

Hooding Ceremony Speech
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Introduction

President Davila, Provost Weiner, Dean Erting, Members of the Board of Trustees, Members of the Faculty, family and friends of the graduates, and graduates. I am honored to speak to you at my first Gallaudet commencement as a member of the Board of Trustees.

Let me first congratulate the graduates. Congratulations! You have worked hard to earn your degrees. But remember that you did it with the support of your family and friends, and the faculty who taught and mentored you.

Connections with Gallaudet

Before continuing I would like to tell you about my connections to Gallaudet. My parents Emil Ladner and Mary Blackinton Ladner graduated from Gallaudet in 1935 and 1936, respectively. (Give their name signs) They met here and became friends among a strong group of friends. After graduation my father returned to California to become a teacher at the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley.

My mother remained at Gallaudet to finish. Only then did any kind of courtship begin. I believe my father initiated the courtship with letters to my mother. They corresponded with each other throughout that year, him in California and her in Washington D.C. When my mother graduated a year later, she went to the Indiana School for the Deaf to become a teacher. During that year they started planning their wedding getting married in 1937 and permanently moving to Berkeley. Imagine planning a wedding by corresponding every two weeks by mail. I am very thankful to Gallaudet, for I would not even exist if my parents had not met here in the first place.

My parents had four children, my older sister Suzanne, twin brother David, and younger sister Jennifer. My older sister Sue also went to Gallaudet as a graduate student. She earned a masters in deaf education in 1962. Since then she has taught in several residential schools, taught sign language at the college level, and still interprets professionally. As you might expect Gallaudet was hallowed ground in my family. In 1985 I decided to come to this hallowed ground for part of my sabbatical leave. I taught one class and hung out with faculty members in the math department. I lived in Clerc Hall. Although that was more than 20 years ago, that experience helps me now as a Trustee.

Currently I work with Gallaudet Professors Caroline Solomon, Fat Lam, and James Nickerson on several different projects with the goal of increasing the participation of deaf and hard of hearing students in science and technology.

Last February when I arrived for my first Board of Trustees meeting, Bob Davila called me aside to show me a photo on the wall beside his desk in his office in College Hall. There was a black and white class photo taken on the California School for the Deaf campus in Berkeley maybe in the mid 1940s. Bob Davila is a preteen boy in the front row. Standing behind the class was his teacher ... my father. Bob said to me that my father was one of his first heroes. To tell you honestly, I see a little of my Dad in Bob, perhaps that twinkle in Bob's eye, that persistent optimism of Bob, that get-things-done Bob.

The changing world

My dear graduates, you are going out into a very different world than existed even 20 years ago. Deaf education is fragmented because of public law 94-142. Deaf students in K-12 are spread thinly in thousands of schools and school districts around the country. Hearing technology seems to be advancing at a rapid pace, perhaps on the verge of curing deafness. It sometimes amazes me that sign language and deaf culture continue to exist with so many forces at work tending to suppress and dismantle them.

Recently, a state legislator in the State of Washington proposed that all deaf children in the state be implanted and that all special programs for the deaf in the state be closed, including the Washington State School for the Deaf, so that these now hearing students can go to regular schools.

Two years ago, during the Gallaudet protest, I attended at a national meeting of 30 or so of the most influential computer scientists in the United States. One of them just blurted out: "What's wrong with those deaf people anyway. Why don't they all get cochlear implants, so they can hear and not have to use interpreters?"

These are smart people. These are accomplished leaders. However, we know from history that intelligence, political savvy, and leadership abilities do not always lead to good judgment and decisions. What they needed is the knowledge you have gained here.

There is a powerful force in human beings for language, spoken and signed, whichever is easier. More than half the world's population is bilingual or multilingual. Humans have the propensity to learn multiple languages when needed, and apparently it is needed a lot. As good as scientists and engineers are, they will not easily duplicate the billions of years of evolution that led to the sense of hearing. For all the forces that suppress sign language and deaf culture, there are even more powerful forces at work keeping them alive and flourishing.

The issues involving sign language, deaf culture, deaf education, and hearing technology are incredibly complex. Those of you graduating today will go out into the world with a deep understanding of those complexities. This is what Gallaudet has given you.

Reasons for Optimism

Here are a few things to think about.

Hundreds of thousands of hearing infants are learning signs from their hearing parents every year. This baby sign movement seems to be driven by word of mouth and not marketing, giving evidence that it might be effective in improving parent-child communication and language development. Is the drive for visual language even stronger than we imagined?

According to the Modern Language Association study that came out this year, American Sign Language is the fourth most popular language taught in colleges and universities in the United States. In 2006, almost 80,000 students took ASL, more than Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Hebrew, Latin, Arabic and all other languages except Spanish, French, and German. In community colleges ASL is number two. I have no idea how many students are taking ASL in high schools, but in Washington State alone, over 65 high schools offer ASL on a regular basis.

At the University of Washington, ASL classes were offered for the first time this academic year. The new ASL instructor is Lance Forshay, another Gallaudet alumnus. For financial reasons, only two sections of ASL 101 could be offered for about 50 students total. The waiting list contained more than 375 students.

Sign language is more popular than ever, and its popularity continues to grow. For those of you who will teach ASL as your career choice, your opportunities seem boundless.

Technology

Some of you may know that technology is a passion of mine; after all, I am a computer scientist. A few years ago I visited a friend, another Gallaudet alumnus, who had a Sorenson set top box and watched her make a video phone call. Sometime later someone called me through a video relay service. I was astounded by the ease and naturalness of two-way video and VRS. They were so much better than texting. I sensed immediately that the run of the TTY was over.

Having worked in data and video compression for the past 15 years, I wondered if there was anything I could do. My colleague, Eve Riskin, suggested that we work on two-way video over cell phones. That was three years ago.

With the support of the National Science Foundation, just last month we completed a working prototype that uses cell phones that we purchased in the United Kingdom. All video-enabled cell phones available in the US have the camera facing away from the screen, making them unusable for two-way conversations.

Seeing two deaf students from the University of Washington talking with each other in sign language over cell phones was indeed a thrilling sight. I predict that video-enabled cell phones capable of two-way video conversations will be out in the next year or two.

(interrupted by a video-call on my cell phone)

About a year ago someone told me about Ella's Flashlight, a video blog, or vlog. Then I saw Bob's vlog. There are many more deaf vlogs, video-enabled web sites where people can discuss whatever is on their minds. I was really impressed how quickly the video-enabled web was being adopted by the deaf community. Deaf people, especially the youth, are flocking to video-enabled social networking sites to talk with each other in sign.

About a year ago I was talking to Ron Painter, a deaf Ph.D. student in chemistry at Stanford. He described how he works with his interpreter to develop signs for advanced chemistry. This is wonderful, but can those signs be preserved and become part of the language. Generally, as deaf people advance in science and technology, how will the language keep up? Almost all deaf students studying for advanced degrees in science and technology are at mainstream universities, usually as the only deaf student in the graduate program.

This led me to create the ASL-STEM Forum. (STEM for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.) This web forum is a place for students, interpreters, sign language experts and others to go to upload video of signs for science and discuss them. Funded by Google, we now have a small team testing a prototype of the forum. In late June we will roll out the forum to the public at RIT/NTID where the Summit to Create a Cyber-Community to Advance Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals in STEM will be held. I don't really know what the reaction will be to the forum. I am hopeful that it will take off and become a vehicle to help increase the number of deaf people pursuing advanced degrees in science.

Recently a student at the University of Washington asked me what she should major in because she was planning on becoming an interpreter. After all, very soon, all newly certified interpreters must have at least bachelor's degrees. I told her she should consider majoring in a science or technology field because as deaf people move into the high paying science and technology fields they will need interpreters who know something about what they are interpreting.

I could go on talking about technology, but there is just not enough time to do so.

Closing

Let me close by telling you about someone I met recently. Her name is Amy Donaldson, a 1993 Gallaudet graduate in something like audiology or speech-language pathology. A few years ago she earned her Ph.D. in Speech and Hearing Sciences at the University of Washington. She is now a research assistant professor in the Autism Center at UW. She is hearing and a fluent signer with deep knowledge of deaf culture.

When she meets people she says she introduces herself by saying "I'm in Speech and Hearing Sciences, BUT... But I know sign language and I don't think that everyone with a hearing loss needs hearing technology."

Mind you, the Speech and Hearing Sciences Department at the University of Washington does not have any courses about deaf people as we know them, no courses on deaf culture. The word "deaf" does not appear in any course titles or descriptions in the catalog.

Students in Speech and Hearing Sciences have learned about deaf people and their culture in the courses that Amy has taught. As one senior Speech and Hearing Sciences major told me recently. "I was a senior and no one had ever said anything about deaf culture in all the courses I ever took. I learned everything about hearing and speech, but nothing about deaf people until I took a course from Dr. Donaldson."

Like Amy, many of you will leave the hallowed ground of Gallaudet to go out into the world where you will be the only person in your sphere of influence that knows anything in depth about deaf people as they really are.

So called experts will say things that will challenge your beliefs and what you have learned here. How you react may define your career. You can become frustrated, angry, and immobilized. Alternatively, you can optimistically take action to make the situation better, whatever it is.

Like Amy, Bob, and my father, I choose optimism and action for my life, and I hope you do too.

Thank you.