“Life and Deaf”: Language and the Myth of “Balance” in Public History

In 1989 an international gathering called the “Deaf Way” was held at Gallaudet University and at various sites around Washington, D.C. The event celebrated the language, culture, history, and art of Deaf people. Registrants from eighty countries attended the weeklong conference and festival, and five thousand people shared experiences and acknowledged that being deaf creates a bond even where no common language, geography, nationality, religion, or economy exists. A part of the program included events at the Smithsonian Institution, where a distinctive “Deaf Way” label highlighted art and artifacts and special tours were offered. The series of events, paired with knowledge of other cultural exhibitions, inspired Gallaudet University sophomore Andrea Shettle to propose the creation of an exhibition to celebrate American Deaf life and bring it to a wider audience. The intent was to bring the Deaf Way outside the Deaf “world.” Her seed of an idea eventually took root, and twelve years later, in 2001, an exhibition about Deaf life began its national tour, although not before finding itself in the eye of a cultural storm on what it means to be Deaf. This article chronicles that storm and details an organized campaign to refocus the exhibition’s concept away.
from community and toward something entirely different: pathology and remediation.

The protests against the exhibition in its originally conceived form demonstrate that attitudes about American Sign Language (ASL) and the Deaf community are deeply rooted and by 1995 had changed little from the previous century. In spite of widely available courses in American Sign Language and an increased visibility of the signing community, the rhetoric of the campaign echoes sentiments of the nineteenth century. It suggests that, by the late twentieth century, the greater visibility of the American Deaf community had failed to connect with large numbers of people touched by familial or professional connections to deaf children.

If only to expand our knowledge of language oppression in the United States, this story is compelling. Beyond language, however, this chronicle on creating a public history exhibition reveals the way in which society values normalcy. Intertwined with this theme is a community/museum power struggle and evidence of pressures on both the community and the museum to demonstrate a supposedly “balanced” view of Deaf Americans.

Project History

Following the Deaf Way, Shettle’s ideas began to take shape in discussions among Gallaudet University staff and historians familiar with Deaf history. Our hope was that the exhibition idea would be of interest to the National Museum of American History (part of the Smithsonian Institution) since it had shown exhibits on the history of other minority groups in the United States. Contacts were made with the museum, and the initial response was positive. Several museum staff members devoted time and contributed ideas to developing a basic exhibition concept. The museum designated one of its educators to serve in a co-curatorial role, and a museum designer created materials for fund-raising and discussion. At Gallaudet University, Jack R. Gannon, author of *Deaf Heritage* and special assistant to the president for advocacy, agreed to serve as co-curator. I served as project director. With the project under way, a small, informal meeting of historians and community scholars gathered core exhibition ideas, and a
member of the History and Government Department assisted with writing a summary of U.S. Deaf history for fund-raising, which would be a key to the exhibit’s success.

At this early stage of the project, the exhibition team was unsure whether there was sufficient physical material to create an exhibition rich enough to justify the use of space in a Smithsonian museum, and determining this became a significant objective. Two small grants from the Gallaudet Research Institute supported travel to the American School for the Deaf and the Kentucky School for the Deaf to examine their extensive collections. A planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities funded research of twenty additional collections. It would not be long before we knew that there were far more germane artifacts available than we had imagined, and our challenge would be to make meaningful selections from the material available throughout the United States.

Exhibitions as Distillations

All history is about reduction; concepts, facts, and support information must be distilled to presentable components. Exhibitions are the ultimate form of distilled history as they serve standing visitors who will most often see the material once. In the best of circumstances, it is difficult to do justice to a story in the space of an exhibition. Nearly two hundred years of any community history presented within twenty-five hundred square feet will be a distillation sure to leave out meaningful context. Presenting that same two hundred years of a Deaf community within a much larger deaf population meant that we could show only the most basic history.

Considering the very real limits of wall space and the propensity for exhibition visitors to spend shockingly little time reading text, complex histories must be reduced to the most essential points, which must then be supported and proven for the audience. In order to be accessible to the majority of visitors, exhibits cannot be a “book on the walls,” meaning they cannot simply take historic research and inundate visitors with as much text as can fit into a room. Space equals importance.

The most discomforting but best advice the museum professionals
gave to the Gallaudet exhibition team as we thought about the project was, “Why should I care?” We were asked why any hearing person should care about the history of deaf people. This provocative question helped to frame the history of a community’s shared struggles, resistance, and survival. The exhibition had to be about the common experiences of a people as a whole, not simply its famous members or its leaders. Revealing both differences between Deaf and hearing people and the common human elements that unite us all would (we hoped) make the visitor care.

Vetting and Venting

The project moved slowly ahead with years of fund-raising and collections research until we were ready in late October of 1995 to ask a distinguished and diverse group of individuals to review the exhibition concept and make recommendations for its improvement. The majority of the reviewers we enlisted were deaf, though not all were from the signing community. They brought to the discussion perspectives on education, rehabilitation, art, law, language, history, and diversity within the Deaf community. They included people with long and successful careers in Deaf education, university scholars, as well as others from the Deaf (and deaf) communities.

Reviewers examined draft documents showing broad categories of topics. The intent of this initial meeting was to solicit input on content, themes, and visitor experience before the project moved ahead. At this point, the title proposed for the exhibition was “Deaf: A Community of Signers.” Topics included language, identity, education, unity and diversity, the Americans with Disabilities Act, disability and difference perceptions, technology, and sports. The draft concept primarily reflected the experiences of the signing Deaf community. Gallaudet’s 1988 “Deaf President Now” revolution, as an example of one of its proudest achievements, received a full page of discussion. A summary of the exhibition’s goals at this point stated that “Visitors should leave with a better understanding of Deaf history as a part of American history and awareness that Deaf people have a unique culture.”

In addition to the exhibition’s objectives, Gallaudet curator Jack
Gannon presented the following “Approaches to the Story” to help the reviewers understand more clearly the project’s intent:

- The focus will be visual, not auditory (it will not have an emphasis on sound).
- The exhibition will be presented from a Deaf perspective.
- The exhibition will be accessible to all people.
- This will not be a Gallaudet story, and Gallaudet University is not a major part of the exhibition. Deaf President Now, however, will be presented as a critical moment in Deaf history.
- The exhibition will be representative of Deaf lives from all over the United States (regional and local input and artifacts).
- The exhibition will present the unity and diversity of the Deaf community.
- As much as possible, we will present the history of the signing Deaf community in a way that does not polarize (Deaf/hearing, signing/nonsigning, speaking/nonspeaking, ASL/Signed English).

The ensuing discussion foreshadowed problems that would endanger the entire project. Reviewers talked about diversity within the Deaf community, as well as the fact that not all deaf people are part of the signing community, and they all agreed about this historical and contemporary fact. Nevertheless, they overwhelmingly stressed that the exhibition should focus on the history of the linguistic minority of signing deaf people as the group that created and maintains a language and has fought most openly for self-determination.

One reviewer, however, strongly objected to a cultural-linguistic focus and insisted that the exhibition give equal time and space to oral deaf people. This advisor fundamentally disagreed with the idea of an exhibition based primarily on signing Deaf people, viewing it as unfair to deaf people who are not signers. Other reviewers countered with statements about the uniqueness of the signing community and the value of presenting a cohesive story of common experiences and a shared language. Some stressed historic intersections between signers and nonsigning deaf people.

The dissenting reviewer was not swayed and remained firm, insisting that the exhibition would be fair only if equal time and space were
given to oral deaf experiences. Demonstrating the signing and oral ways of living as a deaf person seemed to this advisor to be the reasonable way to show a comprehensive deaf story. After extended civil discussion, arguments broke out among the reviewers, and there was shouting in sign and voice.

While most of the panel members recognized the need to incorporate oral and signing education as part of a shared history, they were reluctant to bifurcate the exhibition based on the argument that there are two ways to be deaf. Reviewers did not want the exhibition to give the impression that the historic argument (and thus the primary struggle) was between audiologically deaf and culturally Deaf people. A divided exhibit space would not provide visitors a cohesive experience and would dilute or even distort a community history.

Institutional Relationships and Control

At this point in the project’s development, there was still no firm agreement on the relationship between Gallaudet University and the National Museum of American History. Though many generations of a “memorandum of understanding” were written, none was ever signed by the two institutions. On the one hand, all of the versions made it clear that final control of content would reside with the museum. Its walls were “not for sale.” On the other hand, while the museum could not release control of the presentation of Deaf history to an outside body, it was clear that no museum would be able to make a credible exhibition on Deaf life without Gallaudet University’s resources. At a minimum, several people on campus would have to review scripts and images.

We had therefore been working toward collaborative exhibition development and a joint fund-raising effort, even in the absence of a formal agreement. The National Museum of American History had sought internal Smithsonian project development funds, for example, and Gallaudet had raised more than half of the budget for exhibition construction.

Six museum curators and administrators from the Smithsonian Institution participated in the reviewers’ meeting. They expressed concern about splitting an exhibition story but recognized the need for listening
to all sides and finding a way to incorporate various perspectives. In casual conversations, professionals from the Smithsonian cautioned Gallaudet staff about developing a contentious exhibit and expressed hesitancy for the museum to be involved in yet more controversy.

The Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum had recently received veterans’ complaints about an exhibition featuring the *Enola Gay*, the airplane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan. At the National Museum of American History, a “Science in American Life” exhibition was criticized by scientists for focusing on the negative impact of chemistry and failing to highlight positive effects. Similar clashes surrounding the exhibition on Deaf life and history, it was suggested, would kill the project. Indeed, the museum was about to face a flood of protest about what the exhibition should become. This flood washed away all hope of signing a memorandum of understanding.

A Campaign and Words of Protest

The perils of opening draft materials to an advisory group are many, including the very real chance that the documents will be widely circulated or misinterpreted. Within days of the October 1995 meeting of reviewers, a campaign was initiated to persuade the Smithsonian to change the scope of the exhibition. A member of the review team sent a letter to organizations and oral schools, warning about the direction the project was taking and encouraging a letter-writing campaign.

More than 270 letters of concern were sent, mostly to the Smithsonian, with only a few copied to Gallaudet’s exhibition co-curator, Jack Gannon. Analysis of the letters offers a glimpse into the thinking of those who see American Sign Language as a threat to normalcy, the denial of disability as a danger to accommodation, and both as perilous to a cohesive (hearing) family.

Letters labeled the early draft of exhibition concepts “radical” and “unbalanced” because of its focus on the linguistic minority of ASL users rather than the full population of deaf and hard-of-hearing people. To those who cannot see the linguistic community as a minority group, comparisons to other specific cultural groups seemed spurious. From the cultural community perspective, for example, if there were to be an exhibition on Cherokee life, organizers would not be required
to incorporate Lakota experiences, although they are both Native American cultural groups. To objectors, this analogy was invalid because “deaf” and “Deaf,” though differently capitalized, are the same word. Therefore, they contended, any exhibition on “deaf people” must be inclusive of all people who are deaf. It came down to who had the right to define “deaf” and “Deaf.”

The quotes that follow come from letters that started arriving in November 1995, days after the meeting of reviewers, and continued until December of 1996. Hearing parents and grandparents, teachers, and administrators wrote most of the letters, though a small number came from oral deaf adults and a group of teens attending an oral school. This campaign, contained within a 1995–1996 time frame, provides a window through which we can see the values and hopes of those who desire “hearingness” for deaf children and adults.

Children and the future were the reasons the exhibition elicited an intense response; thus the protest organizers used children freely in their drive to change the exhibition concept. No one cared to argue over the past; rather, discussions revolved around how the depiction of history might impact or endanger the future. The Smithsonian received images of children (generally of toddlers) that included comments such as “YOUR PROPOSED EXHIBIT OF DEAF AMERICANS EXCLUDES ME!!” and “I am deaf, but I listen and speak. I don’t use sign. Change your exhibit to include me.” One letter with a photo of a three- or four-year-old child stated, “Please remember those of us who have chosen to be aural and oral. We are part of the history and the future.” Many letters included the following statement: “Please stop the myth that the deaf are mute and dependent on deaf culture to thrive. Our children deserve to grow up in a society where they are taught the skills to communicate through speech, lipreading, use of hearing aids and cochlear implants.”

Letters stressed the Smithsonian’s responsibility to speak from an unbiased perspective. All exhibitions are public arenas, but none are more public or more contested than those of the Smithsonian Institution. Presentation of an issue in Smithsonian halls is considered a validation of an exhibition’s perspective. One parent wrote, “It is improper for the Smithsonian to display a political view regarding oralism vs. manualism. If the exhibit were to remain as it is, the Smithsonian would in fact be
supporting one approach over another and therefore be telling parents of deaf children what choices to make for their children. I am certain that the Smithsonian Institution is not in the business of telling people how to raise their children.”

Several people cited government funding as a reason for the exhibition not to be exclusionary. Parents wrote, “We urge you to make sure that the publicly funded exhibit tells the complete history of the Deaf community in the United States in a fair and objective way. My son should be able to see his experience encompassed in this exhibit.” Another linked government money with community references: “The decision to join a community of signers does not define all people who are deaf; thus, ‘deaf’ is not just or always ‘a community of signers.’ I respectfully request that the design of this publicly funded exhibit be expanded to recognize alternative communication methods and the importance of options for families.”

Some encouraged abandonment of the exhibition if the presentation of a cultural linguistic story were not changed. A supporter of a southern oral school wrote the following: “Based on the outline of the proposed exhibit, the information presents a biased and political viewpoint which reflects inappropriately on the Smithsonian as well as nullifying the work of individuals, schools, and technology. If the exhibit cannot be all inclusive, then I urge you to abandon the project.”

Threats of removing support from the Smithsonian came with some of the letters: “If the Smithsonian produces such a biased and political exhibit about Deaf people, one that presents only one communication choice for people who are deaf, I will withdraw my support for the Smithsonian. I am hopeful you will rethink this exhibit and its purpose.” Some people also mailed letters to members of Congress and to the secretary of the Smithsonian, requesting their intervention.

Individuals and organizations also warned that the protest would continue. “Therefore, the [organization] remains alarmed. We have no basis to view the situation as changed. Until you and your staff genuinely address the concerns of misrepresentation expressed by so many people who are oral and deaf and by the professionals engaged in oral education throughout the nation, the protest will continue.”

One person who wrote suggested that having an exhibition on the
history of a cultural-linguistic Deaf community would confuse the public:

A national museum, funded by public taxes, has an obligation to present accurate information in order to educate and enrich the public’s understanding. It does not serve your stated desire to enable “non-deaf museum visitors to relate . . . and to identify with the individuals whose stories are being told” by telling part of the story or by distorting and negating the experiences and stories of so many others. Instead, the lopsided concept promises to perpetuate confusion and bias in a climate that cries out for the exposure of legitimate concerns, past policies of ignorance on all sides, as well as the developments, improvements, and expansion of options truly available in the present and possible in the future. Bias can only breed new bias and thus endanger this large population by shrinking choices.

Full presentation, some stated, would make the exhibition less political. “I support your effort to educate the public about hearing loss through an exhibit ‘DEAF: A Community of Signers.’ I am, however, concerned this exhibit will represent only a small segment or a subculture of deaf or hearing-impaired persons. If the exhibit were expanded to show the full spectrum of deafness and the many choices available to deaf adults and children, it would then not be making a ‘political’ statement but would, in fact, be providing fuller knowledge.” Many letters contained similar statements that applauded the Smithsonian for educating the public about hearing loss and deafness.

Several writers suggested that the Deaf community should be presented as part of a continuum, with space allotted according to demographics. A member of an organization serving hard of hearing people wrote, “I ask that the Deaf Community be placed in context on the continuum of hearing loss from normal hearing to mild, moderate, severe, profoundly hard of hearing, and then deaf and Deaf. To concentrate solely on the Deaf gives a one-sided, biased, and incorrect point of view.” Similar statements used numbers to comment on the exhibit’s focus: “Hearing loss is not limited to deaf people. In fact, only about 1 percent of the 248 million people in the United States are deaf. On the other hand, about 9 percent, or 22.4 million people are hearing impaired. Of the 22.4 million, 21.2 million people are hard of hearing. Your exhibit addresses the needs and problems of about
320,000 people, while excluding another 21 million people.” Another letter stated that, “If the deaf culture represents no more than 3 percent of the hearing-impaired population, your exhibit should devote no more than three percent to it.”

For some, the experiences of hard-of-hearing people appeared more critical than the Deaf experience. One letter expressed frustration at not being understood:

As a life-long member of the hearing-impaired (not deaf) community, which community accounts for more than 98 percent of the “hearing-impaired” population, I am writing to request that the hard-of-hearing (HOH) viewpoint and philosophy be represented in the above-referenced exhibit. The HOH community has been traditionally overlooked because of the perceived negative stigma of hearing loss and the reluctance of the HOH person to draw attention to his or her needs. HOH people are trying to come “out of the closet” and make their needs and disability understood. Everyone can understand deaf, everyone can understand blind, but few people, unless they have an HOH friend or relative, can understand hearing loss.

Oversimplification of the story concerned letter writers, and their response was strong: “The intent of this letter is to express extreme opposition to the proposed Smithsonian Institution/Gallaudet University exhibit titled “DEAF: A Community of Signers,” as it is proposed. I have reviewed many of the documents generated for this project and find that it is extremely one-sided concerning an issue that is, in reality, multisided.” The perceived bias in the story line was expressed in the following statement from an oral educator: “It would in my mind be similar to an exhibit on the moral majority titled ‘The World of Christianity.’”

Many of these writers did not understand that this was to be a history exhibition, and many in fact did not want an exhibition on the past. A cultural history, many stated, would deny the public full knowledge of the subject and fail to be inclusive. From their perspective, the proposed focus on the history of a linguistic community was unfair and inaccurate. Some stated that the exhibition would stand in the way of accessibility. However, most did not want the exhibition to be a history of any kind and preferred to look forward. One oral educator wrote, “In terms of historic evolution, the strong favoritism today for
a signing population is a result of the history of struggle that has led deaf people to the state they are at today. The ‘Deaf’ population is building a case based upon their experiences from the past. However, those of us in education are preparing children to be a part of the future.” At the core of many of the letters was the desire for a contemporary or futuristic exhibition, not a history.

Teachers who self-identified as “for the hearing impaired” wrote to stress that the exhibition should include the “entire deaf population.” One teacher wrote, “There are many new and exciting technological developments and improvements in assistive devices which the public needs to understand. I do not feel the exhibit should dwell on the oral-total communication issue.”

A small portion of the letters and e-mails stated that the physical condition of deafness is no longer necessary. An e-mail campaign from an unknown source stated, “This exhibit cannot ignore the view shared by many Americans that deafness is a MAJOR DISABILITY that can be greatly minimized by recent technology—better hearing aids, cochlear implants, and auditory-verbal/oral approaches.” Other letters spoke of the positive aspects of medical technology: “I have met, over the last two years, children and adults who have received cochlear implants. I could not find any ‘damage’ as claimed by some deaf people, and these people who had cochlear implants seem to be extremely happy.” Some people expressed specific requests for the exhibition text: “YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE DEAF ANYMORE. I would like this exhibit to have information saying, ‘Your child does not have to suffer the major disability of deafness if treated correctly.’” The majority of writers stressed that deafness is a physical condition and wanted the exhibition to demonstrate how to alleviate it.

Not many letters of concern were written by deaf or hard-of-hearing people, but there were a few: “As a twenty-one-year-old user of the oral method, I will find the exhibit to be a very one-sided and judgmental view about the most prevalent disability in the United States. Not all of the people who are deaf or hard of hearing use sign language to communicate.” Another oral deaf writer conveyed the importance of the Smithsonian exhibition: “Your exhibit will be seen by many people all over the world, and it is important that they understand that there are also many deaf people who are oral. I am profoundly
deaf and oral, and I cannot tell you how many times I’ve had people tell me that they had assumed that I sign (and not talk).” These few letters from deaf people were the most compelling calls for a more inclusive concept.

For the organizers, the most difficult and painful messages to read were those about the Deaf community. Negative and at times hostile perceptions of a community and culture were expressed: “I would like to recommend that you consult with the A. G. Bell Association for the Deaf. They can help you understand that ‘other side.’ It is really unfair for a segment of deaf people to deny the public the total picture of the American deaf people. A ‘culture’ flourishes in diversity, not in lockstep isolationism.” A parent referred to an isolationist cultural view: “Might I humbly suggest that emphasis be placed on educating the general public and increasing their awareness of people with hearing impediments as having a disability which needs to be taken into consideration when interacting with them? Isolationist policies as advocated by the Deaf culture are just as odious as the actions of any of the other supremacist groups so often seen in the news today.” The Deaf community was also characterized as “poorly informed,” “confined,” and having “insufficient intestinal fortitude to stay the course” in rhetoric that demonstrates a lack of personal experience of Deaf life.

Locked within the cultural and community statements were sentiments about American Sign Language: “Deafness does not revolve around sign language. Deaf culture revolves around sign language.” Rather than understanding ASL as a visually accessible language, it was seen as something upon which deaf people “rely.” Many families and institutions saw the signing Deaf community members as oppressors.

Some people concerned with the cultural-historical perspective believed that modernity clashes with signing. One father wrote the following: “After a visit to Gallaudet University and studying the manual method of helping [daughter’s name] with her deafness, it became obvious to me that there must be something better, something modern and more scientific. Clinical science is my field. The manual method of dealing with deafness seemed primitive. It was born in the eighteenth century. It compared to my patients wearing wooden dentures.”
Several letters criticized Gallaudet University. One letter to Smithsonian colleagues stated, “You should represent all of America’s deaf, not just a small, vocal, politically driven radical faction embodied in the Gallaudet/deaf culture.” This description did not accurately characterize university personnel who were working to present public history.

No comparable campaign was mounted by those who supported a culturally defined exhibition. The museum asked that we not start a countercampaign because responding to the letters was already requiring much of one staff person’s time. The Smithsonian promised that the future of the exhibition would not be determined by the numbers of letters from one side or another. The National Association of the Deaf, however, did respond. Executive director Nancy Bloch sent a letter to the Smithsonian Institution stating, “I ask that you not allow those who have traditionally tried to oppress our cultural community to dictate the nature and content of the exhibition story. I doubt that the National Museum of American History would allow any cultural community to be defined by its oppressors rather than the community members. I ask that the deaf cultural community be given the same consideration and respect.” Multiple exchanges occurred between Jack Gannon and the museum as well.

In summary, the draft materials had fueled a smoldering but enduring ember of opinion about how to live and learn as a deaf person. Described as biased, self-righteous, political, and exclusive, the project was nearly crushed under the weight of critique, but the fiery appraisal reinforced the need for a history of an American minority group that had not yet been brought to the public.

Results and Reaction

The campaign against the exhibit had an important and immediate negative financial effect. Smithsonian colleagues explained that Gallaudet would now have to raise the balance of the money for the exhibition’s expenses without assistance from the Smithsonian or a commitment to host the exhibition. Once funding was in place, the research and the script were completed, and images were selected, Gallaudet could come back and talk about hosting the exhibition in the museum. After years of collaborative efforts, this was a mighty blow.
What made it worse was that we could not use the Smithsonian’s commitment to solicit badly needed monetary backing. One cannot get financial support without a commitment to host, and one cannot get commitment to host without financial support and a finished product.

The protest also forced us to rethink the exhibition’s approach. Clearly it needed to be grounded in U.S. history if it were ever going to be presented within the Smithsonian or perhaps even built at all. The controversy had become so heated that only the “neutrality” of a U.S. historical structure would make it possible to move forward. Two researcher/writers worked for several weeks in the summer to draft documents for the script. Eventually, each introductory section and most of the panels would start with a description of what was happening in the United States at that time and then relate it to deaf people’s experiences.

Since much of the argument underlying the protest was over the term “deaf,” a name change seemed desirable. “DEAF: A Community of Signers” briefly became “A Community of Signers.” Ridiculous as it now seems, we tried to figure out how to create this history exhibition without using the word “Deaf” in the title. Following weeks of letters of protest, a punchy design team joked that the exhibition should be called “Life and Deaf” to play on the life-and-death nature of our efforts. Defeat of the project seemed like a repeat of history, and we were determined to do everything in our limited power to make sure the exhibit came to pass.

The title of the exhibition became “History through DEAF EYES,” which was inspired by a 1910 statement by George Veditz, president of the National Association of the Deaf: “They are facing not a theory but a condition, for they are first, last, and all the time the people of the eye.” The title hinted at the visual nature of communication for both signing and oral deaf people and the desire for the story to be driven by deaf individuals rather than hearing educators and parents.

The organizational concepts and content areas became the following: formation of a community; language and identity; community building; and awareness, access, and change. In order to avoid a laborious chronological treatment, the four themes followed a progressive introduction to topics. “Formation of a community” began with 1817 and extended until the post–WWII period. “Language and identity” began
with the 1860s and also proceeded until after the Second World War. Both of these sections focused on education. “Community building” highlighted adult life and the way in which deaf people created organizations that maintained community. This aspect included the first and second world wars; hence, the first three sections brought viewers up to the second half of the twentieth century. The final area, “awareness, access, and change,” presented the period from the 1960s to the early 1990s and placed turning points within a framework of civil rights.

Although it was difficult to make the exhibition an inclusive yet cohesive story, it was important to show how and when signing and oral stories intersected. Those meeting points were many, and oral deaf experience was shown throughout the exhibition, with one of the four sections concentrating on oral training. Panels emphasized the experiences of the community rather than deaf leadership. While the exhibition would have a community focus, it could not be an attempt to enshrine the Deaf community or present a purely celebratory history.

The goals of the History through DEAF EYES exhibition were condensed from their original draft form and incorporated the deaf population:

• to present the deaf population in a context to which many people could relate and to align deaf experiences with U.S. history
• to explore the ways that a segment of the deaf population (i.e., the cultural linguistic community of Deaf people) formed and maintained connections to each other, their common experiences, language use, and struggles
• to identify turning points in the history of deaf experience in the United States and the forces creating change
• to foster respect for plurality and diversity through greater understanding of a community
• to encourage students and visitors to examine the historic struggles of deaf people as individuals and as a Deaf community and to view events both with an understanding of the time and from a contemporary perspective

The exhibition was to be a social history of a community, but it would also recognize the many ways that deaf people who are not a
part of that community share common experiences. It was an exhibition plan that was safer than the original draft, and it would work. Two major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and support from the Motorola Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the SBC Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Goodrich Foundation helped pay for research, design, and construction. Each host site—for this was to become a traveling exhibition, not one located exclusively in a Smithsonian building—paid for the trucking and installation expenses, and Gallaudet University covered a significant portion of the personnel costs. Products associated with the exhibition included fund-raising and promotional brochures, a DVD presented within the exhibition titled “By Necessity and by Choice: How We Communicate,” a website, and a ten-poster set designed as a school hallway exhibit.

The exhibition traveled to twelve cities and was seen by more than 415,000 people. Included on the tour list was the Smithsonian Institution, where “DEAF EYES” was on display from May through September of 2002. Each host site worked with its community to select local objects and images that would make a national story its own. Hosts planned events such as openings, presentations on local Deaf history, and seminars on art and film. Some used the exhibition as a springboard to collect historical materials. Press outreach increased public attention, and school groups came in buses. The public response was overwhelmingly positive.


**Conclusion**

The hazards of exhibition work are numerous. It would have been easier for Gallaudet never to have been involved in a public history exhibition because the project cost money, time, and considerable effort. People criticized the institution for being either too Deaf or not Deaf enough. It was a risk for a university to align itself with a cultural com-
munity when its primary financial support was based on educational needs, not cultural affinity. But if not Gallaudet, who? If not at that moment, when? By the early 1990s there was enough interest in the Deaf community to secure funding. There was also enough published historical research to demonstrate the story that many community members felt and knew but that few had documented. Public attention from the Deaf President Now revolution had introduced society to this cultural group. Leadership at the university, particularly President I. King Jordan and curator Jack R. Gannon, saw greater value than risk in taking the story of deaf people beyond the campus. It was thus a unique period of history that made the History through DEAF EYES project possible.

If criticism is a gift, the DEAF EYES project was blessed with bountiful returns. If controversy means that people are paying attention, then Gallaudet University and the Deaf community have many people who passionately care about what they do.

This episode in history shows us that values are slow to change and that rhetoric is still used to suppress the Deaf cultural, linguistic community and deny the wisdom of Deaf leaders. Comprehending the dynamics of this cultural clash brings us a step closer to recognizing the barriers to tolerance and acceptance of human difference.

The nature of deaf/Deaf life is so controversial for those involved that a collaborative public presentation of the subject is fraught with land mines. The most visible of platforms—exhibitions and films (particularly those that guarantee a broad audience)—will always be contentious territory, for they hold the greatest potential to communicate.

Note

1. The original letters are the property of the Smithsonian Institution, as that is where they were sent. Copies were shared with Gallaudet University as they arrived and are currently held in the Gallaudet Archives.