

Preface 2012

About This Book and a Changing Deaf America

In the late 1970s, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and Gallaudet College (now University) jointly sponsored a project to develop a book that would recognize the many accomplishments of the NAD (founded in 1880) as it approached its centennial. Today, *Deaf Heritage* is considered one of the most comprehensive histories of Deaf people in the United States. It is frequently described as the *Roots* of Deaf America, and it is credited with initiating Deaf Studies classes in the United States. In 1981 the American Library Association selected *Deaf Heritage* as one of twenty-one international books written by a disabled (in this case, Deaf) writer. Now, after thirty years with the NAD, and well established as a classic, *Deaf Heritage* has “come home” to Gallaudet University where it was researched and written.

During the three decades since *Deaf Heritage* was published, many changes have taken place in Deaf America. The foremost positive change has been the recognition and acceptance of American Sign Language (ASL) as a legitimate language in the United States. Deaf America truly began to change when ASL received its due, thanks to the pioneering work of Dr. William C. Stokoe. American Sign Language is now being taught in more high schools and postsecondary programs than ever before, an idea proposed and pushed by Deaf leaders back in the nineteenth century, but which very unfortunately (and, pardon the pun) fell on “deaf” ears. The widespread recognition and accept-

ance of ASL, along with the presence of more visual information, education, public consciousness and knowledge, and the skills of professional sign interpreters, have given Deaf people access to American society.

Recognition of American Sign Language as a legitimate language led to the growth of more and better awareness of all types of deaf and hard of hearing people. With the publication of Carol Padden and Tom Humphries’ book, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), ASL users learned that all along they had their own culture, which became known as Deaf culture. This eventually led scholars and deaf people to make a distinction between *Deaf* people (those people who use ASL as their primary language) and *deaf* people (those people who have a hearing loss but do not sign or identify with Deaf culture). Some people move back and forth between these two groups and still consider themselves *deaf*.

Achievements in American Society

Deaf people have made tremendous gains in civil rights and access to American life. The historic, peaceful, Deaf President Now protest in Washington, DC, in the spring of 1988 taught much of the world what being deaf in a world dominated by sound is all about. The weeklong protest by students, faculty, and staff at Gallaudet University in March 1988 not only gave Gallaudet

University its first Deaf president (Dr. I. King Jordan) but it set an outstanding precedent for all people with disabilities. The protesters shut down the university after the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees overlooked more qualified Deaf candidates to select a hearing administrator with no experience in deaf education as the university's seventh president. The protesters and members of the Deaf community strongly believed that it was time for a Deaf president. The successful outcome of Deaf President Now gave many deaf persons a new self-image and renewed their pride in American Sign Language, Deaf culture, and Deaf history.

Not surprisingly, the Deaf President Now protest influenced the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was signed into law in 1990. This law protects the civil rights of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of employment and ensures access to state and local government services, private businesses and organizations, and telecommunications. Under this law, Deaf people may request a sign language interpreter for a job interview, a visit to a medical doctor, and a government or business meeting, as well as other accommodations to ensure accessibility.

As a result of the ADA, much new technology of benefit to deaf and hard of hearing individuals is arriving on the scene and providing tremendous accessibility to the deaf and hard of hearing community. Deaf America has come a long way since the old Western Union tele- typewriter (TTY) days. Today, deaf people can use voice relay or video relay interpreters to place calls to hearing people. They can also use videophone technology to make face-to-face calls to each other and other signers. All televisions with screens thirteen inches or larger are required to contain decoders for closed captions. And some movie theaters are using technology that allows deaf and hard of hearing patrons to see closed captions.

Another positive change has been the increased number of Deaf people who hold doctoral degrees. Many Deaf Americans have received grants from the Graduate Fellowship Fund, a permanent endowment established by the Gallaudet College Alumni Association. The contributions received from Gallaudet alumni, their friends, co-workers, and colleagues led to the fund's creation, which has made it possible for more deaf scholars to earn their doctorates than at any time in history. Most of these individuals, in turn, have provided genuine leadership and have given something back to the Deaf community as well as American society.

The National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD) continues to be a strong supporter of the Deaf community.

Founded at the Michigan School for the Deaf in 1902, NFSD sold life insurance coverage to deaf persons in the United States because commercial insurers considered them bad risks and refused to cover them. NFSD ended its 109-year history on March 6, 2010, with a clever "Succeeding Ourselves Out of Business" program at the Peikoff Alumni House on the Gallaudet University campus. The organization sold its remaining insurance policies to the Catholic Order of Foresters and used the funds left in the treasury to establish two permanent foundations—one in honor of Frank B. Sullivan and one in honor of Al Van Nevel, both former presidents. Income from these foundations will provide funds to deaf and hard of hearing undergraduate and graduate students interested in obtaining degrees in accounting and business and for seminars and workshops in business. The Van Nevel Foundation supports scholastic and athletic excellence, as well as leadership programs and training seminars for entrepreneurs. NFSD also donated \$20,000 to the Gallaudet University Archives, where NFSD records will be preserved.

History Through Deaf Eyes, a traveling social history exhibition developed at Gallaudet University, spanned nearly 200 years of United States history and traveled to twelve sites in the United States from 2001 to 2006. It focused on deaf Americans' experiences, particularly on how Deaf people formed a cultural, linguistic community that spread across the country, maintained connections to each other, and shared common experiences related to education, language use, and employment. The exhibition fostered respect for plurality and diversity through greater understanding of community and encouraged students and visitors to examine the historic struggles of deaf people as individuals and as a Deaf community. An estimated total of 415,000 people visited the exhibit at the various sites. The exhibition led to the film, *Through Deaf Eyes*, a two-hour PBS documentary that explored nearly 200 years of Deaf life in America. The film, which aired on PBS stations nationwide, was a joint production of WETA Washington, DC, and Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc., in association with Gallaudet University. A companion book entitled *Through Deaf Eyes: A Photographic History of an American Community*, written by Douglas C. Baynton, Jack R. Gannon, and Jean Lindquist Bergey, was published by Gallaudet University Press in 2007.

Achievements in Entertainment and Public Life

Since 1980, deaf people have become much more visible in American life and have gained recognition

for their contributions in entertainment, education, and government. Phyllis Frelich won the 1980 Tony Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of Sarah, the deaf lead character in *Children of a Lesser God*. In 1986, Marlee Matlin won an Oscar for her performance as Sarah in the movie version of *Children of a Lesser God*. Frelich and Matlin are just two of many deaf actors and actresses who have appeared in plays, films, and television programs. In 1994, Heather Whitestone became the first deaf woman to win the Miss America crown.

Dr. Robert R. Davila served as Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in the U.S. Department of Education from 1989 to 1993. He was the first deaf chief executive officer of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (1996–2004), and the ninth president of Gallaudet University (2007–2009). He was succeeded in both of these positions by Dr. T. Alan Hurwitz. Dr. Roslyn Rosen, a former professor and vice president of academic affairs at Gallaudet University, became the director of the National Center on Deafness at California State University, Northridge, in 2006. Since the Gallaudet Deaf President Now protest and Dr. I. King Jordan's appointment as Gallaudet's first Deaf president, approximately fifteen Deaf school adminis-

trators have become superintendents of schools for the deaf.

Dr. Yerker Andersson, the first Deaf American to be elected president of the World Federation of the Deaf, addressed the United Nations General Assembly in sign language in 1991. He told the Assembly about the federation's work with some of the world's estimated 70 million deaf people.

Dr. Carol Padden, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, San Diego, and author, was named one of the 2010 MacArthur Fellows by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for her work and publications. She is the first Deaf person to receive that award.

The reissue of this history of the very special population of deaf and hard of hearing people who communicate with their hands will help new generations of readers gain a better understanding of the struggles and successes Deaf people have encountered living in a world of sound. These struggles are not finished, however. Deaf people must persist in educating their fellow Americans about deafness and deaf people. Sharing this very unique history of Deaf America is what *Deaf Heritage* is all about.

—JRG