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Technology No Longer Distances Deaf Culture

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Heard on All Things Considered



JOSEPH SHAPIRO

Note: Due to the subject matter, NPR is providing a full transcript.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host: Gallaudet University has named a new president. Jane Fernandes is the second deaf person — and the first woman — to run the world's only university for deaf students. For the last six years, Fernandes has been provost at Gallaudet. The school has always been an important symbol to deaf people. Especially after its historic choice 18 years ago of its first deaf president. Now Fernandes will need to help students succeed in both the deaf and the hearing worlds. NPR's Joseph Shapiro explains:

JOSEPH SHAPIRO, reporter: When hearing people come to Gallaudet, they often expect a campus for deaf students is going to be a quiet place.

Sometimes it is. So quiet, you can hear the songbirds in the trees on the campus green as a few students walk to class on a sunny day. And sometimes Gallaudet's a noisy place. Like inside the student center, at the food court. There's an International Day celebration going on. A deaf student from Nigeria in an embroidered robe hangs a



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Gallaudet University

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Technology No Longer Distances Deaf Culture

ance.

Other students eat lunch, in groups of six or even 10 crowded in at small, round tables. The round tables make it easy to see what everyone else is saying in sign language. And when these students sign, it's elegant. Even dramatic. Their fingers fly. They slap one hand into the other and use strong facial expressions to drive home a point.

Some of the students have some hearing. Others can feel the vibration of the percussive bass. When the drumming stops, students at the lunch tables raise their arms over their heads and wave their hands. That's Sign for applause.

At Gallaudet, when they talk about diversity, often what they mean is diversity in the range of hearing — from people who are deaf to ones who have some hearing.

TOM BALDRIDGE: OK we're here. Obviously I'm using my voice today. Last class we were talking about workplace issues.

SHAPIRO: Tom Baldrige is teaching his class on business ethics.

Most students at Gallaudet have signed all their lives. But others lost their hearing only recently. Some use regular hearing aids or cochlear implants.

BALDRIDGE: End of chapter six, "Discipline and Discharge." There are four different

reasons for discharge.

SHAPIRO: When Baldrige teaches, he signs.

BALDRIDGE: Andrea?

SHAPIRO: But today, a student in the seat closest to the front has asked him to sign and speak. Of the 15 students here, she's one of just a few who has a hearing aid.



Technology No Longer Distances Deaf Culture

SHAPIRO: It's not easy for me teacher. To sign and speak, Baldrige has to speak in two languages at the same time.

BALDRIDGE: Our students are all required to learn sign language. So by the time they graduate, almost all of them are fluent signers. That doesn't mean they are fluent signers when they take a class with me.

SHAPIRO: When Baldrige signs, he's using American Sign Language, or ASL. That's the first language of people who are born deaf. Also of hearing children who are born to deaf parents. Both of Baldrige's parents are deaf. In Indianapolis, where he grew up, he learned Sign before he spoke English. ASL and English have different grammar, different word order. In English, you'd say: Have you visited Gallaudet? In ASL, you'd sign: Touch Finish Gallaudet You?

BRADLEY MILLER, student: Because you know, we all live in the hearing world. All deaf people live in the hearing world.

SHAPIRO: Bradley Miller is one of the students in this class. He's speaking through a sign-language interpreter.

Before Gallaudet, Miller went to a school where people read lips or could hear. For Miller, that other school was often a lonely place.

MILLER: If I joined the basketball team, who could I talk to? If I'm on the bus going to away games or whatever, I just sit there by myself. Wouldn't be able to talk to anybody. And so the coach here recruited me to come to Gallaudet and I was able to talk to everybody. So it was a lot more fun. So the access is greater here.

SHAPIRO: But Miller knows that Gallaudet may be the only place he'll ever be where everybody speaks his language. Everyone signs. So he's gone to speech-therapy classes, where he speaks and reads lips.

MILLER: I don't want to leave the community or leave my culture. And I know that my



Technology No Longer Distances Deaf Culture

SHAPIRO: To speak and read lips is called oralism. At Gallaudet, it was often dismissed as a way of adapting to the hearing world. Signing is seen as more of a statement of deaf culture. It's a tension that goes way back.

In *My Fair Lady*, Professor Henry Higgins teaches a poor flower girl to speak proper English.

HIGGINS, film excerpt: I think she's got it. I think she's got it.

ELIZA DOOLITTLE, film excerpt: The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.

HIGGINS: By George, she's got it.

SHAPIRO: Henry Higgins was modeled, in part, on a Scottish teacher of speech named Alexander Melville Bell. Only Bell didn't go around making the Eliza Doolittles of London lose their Cockney accents. Bell taught deaf people how to read lips and to

speak in the hearing world.

For George Bernard Shaw's play and the Lerner and Lowe musical, it was easier to make the female lead someone who could hear, talk and, of course, sing.

SHAPIRO: Bell's son was Alexander Graham Bell. He, too, taught speech and helped lead deaf educators to replace Sign language with the teaching of speech and reading lips, so that deaf people would adapt to the hearing world. That put American Sign Language in eclipse for about a century. Its revival was boosted by the Gallaudet student protests in 1988, when the school picked its first deaf president. To use Sign became an expression of "deaf pride" and belonging to the deaf world.

Some of Alexander Graham Bell's biographers say that when he helped invent the telephone, what he really was trying to do was come up with a device to help his deaf wife communicate.

No other piece of technology would more cut off deaf people from the hearing world



Technology No Longer Distances Deaf Culture

SHAPIRO: Today deaf people have found technology to connect them to both worlds. When's the last time you saw a telephone booth? At the Gallaudet Student Center, they have them.

I. KING JORDAN, Gallaudet president: This is called a video-phone booth. See there are four here. You can see, three are in use.

SHAPIRO: I. King Jordan is the current president. The school's historic, first deaf president. He shows off a bank of phone booths, each with a black curtain and a video phoneinside.

JORDAN: Here what you do is you sit down and you turn it on. Automatically, an interpreter appears. And that interpreter asks you who you're trying to call. You give a phone number. The interpreter calls that person and speaks to that person and signs to me what that person says back. So it's really been a huge, huge improvement in relay communication for people who are deaf.

SHAPIRO: That's to call a hearing person. Or a deaf person can just dial up another deaf person with a TV phone. Many students have Web cams on the computers in their dorm rooms.

Even more popular is text messaging. Students walk across campus, often with their heads down, banging out messages on Blackberrys and Sidekicks.

And on this day, as Jordan walks back to his office, he gets a message on his. It's from his grandson. He's nine. He's hearing. And he's on vacation in Florida.

JORDAN: He used his grandma's pager. He typed: "Well I just wanted to say hi since life is not fun without you." Ohhhhhh.

Joseph Shapiro, NPR News, Washington

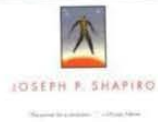
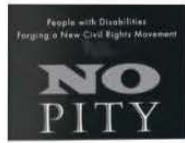
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