

Psychology Gives Gallaudet President Leading Edge

September 06, 2003

Technically, I. King Jordan is a human male of average stature. You'd think he'd need to be a little bigger, not because his last name is Jordan, but because he walks around carrying the hopes and dreams for much of this world's population of deaf people.

Jordan, an APS Charter Member, is the eighth president of Gallaudet University, the world's only university in which everything is designed to accommodate the hard of hearing. He is the first deaf president in the institution's 139-year history. A Gallaudet alumnus, Jordan assumed his current position in 1988 after the Gallaudet community rebelled against the appointment of yet another non-deaf chief executive.

Jordan's subsequent appointment was a dramatic alteration of reality. Suddenly deaf people who had been shunted into unchallenging jobs could see one of their own in charge. Now Jordan is spotted as far off as London, Rome, or Tokyo as if he were Martin Luther King on the streets of Birmingham in 1967. Despite this luminary status, Jordan remains a modest, humble person. Maybe that's just his nature. Or maybe he's got an advantage because he's got a doctorate in psychology.

When Jordan was 21, he was riding his motorcycle near the Washington Monument and was hit by a car. He wasn't wearing a helmet, and the injuries cost him his hearing. After the accident, Jordan enrolled at Gallaudet and spent a great deal of time casting about for a specialty. "Before I took introductory psychology, I didn't even know what it was," he laughed. "But I began to realize that it was just the study of how people behave, why people behave the way they do. It just fit with my new life."

Jordan received his PhD from the University of Tennessee in 1973, and he believes his deafness blessed him with a number of significant advantages over other chief executives. "I learned to pay attention," he said in a precise, measured tenor, signing each word as well. "To listen. To sort data, and to not make assumptions without data. I think that all came from work in psychology."

Like most people who are hearing impaired, Jordan has far too much experience with stereotypes. He related the story of a recent bus trip. The driver, believing that Jordan's inability to easily understand speech indicated some sort of mental defect, quickly dismissed him, leaving Jordan seething. When Jordan talks, his hands flit about, often signing a word before his mouth can form it. As he related his interaction with the bus driver, his left hand flew up, thumb touching the chest, palm down, while his right hovered a few inches below, palm up, the fingers flickering, conveying flames. The sign didn't need explanation – Jordan, like other deaf people everywhere, felt painful indignation deep in his gut.

But it's not just the hearing world that makes assumptions. There is deaf, which is not hearing, and there is Deaf, which is the unique culture wrought by deafness. Since he was able to use hearing aids until last year, Jordan is regarded as a kind of poseur by some in the Deaf community. Asked how he responds to

critics who say he'll never really understand Deafness, Jordan shrugged and said, "They're right."

Signing with an Accent

People whose first language is sign construct sentences very differently from those who first conceptualize the sentence in English and then essentially directly translate those words into sign. As Jordan's doctoral research shows, sign language is a far more efficient means of communication than English. English sentences contain a great deal of redundancy because the language requires more words than sign to convey the same information. While Jordan is fluent in sign, he still thinks in his mother tongue. In effect, he signs with an accent.

"No matter how good you are with a foreign language, a native can see little things that you don't do exactly right," Jordan said. "But I do support the concept of deaf culture, and I believe that deafness sets you apart."

But Jordan sees the benefit of this inclusion/exclusion oscillation. "I think that right now I'm a very good choice for president of Gallaudet because I can bridge these two worlds. The ironic thing is that I can never really be a full member of either. I can't be a full member of the hearing world because I can't hear, and I can't be a full member of the Deaf world with a capital "D" because once I could hear. It doesn't make me feel bad; it's just who I am."

Jordan has devoted a great deal of effort towards increasing Gallaudet's independence, presiding over an endowment that increased from about \$5 million to over \$100 million since he began. The university, Jordan said, used to have to beg money for new buildings from the United States government. "We don't do that any more," he said, pointing to a state-of-the-art structure redesigned so that deaf people can use it. It is an open room with few obstructions that would prevent a sign from being seen.

For Jordan, it's just another example of how things have changed over the last 15 years. "We in the deaf community allowed limits to be placed on what we could do. There weren't a lot of deaf people in senior positions." Then, he said, he became the first deaf president, or, as many refer to it, The First Deaf President.

"It was a social revolution for deaf people that destroyed that glass ceiling, and people saw that the limits were self imposed," he said. "I spend a substantial amount of time being The First Deaf President. It's a symbol that still resonates throughout the deaf community all around the world."

So, what does this physical embodiment of hope do when he's making one of his frequent business trips and an astonished six-year-old deaf boy scampers up, signing, "You deaf?" Jordan smiled ruefully and said, "They see somebody walking around with basically an entourage, wearing a suit, looking important, and that somebody important is deaf." He is a little embarrassed as he relates this, but he knows what that child sees: A deaf person giving direction instead of following it, moving freely through the world.

"You don't have to say anything."