

Richard Ladner commencement address at Gallaudet University, Graduate Awards and Hooding Ceremony, May 15, 2008:

President Davila, Provost Weiner, Dean Erting, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the Faculty, family and friends of the graduates, and graduates, I'm honored to speak to you at my first Gallaudet commencement as a member of the Board of Trustees.

Let me first congratulate the graduates. Congratulations! [applause] You've worked hard to earn your degrees, but remember that you did it with the support of your family and friends and the faculty who taught you and mentored you. Before continuing, I'd like to tell you a little bit more about my connections with Gallaudet. As you heard, my parents Emil Ladner and Mary Blackinton Ladner graduated from Gallaudet in 1935 and 1936, respectively. And their name signs I remember well. They've passed away now. This is "Emil" [signing "E", palm in, small circular movement away from face near corner of right eye] and "Mary" [signing "black", radial side of index finger brushing forehead in horizontal line, repeated movements] This is her Gallaudet sign, which was--her name was "Blackinton" at the time. They met here and became friends among a strong group of friends. After graduation, my father returned to California to become a teacher at the California School for the Deaf. My mother remained at Gallaudet to finish. Only then did any kind of courtship begin. I believe my father initiated the courtship with letters to my mother. They corresponded with each other throughout that year--him in California and her in Washington, DC. When my mother graduated a year later, she went to the Indiana School for the Deaf to become a teacher. During that year, they started planning their wedding, getting married in 1937 and permanently moving to Berkeley. Imagine planning a wedding by corresponding every two weeks by mail.

I'm very thankful to Gallaudet, for I would not even exist [laughter] if my parents had not met here in the first place. My parents had four children, myself, my older sister Sue [Suzanne Boesen] that you heard about, my twin brother David, and a younger sister Jennifer [Sonneborn]. My older sister Sue, as you heard, also went to Gallaudet as a graduate student. She earned her master's degree in Deaf Education in 1962. Since then she has taught in several residential schools, taught sign language at the college level, and still interprets professionally.

As you might expect, Gallaudet [is known as] hallowed ground in my family. In 1985 I decided to come to the hallowed ground for part of my sabbatical leave. I taught one class and hung out with the Math Department. I lived in Clerc Hall. Although that was more than twenty years ago, that experience helps me now as a trustee. Currently I work with Gallaudet professors Caroline Solomon, Fat Lam, and James Nickerson on several different projects, with the goal of increasing the participation of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in science and technology. Last February when I arrived for my first Board of Trustees meeting, Bob Davila called me aside to show me a photo on the wall beside his desk in his office in College Hall. [It was a black-and-white photo of students from his class at the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley, from the 1940's, I

believe.] Standing behind the class was his teacher, my father. Bob said to me that my father was one of his first heroes. To tell you honestly, I do see a little of my dad in Bob. Perhaps that twinkle in Bob's eye, that persistent optimism of Bob, that getthings- done Bob--those things I see in Bob.

My dear graduates, you're about to go out into a very different world than existed even twenty years ago. Deaf education is fragmented because of Public Law 94-142. Deaf students in K through 12 are spread thinly in thousands of schools and school districts around the country. Hearing technology seems to be advancing at a rapid pace, perhaps on the verge of curing deafness. It sometimes amazes me that sign language and Deaf culture can continue to exist with so many forces at work tending to suppress and dismantle it. Recently in my state, a state legislator proposed that all Deaf children in the state be implanted and that all special programs for the Deaf in the state be closed, including Washington State School for the Deaf, so that these now-hearing students can go to regular schools.

Two years ago, during the Gallaudet protest I was here in Washington, DC, at a national meeting of 30 or so of the most influential computer scientists in the United States. One of them just blurted out: "What's wrong with those Deaf people anyway? Why don't they get cochlear implants so they can hear and not have to use interpreters?" Now mind you, these are smart people. These people are accomplished leaders. However we know from history that intelligence, political savvy, and leadership abilities do not always lead to good judgment and decisions. What they needed is the knowledge you have gained here. There was a powerful force in human beings, in language, spoken and signed, whichever is easier. More than half the world's population is bilingual or multilingual. Humans have the propensity to learn multiple languages when it's needed, and apparently it's needed a lot.

As good as scientists and engineers are, they will not easily duplicate the billions of years of evolution that led to the sense of hearing. For all the forces that suppress sign language and Deaf culture, there are even more powerful forces that keep them alive and flourishing. The issues involving sign language, Deaf culture, Deaf education, hearing technology, are incredibly complex. Those of you graduating today will go out into the world with a deep understanding of those complexities. This is what Gallaudet has given to you.

Here are a few things to think about. Hundreds of thousands of hearing infants are learning signs from their hearing parents every year. This baby sign movement seems to be driven by word of mouth and not by marketing, giving evidence that it might be effective in improving parent-child communication and language development. They wouldn't do it unless it worked.

Is the drive for visual language even stronger than we imagined? According to the Modern Language Association's study that came out this year, American Sign Language is the fourth most popular language taught in colleges and universities in the United States. In 2006, almost 80,000 students took ASL-- more than Italian, Japanese,

Chinese, Hebrew, Latin, Arabic, and all other languages, except for Spanish, French and German. In community colleges, ASL is number two. I have no idea how many students are taking ASL in high school, but in Washington State alone, over 65 high schools offer ASL on a regular basis. At the University of Washington, ASL classes were offered for the first time this academic year. The new ASL instructor is Lance Forshay, another Gallaudet alumnus. For financial reasons, only two sections of ASL 101 could be offered for about 50 students total. The waiting list contained more than 375 students. Sign language is more popular than ever, and its popularity continues to grow. For those of you who will teach ASL as your career choice, your opportunities seem boundless.

Some of you may know that technology is a passion of mine. After all, I'm a computer scientist. A few years ago, a friend--another Gallaudet alumnus--had a Sorenson set-top box, and I watched her make a video phone call. Some time later, someone called me through a video relay service. I was astounded by the ease and naturalness of two-way video and VRS. They were so much better than texting. I sensed immediately that the run of the TTY was over. Having worked in data and video compression for the past 15 years, I wondered if there was something I could do. My colleague, Eve Riskin, suggested that we work on two-way video over cell phones. That was three years ago. With support of the National Science Foundation, just this past month we completed a working prototype that uses cell phones that we purchased in the United Kingdom. All video-enabled cell phones available in the United States have a camera facing the wrong way from the screen, making them unusable for two-way conversations.

Seeing two Deaf students from the University of Washington talking to each other in sign language over a cell phone was indeed a thrilling sight. I predict that video-enabled cell phones capable of two-way conversations will be out in the next year or two---Hold on!---Hold on!-- [looking down at podium]--I just got a call--[laughter]--Let me set up my video phone--[places video cell phone on podium and signs in ASL: Hello, how are you? Oh, fine. I'm giving a speech now. Alright, later. Bye.] [laughter] [closes video cell phone and puts it aside]-- [enthusiastic applause and cheers].

About a year ago, someone told me about "Ella's Flashlight," a video blog or "vlog". Then I saw "Bob's Vlog" There are many more Deaf vlogs--video web sites where people can discuss whatever is on their minds. [They impressed on me] how quickly the video-enabled web was being adopted by the Deaf community. Deaf people, especially youth, are flocking to video-enabled social networking sites to talk with each other in sign.

About a year ago I was talking to Ron Painter, a Deaf PhD student at Stanford. He described how he works with his interpreter to develop signs for advanced chemistry. This is wonderful, but can those signs be preserved and become part of the language? Generally, as Deaf people advance in science and technology, how will the language keep up? Almost all Deaf students studying for advanced degrees in science and technology are at mainstream universities, usually the only Deaf student in the graduate program. This led me to create the ASL STEM Forum. So "STEM" is for: "Science,

Technology, Engineering and Mathematics." This web forum is a place for students, interpreters, sign language experts, and others to go to upload video of signs for science, and discuss them. Funded by Google, we now have a small team testing a prototype of the Forum. In late June we will roll out the Forum to the public at RIT/NTID where the summit to create a cyber-community to advance Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in STEM will be held. I don't know what the reaction will be to the Forum. I'm hopeful that it will take off and become a vehicle to help increase the number of Deaf people pursuing advanced degrees in science.

Recently a student at the University of Washington asked me what she should major in, because she was planning to become an interpreter. After all, very soon, newly certified interpreters must have at least bachelor's degrees. I told her she should consider majoring in science or technology, because as Deaf people move into high-paying science and technology fields, they will need interpreters who know something about what they are interpreting.

I could go on talking about technology, but I just don't have enough time. Let me close by telling you about someone I recently met. Her name is Amy Donaldson. She is a 1993 Gallaudet graduate in something like audiology or speech language pathology. She is someone like you. A few years ago she earned her PhD in speech and hearing sciences at the University of Washington. She's now a research, assistant professor in the Autism Center at the University of Washington. She's hearing, and a fluent signer with a deep knowledge of Deaf culture. When she meets people she says she introduces herself by saying: "I'm in speech and hearing sciences, but--[pause]--[I can sign, yes, but don't get the wrong idea and think that all speech and hearing science majors can sign like me. Actually, in all the speech and hearing science courses I took at the University of Washington, there were no courses] about Deaf people as we know them. No courses on Deaf culture. The word "deaf" does not appear in any course title or description in the catalog." [Amy Donaldson's students are seniors at the University of Washington and they often come up to me and say...] and no one said anything about Deaf culture in all the courses I ever took. I learned everything about hearing and speech, but nothing about Deaf people until I took a course from Dr. Donaldson."

Like Amy, many of you will leave the hallowed ground of Gallaudet to go out into the world where you will be the only person in your sphere of influence, and Deaf, that knows anything about Deaf people as they really are. So-called "experts" will say things that will challenge your beliefs and what you have learned here. How you react may define your career. You can become frustrated and angry and immobilized. Alternatively, you can optimistically take action to make the situation better. Whatever it is, like Amy, like Bob, and like my father, I choose optimism and action for my life, and I hope you do, too.

Thank you.

[Enthusiastic applause]

[President Davila rises and shakes Dr. Ladner's hand]

[End speech]

[Note: Bracketed phrases in the transcript are back translations made necessary due to gaps in the audio track of the video of Dr. Ladner's speech.]

=====

Emil S. Ladner
THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
October 5, 1992

Author: Allan Temko Emil S. Ladner, a teacher and leader of the deaf community, died of cancer yesterday at his home in Lafayette. He was 80 years old.

Mr. Ladner was a much-loved figure at the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley. He studied at the school as a youth, and taught social studies and economics there for 35 years before his retirement in 1970.

He was born in San Jose in 1912, but the family soon moved to San Francisco, where his father, Emil O. Ladner, was for many years bell captain at the Palace Hotel. Mr. Ladner not born deaf , but lost his hearing to scarlet fever at the age of 4.

As was usual for deaf children at the time, his early education was at home, taught largely by his mother, Louisa Angelo Ladner. Later, he entered St. Joseph's School for the Deaf in Oakland. The crucial change in his life came in high school, when he transferred to the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley, one of the foremost institutions of its kind in the country.

After graduation, he attended Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., also specially intended for the deaf , where he was president of his class and valedictorian. After graduating in 1935, he returned to Berkeley to start his teaching career. In 1938, he married another Gallaudet graduate, Mary Blackinton Ladner, who also taught at the California School for the Deaf . Throughout his career, Mr. Ladner took a prominent role in the affairs of the deaf community. He served terms as president of the California Association of the Deaf , the International Catholic Deaf Association, the Council of Organizations Serving the Deaf , and the Berkeley-Oakland Division of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf .

Mr. Ladner was an ardent chess player. He was co-author with Juan Font of "Silent Knights of the Chessboard," published in 1979; and he also wrote numerous articles in publications for the deaf .

He also was the author of ``The Last Years of the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley: 1960-1980," published this year.

Mr. Ladner is survived by his wife; his children Suzanne Ladner Boesen, Jennifer Ladner Sonneborn, Richard Ladner, and David Ladner; and eight grandchildren. A memorial service will be held on Wednesday at 1:30 p.m., at St. Perpetua's Catholic Church, 3454 Hamlin Road, Lafayette. Memorial gifts may be sent to Saint Joseph Center for the Deaf , 37588 Fremont Boulevard, Fremont 94536, or to the Walnut Creek Deaf Seniors' Club, c/o Hub Sellner, 1337 Lawrence Street, El Cerrito 94530.

Page: A20 Column: OBITUARIES