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Gallaudet Euphoria Fades Into Reality; 6 Months After Triumph, Obstacles Remain for Deaf

By Molly Sinclair, Washington Post Staff Writer

Six months after a student protest at Gallaudet University led to the appointment of the school's first deaf president, the deaf world is struggling to advance an ambitious agenda for legal, social and educational reforms.

Many deaf leaders acknowledge that tough battles lie ahead with the hearing world, within the deaf culture and at Gallaudet.

"There was euphoria at Gallaudet, unmatched by anything in history," said Jeff Rosen, a deaf lawyer who helped organize the protest, "but now that it has calmed down, we see many of the same problems we always had."

The problems, Rosen and others agree, typically come down to the barriers that keep deaf people from obtaining quality jobs and moving ahead in those jobs.

There appears to be little evidence that the high hopes of March for improved employment opportunities for deaf people have been fulfilled.

"We were getting ready for telephone calls from employers, asking what it's like to work with deaf people, how they can advertise for deaf applicants," said Geoffrey Mathay, director of Gallaudet's career center. "But nothing happened."

In the push for change, Irving King Jordan, Gallaudet's new president, has emerged as both a pivotal leader and a personal symbol for what deaf people can achieve.

"King is really king of two kingdoms -- the university in the narrow sense and America's face toward deafness in the wider sense," said Harlan Lane, author of "When the Mind Hears," a history of the deaf.

Jordan has spent the spring and summer working to consolidate the movement's gains, build his team and set goals. He has spelled out his plans in dozens of interviews, in which he has sought to advance the university and the cause of deaf people, and has become a familiar figure on Capitol Hill. He flew to Canada to appear as himself, the first deaf president of Gallaudet, in a film starring deaf actress Marlee Matlin.

But Jordan, as he prepares for the new school year and his official inauguration in October, faces a myriad of challenges.

On campus, he must cope with opposing factions within the deaf and hearing worlds while directing the faculty, staff and administration. "When he says no, the honeymoon will be over," said Mervin D. Garretson, special assistant to Jordan.

Off campus, Jordan must find adequate funding for Gallaudet in an era of limited resources. He also must amass public support for the programs and policies of the federally chartered institution.

Above all, he must succeed, said Jack R. Gannon, executive secretary of Gallaudet's alumni association: "When he succeeds, we all succeed. If he fails, we all fail."

Despite the discordant notes, the echoes of the student victory are still heard, according to interviews with more than 30 deaf and hearing persons who have played a role in events since March.

At the July convention of the National Association of the Deaf in Charleston, S.C., younger, more militant delegates successfully installed Gallaudet protest leader Paul Singleton as vice president and Gallaudet dean Roslyn Rosen as secretary-treasurer of the association, an advocacy group with 20,000 deaf members.

Singleton's platform pressed for the association to develop a new, more sophisticated communications system among its state units so that the association could become a more effective lobbying group for its causes.

The Gallaudet protest also accelerated the progress of several legislative measures benefiting the deaf. "Events at Gallaudet sharpened Congress' attention on the needs and capabilities of deaf people, and this increased awareness has made it easier to gain passage of legislation affecting deaf persons," said Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), chairman of the Senate subcommittee on the handicapped. Harkin's bill to enhance the use of technology to assist persons with disabilities sailed through Congress this summer and now awaits President Reagan's signature.

A proposal to establish a National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, an idea that has been debated for more than a decade, picked up steam after the Gallaudet protest. Legislation to create the institute passed both the House and the Senate this summer and has gone to a conference committee.

Congress also surprised Gallaudet officials by increasing the annual appropriation for the university from \$ 62 million this year to nearly \$ 66 million for 1989, more than double the rate of increase in recent years.

Still, Jordan and others believe that Gallaudet must reach beyond Congress and build a bigger base of private funding.

"The high visibility that Gallaudet received will help him [Jordan] attract money from the private sector," said Jane Bassett Spilman, former chairman of the Gallaudet board.

In the work place, a few new opportunities have begun to open for deaf people since the Gallaudet protest. Among those who attribute their advancement to the influence of the student demonstrations are Joseph McLaughlin, a deaf Canadian educator, who was appointed principal of the Alberta School for the Deaf, the first time that a Canadian deaf school has had a deaf principal in this century, and Sandy C. Duncan, a deaf activist in Harrisburg, Pa., who was appointed to direct the state's new Office for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired.

Some developments are a matter of perception. Throughout the deaf world, which has been more divided than united in the past as deaf organizations and deaf schools pursued their own philosophies, there is talk of a new spirit of cooperation. "Gallaudet made us feel together as a family," said Ken Levinson, the deaf president-elect of the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, which advocates lip reading and speech education rather than relying only on the sign language so common at Gallaudet.

Deaf leaders also have seen evidence of new support and recognition among hearing people, who have been sometimes hostile and even frightened of deaf persons.

"Before, if I was flying on a plane and I told the person next to me that I was deaf, sometimes that person would turn absolutely pale," said Philip W. Bravin, the deaf IBM executive who is chairman of the Gallaudet board. "That doesn't happen anymore . . . They are willing to try to talk to me, and that is very nice."

For many deaf and hearing-impaired people, the Gallaudet protest has come to represent what Gallaudet Prof. Allen E. Sussman has called the "Selma of the deaf," a dramatic event that raised awareness of a minority group's position and thereby set other events in motion. Selma is a reference to a major protest march in Selma, Ala., during the civil rights movement.

The spark for the deaf people's Selma came in the late evening of Sunday, March 6, when the Gallaudet board of directors announced that Elizabeth Ann Zinser, the only hearing person among three finalists, had been selected as the new president of the university.

Members of the Deaf President Now Committee, who had been demonstrating for days for a deaf person to be named the new president, quickly organized for action. Students took over the university, marched on Capitol Hill and issued four demands: Zinser's resignation, the appointment of a deaf president, the resignation of Spilman as board chairman, and the reorganization of the board to include 51 percent deaf membership.

Zinser resigned four days later. The next Sunday, the board announced that Bravin had been appointed board chairman and Jordan had been selected as president.

In eight days, the rebels with a cause had won.

Feminist Kathy Bonk, who spent nine years as media director of the National Organization for Women Legal Defense and Education Fund, said there are important parallels between the Gallaudet revolt and other social movements that offer clues to the challenges for Jordan and for the deaf world.

"What happened at Gallaudet was an important symbol and consciousness-raiser for everyone involved -- people on the campus, people who read the stories about it," Bonk said. "But now comes the maintenance phase and that is really tough, from the funding perspective, the organizing perspective, and from the perspective of what issues you go after."

Gary W. Olsen, executive director of the National Association of the Deaf, takes the optimistic view that "the protest helped us gain more confidence in determining where we are going." Specifically, he said, the movement is "going after education issues, employment issues, social issues."

But Zinser, the deposed president who now wears a silver necklace charm of a hand making the sign "I love you," warned that the university must not become "ideologically closed" in trying to advance deaf causes.

Spilman, the former chairman, remains concerned that "some very capable hearing people have left Gallaudet, and this is a loss not only for Gallaudet but for the deaf community." She declined to name any specific persons.

However, since Jordan became president, several high-ranking officials of the university have resigned, including James Barnes, vice president for administration and business, who worked closely with Spilman during her tenure. Raymond J. Trybus, dean of graduate studies, also resigned shortly after the protest week. "Not being deaf," Trybus said, "I had a clear sense that I wouldn't be able to move forward in my career."

Filling the vacated positions with qualified people -- while balancing the demands from deaf and hearing constituencies -- is high on the agenda that Jordan has set.

Another challenge facing Jordan is the division among deaf leaders, many of whom are Gallaudet graduates who are active in university politics and are counting on their new deaf president to advance the revolution in specific ways.

Jordan is under pressure, for instance, to change the curriculum, placing more importance on deaf studies. Among those pushing for that is lawyer Rosen, who said the promotion of deaf studies at Gallaudet -- which he describes as a "gem that the deaf community holds out to the rest of the world" -- is crucial to the self-esteem that deaf people need to develop to survive and succeed.

Some deaf leaders don't agree with this premise.

"To go back and look at . . . deaf studies distracts us from the real challenge," said Frank Bowe, the deaf chairman of the federally appointed Commission on Education of the Deaf.

He said Gallaudet must not turn inward to "this internal stuff -- deaf pride, deaf culture" -- but must reach out and link up with other groups.

"For too long, deaf people have stood by themselves, fought for themselves alone," Bowe said. "But it is time for them to recognize that they share so much with people who are blind, who have cerebral palsy, and we all need to work together."