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“You Can Be Anything You Want to Be”

DURING THE INTERMISSION, I excused myself to go to the men’s room. When the swinging door closed behind me, my Blackberry started to buzz—and kept buzzing. Incoming was a long list of texts from Ben Soukup and Frank Wu, chair and vice chair, respectively, of the Galaudet board, who had been trying to reach me for over an hour. They wanted to meet with me right away. Where was I? they wanted to know. Flustered, I stood at the sink and responded, texting them that I’d been in a hotel ballroom with no cell reception all evening. “We’d like to talk to you right away,” they replied. I texted back: “OK, I’ll find a way back to my hotel now, but there are hundreds of people at this event, so it won’t be that easy to leave inconspicuously.”

“That’s understandable,” they texted, “but come as soon as you can.”

Back in the ballroom, I tried to get my wife Vicki’s attention. Characteristically, she was surrounded by a crowd, talking with her friends. Her sociability and interest in people, usually something I especially love and admire in her, frustrated me at that moment. Couldn’t she be more retiring? More standoffish, so that it would be easier to extricate her quickly from crowds when time was of the essence? She finally saw me, and I silently—and I hoped unobtrusively—mouthed to her that we needed to leave right away. “What for? Why?” she asked. I mouthed again, “We have to leave. Don’t argue with me.”

I remembered that our daughter was in the hallway outside the ballroom, so I added, “Stefi wants to see you in the hall. And bring our coats!” Of course, when we got into the crowded hall, Vicki and Stefi saw each other and immediately began what looked like a leisurely conversation. I gently tugged Vicki away but still couldn’t explain why we had to leave so abruptly. A ride down the slow escalator to the lobby deposited us into another large crowd of deaf people because the event was a Deaf community function, sponsored by Purple, a video-relay services vendor. “Hello!” “Hi, how are you?” “Good to see you, Dr. Hurwitz!” “Have you gotten any news about the search decision yet?” We smiled as we made a beeline to the exit. I felt perspiration gathering on my forehead.

Earlier in the day, I’d had my first meeting with the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees (after two earlier meetings with the search committee and one campus-wide public meeting), and this was my third visit to Gallaudet as a presidential candidate. When the meeting had ended at two-thirty, Ben and Frank had asked me to meet with them privately in the next room.

“We’ll be making our selection this afternoon,” Ben said, “and so our last question of you and all the other candidates is this: If you are selected, will you accept our offer?” I’d known I was past the point of no return. I *did* want the job and would accept it if it were offered to me. It would be the leadership opportunity of a lifetime, a thrilling cap to an already unexpected career. “Yes,” I said.

Later, at lunch with my wife, I shared everything with her, including my assessment of my chances. I’d done well, I thought, at my last interview. The board members and I had been candid and comfortable in our discussion of how critical a time it was in the university’s trajectory, with a newly written strategic plan and the selection of a president to manifest the plan through organizational leadership. “It will be a tough decision for the board,” I told her, “because the other finalists are such outstanding candidates.”

The others were Dr. Stephen Weiner, provost of Gallaudet University; Dr. Roslyn Rosen, director of the National Center on Deafness at California State University, Northridge; and Dr. Ronald Stern, superintendent of the New Mexico School for the Deaf. Since all were either alumni of Gallaudet or current leaders, I had initially wondered

why I was included in the final pool, especially since I had not attended Gallaudet. It also occurred to me that *not* being selected as Gallaudet's president might be a blessing in disguise because it would mean I could remain at the National Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT/NTID), where I'd happily spent nearly forty years of my career. But after the months of interviews—meeting with large groups of lively, engaged Gallaudet students, meeting faculty and the board of trustees, seeing the campus, imagining ourselves living in this city, and leading this vibrant university into its next promising chapter—the prospect of having RIT/NTID as the last stop on my professional journey paled.

Outside, it was still pouring rain, and there was a long line of folks waiting under the hotel portico for a cab. Red and green and blue lights reflected on the wet sidewalks and streets. As soon as I saw an opening in the taxi line, we cut in, excusing ourselves, and finally got into a car. We were on our way at last! I wrote a note to the driver to take us to our Marriott hotel a mile away, and then I showed Vicki the long list of texts on my Blackberry. Her face showed alarm and apprehension that matched my own.

I texted Ben and Frank that we were finally in a cab, and they responded that they were in the bar on the second floor of the Courtyard Washington, DC/US Capitol hotel in the NoMa district. "Should I come alone?" I texted. If they said yes, that might be an indication they'd decided not to select me and didn't want to break the bad news with my wife there. They texted back: "No, bring Vicki, and we'll all have drinks together." That seemed like a good sign.

Ben and Frank were nursing cocktails when we arrived, sitting around a large table by the bar, next to a window that looked out onto city lights blurred in the rain. Smiling, they urged us to order drinks too. When the waitress returned from the bar with our glasses, Ben grinned widely and said at last, "Alan, I'm delighted to let you know that the board has decided to appoint you as the tenth president of Gallaudet University!"

Vicki and I turned to look at each other, completely stunned. I looked questioningly around, and Vicki said, "Yes!" Ben smiled and asked if we were surprised. When we said yes, he said, "Let's celebrate," and toasted us.

The vice chair, Frank Yu, then produced a contract for me to review and sign. When I'd read it, signed my name, and pushed the contract back across the table to him, Frank said, "Did you have a nice lunch at Five Guys?" Vicki and I again looked at each other, puzzled, and asked how he'd known that we'd grabbed lunch at that burger place earlier in the day. He grinned and said it was posted on Twitter by a student member of the presidential search committee. Our lives had shifted into a new phase, a very public one. Our privacy was shot for the foreseeable future.

Still dazed, though thrilled and happy, Vicki and I went up to our room and texted our children the good news, asking them to keep it to themselves until after the announcement. I immediately went to work on my acceptance speech at the round table in the corner of our hotel room, staring at the blank screen of my laptop for a moment, conscious of a feeling of great joy and gratitude. My mind kept returning, for some reason, to my father, who always proudly referred to me as "my boy." What would he have thought, to see his boy about to take the reins of the world's premier institution of learning and research for deaf and hard of hearing scholars and students, the first born-deaf person to lead the school? I could picture his face, his loving look, and reassuring smile, his confidence in me. My parents' spirit of pride and optimism had a lot to do with where I found myself now.