



ALDAcon 2007—Rochester, New York

**President's Luncheon
Dr. Robert Davila**

BERNIE PALMER: I have the honor and the privilege of introducing this afternoon's keynote speaker, Dr. Robert—or Bob, as we call him—Davila.

Dr. Davila became deaf at age eight. He was born in San Diego, California, to Mexican parents. At age eight, he was diagnosed with meningitis, a severe case of meningitis which caused his deafness. His parents discovered information about schools for the deaf in northern California and sent him there alone, to the School for the Deaf, which at that time was in Berkeley, California, I believe.

While there, he succeeded as a student. He was very eager. At age 15, he entered Gallaudet as a freshman with 45 other students and earned a bachelor's degree in math, later earning a master's degree in education and eventually a Ph.D. His master's degree is from Hunter College, and his Ph.D. is from Syracuse University. He has a long history in education, probably one of the most recognized faces in the deaf community.

While he was at New York School and teaching math he eventually moved on to Gallaudet where he became a professor of education, and he worked there for nine years. That is where he received his administrative experience. He was a Vice President of Gallaudet at that time. That was at the Laurent Clerc School for the Deaf. Later he worked as a special assistant in the Department of Education where he oversaw and advised the President on disability issues.

He has four honorary degrees, one from Gallaudet, one from NTID, one from Hunter College, and a fourth from Stonehill College. People know him now as a Chief Executive Officer for the School for the Deaf, and to be honest with you, he is one of those people who needs no introduction. With no further adieu, I would like to present this afternoon's keynote speaker, Dr. Robert Davila.
(Applause.)

DR. ROBERT DAVILA: Thank you, Bernie. Good afternoon. This is not the first time that I have spoken at an ALDA conference, and it is always a pleasure to be invited back again. This might be my seventh or eighth conference, and I have enjoyed every one of them. I like being able to keep coming back once in a while because I can identify with almost everybody in the room.

In this room, we have people who lost their hearing as adults, and that was how this organization was founded. It started with a support group for people facing this kind of trauma, who have lost their hearing. And also there are people in the room here who become deaf as they were infants and grew up

and have been functioning in the world as deaf adults. And then there are people in the room who can hear, also.

I think of myself as an NSLDA, a “Not So Late-Deafened Adult,” because I was eight when I became deaf. Earlier than some people and later than others. So that is my story I get to tell. We all have our individual stories. We have those common links. We all have different stories but we have that linkage. It is all about our individual differences and how we approach this.

I was reading through the ALDA Reader this morning, just reading the articles. There are some fascinating stories about the individuals in there and how they dealt with their hearing loss and how they had to adapt to the world of silence. The one thing that we all have in common with everybody—with each other except for the people who can hear—is that we are all obsessed with communication access. We all have to find a bridge from our positions as people with hearing loss to the hearing world.

So we have a community of people where a lot of people use sign language, and certainly my experience in becoming deaf younger. My experience at being younger and learning sign language wasn't quite as traumatic as other's. Other people had much more traumatic experiences. Now I am living long enough to appreciate everything that is going on and realizing that I don't need to lose everything. The circumstances have improved my life in terms of being a deafened person.

I have had opportunities I wouldn't have had if I were not deaf. I was able to go to a school where strangers—people I had never met before—opened their hearts to me and took me in. They helped me. They helped me grow and develop as an individual. They turned me into the person I am today.

My parents had a strong influence on me as well, of course. They taught me values, but I want to tell you also my father died before I lost my hearing when I was six years old. I have no memories of my father.

My mother was wonderful, very strong woman. As a widow, she took control of the situation and raised eight children, and raised me to be bilingual-bicultural, and really emphasized the importance of an education. We developed our own family orientation. We continued to pursue the American dream together as a unit, and we were able to succeed at that. My story may be different than yours, but all of us have gone through adjustments, major adjustments, as we face the different experiences we have had.

Now, the deaf community—and when I say the deaf community, I am not speaking of devotion to a philosophy—I am talking about people who are deaf, severe to profound hearing loss, and need to connect and associate with one another because there is strength in numbers. When I look back over my life, I think of the impact of the immediacy of the quality of life I have now, the advantages that I have had, that I didn't have before.

First is the long and continued struggle for communication access. That was made possible through the improvement of education that I received, federal and public support, civil rights legislation that occurred, but as well it was tied to the way in which deaf community members in this country were empowering themselves. They learned to speak for themselves directly. They were able to confront head on using skills and knowledge to address the public, to create a public good.

We have had people speaking for us for many years, over 100 years. People were speaking for us. We were not given the knowledge, the education, to interact. Other people spoke for the community. They made decisions for us. And they thought they could know how to make our lives better.

The deaf community needs to remember us, too, though. There is one group of people who are deaf, but it is not about just one group of people who are deaf. It is about all people and access through communication and to their everyday lives. The deaf community needs ALDA and ALDA needs the deaf community. We are not on an island, people. And that is one of the reasons that this is progress. We have empowered ourselves. There is strength in numbers.

The best example of political influence by the deaf community is the passage of the Decoder Circuitry Act, which happened in 1990. That Act required that all television sets 13 inches and larger, by July 1st, 1993, must have the decoders. Before then, people had to buy—spend 300, 400, 500 dollars to purchase a decoder machine. And we didn't have that many. How many people in this country had that? I mean, we didn't even know how many people had those decoders. But during those years, Sears and Roebuck sold those, and through the National Captioning Institute, there were only 400 sold in a period of six to seven years. And the last two years of service, over half of the decoders were purchased by people who were not deaf. People who were learning English thought this would be a great tool to have in their homes to improve English skills.

There was a low incidence of disability, or at least deafness was considered a low incidence of disability, of which all of us are considered a member of that community. And there is a huge world and huge industry out there that we have forced to change. There is a lot of power by people who are deaf, and we have shown that by that passing of that act.

We are not able to do things alone. We worked with other organizations to get things accomplished. The disability community has learned to work together. We were successful in passing the ADA and other civil rights legislation. We were able to get benefits as a disabled community. We were able to put aside our different views and perspectives, our philosophies and opinions, and we looked at how we could help each other accomplish our goals, which were the same. And it is a very important lesson for us to remember. If you look at life for people who are deaf, it has changed.

There was a protest last year at Gallaudet University, and there was a lot of media exposure of that protest. I was retired at that time. I retired from NTID/RID. I was in my new home in Maryland. I was enjoying my days of golf. And I was reading the Post one day, and when I opened the Post in the morning while I was drinking my coffee, the caption said—it was really terrible—it said, “some of the Gallaudet students can't multiply four times four without the help of a calculator.” And I was like, “wait a minute!” I was angry. That was my school. And I was a high school math teacher for 14 years. And I was thinking, where did this come from? That kind of loss of control and that message that had been dispersed throughout the United States, it was awful and it created havoc and upheaval.

It was a very terrible thing to happen. I went to Gallaudet. I got a good education there. I know what that university can do. And I was a very good graduate student. I received my master's degree without an interpreter. I didn't get any support services at the time. There were none. I stood in class and couldn't understand a word that was said, but I had enough experience, and I also had the same kind of trauma that you all have experienced.

What do you do when you don't understand the world around you? I would sit in class and study. It took me three years to get my master's degree. I sat in class for three years and not understand a word that was said around me. I had to go to the library afterwards and read. When I studied for my Ph.D. it was the same story, but I did get interpreters and support services part time, and the last year of my Ph.D. I worked very, very hard to get my degree. And it was that way or nothing for me.

So why did I do this? If I didn't do these things, it would not be possible for me to advance professionally, and this is an example of the challenges that we faced in the past, the challenges I had to face to get my Ph.D. I was number four. Now we have a high incidence of deaf people with Ph.D.s. It doesn't matter that I am number four anymore. That is a very positive thing, and it is also a matter of pride and honor to be able to say I went to a university and I went through and I got my degree without an interpreter.

I did it all by myself. I pulled myself up by the bootstraps and I did it. But that is not the point of getting the degree. The point of getting the degree is that you learn something that you can use later in your life and in your career to serve others and improve the quality of life for others who come after you. That is the purpose of my Ph.D.

I am an educator, and there are other people in this room and other people in a variety of organizations who need that support. I got my Ph.D. to help other people, to advance our community, to improve our collective quality of life, and to improve the circumstances of our family, and improve the quality of life for all of us in the future.

When I was a little boy, within two months of losing my hearing, I was in the School for the Deaf and I was exposed to sign language immediately. It was a traumatic experience because I didn't know English. I knew Spanish, and then I started to learn ASL. I saw another little boy about my age, nine or ten years old, and I started signing to him, and I am thinking of phrasing in Spanish. He is thinking of phrasing in English. And it was a challenge. Later as my English began to improve and change, I noticed my forgetfulness of the Spanish language. I learned English very well. By the time I was in my thirties, I lost all of my Spanish. It was gone.

Then one time when I was in my thirties at Kendall School—I remember now. I was 35. I was the Director at Kendall School in Washington, D.C., and I was invited to go to Spain to give a presentation. They saw that I had a Spanish name. So they said, great, you are the perfect person to come over here to Spain to present to us. You have been educated in the American style of education, you can come and talk to us.

So I went to Spain, and two weeks before I flew off to Spain, they called me long distance. Now, this was before telephone technologies was very prevalent. And they said, we need your paper so we can distribute it. And I said, “oh, okay. You are going to translate it into Spanish for me?” And they said, “no, you wrote in Spanish, didn't you?” I said, “no, I wrote it in English. I am not able to speak Spanish that well at all.” They said, “oh, but we thought you could!”

So we are talking on the phone and my secretary was speaking for me. My secretary spoke Spanish. I had to accept my weakness. I had to ask a Spanish teacher at Gallaudet to translate my paper, my

remarks. And then I sat and read it and I practiced my paper in Spanish. And I practiced the pronunciations, and the Spanish teacher helped me and wrote notes and basically taught me to speak my lecture.

And I went to Spain, and I knew—I didn't think about deaf people in Spain. Here I was in a very large meeting room with 400 people in the room and all of them were very cold looking professionals. They were school officers and principals, et cetera. And the most frightening experience of my life I had there. I was ready to faint. And I said to myself, read the paper. Don't diverge! So I read the paper. And by the second or third page, there was a joke. And it was supposed to make people laugh. I got to that point, and I saw people laughing, and I felt so gratified. And I decided that it was time for me to learn about my roots again. And I went and studied Spanish independently.

But I need to tell you that all of my education was conducted in English. And when I had to learn to speak Spanish, that was my first language. I never had to study Spanish when I was born. I never studied Spanish in school. I always studied in English at the School for the Deaf. And my mother depended on me quite a bit and my family did as well. I was her link to the English speaking world.

So I studied Spanish independently to learn to read and write Spanish again, so I could write notes in Spanish. And the teacher helped me quite a bit. And I learned how to translate, and I may be the only deaf kid in history who had to get an interpreter for hearing people.

But my life, I have led a very different kind of life than other people have. And I don't think mine is better than anyone else's. The point is I have a story to tell, just like everyone. And I have had to adapt. As President of the university, I have had to adjust to things. It is a new forum. And we will all be successful in the end.

My view of this organization, which I have experienced for the past eight or nine years, is that you are part of the larger deaf community. You have the privilege of being an active member of the larger deaf community. They also have the privilege of having you, and they need to reach out to you and welcome you and need to work together with you all. And that experience will benefit us all in the future. Be the people that you are.

I am noticing a trend within deafness, and also within the mission of this organization. I am noticing that people have been coming here for three or four years and then suddenly they have disappeared. And I think that many people who get a taste of ALDA for a few years and then stop coming, I think what happens is their mission is accomplished. They get the help that they need in the immediate time from ALDA. They understand—they begin to understand what is ahead of them for their future, and they develop the skills and the knowledge and the tools that they need to apply to their life and to the adaptation that they need to do towards their deafness. And once they get those things, they go off and do other things in the world and have full, demanding lives. And they are able to do what they are doing on their own terms. It is a very positive thing.

This is a wonderful, great organization. It really is. And I hope that you continue to reach out, and you do much better. For example, a lot of the advantages that you as a group and also as individuals enjoy are due largely, in part, to the work and empowerment that has been done within the larger deaf community. The technological advances—I would like to say, you know, I could have been deaf at any

time, but this is the best time to be deaf. I mentioned earlier that when I was in graduate school, I had no support. And I was quite overwhelmed and very frustrated. It was traumatic for me. I knew an exam was coming up and this exam depended largely on whether I would receive my degree or not, and I didn't understand a word being said in class. I needed to prove that I was in my right track in my studies and I needed to see that, yes, my inability to hear was a difficulty.

Let me tell you another story before I run out of time here. There are many traditions and things, stories about people's attempts and adjustments to do whatever is necessary to get ahead. In many deaf families—and I mean families where the parents are deaf, and including my own family now—I have two hearing sons. Families like ours, the birth of the first born child is an extremely significant event. It doesn't matter which other children—how many other children—but your hope frequently for the first born is to be hearing. And the reason is because when that child becomes three, that is almost the equivalent of your child becoming 16. You can wake them up and say, now you can go sign up for your learner's permit, you know, when they are 16.

In a deaf family, when [the first hearing] child becomes three, it is a magic age because the parents could go and get telephone service and install a telephone in their house. And they would start with their three year old, about this big, and teach them how to understand the telephone. This is years and years ago. And then suddenly deaf parents were able to reach out to the world and communicate through their children.

I remember taking my car in for a repair at a shop and driving home and having the car break down on the way home and getting a flat tire, and I was mad at this man. He didn't fix it right. And I said to my son, “come here. I want you to call this guy, this repair shop for me,” and I was angry! And I tried to convey my emotions and my anger to this man through my little three-year-old child who is, you know, barely understanding what I am saying. But that was the only way deaf people had to communicate with the hearing world at the time. Can you see the progress and the advantages now? We don't do that anymore. If you tried to do that now, they would put you in jail for child abuse.

(Laughter.)

But we had no choice.

Finally, the last of my stories, the last of my anecdotes for you, is a perfect example of how people learn and develop their street smarts to overcome communication barriers. I remember the weekend, the whole nation, perhaps even the world, but definitely the whole nation stood in front of the television when JFK was murdered. It was his funeral service, and it was not captioned. None of us understood what was going on on these tiny little televisions, but we stood there in rapture. “What do you think they are saying? I think they are saying this.” “No, I think they are saying this.” And there were so many things happening so quickly at that time in our lives.

So we got our two sons, and we communicated and they shuttled with our neighbors. “Okay. Do we know if Jack Ruby shot him or was it someone else who shot him? Really? You know, who shot him? Do they know who shot him?” Yeah. And the kids would hear it, so we would write a note. I would write a note to my neighbor, and I would tell my son, “go next door and give him a note and bring the pen so they can bring back the answer for me.” And my son went next door, knocked on the door, talked to the neighbor. And they brought back the information, and the fact was they shot and killed him, and then later on we got another question. I would write another note.

I would say, “don't go to the same neighbor. Go to another neighbor and ask him this.” So I had my two children shuttling messages back and forth all day long that weekend. The funny thing is it is comical now to think about it, but this was how we maintained our grasp with the world. This is how we overcame our deafness. And people have really learned to do that well. And the world has now changed. There has been a great resistance to cultural change, but not to worry because culture is not constant. Culture is always in flux. There is always change going on. One part ends and another part begins.

If you look back at life years ago, compared to life now, there is a huge difference, but we don't notice when it is happening. Changes just happen fluidly. In my opinion, the big coincidence of our time is the fact that Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone with the intention of helping his wife, who was hearing impaired and instead the telephone changed the entire world. Being able to speak electronically over large distances was probably one of the most significant inventions in history. He was just looking for a way to help deaf people. Instead, the telephone become useless technology for over 100 years for deaf people.

I think it is a very interesting irony. It took a deaf scientist, Robert Weitbrecht from California to invent the modem, the telephone coupler that permitted it. It changed our deaf world. Now we are waiting for another member of our deaf community to empower us again, to arm us with increased potential ability to get through the difficult and demanding world that we live in.

I will wrap up now because I believe my time is up. Thank you all very, very much for the opportunity to come and speak to you. I could talk for hours, as many of you in this room know, but this has been an honor. Keep on trucking! Thank you.
(Applause.)