeed without faculty support.30

At the same time, the DPN movement continued its media outreach, with student leader Greg Hlibok appearing on Nightline and Good Morning America. More support for the movement came pouring in the next day in the form of busloads of students from deaf schools, money and supplies from local and national businesses, and a check for $5,000 delivered in person by the president of the American Postal Workers Union, which had several thousand deaf and hard-of-hearing members.

Support also came from the local community; Gallaudet is located in a predominantly black neighborhood, and many of these residents identified with the struggle the deaf community was undertaking. They provided their support in a variety of ways, including by writing letters, donating money, and joining marches.31 Local businesses provided donations of food, fabric for banners, and even legal services.32

Deaf and hearing people around the country showed their support as well, contacting their representatives in Congress, holding local rallies, sending letters to the Gallaudet board, and coming to Gallaudet to join the protest.33 “I didn’t expect this tremendous response,” Hlibok said. “But as we moved along, it made sense because this struggle involves deaf people’s lives all over the country. The board’s decision was the catalyst for us to realize that this is our time.”34

A New Civil Rights Movement

Through DPN, the deaf community placed itself in the tradition of the civil rights movement as an oppressed minority group seeking self-determination – a concept that was easily understood by the world at large. They saw themselves not as disabled individuals who need to be “fixed” by becoming more like hearing people, but as a proud community with a history, culture, and language of their own. As with all minority communities, the DPN movement posited, the deaf community had a right to equal access and a measure of self-determination.35

Furthermore, the protestors said as they pointed to other marginalized groups, this was long overdue. “It’s time!” declared a DPN poster. “In 1842, a Roman Catholic became president of the University of Notre Dame. In 1875, a woman became president of Wellesley College. In 1875, a Jew became president of Yeshiva University. In 1926, a Black person became president of Howard University. And in 1988, the Gallaudet University presidency belongs to a deaf person.”36
On the fifth day of the protest, as support coalesced around this message, Jordan retracted his support of Zinser’s presidency and declared his solidarity with DPN. The movement was clearly building momentum. Zinser recognized that she was in the midst of a civil rights movement that had assumed national significance, and issued her resignation that same day. The Gallaudet campus erupted in celebration, while still insisting on the fulfillment of the rest of the four demands under the call, “We’re just getting started.” Embarking on a massive march to the Capitol, the crowd bore a banner reading “We still have a dream” – the very same banner that civil rights leaders had displayed in their campaign to have Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday designated a national holiday.

Two days later, the Gallaudet board held a press conference to announce the selection of Jordan as Gallaudet’s first deaf president, Spilman’s resignation from the board and replacement with Phil Bravin as the first deaf chair of the board, the formation of a taskforce to work towards achieving a 51% deaf majority on the board, and a guarantee of no reprisals. In just a week, all four of the DPN demands had been achieved.

DPN’s Legacy
DPN ushered in not only a deaf president for Gallaudet, but also a shift in control of the university from the hearing to the deaf. The number of deaf Gallaudet employees began steadily rising, and by 2015, 52 percent of faculty and staff were deaf or hard of hearing. At the same time, campus norms shifted; while hearing employees did not typically use ASL to communicate prior to DPN, sign language soon became the standard form of communication on campus. The university also embarked on a project of architectural innovation known as “DeafSpace” – centering the design of campus buildings around the needs of the deaf rather than following conventions designed by hearing people. In short, DPN made it possible for Gallaudet to become a university of and for deaf people.

More broadly, DPN provided the deaf community with a new sense of empowerment. As Jordan says, “It changed the way deaf people think about ourselves. It changed the way hearing people think about deaf people.” Before DPN, he says, “all of us allowed others to place limits on what we could accomplish. Again and again, people told us, ‘You can’t.’
Starting as children, we believed it.”44 After DPN, “the glass ceiling cracked for deaf people…you could see the land of opportunity. Children were talking about becoming a lawyer or a doctor, and we didn’t have that in the past.”45 DPN’s impact stretched around the world as Gallaudet students from countries ranging from South Africa to Belgium to Argentina were inspired to go home, organize, and advocate for their rights.46

Outside the deaf community, DPN captured the nation’s attention and won the support of 93 percent of Americans.47 As one supporter wrote, “You have succeeded in educating the world about deafness, the concerns of deaf people, and the simple truth that we all need and are entitled to dignity and respect.”48 Within weeks, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was introduced in the Senate; its passage two years later provided sweeping protections of the rights of people with disabilities. For deaf people, the ADA made it possible to communicate by phone through relay services, required captions for television programs and rental videos, and made public events, medical care, and other services accessible through interpretation.49 According to the ADA’s sponsor, Senator Tom Harkin, DPN “provided critical momentum” for the law’s passage.50 It also spurred a wave of legislation focused on the deaf; in the five years after DPN, Congress passed more laws protecting the rights of deaf people than it had in the previous two centuries all together.51

I. King Jordan encapsulated the “higher aspirations and belief in themselves” that deaf people had gained at the end of his first press conference as president of Gallaudet.52 One reporter spoke up with the question: “All of this is nice…it’s good your deaf students get an education. But really, what can deaf people do – even with a college degree?” Jordan replied, “Where have you been all week? Deaf people can do anything except hear.”53
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http://www.gallaudet.edu/campus-photos.html
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http://www.gallaudet.edu/Images/Institutional_Advancement/PR/DPN/Chun/airplane500.JPG
http://www.gallaudet.edu/dpn-home.html
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Endnotes

5 “Deaf President Now: In Their Own Words.”
6 Christiansen and Barnartt, 16.
12 Gannon, 37.
13 Christiansen and Barnartt, 15.
17 Christiansen and Barnartt, xvi.
18 Christiansen and Barnartt, 84.
20 Christiansen and Barnartt, xix.
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52 Adelman, “Gallaudet University Interview with President I. King Jordan.”