

## Introduction

This story begins on August 25, 1987. I was in Vermont with my family at our A-frame chalet among the trees for our usual late August vacation before the September craze began. My wife, Judy, a librarian at the New York School for the Deaf, was preparing to go back to school, as were our children—Jeff was a freshman at Gallaudet University, and Deb and Seth were high school students at the Lexington School for the Deaf.

Vermont in late August is always special; the weather starts to turn a bit cool, and the tips of the leaves begin to change colors. Evenings are usually brisk, and the air smells of pine when we go out for a walk under the moon. When there's no moon, the neighborhood is extremely dark, for there are no streetlights on our dirt road. Trebo Road has been there for more than a hundred years, almost wholly dirt for its six-mile length. Over half of the roads in Vermont are dirt, and they have served us well except during the mud season when the snow melts, and the dirt doesn't seem to be able to absorb so much water at a given time. The mud stays with us for about a month or so. Washing cars is useless at that time of the year.

One afternoon, while resting in our great room, the lamp next to the phone flashed, letting us know we were getting a call. We then had a TTY, a portable teletypewriter—a smaller version of the bulky machines the Army, Western Union, and the press used in the 1940s and 1950s to send and receive printed messages. Our device had an alphanumeric display with a small printer to print the messages we typed back and forth. This was how deaf people were able to communicate over the phone in those days.

It was a call from our daughter, Deb, who was staying in New York. She indicated that the office of the president at Gallaudet had been trying to reach me—they didn't have our Vermont number, which we did not freely give away. Having been a trustee for the past six years, I knew that such phone calls between board meetings from the president or the board chair were rare and usually for a good or a crisis-related reason. I then called the president's office back and was put on hold while they got Dr. Jerry C. Lee, the then president of Gallaudet, on the phone. After some pleasantries, Dr. Lee indicated that he was stepping down as president of Gallaudet later in the year. When I asked Jerry what his plans were after stepping down, he indicated that he was going to work for Robert Spilman, who was the CEO of Bassett Furniture. That took me aback (and puzzled me) as the then chair of the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees at that time was Jane Bassett Spilman, the wife of Robert Spilman. This was an unusual set of circumstances, and after congratulations and best wishes from me, Jerry put Jane on the phone, and I indicated to Jane that I was sorry to see Jerry go. This news was a stunner—Dr. Lee, in his short tenure of nearly four years, had performed admirably for the university, and there was no indication whatsoever that he was contemplating such an action.

Jane opened with the usual greetings, as she was a very well-poised and down-to-earth person. One's first impression of Jane was that she was a woman of dignity—she was always well dressed and well-coiffed. A greeting hug from her was always genuine and accompanied by a contagious smile. Jane had joined the board shortly before me in 1981, and she commanded respect and made us do our work very well. I was relatively young to be a board member then, being forty-two years old, but my youth in relation to her age—she was probably ten to fifteen years older than I was at that time—did not mean a thing. She obviously, for whatever reason, saw me as a

useful board member and put me on several missions for the university before that phone call.

As Jane's middle name indicates, she was part of the Bassett furniture empire that her father founded. Up to that time, she had never mixed the business with university matters. The call from Dr. Lee that day changed everything. Sure enough, Jane wanted to talk to me about another mission.

Jane asked me point blank, "Would you consider serving as chair of the search committee to find the best person to replace Dr. Lee as president of Gallaudet?" This question took me aback because not in a hundred years would I expect to be called to duty in such an honorable and extremely sensitive situation. I told Jane, "Even though I am humbled and flattered by your request, I would ask that you give me some time to think about this—I want to do it, but I want to think about it before giving this my full commitment." I was fully aware of the enormous responsibility that would befall me—both personally and publicly.

I shared the news with Judy, and she, being a Gallaudet alum like me, felt so proud of me. At the same time, she was fully aware of the daunting task that lay ahead of me. Why so huge and significant, one may ask? The answer lies in the role Gallaudet University plays in the deaf community. Gallaudet is considered a "mecca" for deaf people. It could well be called the Harvard of the deaf world. Many of its graduates have assumed leadership positions in the deaf community, as well as in the larger hearing society. I consider myself a proud Gallaudetian, so to be called to duty to find a president for Gallaudet was a huge undertaking and a humbling responsibility.

Thankfully, I was in Vermont when I received the call from Jane Spilman. Vermont is quiet, even for a deaf person. During most of the year, we lived in Pelham Manor, New York, a suburb of New York City in Westchester County. We would go to our home in Vermont to recharge our batteries and clear our

minds. The tranquility afforded me the space to think thoroughly through the challenge I had been offered.

There were many elements to the challenge—political, emotional, and practical. Being the mecca Gallaudet is, the entire deaf community would be watching and monitoring the search with a close eye. Up to that day in August 1987, Gallaudet had had six presidents—none of whom were deaf, in contrast to Gallaudet’s mission to produce deaf leaders, and its board of trustees had never had a majority of deaf members. This situation created the expectation that this time, Gallaudet would get a deaf president. In 1950, there were no deaf people with PhDs. By 1987, we had more than twenty-five with earned doctorates and other professional degrees, and this created part of the pool from which to choose the first deaf president. The dilemma was whether Gallaudet should focus only on deaf candidates or find the best person regardless of whether that person was deaf or hearing. This choice would be the challenge before me.

A few days later, I called Jane back on the TTY to tell her I was willing to chair the search committee with some conditions, to which she readily agreed. One was that I would have full control of the process and that she, as chair, would be in a consultative role. The other was that I would have the full prerogative of selecting members of the committee from Gallaudet’s various constituencies to serve on the search committee. Still, the majority of the committee would be composed of board members. That was the deal we struck. Finally, I asked if Lil Holt, the board support liaison, could be my support person. “Sure,” said Jane without hesitation. That was a big catch. If anyone could keep me straight, considering the weak paperwork and organizational skills I had, it would be Lil. As it turned out, Lil and I made an excellent team for the duration of the search and beyond. Bless her. The search process was bound to be a logistical nightmare, and everything had to be done correctly, with no missed heartbeats. My life has never been the same since.