

An Interview with Philip W. Bravin, Author of *Controlling Our Destiny: A Board Member's View of Deaf President Now*



Gallaudet University Press: Deaf President Now (DPN) happened over 30 years ago. What do you feel is the lasting impact, both on a personal level and on a broader scale?

Philip W. Bravin: On a broader scale, it opened up opportunities for deaf people to do anything they wanted to do, without the specter of thinking “I can’t (or should not) do anything because I am deaf.” After DPN, many boards opened up seats for deaf people, and that was a step towards them being able to control their destiny. I am of the opinion that boards and other positions of authority that deal with deaf people should be filled by more

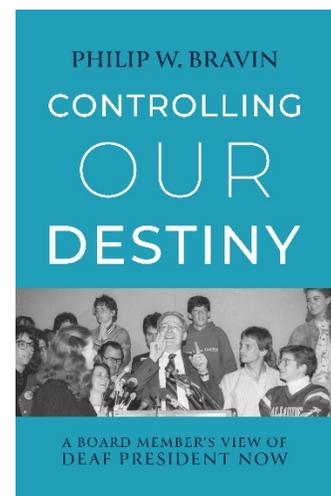
deaf people to be in sync with the needs of the deaf stakeholders they serve and represent. I recall King Jordan meeting a 5-year-old deaf girl in New England a year after DPN, and her looking up at him. There’s a picture of that girl somewhere and it’s a powerful one.

Personally, the lasting impact is the feeling of “we have arrived.” The beach of “arrival” is the beach of “equality.” The simple recognition of deaf people by the community at large in recent years is starting to be a watershed event—examples are the signing Starbucks, appearances of sign language in TV commercials, and *Deaf U* on Netflix. In other words, sign language and deafness is now becoming mainstream. All this was very unthinkable in the 1980s. Like I implied in the book, we are not fully there yet, for there are forces that will continue to resist this progress, and we must continue to be vigilant.

GU Press: DPN was an uplifting and energizing movement. Yet you’ve shared that this period was very difficult for you. One of the most powerful passages in the book is when you and other board members addressed DPN protesters outside the Mayflower hotel:

As I looked around, one deaf guy I knew very well waved to get my attention and signed to me, “Phil—you Judas!” This shattered me emotionally to the core, but I maintained my composure; internally, I was a wreck. After all, I was a true-blooded member of the deaf community—I had deaf parents, a deaf sister, a deaf wife, and three deaf children. My wife had deaf parents and grandparents on both sides and three deaf siblings. To be called a *traitor* was a shock to my system ... By the time I went up to my room, it was close to 11 p.m., so I turned on the news and saw the protest. I wept uncontrollably.

Could you elaborate on what you went through personally during DPN?



Bravin: A lot of different emotions for different reasons. Basically, the hope we would have a deaf president was “lost” for the time being. I held back hope until after the finalists’ interviews because I knew from the search process that an interview could make or break a candidate. King Jordan performed admirably in his interview despite the “interference” by Jane Spilman as described in the book. After the other interviews took place, I became more confident and hopeful that King Jordan would be the person. The board did deliberate very hard and tried to “listen,” but their inner biases took hold.

The other thing was, all the hard work I did during the search process did not produce the result that the community wanted, and I felt responsible for not making this happen. I felt bad for the community—they deserved the ultimate prize and the consequence was having to wait until after Elisabeth Zinser served as president.

Finally, I had the feeling that this was not what Gallaudet deserved. I love Gallaudet so much and I wanted it to have a president who was a role model and was like the students.

GU Press: During the week of the protests, was there any particular event or turning point that changed the dynamics of the movement from your perspective?

Bravin: The real turning point was Elisabeth Zinser’s resignation. Nothing more and nothing less. Boards rarely, if ever, change their positions. I have served on many boards over the years and can say this. Boards can change if there is new information that affects the decision(s) they made. In the case of DPN, with the search the way it was handled, with how the interviews with the semi-finalists were conducted, and how the search committee did its work, the board had all the information needed to make its decision. The only thing that affected the decision was the biases of the individuals on the board.

GU Press: Were you surprised that the board of trustees agreed to meet all four of the student protesters’ demands?

Bravin: I was more surprised that Jane Spilman stepped down from the board. To be fair to her, notwithstanding what happened during that week, she served as a great leader and a resourceful board member. I did expect her to step down as chair since her standing in the community was diminished that week. The four demands were very weighty for any board to take up. Jane’s resignation of her own accord took care of one of the four demands. The “no reprisals” thing was a tough matter. To close down a university deprives students of an education and freedom of access. We let this go for once and outlined (as stated in the book) that going forward, this would not be tolerated. The basic reason we let this go was because we agreed this was a civil rights movement and more than just a protest addressing the selection of an individual president. This took care of the second demand. The selection of King Jordan took care of the third demand. There were options presented to us such as reopening the search, appointing an interim president—this would have continued the trauma that evolved that week, so in hindsight, this was a great way to clear the air and move forward. The final demand was the 51% deaf composition of the board. It was a very heavy item with a lot of unknowns that could not be resolved in a few hours, so the appointment of the task force allowed us time to review this further. So, basically

the resolution of the four demands was not a surprise, but rather a process of dealing with each demand which differed in scope and content.

GU Press: In the process of writing the book, did you come across any new information that changed your perspective of DPN events?

Bravin: The biggest find was the unpublished Merrill paper “The Feasibility of a Deaf Person Serving as President of Gallaudet College,” which was very important in validating my writing the book (I came across it after the last two thirds of the book was written). The rest of the information was not really new, except that it refreshed my memory of what transpired then. In talking to some friends after publication of the book, they felt that the Merrill paper was important for posterity and history’s sake. The success of King Jordan’s raising funds for our endowment was one example that further validated Dr. Merrill’s thinking.

As I mentioned in the book, the movie *Selma* caused me to further research the event and made me realize the close parallels between the civil rights movement and the DPN movement.

In writing the book in the early stages, I really addressed the last parts of part one and part two. I felt something was missing and decided to reread various deaf history publications to try to understand why DPN “happened.” In rereading Harlan Lane’s book *When the Mind Hears* and *Through Deaf Eyes* by Baynton, Gannon, and Bergey, it occurred to me that the Milan Congress in 1880 was the genesis of oppression of deaf people through the deprivation of sign language. This oppression built up over the years like an inflating balloon and was punctured forever by the DPN movement, which took place in a week’s time! Gallaudet’s retired professor, Charles Giansanti, summed it up well (as noted in the epilogue of my book) by saying: “God made the world in seven days and we have changed it in seven days.”

GU Press: What are the takeaways of the protest for young people today?

Bravin: Simply stated, standing for what you believe in is just and right, and articulating that belief gets one a long way. Articulating this in a form that people will notice and listen to will go a long way, whatever the form is.

Finally, King Jordan said it best, “deaf people can do anything hearing people can, except hear.”

GU Press: As you reflect on your actions during DPN, is there anything you would have done differently?

Bravin: Hindsight, as they say, is better than foresight. The answer to your question is: nothing I would have done differently would have made things any different. It was a big process and each part of the process had its time and place and was much bigger than any one individual. Different things had to happen to make the end result come out the way it did.

I am personally proud of the way I conducted the search and did my best in presenting the candidates to the board, finally becoming the chair of the board, and working closely with King to take Gallaudet to new heights. This was the best I could have done and I will let history be the judge.