

Unity for Gallaudet: A Review

by Tawny Holmes

May to October—these months mark the bridge of uprising of systematic oppression against our deaf and hard of hearing community. The words, “We have had enough!” were often seen sentiments among the protestors at 800 Florida Avenue. Our eyes were bombarded with examples of audism and racism and we experienced a loss of trust—protestors, the Gallaudet community, alumni, and the deaf and hard of hearing community, not necessarily in that order.

It all came to a boil on May 1, 2006. There were two sides to the protest related to the search for and selection of a new president at Gallaudet. Students of color objected to the lack of diversity in the search process and the exclusion of a qualified black candidate from the final three selected back in April. Others objected to the candidate ultimately chosen by the Board of Trustees.

The formation of FSSA

The Faculty, Staff, Students, and Alumni Coalition (FSSA) was established after airing of the many opinions on why people objected to the announcement of the president-designate. The FSSA began after students and faculty of color confronted other students on not working together. After much healthy discussion, a foundation of understanding and dialogue was established that had never been seen on campus. Students of color came to understand that the white students were “blind” with white privilege and often did not intend any harm, or that their actions/words were misunderstood or misinterpreted. White students came to understand that it was their responsibility to involve students of colors at all times and to learn to communicate better, with an open mind.

“Diverse groups within the campus community are not being heard. This is important and worth fighting for.”

—Latoya Plummer, student leader

We all also learned that everyone had a story, everyone was diverse in his/her own way, and everyone had a right to partake in building the bridge. This was the beauty of the protest



at its beginning, the beauty of coming to a slow understanding that we needed to include everyone—in shared governance on campus and through community and multicultural lens on and off campus. This was not being done by the administration or the Gallaudet Board of Trustees.

The FSSA participated in hours and hours in this kind of dialogue, and determined that it would continue to peacefully fight to reverse the current situation of a flawed search process and to achieve the removal of a candidate that did not bring a comfortable ideal of justice.

Protest picking up speed

In October, after the summer break, the protests increased in tempo and intensity. This was in response to the divisive tactics used by the then university administration, particularly with the media, as they explained, incorrectly, that the reason for the protest was because supporters felt that the president-designate was “not deaf enough”. This intentional diversion from the real objection to the flawed search process and the ultimate choice of Dr. Jane K. Fernandes was directed to the hearing community, the general public, who would grab at this as “not a valid reason for protesting” and would lose interest.

Bobbie Beth Scoggins, president of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), expressed NAD's distress at “the destruction caused by administrative use of ‘the deaf card’ in the media—which set back our hard-earned civil rights and respect in the eye of the general public.”



Inspirational Speaker: At the Gallaudet campus, NAD President Bobbie Beth Scoggins addressed the protesters.

Standing firm

Throughout the protest, the deaf and hard of hearing community became aware of the injustices on campus. Injustice is evident in society as a whole, but the fact that it also happened on the campus where our culture and community is centered was shocking to all. The threats and aggressive action by the administration during the protest resulted in student injuries and trauma by campus security officers, arrests of protesters, and force by bulldozing. The students often felt helpless and angry at the continued oppression, but were inspired by the outpouring of support from community members. As one student leader, Delia Lorenzo-Martinez remarked, "this helped pull us through despite Jane K. Fernandes calling us mobsters, anarchists, and terrorists. She had no right to do so and it enraged us and inspired community support for ultimate unity."

“ We will no longer live in fear as we stand up as a linguistic minority and embrace diversity towards the advancement of our culture. ”

—Ryan Commerson, student leader



Hungry for Justice: Student leaders in front of the U.S. Capitol during the march.

Quick Facts

2 Media Representatives
Tara Holcomb and Latoya Plummer

3 Trustees that resigned
from the Board

4 Student Leaders
*Ryan Commerson, Leah Hernandez-Katz,
Delia Lorenzo-Martinez, and Latoya Plummer*

6 Months of Resistance

7 Seats on the Board that
will be replaced in 2007

39 Days of Protesting
on Campus

84 Tent Cities around
the World

134 People Arrested
on Black Friday

Unity for Gallaudet

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Through it all, the NAD valiantly stood by the protestors, issuing eight open letters and by their presence on campus. Chief Executive Officer Nancy J. Bloch, President Bobbie Beth Scoggins and staff members provided inspiration by their presence and advocacy efforts. In many other ways, the NAD contributed its skills and resources by providing legal contacts, educating the public, and taking a lead in organizing an information resource kit for the Board of Trustees to review.

“A prolonged crisis that could have been prevented in the first place.”

—Bobbie Beth Scoggins, NAD President

We did not ask for our language to be ripped apart, or for our identity to be dissected, or for our personal experiences with Gallaudet University's failures spearheaded by Fernandes' leadership to be exposed to the public. We simply asked for a fair search process at a university that is strongly connected to our community. We wanted a candidate with no history of mistrust and failure. We wanted to be included in building this bridge, this new President of Gallaudet University; a new ambassador and leader for the future.

“Ironically, there is a silver lining to the protest—it sparked the desire and commitment necessary to begin the healing process and much-needed rebuilding of Gallaudet.”

—8th Open Letter by the NAD

We stood up for what we knew was right. We stood up for our future. We did it with the support of many. The Gallaudet University Board of Trustees ultimately withdrew its appointment of Jane K. Fernandes as the next president. On December 10, 2006, the Gallaudet Board of Trustees announced the appointment of Dr. Robert Davila as the ninth president of Gallaudet. In addition, seven seats on the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees will change in 2007. Gallaudet is on its way to healing. With that, let us continue the momentum and go on to heal more bridges in our community. ♻️



An active alumni leader during the protest, Tawny Holmes is currently preparing to enter law school in the fall of 2007. Living in Washington, D.C., she works at both the Clerc Center and as a Youth Programs Assistant at NAD Headquarters.

All photographs provided for this articles are courtesy of Jane Jonas.



Black Friday: One of the 134 protestors arrested on the night of October 13, 2006.

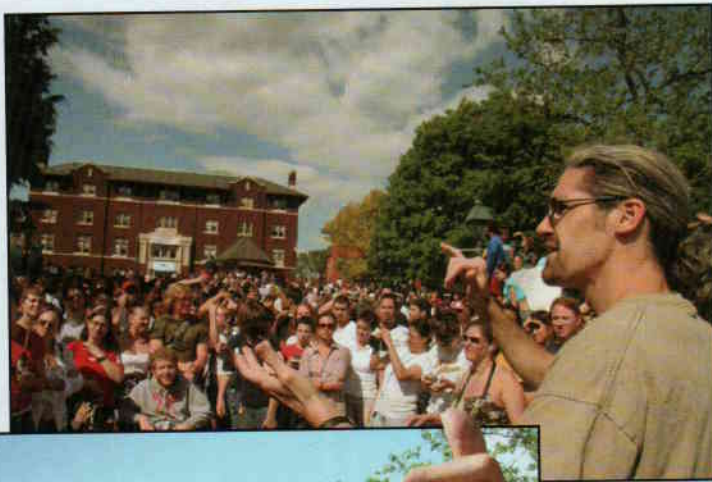


Camping Out: A few of the many tents set up on Kendall Green.



On the Front Line: Student leaders march to the Capitol.

Taking a Stand: A few snapshots representative of the various people who spoke out during the protest.



Timeline

May 1: The announcement is made: Dr. Jane K. Fernandes, the current provost is named the president-designate. Students and others spontaneously gather and initiate the protest at the front gates.

May 8: The Faculty Senate of Gallaudet University passes "a vote of no confidence" in Fernandes and the Board of Trustees in the decision to select her as president.

May 12: Gallaudet University's graduation ceremonies; students go home.

June 29 – July 3: The Faculty, Staff, Students, and Alumni Coalition (FSSA) provides workshops and alumni host a rally at the NAD Conference. President I. King Jordan gives keynote address at NAD Conference and announces restrictive guidelines.

October 3: Tent City comes back to campus and protests start again with students and faculty walking out of class and holding rallies.

October 5: After no response from the Board of Trustees, the protestors take over Hall Memorial Building, the main classroom building.

October 11: The football team players volunteer to take a lead in the campus lockdown. All gates are blocked and campus activity stops.

October 13: Black Friday; 134 individuals, mostly students, are arrested on President I. King Jordan's orders, after a 3-day shutdown of the campus.

October 16: The Faculty Senate of Gallaudet University passes a vote for Fernandes to resign or to be removed as the incoming president; and a vote of no confidence in President I. King Jordan.

October 18: The Washington Post publishes an article revealing that the Board of Trustees is split in their support of Fernandes, some want her resignation.

October 25: School officials send a front-end loader to clear a blockaded entrance, nicknamed "Mt. Bison" by the protestors. One student suffers a toe injury and another suffers a knee injury.

December 10: The Board of trustees appoints Dr. Robert Davila as ninth president.

October 29: The Board of trustees vote to revoke Fernandes' appointment as the next president of Gallaudet.

Errata

Page 21, lines 12-13 and right-hand graphic: Delia Lozano-Martinez is the correct spelling.

Page 21, right-hand graphic: Leah Katz-Hernandez is the correct name.