

Manifesto

October 16, 2006

To: Dr. Jane K. Fernandes, Dr. I. King Jordan, and the Board of Trustees of Gallaudet University

FROM: The Student Leaders of the 1988 Deaf President Now (DPN) Movement in support of the Students, Alumni, Faculty and Friends of Gallaudet University

Much has been said and written about the last several days, weeks, and even months leading up to the recent arrests at Gallaudet that occurred on Friday night, October 13, 2006.

The decision to arrest over 130 leaders has tainted the spirit of the Deaf President Now movement and reversed King Jordan's legacy.

In May 2006, as soon as the current crisis emerged, Bridgetta Bourne-Firl flew from California to Washington D.C. to gather information about the conflict to bring to the larger Deaf community. She repeatedly requested to meet with Dr. Jordan only to be avoided. After so many efforts, she finally met with him but was granted just five minutes—five minutes for a leader who was instrumental in putting Dr. Jordan in the position of president. During her stay at Gallaudet, she was appalled at the intimidation stories she heard from faculty, staff, and students.

Upon her return to the Bay Area, Bridgetta wrote Dr. Jordan a personal letter urging him to consider the accomplishments of the Deaf President Now movement, the implications for the current movement, and its lasting legacy for the sake of deaf children who are isolated all over the country, who have never seen deaf adult role models nor heard of their success stories. She emphasized that the Deaf President Now movement provides them with hope. Dr. Jordan approached Bridgetta at the National Association of the Deaf convention—after announcing to the participants that “there was no crisis at Gallaudet”—and told her that he simply disagreed with her letter. She received no further explanation or opportunity for dialogue.

Living in the D.C. area, Gregory Hlibok has remained an active and impassioned member of the community as well as a symbol of Deaf empowerment. He has gone to campus several times during the current crisis to speak with students, faculty, staff, and the larger community. He has expressed growing concerns with his lack of access to the current Gallaudet administration as well as their lack of communication with the students in their care.

Prior to Tim Rarus' now well-publicized arrival, he sent e-mails to King Jordan informing him of his concerns and of his impending arrival on the Gallaudet campus. He requested the opportunity to meet personally with Dr. Jordan, but, unfortunately, received no reply. He was left to roam our renowned campus of Gallaudet on his own. Although Tim had been following the events closely from South Dakota, nothing prepared him for the shock of what he witnessed Friday afternoon. The sight of the rift between the constituents and the administration as well as the escalation of the crisis saddened him.

CRUCIAL ISSUES TO ADDRESS:

- The Refusal to Meet with the DPN Leaders
- The Function of Gallaudet University as More Than a University
- The President-Designee's Infamous Track Record
- Lessons from the 1988 Deaf President Now Movement
- Our Voices are being Dismissed
- Our Demand of Dr. Fernandes

THE REFUSAL TO MEET WITH THE DPN LEADERS

Because we were denied the opportunity to have a dialogue with I. King Jordan, Dr. Fernandes, or the Board of Trustees, we cannot begin to explain why they have allowed this crisis to escalate to the point of arrests. What we can tell you is that our students are frustrated, angry, and desire to ensure that the Presidency of this fine institution is treated with the dignity it deserves.

THE FUNCTION OF GALLAUDET AS MORE THAN A UNIVERSITY

The President's office at Gallaudet represents more than a typical university. It's not just the bricks and mortar that make the buildings. It's not the programs and curriculum that make the educational foundation at the university. Gallaudet is unique from all other institutions of higher learning because it represents the work and dreams of us, our community, our culture, our language. It represents the hopes of deaf people all over the world and the future generations that will attend this fine institution. It is nothing less than the Mecca of the Deaf world. Gallaudet has earned this distinction as the only liberal arts university in the world that is run by and of the Deaf and serves the Deaf community including its many deaf and hard-of-hearing students. So, this university represents more than just the educational programs offered on this campus—it lives and breaths the ideals, dreams, and aspirations of deaf people—a place where deaf people can realize their full potential as human beings. This is a place where communication barriers and their resulting frustrations should not exist—a place that we can call home. This is why all that happens on these hallowed grounds is sacred to all of us within the Deaf community near and far.

THE PRESIDENT-DESIGNEE'S INFAMOUS TRACK RECORD

We believe it is crucial to distinguish this movement from a popularity contest as some have alleged. The fact that Dr. Fernandes has served as provost of this university has given us an intimate look at her management style. The campus community has already experienced her arrogant, vindictive, autocratic, and retaliatory style of leadership. These traits are not becoming of a university president or productive for a learning community. They are certainly not becoming of a university president who also serves as an icon to the Deaf community. Dr. Fernandes has earned few admirers on campus which has led to concerns from students, staff, and alumni as well as financial contributors to the university. These concerns came early in the search and selection process. Many

constituents predicted that Dr. Fernandes was going to be difficult to work with as a leader and a representative of the community.

We do not dispute that Dr. Fernandes has an excellent resume and appears to be very qualified on paper. Throughout her career, she has made contributions to Gallaudet in various ways. The majority of us from the Gallaudet community and beyond do not question her record of service or qualifications. We ARE questioning, however, the quality of her service, and why our input was disregarded by the current administration. The problems stem from not only the process used by the Board of Trustees to select the new president but also from the alarming fact that they refused to listen to us and honor our input—the crucial concerns expressed by the students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, and friends of Gallaudet.

We believe that the heart of the crisis at Gallaudet isn't just the fact that we have evidence that Ms. Fernandes is not deserving of our confidence in her ability to lead the university, but also that the Board of Trustees and the University Administration have cast our input and experiences aside. For thousands of years, people have cast the souls of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing people aside. For thousands of years, we have been objectified, oppressed, discriminated against, trivialized, patronized, and dismissed. The last place we expected prudential and stereotypical attitudes towards the Deaf community to prevent equity and justice would be at our own Gallaudet University .

LESSONS FROM THE 1988 DEAF PRESIDENT NOW MOVEMENT

The 1988 DPN Movement was a milestone in the history of Deaf people. Because of that event, deaf people were given the opportunity to lead, to make decisions, to self-advocate, and, to some extent, govern our fates. For the first time, the Deaf community, the larger civil rights community, the larger network of institutions for higher learning, the media, and therefore, the world, stood behind the assertion that deaf people should make the decisions that affect their own lives. It became a principle that DEAF people know their own needs better than anyone else could. Who, in fact, knows us better than we know OURSELVES? We believe that we have proven our leadership again and again. Through our personal and political efforts—indeed, through protest—we have installed deaf leaders to represent us.

OUR VOICES ARE BEING DISMISSED

The current situation here at Gallaudet today is an extension of the aims and passions of the DPN movement—an ongoing fight to be heard, respected, and recognized by the Board of Trustees, and now the Congress. We want our input to matter. We are not asking for the ultimate authority to appoint a president or approve of an appointment. However, when so many of us share in a collective message of concern about one of the candidates, we would expect our concerns to be heard and honored. When our access to communication and information is denied, when our concerns are met with repetitive, party-line statements, you are sending us the message that we are not valued, not respected, we don't matter and that you don't care. And this message is being tailored to

the consumers of this community—consumers who in large part placed you in your current positions of authority!

As we all know, Dr. Fernandes is deaf herself, and she is a member of the Deaf community. But we all know that deafness *alone* shouldn't qualify anyone for anything. Although she is qualified on paper and has held many positions of leadership within Gallaudet and other educational organizations, we know what her leadership style is like. We also know the kind of damage she has done in the past. This is the crux of our concern. For Dr. Fernandes and the Public Relations Department at Gallaudet to say the students have asked for her resignation because she is “not Deaf enough,” is an insult to each and every one of us. This comment alone tells us that she is taking advantage of the 1988 DPN protestors aims and twisting them to her advantage—to attempt to use the issue of being Deaf to detract from the very real concerns of the modern protestors' movement. In fact, this movement is made up of deaf and hard-of-hearing protestors of every background who have no confidence in her leadership.

We question why the Board of Trustees selected Dr. Fernandes despite the public concerns that were brought to their attention BEFORE the selection was made. And, we are questioning why, after five months, there have been no solutions to the issues and why someone who claims to have the leadership to be a dynamic president has not been able or willing to make her case on campus.

The protest continues, and we have a rapidly-escalating crisis. The many deaf constituents who have dedicated our lives to Gallaudet and all it represents as a beacon of hope around the world are deeply saddened. Once again, the Deaf community as a collective body is being told our input doesn't matter and that our leaders don't care if we are being oppressed. We are being told, “We know what is best for you.” This condescending and paternalistic attitude is hard to stomach in today's world where access, equality, and justice are expected. What is happening is a tragedy. Nobody can win in this situation.

Yet, “Gallaudet” has spoken. In reality, Dr. Fernandes and Dr. King have spoken. They have spoken volumes. The arrest of nearly 135 students on Friday, October 13, 2006, is evidence of this message. The leaders our protests put into positions of power are using that power against us. We need to be heard; we need to be respected; we need new leadership; we need to heal.

OUR DEMAND OF DR. FERNANDES

We acknowledge that the Board of Trustees may be adamant about not changing or rescinding their decision. We recognize that the Board may be concerned that a precedent cannot be established whereby demonstrations and protests can force the university authorities to change policies and appointments every time a new president is selected.

However, we do have a demand. We ask only one thing, and it is directed to only one person, Dr. Jane K. Fernandes: Do what is right in this situation and graciously resign from your appointment. Do so because it is the most just resolution for all of the parties involved. Relinquish control as a show of good faith to the collective community at the university and beyond. That is exactly what Dr. Zinser did nearly two decades ago, and it has lead to *great* progress all over the Deaf world. Gregory Hlibok relates that Dr. Zinser considers her resignation the best thing that she has ever done. We can only hope that someday, we will be able to thank you for being courageous enough to take the same action. Help us to move beyond this stalemate. Help us to tear down the wall that has been built between repetitive denials and positive action. Just as President Reagan appealed to Mikhail Gorbachev, we appeal to you:

Tear down the wall, Jane Fernandes. Tear down the wall!

Unity for Gallaudet!

Remembering our past and committed to a just future, yours, the 1988 DPN Student Leaders,

Tim Rarus

Bridgetta Bourne-Firl

Greg Hlibok

Jerry Covell