



Guiding Gallaudet

As the 10th president of Gallaudet University, T. Alan Hurwitz '80W (EdD) hopes to help bring a community together.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

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ALAN HURWITZ '80W (EdD) knows he will be navigating some unsettled waters as he begins his new job as the 10th president of Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts university in the world designed for deaf students.

But Hurwitz, one of the nation's most prominent deaf educational administrators, recognizes that leading an institution often requires making difficult decisions.

"I think it's important to have various voices in the community be heard," says Hurwitz through e-mail as he reflects on his six-year tenure as president of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology. "I quickly learned I could never make everyone happy 100 percent of the time."

Hurwitz will rely on many of the lessons he's learned over the course of his career as a deaf student, as an engineering professor, and as an administrator as he leads one of the nation's most venerable institutions on its 10-year strategic plan. Founded in 1864, "Gally," as it affectionately is known, has a long history. Congress established it, President Lincoln signed its charter, and its 100-acre campus, known as Kendall Green, sits within walking distance of the Washington, D.C., Mall. Few institutions, anywhere, have greater credibility on deaf matters.

But in recent years Gallaudet has made national news more often because of student-led protests. Sparked in part by the selection of previous presidents, a 2006 protest and a 1988 protest—both of which nearly shut down the campus—revolved

around questions of deaf identity, culture, and communication, issues that have divided the deaf community for more than two decades.

The intensity of the controversy was due in part to the university's bellwether status: Decisions about Gallaudet's direction carry heightened import because they are sometimes seen as an indication of the entire community's future. Last October, when the chair of Gallaudet's board introduced Hurwitz to an overflow crowd in the main campus auditorium, an audience of deaf people around the globe watched live on the university's Web site.

Delivering his acceptance speech in sign language, with his wife, Vicki, his high school sweetheart from St. Louis's Central Institute for the Deaf, standing nearby, Hurwitz outlined his vision for Gallaudet. In a statement signaling his determination to move the university forward, Hurwitz declared that Gallaudet was to be "a university model for a bilingual and multicultural institution."

Although united strongly by circumstance, the deaf community is strikingly diverse in almost every other respect. In addition to all the variations of race and heritage found in the hearing world, the community encompasses people with differing means of communicating. It includes those taught from an early age to speak, read lips, and use an array of assistive devices, and who enter adulthood unable to understand sign language. And the community includes those raised with sign language, who consider sign language the heart of a capital-*d* Deaf culture with intrinsic value, built over generations.

COMMUNITY LEADER: "I think it's important to have various voices in the community be heard," says T. Alan Hurwitz '80W (EdD) as he begins his tenure as president of Gallaudet University.



FAREWELL: Hurwitz talks with Greg Pollock, the president of the Student Congress at the National Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, during a farewell reception for Hurwitz, who led the institute for six years.

Rochester Presidents

T. Alan Hurwitz '80W (EdD) joins the several other Rochester alumni who are currently serving as presidents of colleges and universities around the nation. Here are a few of them.

- **John Bassett '70** (PhD), Clark University, Worcester, Mass., since 2000.
- **Daan Braveman '69**, Nazareth College, Pittsford, N.Y., since 2005.
- **Susan Hockfield '73**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass., since 2004.
- **Brian Mitchell '81** (PhD), Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pa., since 2004.
- **David Sweet '61**, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio, since 2000.

Hurwitz, a leader in a community that has a heightened appreciation for communication—and how it can break down—sees it as essential that all segments of the community strive to understand one another.

BORN DEAF TO deaf parents, Hurwitz learned to speak as well as sign as a youth. A native of Sioux City, Iowa, he attended public schools as well as a school for the deaf in St. Louis. But outside special schools, Hurwitz was on his own.

“It was a lonely experience,” he writes of his days as an undergraduate studying electrical engineering at Washington University in St. Louis. “I had to do my best at understanding what was said in class.”

Nonetheless, he completed his bachelor of science degree, and moved on to St. Louis University, where he earned a master’s degree in electrical engineering. He worked for five years at McDonnell Douglas before accepting a job at RIT in 1970 teaching mathematics, electronics, and computer science.

By the time he entered the doctoral program in

curriculum and teaching at the Warner School, opportunities for deaf students at public and mainstream private schools had improved markedly. It was 1991, the year after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which required colleges and universities to provide equal access, via “reasonable accommodations,” to students with disabilities.

“It was the first time I had taken a class with an interpreter in the room,” he says. “I didn’t even realize how much I had missed for all those years. I learned how to become a full participant and actively involved in the class.”

But not every college or university provides the same level of access as Rochester, which is situated in a community with the highest per capita population of deaf people in the nation—almost 7,000 or 0.7 percent of the city population. Nationally, about 0.5 percent of the population is deaf.

Hurwitz notes that however much progress has been made in accommodating deaf students in mainstream public and private universities, “many times the access services don’t meet the students’ expectations.”

He intends to stress that point as he works to

attract more students to Gallaudet, which, like many deaf institutions, is facing a challenging time.

During his nearly 40 years at NTID, “finding potential students had become harder,” he says.

When the institute welcomed its first class of students in 1968, most came from schools for the deaf. These days, however, “a great majority of NTID students come from public schools with mostly hearing peers. That made our outreach efforts more difficult.”

Nonetheless, the institute’s enrollment reached a record level on Hurwitz’s watch. In the 2008–09 academic year, 1,450 students were enrolled, about 100 more than in the previous year. For 2009, the number rose again to 1,474.

Hurwitz’s success in attracting and keeping students made a big impression at Gallaudet, where enrollment recently fell to 1,633, the lowest level in more than 20 years.

Benjamin Soukup, the chair of Gallaudet’s board of trustees, told the overflow crowd in October that the decision to hire Hurwitz ultimately came down to who would be most effective in making the University’s strategic goals a reality. Those goals include increasing enrollment to 3,000 students, and making Gallaudet the “university of first choice” for qualified deaf students.

In a written version of his speech, Soukup noted that “the board wanted to find a person who we thought could help bring this vision about.”

Hurwitz suggests that part of the success at NTID is due to its large numbers of interpreters, classroom captioners, and notetakers, who make the courses in all seven of RIT’s other colleges accessible to NTID students.

During the presidential search, Hurwitz stressed the need to strengthen and expand partnerships with other D.C. area universities to make offerings not available at Gallaudet more accessible to Gallaudet students.

IF THE PRESIDENTIAL search process is especially fraught with tension at Gallaudet, that’s in part because only in 1988, after days of student-led protests, did the university appoint its first deaf president.

Ted Supalla, a visiting professor at Gallaudet this year, is an associate professor of brain and cognitive sciences and linguistics at Rochester, and the director of Rochester’s program in American Sign Language. Speaking through an ASL interpreter, Supalla, who is deaf and was raised by deaf parents who used ASL, noted that in the 1980s “the president of Gallaudet didn’t even know sign language.”

Students began making the case that the leader of a university designed for the deaf should be deaf as well. When the board of trustees selected the only hearing candidate among the finalists, stunned students responded by forming the organization Deaf President Now. The group led days of protests, after which the president resigned, and the board selected the university’s first deaf president.

In 2006, the campus erupted again after the selection of a president that protesters claimed was not fluent in sign language. Supalla notes that this past year, not only were all of the presidential finalists deaf, but “they all gave their talks in ASL. And this marked a huge change in terms of the acceptance of ASL as a language.”

Rebecca Edwards ’95 (PhD), who teaches courses on deaf history and culture and chairs the history department at RIT, says that many deaf people are so deeply committed to sign language in part because of the long history of campaigns against it. In the 19th-century

United States, she says, deaf educators were divided between “man-ualists,” who advocated sign language, and “oralists,” who believed the deaf should be taught exclusively to speak and read lips.

Oralists came to dominate schools for the deaf in the late 19th century, and their ideas gradually became the conventional wisdom. But many oralists, Edwards says, aligned themselves with “social Darwinists,” who saw sign language users as “genetic throwbacks, using a language form, gestures, which had long since been supplanted by the ‘superior’ form of language, speech.” The mission of this group was to speed deaf people along in their evolution and work for the extinction of sign language.

In reality, says Supalla, ASL, like all other sign languages he researches, “has a history that’s been passed down, developed by previous generations of deaf people, originally developed from gestural systems that have become more complex.”

Far from a next-best substitute for spoken language, ASL has all the same features of grammar and syntax that spoken languages have and is neither a code for spoken language, as many people believe, or a simple system of gestures, Supalla says.

ALTHOUGH ORALISM EVENTUALLY lost its association with 19th-century pseudoscience and the discredited goals of some of its early proponents, many deaf people have not forgotten these early roots.

“Some feel that parents who teach their deaf children to speak rather than learn sign language are depriving them of Deaf culture and as such, diluting Deaf culture,” says Hurwitz.

In spring 2008, Hurwitz faced a campaign by ASL advocates at NTID to have the name of Alexander Graham Bell removed from an RIT dormitory that housed mostly deaf students. Bell is best known in the hearing world as the inventor of the telephone, but he was actively involved in deaf education—particularly in the effort to teach deaf children to speak. Many deaf people noted his references to the deaf as a “defective race,” his efforts to discourage deaf people from marrying one another, and his promotion of oralism as a means to make sign language extinct.

“Alan led the campuswide discussion that led to the decision to remove the name,” says Edwards.

He organized forums that resulted, as he explained to RIT’s *Reporter* magazine, in “a growing consensus that Bell advocated an exclusive approach to communication that did not support a sense of community of Deaf people who use a variety of communication approaches.”

It was, Edwards says, “strong leadership on his part with a dicey campus issue.”

One Gallaudet alumnus who is strongly committed to a Deaf culture rooted in ASL is Guillaume Chastel, an instructor in Rochester’s ASL program who teaches courses on Deaf culture and ASL literature. Chastel points out that deaf people are trying to find the same balance between assimilation and cultural preservation as many minority groups. He believes that enrollment suffered from the protests of 2006, and that Hurwitz will probably be able to attract more students to the university.

But as for whether he believes Hurwitz will steer Gally in the right direction, Chastel sounds a cautious note.

“Time will tell,” he says through an ASL interpreter. “They’ve had to do a lot of work cleaning things up. Healing will be a big part of his role.” 