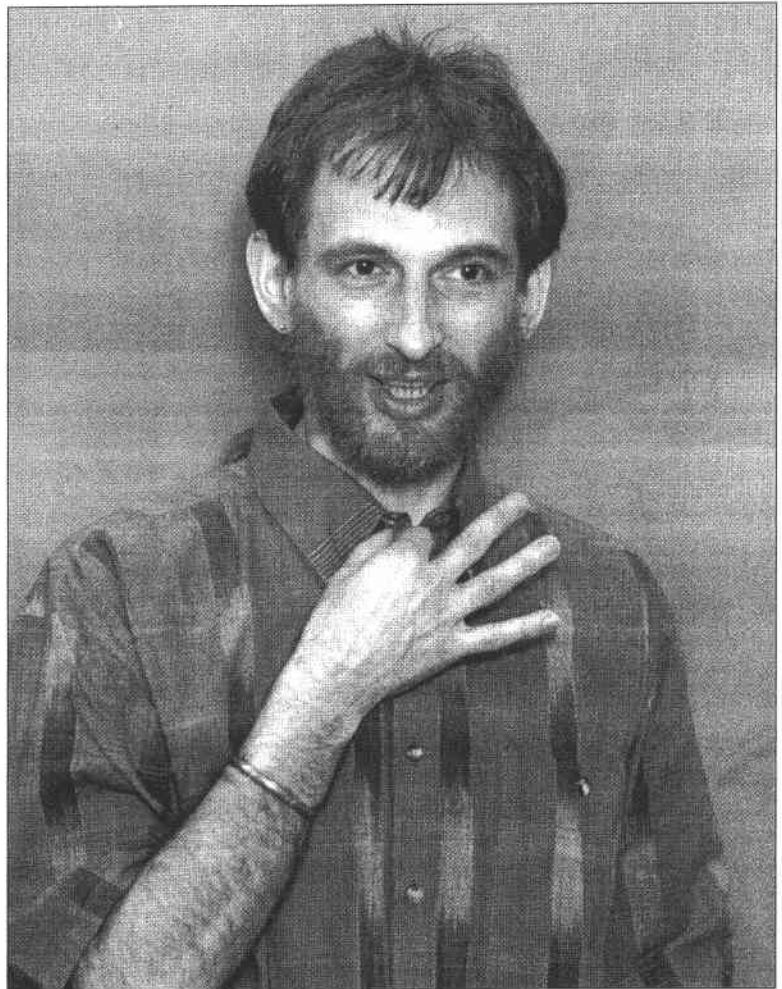


A GLOBAL

Visiting scholar Paddy Ladd holds a vision for the deaf community

In his studies of deaf culture, Paddy Ladd—Gallaudet’s 1992-93 Powrie V. Doctor Chair of Deaf Studies—sometimes feels like a canoeist navigating between the rocks of a treacherous whitewater river. On one side are what he terms the “Deaf nationalists,” those who see ASL as a cure-all and urge deaf people to rid themselves of any habits and practices deemed “hearing.” On the other side lies the obstacle of the deaf professional middle class, whose weakening ties to “grassroots” deaf people, in Ladd’s opinion, threaten the unity and well-being of the whole deaf community.

One hardly expects the work of a visiting scholar to be so hazardous, but deaf cultural studies is a field



VIEW

— BY BRUCE SNIDER —

fraught with controversy. Of course, Ladd knew what he was getting into when he took the job. In his native Great Britain, he was a founder of the National Union of the Deaf and of the London Deaf Video Project. He also was a presenter, researcher, and director for the BBC television's "See Hear," Britain's first sign language TV program.

It seems obvious to many in and around the deaf community that there is such a thing as deaf culture. Deaf people use different modes of communication and different languages than hearing people. Deaf people marry other deaf people at a rate that is extraordinarily high, even when compared with ethnic and religious groups. Many have noted certain types of behavior as being particularly "Deaf": touching a person to get his or her attention; organizing conversation to allow one person at a time to address a group; a very direct conversational type. Moreover, deaf communities have their own institutions—schools, clubs, and places of worship—and deaf people participate in local, national, and international deaf organizations.

Still, there is much disagreement about what is and what isn't deaf culture, partly because, unlike members of hearing ethnic cultures, most deaf people do not come to their deaf culture through family ties. It is difficult to separate things that deaf people do or believe because they are deaf from things they do or believe because they are also American, Italian American, African American, or Native American, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, or Muslim.

Since his arrival at Gallaudet in October 1992, Ladd has conducted informal interviews with deaf Americans and members of other minority groups in America, in order to bring the features of American deaf culture into sharper focus. Are deaf people more comfortable with touching than hearing people? Do deaf people from deaf families enjoy greater prestige in



Ladd poses with staffers of the London Deaf Access Project, which he co-founded. From left are Michael Quinlan, Caz Adams, Lydia Mogridge, and Lesley McGilp. LDAP translates information from English to sign language videos.

the deaf community than those from hearing families? What common experiences at home and in school form the basis of deaf culture? What are the attitudes toward minorities in the deaf community? Are they different from attitudes in the hearing world? These are some of the questions Ladd is asking his contacts here at Gallaudet and around the United States.

Ladd also has interviewed deaf people in Great Britain to test his perception of differences between the deaf communities in Britain and the United States. In Ladd's view, British deaf people may be more community oriented and less status conscious than middle-class deaf Americans. While people with deaf family backgrounds and native ASL skills appear to have prestige in the American deaf community, British deaf people seem to reserve their highest esteem for those who show greatest dedication to the deaf community. Deaf people in the United States, he believes, may have begun to adopt the individualistic values of the majority culture to a greater extent than have deaf people in Britain.

Ladd acknowledges that his methods may strike some as too subjective to be scientific, and he does not claim that his findings will represent the

last word on deaf culture. He emphasizes that his

views are evolving and invites input from anyone interested in joining the discussion. "I'm sticking my neck out so we can all start to do the same," he says. "We'll find out the full answers later, down the road."

Ladd's presence on Kendall Green has enlivened discussions of deaf culture at Gallaudet. His Deaf Culture Conference on the Gallaudet computer network has become a popular forum for members of the Gallaudet community to share their opinions on a broad range of subjects, from deaf norms and values, to the influence of computers on deaf culture, to minority groups within deaf culture. Beyond merely describing the outward characteristics of American deaf culture, he is also exploring its philosophical, moral, and political dimensions.

"Cultural studies are by their nature political, because they automatically challenge the values of the majority culture," Ladd explains. He brings a strongly political perspective to his work; he is at least as concerned with changing the deaf community as he is with describing it. He wants deaf people to understand



As a guest lecturer, Ladd discusses deaf culture with Gallaudet undergraduate anthropology students.

themselves and, through that understanding, to develop a concern for the well-being of all deaf people.

Cultural self-examination is a difficult process, says Ladd, "but we are forced to embrace it and follow this path to see where it leads. And one place it leads is right to the door of other oppressed peoples." By comparing the U.S. deaf community with other minority groups in this country, Ladd hopes to find a common ground. He is also looking for strategies used by other groups that might help the deaf community cope with minority status while maintaining its cultural identity. He is particularly interested in parallels between the American deaf community and the African American community.

According to Ladd, the rise of a black middle class after desegregation has brought greater wealth and political power to the black community, but not all the results of desegregation have been positive. Under segregation, African Americans could not participate in many of the institutions of white America, but their religious, cultural, and educational institutions thrived. When barriers to black participation began to fall, increasing numbers of African Americans moved up the career ladder of mainstream society and moved out to the suburbs, seeking the American

dream. This exodus of successful African Americans from inner cities has left some black institutions and communities sorely in need of leaders and role models. African Americans who enter mainstream life also may find that they have begun to replace their traditional African American values of community with the individualistic, me-first values of the middle class.

In Ladd's view, a similar process is occurring in the deaf community of the United States. A minority of deaf Americans—largely Gallaudet graduates—has established itself as a deaf middle class, perhaps the only one in the world. These college-educated deaf professionals have taken advantage of greater opportunities in legal protections to advance themselves and their families.

But, as in the African American community, the success of the deaf middle class, Ladd believe, has had a detrimental effect on the grassroots deaf people who have not shared in these gains, and may actually pose a threat to deaf culture. Access to the American dream of individual advancement has drawn the deaf middle class away from the traditional community values embodied by deaf clubs and has left grassroots deaf people to fend for themselves.

For example, Ladd believes that

the deaf middle class has been slow to respond to the trend toward mainstreaming deaf students, which threatens the existence of residential schools. Residential schools for deaf students have long been considered a central element of deaf culture, and their decline is felt throughout the deaf community. In Ladd's view, the response of the deaf middle class has been inadequate and points to deeper problems within the deaf community. "A culture that does not defend he says, "is not healthy."

Ladd is concerned that, for many middle-class deaf people, hopes for the future center around gaining greater access to the mainstream culture—through captioned television, greater availability of text telephones, and more widespread use of sign language interpreters. Relatively few are "dreaming of how to improve the Deaf world and Deaf culture itself," he says. Becoming middle class, it seems, may mean becoming less "deaf."

Ladd notes that another obstacle to the progress of the American deaf community is posed, ironically, by some deaf leaders who claim to speak for grassroots deaf people. These "Deaf nationalists" support a concept of deaf identity that begins with deaf people ridding themselves of cultural values thought to belong to the hearing world. This impulse is misguided, claims Ladd, and hinders the progress of the deaf community as a whole. "The danger lies in thinking that because we reject something it no longer exists, when all we have done is push it to a deeper place, where it would prove much harder to examine," he says.

According to Ladd, deaf people must examine the values they hold—both those they share with hearing members of society and those that arise from the deaf experience—and judge them not by whether they come from the deaf world or the hearing world, but by whether or not they are beneficial to the deaf community. "To be complete Deaf peo-

ple," Ladd says, "we need to be thinking and talking about our world—not just disagreeing on issues like ASL, signed songs, etc., but expressing ourselves in terms of where we are striving to go and debating ways to get there." Focusing on values that are exclusively deaf deprives the community of values that could be quite useful, especially those it might borrow from other oppressed minorities, he says.

An example is the traditional African American emphasis on the good of the community. Concern for other black people, rather than for the "purity" of one's black culture, might define one as "truly black,"

Ladd talks with Great Britain's Princess Diana during her visit to the London Deaf Access Project offices. The princess is an active supporter of the British Deaf Association and the LDAP.



Ladd believes. Such community-mindedness would be of great benefit to the American deaf community, he says. With that in mind, the separateness of white deaf people and minority deaf people in the United States comes as a particular disappointment. Ladd urges mainstream deaf Americans to "become more Deaf by embracing and learning from the Deaf members of minority groups," who often maintain stronger ties to their hearing communities than do white deaf people. Blanked rejection of "hearing values"

needlessly limits the deaf community and isolates it from other oppressed minorities, with which it has much to share, he says.

Ladd's vision for deaf people is nothing less than what he terms "global Deaf consciousness," a sense of connection and community with every other deaf person in the world. He finds that British and European deaf people are much closer to achieving this ideal than are deaf Americans. Because their countries—and their deaf communities—are relatively small and close together, they have more frequent contact with deaf people from other countries who use other sign languages. As a

result, British and European deaf people are developing a sense of deaf identity that transcends national borders, says Ladd. They are growing accustomed to handling language differences and easily find common ground in the universal language of gestures. American deaf people, by contrast, tend to cling to their own language, ASL, and their identity as "American first, deaf second."

In attempting to convey the essence of his ideal, Ladd describes

the feeling he experiences when he is in a group of deaf people from a number of different countries. "When we all meet, the spoken languages have to be left behind," he says. Lacking a common language, the group must find other common ground for communication. They use bits and pieces of each other's language; they communicate through gestures; they rely on "the pure power of the visual medium. At such times," Ladd says, "I feel a very pure kind of Deaf person."

In these encounters, Ladd says, he feels a great sense of equality and a connection to other deaf people based on what he terms "Deafhood." Ladd believes that this connection is a birthright of deaf people everywhere. "The ability to communicate on a global scale is unique to Deaf people," he says. "It is an ability that should be actualized and cherished."

In Ladd's view, deaf Americans have two main hazards to avoid if they are to achieve global deaf consciousness. On the one hand, as they take advantage of greater opportunities in the hearing world, they must not lose their sense of connection and responsibility to each other. On the other hand, they must not isolate themselves in their deaf communities. Deaf people should accept themselves as the products of both hearing and deaf cultures, and create ties of mutual concern with other deaf people while reaching out to other oppressed minorities. A crucial step in this process is one that Paddy Ladd is encouraging through his work: discussing and debating not only what deaf culture *is* but also what it *could be*.

Ladd invites the input of anyone who is interested in his work. He can be contacted through the Gallaudet Research Institute at Gallaudet University. ■

Bruce Snider is a graduate student in Gallaudet's Department of Education and a graduate assistant with the Office of Gallaudet Research Institute Publications.