

Deaf President Now (DPN): The Protest Heard Around the World in 1988 Continues to Change the World

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Good afternoon. It is an honor and a privilege to be here to speak with you. Honestly, without the media, I know that I would not be standing before you today.

Many of you may remember, and perhaps reported on, the events that led to my appointment as president of Gallaudet in 1988—the first deaf president in the university's 124 year history. In March of that year, Gallaudet students—with support from alumni, faculty, staff, and friends of the university—protested the Board of Trustees' appointment of a hearing person as president. This protest, seen and heard around the world was a demand for "a deaf president now"—widely known as DPN.

The protest received extensive coverage by the media, locally, nationally, and internationally. Within a week, the hearing woman who had been selected as president stepped down and the board appointed me the eighth president of Gallaudet University.

I am convinced that if the Board of Trustees had appointed a deaf president from the start, the appointment would have received little notice. I can imagine a short article appearing in the metro section of the newspaper, maybe on page B6. I doubt there would have been any mention on TV, and most assuredly, there would not have been front page New York Times coverage. Without such extensive media coverage, we would not have seen the major changes that followed DPN. The protest and the national and international attention it received were necessary for significant social change to happen.

The Deaf President Now protest quickly became a social movement that fought for the civil rights of deaf people. In her resignation announcement, Dr. Elisabeth Zinser, said she resigned "to pave the way for the civil rights movement to progress." DPN actually set in motion a social revolution that led to change not only at Gallaudet and not only for



deaf people, but also for people with disabilities.

Most of you here today know that currently there is another protest at Gallaudet. Since you probably have questions about what's going on I want to talk about that and explain why this protest is not another DPN. Last week, the board of trustees announced the appointment of Dr. Jane Fernandes as Gallaudet's Ninth President, the first deaf woman president in the university's 142 year history. Dr. Fernandes will assume the presidency beginning January 2007.

Dr. Fernandes has outstanding credentials. She has been the provost at Gallaudet for six years and prior to that served as Vice President of the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center at Gallaudet. I will tell you just a few of her many qualifications:

- bold vision for Gallaudet 's future and demonstrated leadership developing strategic plans to carry out her vision
- strong commitment to diversity; Dr. Fernandes led the effort to develop an ambitious diversity plan that will be reviewed for approval by the board this week
- strong plan for raising academic standards and recruiting highly qualified and diverse students
- successful leadership in k-12 and higher education
- proven leadership during crises; unparalleled strength and clarity of thought and action under pressure

So why the protest? Among the protesters, different reasons are given. Unlike DPN, the six semi-finalists were all deaf so deafness is not an issue. In fact, I believe a tribute to the success of DPN is that there were 21 deaf and hard of hearing applicants in the pool of candidates. The issues here are what you might find at any university where there is very strong community interest in who will lead the university.

- **personality.** Dr. Fernandes describes herself as a quiet leader and some want more of an extrovert-which I am. As noted earlier, a strength Dr. Fernandes has is her capacity to adapt her leadership style to the needs of the situation. Also, it should be noted that quiet leaders are fairly common among university presidents.
- **the search process.** Some argue there was not enough diversity, yet half of the semi-finalists were either deaf women or deaf people of color. In addition, some questions have been raised about why a couple of popular candidates were not selected.
- **some suspect that I influenced the board's choice.** The fact is that the board kept me out of the process, except a meeting with each final candidate during their campus visits. I did not meet with the board nor did they receive a report from me about my meetings with the candidates.

I think it is important to note too that the search committee was comprised of 17 members, 13 of whom were deaf, about 1/3 were board members (unlike most president searches where a majority are board members), and five were people of color. To be sure that best practices were followed, the search committee engaged a consulting firm that works only with higher education searches at the senior administrator level.

I have with me copies of the Board Chair's memorandum to the campus that explains in detail the entire search process. I also have copies of an interesting e-mail from Dr. Elisabeth Zinser, the hearing president who stepped down during DPN. She explains why she believes this protest is not another DPN.

It is clear that the process was fair and open. The board has indicated they will not reopen the search and Dr. Fernandes fully intends to lead the university. So where does this bring us today? I am calling upon the students and others involved in the protest of the past week to work with Dr. Fernandes toward reaching the goal we all share of ensuring that Gallaudet University remains strong and becomes stronger in the future. We can achieve our goals through dialogue, cooperation, hard work, and teamwork. I call upon the entire Gallaudet community to join in building Gallaudet's future under Dr. Fernandes' leadership.

Returning to the theme of DPN as a civil rights movement, civil rights movements in this country have many memorable historical moments: Rosa Parks' refusal to relinquish her seat on a bus, women suffragettes demanding the right to vote, and Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, to name just a few. I honestly believe that the success of DPN ranks among these memorable moments as it pertains to civil rights for people who are deaf or disabled.

Often people ask me to name my most important accomplishment as president. It's very simple. My most important accomplishment is that I succeeded. It was critical that the first deaf president succeed. If I had failed, the position of deaf people would have been worse than before DPN. Many people expected me to fail. Many believed a deaf person wasn't up to leading a university. The doubters included some people in the media, and even some deaf people. Why some deaf people? That's part of the dynamics of oppression. When people have been told for generations that they cannot do certain things or that they cannot have the same aspirations as others, some come to believe it.

Most people don't realize that deafness or disability isn't the primary barrier to success; the real barrier is social attitudes. Given opportunities and changes in social attitudes, deaf people and people with disabilities can and do succeed. People who can hear, especially those who don't know deaf people, tend to think that being deaf is a terrible thing. Let me tell you that becoming deaf changed my life for the better. I grew up with normal hearing and was a very average student in high school—all five years of it. After high school, I enlisted in the Navy. At age 21, after several years in the Navy, I was in a serious motorcycle accident. I woke up in the hospital profoundly deaf. That was, of course, a great shock, but as I recovered my health, I quickly realized that if I wanted to make anything of my life, I would need an education. I enrolled at Gallaudet and earned my B.A. and went on to get a Masters and Ph. D. at the University of Tennessee. Before becoming deaf I never dreamed I would become a college professor or dean, and certainly not the president of a university.

Social movements need symbols. A deaf president at Gallaudet University symbolizes to deaf children and adults everywhere that their dreams and aspirations can be achieved. Since DPN deaf people are succeeding in careers rarely open to them in the past: our graduates include attorneys, entrepreneurs, scientists, university faculty and administrators, accomplished actors

and actresses. Greg Hlibok, one of the four student leaders during DPN is now an attorney with the Federal Communications Commission.

Not only did DPN have a significant impact on opportunities for deaf people in this country, the impact has been global. A young woman from South Africa who is deaf and black received her degree from Gallaudet, tore down barriers and changed the world. Chosen as the undergraduate speaker at her commencement, she spoke of experiencing racism and oppression as a black person, "handicappedism" as a deaf person, and sexism and unequal opportunities as a woman in South Africa. One of her dreams was to one day obtain the right to vote in her country. When she returned to South Africa, not only was she able to vote, she has been twice elected to Parliament, the first deaf woman elected to a national parliament. Another of our graduates was elected as a member of Parliament in Ontario, Canada.

Recently, a deaf Ph.D. student from Belgium gave a lecture at Gallaudet about the impact of DPN on deaf people in her country. Inspired by DPN, a group of Flemish deaf leaders visited Gallaudet for a week in 1994 and returned home to work for empowerment in their country. Currently, the doctoral student is conducting research on Flemish deaf leaders. One leader from the Flemish deaf community who visited Gallaudet noted, "that is possible, a deaf president! Before, I always thought: a deaf president, that is impossible. But it is not! Because the president is deaf, and because of other things, I started to think differently: if he can do that, I can do that too!"

A Gallaudet undergraduate student who had a two-month internship in Argentina helped the deaf community there organize and advocate successfully to change the law to permit the use of sign language for educating deaf children. Prior to this effort, only oral education was permitted. That is a remarkable achievement for anyone, and it was led by an undergraduate student intern.

DPN gave birth to other initiatives that had global impact. In 1989 Gallaudet hosted what we called "Deaf Way," the first international conference that celebrated the art, history, and language of deaf people. The focus was on deaf people's abilities and achievements-not on ways to "fix" deafness. Registration exceeded expectations and thousands of people waited hours in line to register. The people waiting in long lines didn't express anger or frustration, but used the opportunity to interact and celebrate. In 2002, Gallaudet did it again. Nearly 10,000 people attended Deaf Way II.

DPN had a powerful impact on the disability movement and the formation of coalitions that advocated for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Senator Tom Harkin has said that Congress passed more bills in the five years between DPN and 1993, that promoted the rights of and access for deaf people, than in the 216 years of the nation's existence.

I will conclude here by saying that Gallaudet University is fortunate that Dr. Fernandes will be at the helm in January. She and I will be working together until then to restore unity to the community. I am confident that Dr. Fernandes will lead the university into a future of continued success.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today.