

THE GALLAUDET "DEAF PRESIDENT NOW" MOVEMENT

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Gallaudet University students galvanized the deaf community and revolutionized global perceptions of deaf people in their "Deaf President Now" (DPN) Movement in March, 1988. "The time is now" was their rallying cry, which held implications for deaf pride, self-assertion, and civil rights extending beyond the DPN issue.

Gallaudet University, founded by President Lincoln in 1864 and funded primarily through Congressional appropriations, educates deaf students from pre-school age through graduate school. When the sixth president, Dr. Jerry Lee, announced that he was retiring, there was optimism on campus that, for the first time in the University's 124-year history, one of the two qualified deaf candidates, Dr. Harvey J. Corson or Dr. I. King Jordan, would be voted into the vacated position by the Board of Trustees. When the Chair of the 21-member board, only five of whom were deaf, announced the board's choice of Dr. Elisabeth Zinser — a hearing educator who knew no sign language — initial shock, anger and disbelief gave way to student mobilization and strike from March 6 through 13, 1988.

Four student leaders — Greg Hlibok, Jerry Covell, Bridgetta Bourne, and Tim Rarus — together stood at the helm as organizers, spokespersons and morale boosters. On the first day of the strike, 500 students set out to shut down the campus after a stormy meeting with the university administration. While the school remained open, students claimed that 90 percent of the campus community participated in the strike. Campus entrances were blockaded with shuttle busses after the tires were flattened. The faculty voted 147 to 5 to back the students.

The civil rights movements of other groups, such as African Americans, South Africans and women, served as points of comparison and reference in the DPN struggle. During the campus rallies, student leader and cheerleader Bridgetta Bourne led sign language chants such as "Deaf Power!" "Deaf President Now!" and "Zinser Out!" to keep spirits high as the freedom songs did in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. A waving sea of hands signed to the 4/

4 rhythm of impromptu percussionists at DPN demonstrations the way that a dance class or a cheerleading practice at Gallaudet moves to a drummed beat.

The Friday "Deaf Pride Day" march on the Capitol, which attracted 3,000 marchers from all over the U.S., was headed by a banner borrowed from the Crispus Attucks Museum emblazoned with the message "We Still Have a Dream"; the same banner had been used in a march to have Dr. King's birthday decreed a national holiday. The "Deaf Pride Day" march and demonstration on the National Mall took place as planned despite Zinser's previous resignation, as the strikers waited for the response to their other demands. Using sign language and lip synchronization, students of the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) presented "The Time is Now," composed by theater teacher and playwright Tim McCarthy.

The words the deaf world had been waiting for came on Sunday, March 13, when Dr. I. King Jordan was voted in as the eighth president of Gallaudet University. A majority deaf task force was named to formulate a majority deaf board. Ultimately there were no reprisals against the strikers. A surprisingly peaceful scene awaited President Jordon on

Monday, March 14, when he arrived on campus to begin his administration.



The "Deaf President Now" Movement drew inspiration from other struggles involving civil rights. (Cartoon by Mike Keefe of the Denver Post)

CITATIONS AND FURTHER READINGS

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Sanchez, Carlos and Martin Weil. 1988. Zinser Quits Gallaudet Amid Student Uproar. *Washington Post*. March 11.