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Four Lives Cross Tragically *Different Paths, One Bond Led Students to Gallaudet*

By MANNY FERNANDEZ
Washington Post Staff Writer

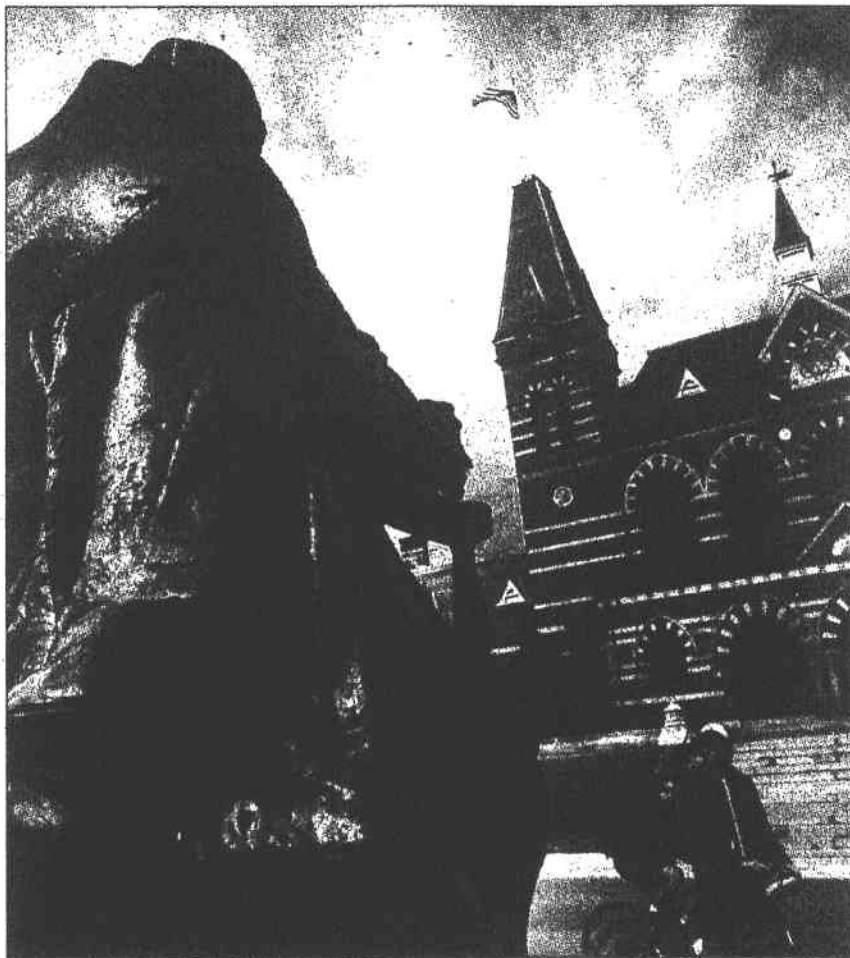
The star student from Minnesota in Room 101 taped pictures of his baby sister's first birthday party to his dorm wall in Cogswell Hall. With video cameras and the Internet, Eric Plunkett could watch her grow from afar.

In Room 102, Joseph Mesa hung the flag of his native Guam over his bed. A few doors down, the inquisitive one from Texas wrote to his parents online virtually every day; Benjamin Varner missed his mom. In nearby Krug Hall was the young man from New Hampshire, Thomas Minch, who loved the outdoors and dreamed of a Ford Explorer.

It was the fall semester of 2000, their first in college. The quartet had come from all points of the compass to do some growing up in the same small place—a university in the nation's capital unlike any other. One thing made them as close as brothers: They were deaf.

In four months, they would be bound by tragedy as well. Plunkett and Varner would be slain in their rooms, and Mesa would be charged with killing them as he robbed them. Minch would be accused—falsely—of one of the killings and banished from the school he had long dreamed of attending.

Each had chosen Gallaudet University, but in many ways their choice seemed predestined. The university has been at the heart of American deaf culture since its founding 136 years ago, educating generations of deaf families by offering the best of two worlds—the special attention that hearing schools have trouble providing and the independence that comes from being in a place where deafness is enriching, not disabling. More than on most campuses, Gallaudet students see themselves as kin.



BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

A statue of the Rev. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet stands at Gallaudet University, which has been at the center of American deaf culture since its founding 136 years ago.

Those on the first floor of Cogswell Hall certainly did. On an August night, Plunkett, Varner and Mesa joined others from their wing at a campus café called the Abbey, where M&M's, Ben & Jerry's and Snickers awaited. They were getting to know each other midway through

their first week. Someone came up with a name for the west wing, where they lived, and everyone voted to keep it. The Wild, Wild West. The students adopted dorm rules: Respect others. Keep the

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4 Bonded by Pride, Tragedy at Gallaudet

GALLAUDET, *From A1*

bathrooms clean. Don't do anything in your dorm that you wouldn't do at home.

At the end, they joined hands and yelled their new name. One hand crisscrossed on top of another until there was a stack of intersecting fingers.

How deafness shaped their lives, how that brought them to Gallaudet, was a journey unique to each. What follows are portraits of Plunkett, Varner, Minch and Mesa.



**Eric
Franklin
Plunkett**

Eric Franklin Plunkett craved adventure. He used to fill up his Christmas wish lists with requests for plane tickets. New York City, Winnipeg, Rome. Just in case that failed, as it often did, he'd ask for a new Nintendo video game, too.

He had a flair for the dramatic, treating everyday life in the two cities where he was raised—Portland, Ore., and Burnsville, Minn.—as if a curtain had just been raised. He couldn't just *tell* his parents he really didn't want to do yardwork. He had to make a show of it, lying flat on the ground, raking leaves all the while.

Other kids say they want to be astronauts or police officers when they grow up. Not Plunkett. His career of choice: chef at his favorite Japanese restaurant. They cooked the food at the table. It was so cool.

He was tall and skinny, energetic and outgoing, with a wide smile that showed off a perfect set of teeth.

"I have to look really good, because I'm going to college," he wrote to a non-signing hairstylist back home in Minnesota the week before classes started.

His family gave him his own name sign

ther, Chris Cornils, had moved to nearby Burnsville, a Minneapolis suburb of quiet cul-de-sacs with sleds on the porches in wintertime.

Plunkett blossomed at the Minnesota school. The academy, which sits on a hilltop outside Faribault, is an intimate school built 135 years ago. There, old and new stone buildings provide a protective environment for about 150 preschool to 12th-grade students.

"He took risks," Principal Thomas Zins said of Plunkett. "He accepted challenges. He didn't let anyone say 'no' to him."

Plunkett dyed his hair red or bleach-blond, depending on his mood. He graduated with second-highest academic honors in the 10-student senior class. His English teacher, Janet Skjeveland, gave him the news.

"He was jumping up and down," she recalled.

Plunkett debated whether to attend a community college that offered programs for the deaf, but Gallaudet remained his number one choice.

At Gallaudet, the bonds that tie people together are singular—deafness and pride in it. Virtually everyone speaks the same language—American Sign Language—and day-to-day campus life relies on the eyes, not the ears. Employees entering an office flick a light switch instead of knocking on the door. Things are felt, not heard, like the vibrations of two-way pagers with keypads attached to nearly everyone's hip to communicate on a campus with no use for cellular phones.

Like elsewhere, students run for student body president and throw touch-downs at football games. Unlike elsewhere, lunchtime at a campus snack bar features across-the-room signing. Gallaudet is a tranquil place, a 99-acre island of redbrick buildings and grassy hills in a frayed section of Northeast Washington.

Plunkett first visited the campus when he was 4, while his family attended a summer program on raising deaf children. When the letter admitting him to Gallaudet as a freshman finally arrived, his mom opened it without waiting for him.

"I was dying to know, and I wasn't go-



Diane and Willie Varner were ama-

Varner crawled near the stove, hand and said it, "Hot."

"I can't believe it!" Diane Varner "Did you hear that?"

It was the tiniest of miracles, the fruit of one mother's determination. Her son had been born into the deaf, and she had dedicated herself to ensuring his success in the hearing world. Though his parents and his sis-

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"I have to look really good, because I'm going to college," he wrote to a non-signing hairstylist back home in Minnesota the week before classes started.

His family gave him his own name sign soon after he was born. A right hand in the shape of the sign language letter "E," held over the heart. Plunkett's mother, Kathleen Cornils, had contracted German measles while pregnant, and her second child was born deaf and with cerebral palsy. Cornils learned that he was deaf when he was about 8 months old, the only deaf child in a hearing family.

The family—Cornils, her daughter Erin and Plunkett's father, Craig Plunkett—read books on how to raise deaf children and took signing courses. They would adapt. They began teaching Eric signs almost immediately after they learned he was deaf. He grew to view his deafness as a gift.

"Mom, it must be so loud in here," he told Cornils one day, relishing his personal silence at a crowded shopping mall.

In Portland, he attended deaf programs in regular elementary and middle schools before becoming a student at the Oregon School for the Deaf in Salem. It was a boarding school, and Cornils felt as if she were sending her son to college when he was barely a teenager. Plunkett was not as athletic as other kids. The cerebral palsy weakened his legs and made it difficult to ride bikes or climb stairs. But he didn't equate cerebral palsy and deafness with dependence or timidity.

By the time he was about 15, he had taken trips to Florida, Colorado and California. When the family was debating moving to Minnesota, he hopped on a train by himself to take a look around. They moved in 1997, shortly before Plunkett turned 16. He started school at the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf in Faribault, also a boarding school. Plunkett lived in a dorm during the week and visited his family on weekends. His mother and stepfa-

ther, not the car. Employees entering an office flick a light switch instead of knocking on the door. Things are felt, not heard, like the vibrations of two-way pagers with keypads attached to nearly everyone's hip to communicate on a campus with no use for cellular phones.

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"I was dying to know, and I wasn't going to wait for the weekend," Cornils said. She and Plunkett's stepfather drove to the Minnesota school to tell him, bringing balloons.

A surprised Plunkett greeted them in the lobby of the dormitory.

"He thought he was in trouble," Cornils said. She hid the balloons until Plunkett opened the letter. That weekend, the family helped Plunkett frame and hang it on a wall in the family room. He told his mother it was temporary; he would replace it in four years with his diploma.

His new adventure began in August. The Cornilses helped Plunkett, 19, move into his dorm room at Cogswell, and they attended New Student Orientation together. At the end of the trip, after his mom and stepdad dropped off a care package of blankets and Top Ramen noodles, they embraced for snapshots.

"Don't worry about me, mom," he told Cornils. Then he walked away, headed for lunch, turning around to wave.

Cornils would remember that moment, the last time she would feel her son's touch.



**Benjamin
Scott
Varner**

Benjamin Scott Varner's first word was "hot." He was 13 months old. The day before, his mother had pointed at the stove. "Hot stove," she said. The following night,

Diane and Willie Varner wei

Varner crawled near the stove and said it, "Hot."

"I can't believe it!" Diane said. "Did you hear that?"

It was the tiniest of miracle fruits of one mother's love. Her son had been born in the deaf, and she had dedicated herself to ensuring his success in the hearing world. Though his parents and grandparents were on the other side.

Ben Varner had a profound hearing deficiency but wasn't totally deaf. At 13 months old, he wore hearing aids. His mother became his closest teacher, his confidante. She sent away for teaching materials, lay on the floor next to him to help him focus on his hearing aids, so he would learn to read.

"What color is the ball?" she would say the word "red." Her hopes were far from realistic. She wanted him to be able to go to college someday and say, "I'm going to a restaurant and say burger without mustard," said.

Willie Varner was an avid reader. He was stationed at Fort Lewis in Colorado when his only son was born. Shortly after he was born, he began looking for schools that taught listening and signing to deaf children. They found one in the Sunshine Cot Deaf Children. The Army sent Willie Varner to New Houston.

When the youngest Varner began to read, his mother took her son into a classroom kitchen into a classroom kitchen cabinets, the chairs. The door was labeled, and she would sit her son on a stool. "Mommy's going to cook now," she would say every little move.

"And I would do this over again, day after day," Varner said.

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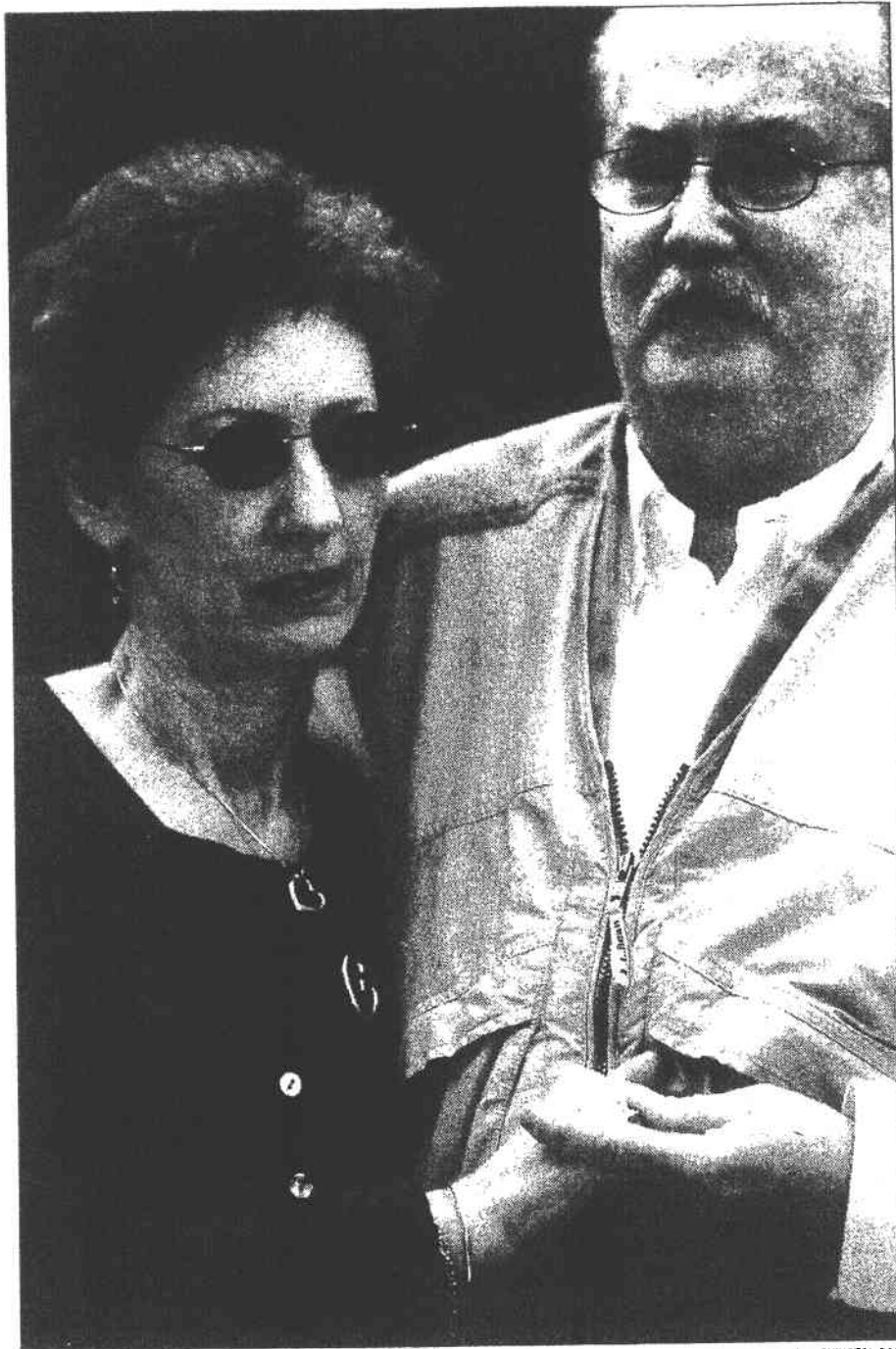
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BY MARK MATSON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Diane and Willie Varner were amazed by their son Ben's pursuit of knowledge.

Varner crawled near the stove, held up his hand and said it, "Hot."
"I can't believe it!" Diane Varner cried. "Did you hear that?"
It was the tiniest of miracles, the audible fruit of one mother's determination. Her son had been born into the world of the deaf, and she had dedicated herself to ensuring his success in the hearing one. Though his parents and his sister could

Ben Varner stayed at Sunshine for eight years and progressed rapidly. Lisa Lopez, a counselor there, credits the school and Varner's mother for his growth in vocabulary and tone of speech.

"Behind every oral deaf kid who really learns how to listen and speak, there is a family member who had to practically dedicate their life toward the success of that child," Lopez said

per on religious beliefs.

"He just liked to be left alone to do his thing, sit off by himself and read his travel books," said Wendall Watson, MacArthur High's principal.

Varner had a solitary disposition and was selective about whom he befriended. He grew more comfortable in social situations during his junior and senior years. His senior year, he traveled to Australia with a student group, reading about the country for months in advance and talking about it for months afterward.

Diane Varner wanted her son to attend Gallaudet because its support system would make learning less stressful. Ben Varner's main interest, however, was in the school's location. Washington offered the international flavor and experiences he had always sought. When he found out he was accepted, he studied the school's history and started memorizing District maps.

Diane Varner went with her son to Gallaudet in August to help get him settled. She stayed in a room at the campus hotel as Varner moved into Cogswell. The night before she returned home, Varner, 19, visited his mother in her room. He sat on the bed opposite hers and then lay down, tears rolling from his eyes.

"Ben, I know this is going to be one of the hardest things in the world that you've ever done," his mother said. "But trust me, you can do this."

When it was time to go, they embraced. Varner backed into the hallway, and his mother closed the door. She stood there and heard him cry in the hall. She leaned against the door and cried long after he was gone.



Thomas William Minch

Thomas William Minch was born into a world of silence. His mother and father were deaf, and so were his younger brother and five of their cousins. He grew up in Portsmouth, N.H., one of the oldest sea-coast towns in the nation. Smokestacks and ships' masts rise across a horizon of winding cobblestone streets, while funky art shops and vintage clothing stores inject some spice into downtown.

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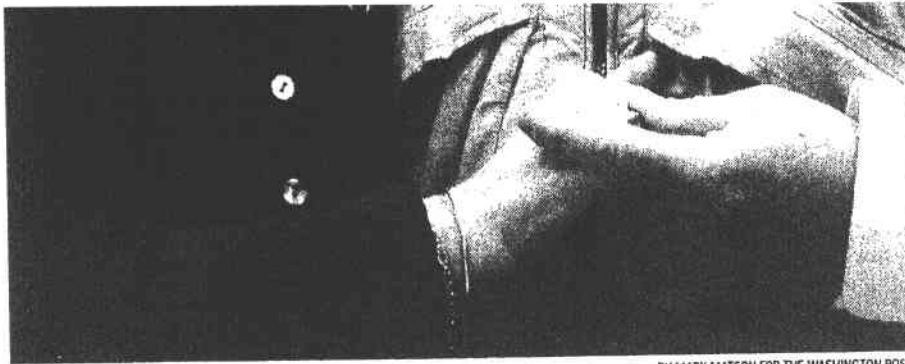
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Ben Varner had a profound hearing deficiency but wasn't totally deaf. From 8 months old, he wore hearing aids. His mother became his closest friend, his most devoted teacher, his fiercest protector. She sent away for teaching guides and lay on the floor next to her infant son, getting him to focus on listening with his hearing aids, so he would learn to speak.

"What color is the ball?" she would ask. She would say the words, "The ball is red." Her hopes were far from grand. "I wanted him to be able to pull up to a gas station someday and say, 'Fill it up.' Or go into a restaurant and say, 'I want a hamburger without mustard,'" Diane Varner said.

Willie Varner was an Army nurse stationed at Fort Lewis in Tacoma, Wash., when his only son was born in 1981. Shortly after he was born, the Varners began looking for schools that specialized in teaching listening and speaking skills to deaf children. They found one in San Antonio, the Sunshine Cottage School for Deaf Children. The Army agreed to transfer Willie Varner to nearby Fort Sam Houston.

When the youngest Varner began learning to read, his mother would turn her kitchen into a classroom, labeling her kitchen cabinets, the refrigerator, the chairs. The door was labeled, "Door." The window was labeled, "Window." She would sit her son on a stool when she cooked. "Mommy's going to get the egg-beater now," she would say, describing every little move.

"And I would do this over and over and over again, day after day after day," Diane Varner said.

Ben Varner stayed at Sunshine for eight years and progressed rapidly. Lisa Lopez, a counselor there, credits the school and Varner's mother for his growth in vocabulary and tone of speech.

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The Varners sent their son to public schools beginning in the third grade, hoping that school interpreters would help him become fluent in American Sign Language, which is not taught at the Sunshine school. But from elementary school through MacArthur High School in San Antonio, Varner seldom paid attention to the interpreters, preferring to use the listening skills he learned early in life. He wanted to be part of the hearing world.

But he struggled with his deafness, coming home from school so exhausted that he would head straight to bed.

"He used to come home, and it was so hard for him, always straining to hear," Diane Varner said. "He'd say, 'I wish I could hear! I wish I could hear!'"

But he excelled academically, getting A's and B's. He had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. He would amaze his parents, memorizing the exact distance between Mars and Venus, taking more interest in studying the rules of baseball than actually playing it.

He studied foreign cultures and became so engrossed in the stories of faraway places that Willie Varner received an unexpected call one day when Varner was in high school. It was an official from the Israeli consulate. His son had applied for a visa.

Varner read books on the Middle East and books on sports rules and books on astronomy and books on whatever happened to capture his attention. At 13, he joined the Islamic Center of San Antonio and became a student of the Koran.

He knelt on his bedroom floor almost every day to pray, facing Mecca, the holy city, and later would carry a green, pocket-size Koran. His curiosity about Islam had been sparked after working on a class pa-

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The Minch family is well-known among the town's 23,000 residents and is considered a kind of royalty among the local deaf community. Minch, his family and their attorney declined requests for interviews, but those who worked or went to school with Minch describe a young man comfortable building bridges between the deaf and hearing worlds.

When Minch was 4, his parents, William R. and Cathy Minch, moved to nearby Greenland, N.H.

"Tommy was respectful and pleasant. And he always was patient with me even though I never learned to sign," said Marion Carlton, 95, who was the family's landlord for 14 years. Carlton's daughter was so enchanted with the Minch family that she learned American Sign Language.

Minch treated his deafness as part of his uniqueness and charmed so many dinner guests and classmates that he inspired some of them to learn how to sign. Managers at the Market Basket supermarket in Portsmouth hired Minch as a bagger when he was 16 and were pleasantly surprised to watch him put customers at ease, said merchandiser Patrick Kane. But Minch didn't want to just bag groceries.

"He wanted to work the cash register. And frankly, we just weren't so sure about that," Kane said. "But we finally let him have a try, and he was great."

Minch attended public schools, where an interpreter would follow him to class, although he learned to read lips and spoke fairly well. When Minch's only brother, Brian, had to transfer to a school in Massachusetts because there was no longer a school for the deaf in New Hampshire, Minch testified before the state legisla-

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