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## Special Guest Speaker I. King Jordan

I. King Jordan

Jerry Barnhart: I have the honor to introduce our guest speaker. The interesting thing about this is that though he and I have never met, we have some ties. In the spring of 1988 I was a doctoral student at Gallaudet University, the year of the president protest, and had the opportunity to see this man rise from relative obscurity to lead deaf people into world prominence. At that time, I was there among several thousand other deaf people marching to the steps of the capitol to support him. I even took part in a sit-in in the early stages of that protest at the front gates of Gallaudet, which effectively closed down the university. We watched as the police came with paddy wagons to haul us off to jail. For some reason at the last minute, they backed off and let us be. I don't know if this man had anything to do with that, but I want to thank him if he did, as it meant I did not spend the night in jail.

There is one other connection I have with this man that I feel is even more important, and that is that we both became deaf later in life. At the time I came to Gallaudet University I was just starting to emerge from the long and emotional process of becoming deaf myself. And during my time at Gallaudet, this man showed me that there is, indeed, life after deafness. He demonstrated that deaf people can rise above their disability and go on to bigger and better things. In fact, he was able to go on to bigger and better things not in spite of his deafness, but because of his deafness. And I have a feeling that if you were to ask him if he would trade his life after deafness to become hearing once more he would say: "No thanks." Please welcome Dr. I. King Jordan.

King Jordan: Jerry, you are lucky you weren't put in jail. But the reason that happened is that the police didn't know what to do. They are a very sophisticated unit that works with protests. And when the Gallaudet students began to protest, they arrived in large numbers. They opened their trunks, and they took out their mega phones....and the rest is history.

I am late deafened. I became deaf at age 21. I am going to try to speak to those of you who are here as first timers. But before I do, a few disclaimers. I grew up hearing, but am now, and for most of my life have been, a deaf person. For you, that's not true yet.

Second, I have wonderful family support. My family has only known me as a deaf person. I met my wife after I became deaf. My children were born after I became deaf. So they didn't have to adjust to my deafness. They all know me as a deaf man. And that's very important distinction I think.

And third, and perhaps most important, is that where I live and work, my life is probably unique in the world. I'm very lucky. I go to work everyday. Everybody signs. I never have to worry about communication access. If something is not accessible for me, I can make it happen. You probably can't do that. I am standing here and preaching to you about what life is like as a deaf person, but comparatively my life is relatively easy. If I had not lost my hearing, I would never have become president of Gallaudet. I honestly think that if I made a list of good and bad things that have happened since becoming deaf, the good list would be very long, and the bad list very short.

As first timers you may want to hear about my personal adjustment to deafness. As I said, I grew up hearing, in a hearing family, in a regular school, in rural America. During that time I don't think that I ever met a deaf person. I never thought about deafness. Then all of a sudden I had a motorcycle accident, and became a deaf man. The doctors told me that my deafness was temporary. I was in the U.S. navy. It was 1965. They didn't know deafness, because in the military, there aren't any deaf people, and they encouraged me to believe that I should not be concerned about my hearing because I would soon become hearing again—which was exactly what I wanted to hear. I held onto that belief much, much too long. This is a textbook example of how not to adjust to deafness, for I stayed in denial for years and years. I thought of myself as a hearing person who couldn't hear. This is an important distinction. I'm not sure when I realized I was a deaf man. I went to a program at Walter Reed in 1953 for adjusting to deafness and I don't have one single memory, because I knew it wasn't for me. They put me there and I had to go. It was an order. It was for deaf and hard of hearing people, and I was, after all, a hearing person who could not hear. So I didn't pay any attention. I gained nothing.

In my family the goal was to go to college. I really wanted to go, so I went to Gallaudet. But I went as a hearing person who couldn't hear. I couldn't sign. I couldn't fingerspell. I can remember my first class, with a wonderful chemistry professor, who signed without talking at all and I went through that first class with no idea what to do. Gallaudet was a wonderful experience all in all, but I know if I had gone as a deaf person, I could have gained so much more.

I then went to the University of Tennessee graduate school—again as a hearing person who couldn't hear. It was hard. This was 1969 and the field of interpreting didn't exist. In 1969, family or friends or anyone who was willing to help you did interpreting. I went to class, and I asked people to take notes for me. That was my total support service.

I have heard some people talk about the faking it. We all do that— we smile and nod, when we really don't understand. I did a lot of pretending. And while I did have a great

graduate experience, I know that if I had only insisted that people repeat and acknowledged to them that I was a deaf person it would have been far better.

My wife has a saying that finally got through to me. She said, when life gives you something to challenge you, deal with it. You have to. That is life. Maybe it's not what we want if we could choose, but it is the hand that we've been dealt, and we have to deal with it. One of our biggest challenges is that people who are not deaf, who don't really know deaf people are afraid of deafness. They're afraid of me as a deaf person. They're afraid of you. People really fear the unknown. So one of your goals should be to help people understand that deafness is really just a communication issue. It's an inconvenience. It's a pain in the neck for me, and it's a pain in the neck for them, but really that is all it is.

One of the worst things I've experienced is the notion that if we would just try harder, we could understand. One time I went to a black-tie event. We were seated around a round table and a 77-year-old man, a doctor, whom I had never met before, was talking to me, and I was watching my interpreter. And he kept telling me to look at him—over and over again. I said: “I can't look at you, I can't understand if I don't look at my interpreter. He said, “If you really looked at me and you tried, you could understand me.” He is a physician, used to dealing with and helping people, and he believes that if I try harder I could understand? Sorry, it doesn't work that way. I can't understand, and trying harder won't help me understand. Now, maybe I should have been mad, and maybe I should have been rude, but instead I tried to explain to him. I don't know if he ever understood. And this happens a lot, and we need to educate people and help them understand that deafness is a communication problem and if we all work together we can find ways to get around it.

I can't put a date on when I became a deaf man. One day I was a hearing man who couldn't hear, and the next day I was a deaf man. I can't tell you exactly when that happened, but I am very glad that it did. Once I was able to acknowledge my deafness, life became easier.

My family and I became skilled signers only after I decided I was a deaf person. In graduate school, I didn't sign very much. I didn't have to sign since no one else could. But at some point that changed, and it was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

You are deaf, and I am deaf. If you're going to become deaf, it is a pretty good time right now for that to happen. Two reasons: attitudes, and technology.

Attitudes about deafness are really different than they used to be. I went to college in the '60s. In the 1960s, even at Gallaudet, when students left campus, we signed small. If you were standing in line at a movie, and you were signing to someone, you signed small; hoping people would not notice you. If someone looked, you stopped. We tried to hide our deafness. Now you see signing everywhere and people don't hide it anymore.

When I got my first hearing aid, the object was to try and hide it. You let your hair grow long so your ear mold could not be seen. Now people have brightly colored ear molds and hearing aids.

I remember getting on airplanes all those years ago and telling the flight attendant that I was deaf and seeing them roll their eyes, because I was one more problem to deal with. These days when I fly and I tell them of my deafness they are full of questions and eager to help in any way. They want to talk about it. I think that's a wonderful advancement.

During the rallies for a deaf president at Gallaudet, when the media first came to cover it, they weren't sure how to deal with deaf students. They would walk up to a deaf person who didn't speak, and pull out a microphone. The deaf person of course, would push it away. But within a day or two you could see the change as the media learned to walk up to them and put the microphone by the interpreter, while keeping the camera on the deaf person. And by the end of a week, they were cheering for the deaf students. Attitudes really started changing during that time.

The ADA opened up many wonderful opportunities for us. Those opportunities put deaf people on jobs with hearing people. The more hearing people are exposed to deafness, the more hearing people begin to understand that we are just people who can't hear, and their attitudes become positive. Right now attitudes about deafness are as good as they have ever been.

Technology: I am not an expert in this area, but I am a consumer. Technology has changed since I became deaf in ways that I can't even begin to explain. We had two telewriters when I first went to Gallaudet. You had a pen that was hooked up to a mechanical arm and you wrote, and then that was transmitted to the other machine which also had a mechanical arm, and copied what had been sent. We could send messages from one end of the campus to another, and that was the most wonderful thing. Wow! We thought it amazing that we could send a message to someone a mile away.. This was when, if you were deaf and you wanted or needed to talk to someone, you drove. You couldn't use a telephone. There were not TTYs. You had to go to them. So things have really changed.

I sat down recently and tried to make a list of what I think are the most important advances technologically which impact directly on deaf people. I grouped them into three categories. One is communication--and telecommunication especially. One is entertainment, and one is hearing assistance.

First are TTYs. Then in the '80s, Gallaudet started to use text-based e-mail. I remember our old fax computer system. You couldn't send any graphics. Now you can. And you don't even have to be home to receive it. And now we have the instant messenger system. You can IM anyone in the world and have a conversation. You can buy a TV video camera and hook it up to your computer and you talk with sign to people anywhere in the world. There are two-way pagers, which are the deaf guy's version of a cell phone. I suspect that not far in the future we will have a hand held device which will give us text when someone talks to us which uses voice recognition software. And there is captioned television and, one of my favorites, the new caption telephone, or CapTel. For deafened

people, relay works better when you can speak yourself using voice carry over, but this phone is a huge advancement and will allow us to make a phone call with no time lag such as we have now just like anyone else. It uses voice recognition software and is much faster and smoother. Soon you won't even know it's a deaf person that is making the call. There is also video interpreting, and video relay, which allows those that sign to talk on the phone.

I don't have to go only go to foreign films anymore. Now many theaters have first-run, open-captioned films. They do show them at off times. I don't understand why they do that, but you do get to see it with captions right there. Captioned plays, and captioned operas are also available. Interpreted plays are very common. We can see captioned movies at home or away on our laptops now, and pick what we want to see when we want to see it.

Last, hearing. Hearing aid advancement and cochlear implants are really changing very fast. Many people now use digital hearing aids. And people who get a digital say that it has changed their life. People who have successful implants tell me again and again how it has changed their life.

Remember I said deafness was an inconvenience? If you are hearing you go to the movies. If you are deaf, you can't unless it's captioned. If you are hearing, you open up your cell phone. If you are deaf, you have to have a special device. But even so, these days the inconvenience is so much less. Technology is changing the world for everybody, and the good news is that we have very good and effective advocacy groups who are refusing to allow the corporate world or the government to forget our need for access. That is really important, because technology changes so fast, that unless we are vigilant new devices may not be compatible with hearing aids or cochlear implants. Maybe we still don't have captioning on the Internet, but there are many groups fighting to make sure that we will.

I will close with a short suggestion. I said before that if you could choose to be deaf or hearing, you would probably say you would rather be hearing. But since you can't choose, then what you need to do is acknowledge your deafness. Do it more quickly than I did it. Don't wait years before you acknowledge that you are a deaf person. Last year I had the opportunity to speak in Rhode Island at the ALDA convention, and I am not sure why I said this, but I said that if you haven't acknowledged your deafness, then do yourself and your family a favor. Leave the meeting when it's over, go back to your room, look in the mirror, and say to yourself: "Okay, I am deaf." Watch yourself say it, and if you can, accept the fact that you are a deaf person. After that it's really easier. So my last two suggestions to you are be yourself, and value yourself. Deaf or not, continue to value yourself.

Gallaudet University President I. King Jordan grew up in Glen Riddle, Pennsylvania, a small town just outside of Philadelphia. After finishing high school, he enlisted in the Navy and served four years. Dr. Jordan was involved in an automobile accident when he was 21 years old, which resulted in a profound hearing loss.

Dr. Jordan earned a B.A. in psychology from Gallaudet University in 1970. Gallaudet, which is located in Washington, D.C. is the world's only university with programs and services

designed specifically for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. In 1971 Dr. Jordan earned an M.A., and in 1973 he earned a Ph.D. in psychology, both from the University of Tennessee.

Upon earning his doctorate, Dr. Jordan became a faculty member of Gallaudet University in the Department of Psychology. In 1983 he became Chair of the Department of Psychology, and in 1986 he was named Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Jordan has made international contributions in education through a number of professional fellowships abroad. He served as a visiting research fellow at Donaldson's School for the Deaf in Edinburgh, Scotland, as an exchange scholar at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, and as a visiting scholar and lecturer at schools in Paris, Toulouse, and Marseilles, France.

After an historic protest on the Gallaudet University campus in 1988 which catapulted the needs and accomplishments of deaf people into a national focus, the Gallaudet Board of Trustees appointed Dr. Jordan the eighth President of Gallaudet and the first deaf President since the institution was established in 1864.

Since then, I. King Jordan has served not only as an international spokesperson for deaf and hard of hearing people, but also as an advocate for persons with disabilities as well. Much sought after as a speaker, Dr. Jordan continues to challenge the American Public to examine their attitudes toward people with disabilities and to open their minds, hearts, and workplaces to people with disabilities.

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