



*ALDAcon 2007—Rochester, New York*

**Appreciation Luncheon  
Dr. I. King Jordan**

**JANE SCHLAU:** Good afternoon. I'm thrilled to see so many people are here!

I think this is the second or third year I have the pleasure of introducing I. King Jordan. The first time I met Dr. Jordan, I was invited to have lunch with him at ALDAcon in Florida. I never planned on going to the convention until I got that invitation. I didn't have a lot of money at the time and I didn't care. I told my husband, "Larry, I have to go so I can sit with I. King Jordan." So I went to lunch and sat there and for the entire lunch I stared. I am may be one of his oldest groupies.

Since I've been involved with ALDA and as Past President of ALDA, I have gotten better and this year I was able to say to King, "so what are you doing since you retired?" I'm getting better.

I could tell you all about Dr. Jordan's accomplishments in life but I would like to focus just for a minute—as I don't want to take up the time—on what I. King Jordan means to ALDA. Dr. Jordan himself is late-deafened and as a person who is deafened now 7 years, the first time I heard him speak, he told a story I won't repeat just in case he wants to use it again, but he caused me to look at myself as I hope he influences you today, and recognize that, yeah, I lost my hearing but—in his famous words—"I can do anything but hear."

If that message is spread today, that's all this conference is about. It is my pleasure to ask Dr. I. King Jordan to come up and speak.

(applause).

**DR. I. KING JORDAN:** Thank you. I remember that lunch. The whole lunch I just sat there and stared at you.

(laughter).

(adjusts microphone)

Microphone.

I think it is alive, really.

(laughter).

I don't want too much. I want to be able to see my speech. I want to be able to sign. I want to try to avoid knocking the microphone. Can you hear me? Well, I hope not all hands go up because I hope some of you can hear me? If you can hear me, what are you doing here? I apologize in advance for you way in the back, hard to see, I'm sure. I will try to sign big. The interpreter, captions, you should have access to the speech, I think.

I love ALDA. I promise you, I love ALDA. People say, oh, yeah, you say that every convention you go to. Every time you stand up and speak, you tell that group, you're my favorite group. But honest, ALDA, I wish when I became deaf in 1988, there was ALDA. I wish. I could have used ALDA and the support network that ALDA is when I became deaf.

I heard that there are 28 first time people here. I hope all 28 are here at lunch. I hope you will meet me and talk to me. I hope, because we have the same journey to become deaf. When you lose your hearing you don't become deaf, you lose your hearing. Becoming deaf is the big, different thing. And I like to share with ALDA, especially with new ALDA people, I like to share my journey to becoming a deaf person.

I was born hearing in a hearing family. I grew up hearing. And honestly, I never heard the word "hearing" in my life. I never heard the word "deaf" in my life. The whole concept of deafness, hearingness—if that's a word, hearingness—that was foreign to me. It didn't exist because it wasn't part of my life or part of my family's life or part of my friends' lives.

Now I look back and I know, for example, that I had neighbors who were very, very hard of hearing. I grew up in the 60s. Really, I grew up in the 40s and 50s, a long time ago, and technology back then was different than now and people who had hearing aids, had huge hearing aid equipment. I never really paid attention to that kind of thing.

And then when I had an accident in 1965, my life turned around because I woke up in the hospital a deaf man. No. I woke up in the hospital a person who couldn't hear. And I was in the U.S. Navy. I was in the U.S. Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. Maybe you are familiar with that because that's where Presidents go for their medical care.

Nice hospital. In 1965 and 1966, they knew squat about deafness, really nothing. They didn't know what to do with me. My accident was in April 1965, but they kept me in the hospital for more than a year because they didn't know what to do. It actually reached a point where I got a job and I worked in downtown Washington D.C. I worked for Blue Shield and took the bus every day and the doctors didn't know what to do with me.

But one thing they did know to do was to tell me again and again and again that my deafness was temporary.

Why they did that, I don't know. I think about this frequently. Why would doctors tell me my deafness was temporary? Because today I know enough to know that my nerve was severed. So that's not temporary. That's forever deafness. But they told me again and again that my deafness was temporary. So that helped me deny my deafness.

And then when I found out about Gallaudet and went to Gallaudet and saw that there are other deaf people, and more important, saw that there are *successful* deaf people, not just successful deaf people but deaf people who *excel*, I thought maybe there *is* life after deaf. Maybe.

So my doctors in the Navy, I'm still angry at them for not helping me come to an understanding that I was a deaf person.

I want to talk about my advice to newly deaf people that you must become not just a hearing person who can't hear but a deaf person. And that's hard to do. That's really hard to do. The first thing you have to do to get there is look at yourself, and it really almost sounds silly but I recommend that you go back to your room, go into your room, look in the mirror and talk to yourself and say, "I am a deaf person. I'm deaf today and I will be deaf tomorrow. I will probably be deaf for the rest of my life." And that's okay. I'm different than I was when I could hear but I'm not less than I was when I could hear. I'm just different than I was when I could hear.

So look at yourself and say, "this is me. This is a part of me. This is a permanent condition I will have for the rest of my life."

I say that in part because I look in this room and there are probably 150, 200 people sitting in the room. Each one of you is deaf in a different way. Each one of you defines your deafness differently than other people. And that's fine. That's fine. I should be able to say, "being deaf and hard of hearing requires you to make many choices in life." You have to make choices.

For example, I chose to learn sign. I think I chose that by default because I went to Gallaudet, and there everybody signs. But I'm thrilled I made that decision and chose to learn to sign. But I have many friends who don't sign. They decided they could live their lives without signing, and didn't need to sign. That's up to them to make that decision.

I asked them to respect my decision to learn sign, and they expect me to respect their decision not to sign. And that's okay. Cochlear implants? Really changing the world. People—I met someone this morning who is probably sitting in this room somewhere who said—after her cochlear implant surgery she recovered 94 percent of her hearing. And for someone who is deaf and then has surgery and recovers 94 percent of their hearing, that's really different. But that woman is deaf. She is a deaf woman who has a cochlear implant that's a very successful cochlear implant. But she is deaf. Deaf children with cochlear implants are deaf children with cochlear implants.

Part of a myth out there, especially in the medical field is that a surgical implant fixes deafness or reduces deafness or eliminates deafness. And genetic engineering, people thought about that as eliminating deafness. That's not going to happen. People will always be deaf, there always will be deaf people, different kinds of deaf people.

You know that I was President of Gallaudet for 19 years. I worked at Gallaudet for 35 years. During my time I saw many changes inside the University and outside the University. And three areas that I think are most important are access, technology and attitude.

When I first started going to Gallaudet, people, students at Gallaudet, would go to the movies or go to a restaurant and sit around signing to each other, and then if people looked at us, sometimes we would sign smaller knowing people are watching us sign. Because they saw the difference as almost a strangeness to signing. Now if I go somewhere and I sign, people want to know about sign language, want to know about deafness, they want to talk about deafness and communication.

It used to be when I flew, the stewardess, and we used to call them that, would come and I would say, "I'm deaf." You could see the stewardess thinking, "one more problem I have to deal with," not "so many problems I have to deal with." "Here is a deaf person, one more problem." Now I fly and the flight attendant will come up and I will say, "I'm a deaf man." Often they sign to me. Not sign but sign something or they know somebody who is deaf and ask me questions. Sometimes when I fly they join the flight and come to me and talk about deafness and communication. Attitude is really better than it used to be.

Access really, access via interpreting and captioning is completely different than it used to be. Now if you have children in school and you want to go to a PTA meeting, you tell the school that you will be there to meet the teacher or attend the meeting or something, they must provide interpreters for that meeting. When my children were growing up, parent-teacher conferences, I couldn't go alone to talk with the teacher because there was no interpreter there. Now if I go, they would bring an interpreter. Go to a town or city council meeting, they have interpreting there.

Watch TV, they have captioning. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not but almost always captioning is there. Captioning right there has really changed a lot. But if I had to pick two technologies that really helped me most that changed my life most, one would be captioning and one would be VRS.

When I was President of Gallaudet I had a staff I could depend on. If I needed to make a telephone call I could ask an interpreter to sit with me and make a telephone call. If I needed someone to make a call for me to make flight reservations or hotel reservations or anything, they would do that. Now I have no staff. I am my staff. If I want to call, then I have to make the call myself.

I just learned how to use VRS, VCO about less than a year ago, really. I'm almost embarrassed to say less than a year ago I learned how to use VRS, VCO. And now, what a difference. I have a friend who applied for a job, and he asked me to serve as a reference for him. Sure, I would be happy to do that. Then I thought about that, and near the time for his interview, his company, the company where he applied for the job, called me and asked to interview about him. So by that time I was experienced with VCO.

So I called them and spoke on the phone for an hour-and-a-half. Two things about that: For an hour-and-a-half I knew that they heard exactly what I said. I knew that I saw exactly what they said because the interpreter was very skilled. So I got exactly what they said. But the second thing, the interpreter, for an hour-and-a-half, if you go somewhere the interpreters take turns, and correctly they took turns because it is very demanding job to stand and interpret. But that one VRS interpreter for an hour-and-a-half.

Another cool example. Last Saturday, forgive me for telling stories about my personal life. Last Saturday I took the train to Philadelphia where my brother lives. My brother has a big trawler that he keeps near the airport. And then we cruise down the bay to Annapolis and took his little dingy to my house, really fun. When we finished, we decided to call my sister. So my brother and I decided to call my sister, and my wife also joined that conversation.

So picture this: I was sitting signing with a VRS interpreter on my TV. Here was my brother, who can't sign. My brother—I became deaf at 21—my brother and I were already separated, going different ways. He never really learned sign. Very basic sign skills. Here is my wife who can sign. So my sister would

talk. The interpreter would sign what my sister said. Then if my brother talked but didn't sign, the interpreter would see he wasn't signing so the interpreter signed what my brother said, too. So my wife, when she talks, she signs at the same time. But the interpreter interpreted not just the VRS call but my brother.

I hung up from that call and I thought, man, I can make phone calls like anybody can make phone calls. So very different than what life used to be like for a deaf person. It changed the world. Evidence, evidence.

(laughter)

I was President for Gallaudet for 19 years and you may know the current President sitting over there. Hello, Dr. Davila. I was part of the changes that happened in access and technology and attitude, and looking back at my years at Gallaudet, I'm really happy that I was part of that.

Right now people ask me what I do? Do I have a job? What do I do now? My response is that now I'm a full time advocate. I travel. I speak. I lobby. I can lobby. Alan Hurwitz can't lobby. Bob Davila can't lobby because they rightly represent very important federally funded institutions but I don't represent anybody. I'm a deaf man who speaks about deaf issues. So I can go lobby for the rights and activities for the people who are deaf and rights and abilities of people who are disabled. When I lobby I tell people that I decided to step down as President of Gallaudet. Actually, during the summer of 2005, I decided to step down.

When I decided to step down I made that decision because just before that, the Board of Trustees at Gallaudet had approved a new strategic plan that was based on information about what was happening in the world. Information about cochlear implants. Oh, many, many people are getting cochlear implants, including not just young children but infants are getting cochlear implants. Information about how more and more people are going to school in the mainstream and how many of those people who are going to school in the mainstream are one or two deaf people in the whole school—sometimes in the whole school system. Many of them don't know sign language or don't know about the deaf community, so a lot of changes were happening out there.

We realize that people like that will be the future of the deaf community. And those people have to feel welcome to come to Gallaudet, to go to N.T.I.D. The Americans with Disabilities Act really changed access to colleges and universities. Now a deaf person can go to any college or university he or she wants. If that person decides to go to the University of Rochester, then the University of Rochester, they have to supply accommodations necessary to succeed. So where before high school students would try to decide whether to go to N.T.I.D., shall I go to Gallaudet, CSUN, now they have 3,000 choices instead of three choices.

That's a very, very positive change for deaf high school students but potentially a very threatening change for Gallaudet, for N.T.I.D., and for CSUN, and we have to welcome all of them.

I continue to be passionate, passionate about that. I said in the beginning of my remarks that different people decide to be deaf in different ways. How you or they decide to do that is their choice, and we should all respect that choice. One great example of how different people can work together is the ADA.

The ADA succeeded because every disability group, every constituency worked collaboratively to see that the ADA passed.

Sometimes advantages for one group don't help another group. The captioning, for example, doesn't help people who are blind. So why would people who are blind be concerned about captioning or about the relay part of the ADA? They were concerned because they all advocated to work collaboratively. It is a lot more challenging out there and those challenges require that we work collaboratively.

If we divide our communities, if we divide our efforts, then we will be much less successful. I know that collaboration and respect will go a long way to turn the day and help move us into a better future. So I hope you new ALDA members, people who are here for the first time, I really hope that you will talk to me about your experience. I hope you will do what I recommend and go into your room and look in the mirror and say, "I'm a deaf person."

I hope the rest of this conference is very, very successful. I won't see you Saturday night, but for those of you who want to play in that Karaoke party, I wish you good luck in that, too. Best wishes for a great conference. Thank you.

(applause)