

December 10, 2006

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH OF PRESIDENT-ELECT ROBERT R. DAVILA:

Thank you. [*sustained applause*]...

So, I'm home again! [*cheers and applause*]...

You know, I've done a lot of public speaking in my days, especially during the time when I was serving in the government. And as time passed, I became a hardened kind of presenter—very familiar to this function of doing public presentations in a variety of different forums. And my former sense of nervousness was no longer a source of concern, as that anxiety for presentations sort of went away over time. But today is different, and I say that because this university is so very special to me.

Before I speak more about that, I would like to make sure that my wife has an opportunity to have a seat. My wife's name is Donna. She and I have been married for over 50 years [*applause*]... She's the daughter of deaf parents, and all of the other members of her family are deaf as well. And I met her on a beach in California, when I was, you know, a boy, as boys do typically meet girls on beaches [*laughter*]. We've had a wonderful life together, and I have to honestly tell you. There are two important factors that led me to applying for this position and standing here before you today as Interim President of our university. The first factor was the education that I received here when I was an undergraduate student. And secondly, was Donna's support. Her love and her encouragement over the years. So Donna, I love you as I always have and I will forever [*applause*].

This is for me personally the happiest moment. Yet at the same time, a sad one. Because we are just now trying to find some way out of some very difficult times. You know, no one in life is ever free from any difficulties, but the recent protests really brought to the surface many issues and problems that we really need to seriously focus on and work towards resolution. We—will—do—this, and that's why I'm here. I'm here to help you and all of the other constituency groups, including the alumni, parents of students, and especially our students, so we can work together to resolve issues and bring back Gallaudet to the highest level it has always enjoyed and will continue to enjoy into the future.

We have to invest our time and our energy in the best interests of who we are right now, considering first and foremost our students and future generations of students to come. So with this I have several thoughts that I want to share that I've already put into place just since yesterday when I was informed that I had been selected as the Ninth President. And I wanted to share some of these ideas with you a little bit, hoping that we can move on—move forward. And I want to continually be in contact with you and other groups on campus.

We need to look very carefully at what we believe in. There are some things that are very sacred to us at this university. Gallaudet lives and thrives in the support of ASL. There's no question about that. There's been no question about that in my mind—ever. I want you to understand that. I read some statements made on blogs, and people were adding a lot onto that which basically are not true and are incorrect. But be that as it may...

We lead the world in linguistics research, in curriculum. We have put efforts over the years to provide the support for new knowledge that will benefit many people, not only in this country, but throughout the world. And we will continue to do those kinds of things—developing research endeavors—to help other languages also to have the same status and recognition. We are in a position where the world looks to us. Gallaudet is sacred, and our acknowledgment of the importance of American Sign Language and diversity are two key issues for us. We're a diverse group of people here. That has a very broad meaning. We all come from very different backgrounds. We have different thoughts, different opinions and a variety of different aspects that we bring to this campus.

We want to create a positive, supportive, pluralistic environment. And that environment can continue to grow and be expanded upon. This needs to be a campus where we can speak openly and involve ourselves in discourse and debate of these issues, because there is no better place to do that than the academy. And that's what leads to creativity—creative thoughts. It leads to the formulation of ideas, the establishment of programs through changes and improvements being made and therefore, better preparing graduates who are ready to face the world of work and the world beyond, with the knowledge, skills and ability that they need to function. And that's what we do as a university and need to continue to do.

But in order for us to have this kind of environment. We need to build trust. We must communicate well with one another. We must support one another. We must accept that we may agree or disagree with one another, but we will *not* walk away angry. And that's the kind of environment that I want to put into place between now and 18 months from now when I return to the world of retirement.

And I will not be able to do this alone. My appointment is not about me. It most certainly is not about me. It's about all of us. It's about our beloved university [*applause*]. It truly is. If we can't do this job together, it will not happen. But—you know—I go back many, many years. I'm not a stranger to this university. I'm not a stranger to the deaf community. I go back many years and remember when I was a young boy at the age of 12 or 13 at the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley, I can remember lying at night, in my dormitory, on my bed, lying awake at night absolutely consumed with worry that I may not be able to enroll at Gallaudet University. Maybe because I wouldn't pass the exam or because they would pick someone else. You know back in those days Gallaudet limited the incoming students to 40 to 45 students in that first year. There were ten members of my high school class who were seniors. And you didn't have to be a

rocket scientist to figure out that there was no way that Gallaudet could take all ten of us.

So I lay at night worrying, because I wanted to be sure that I was one of those students who was accepted to this university. Well, surprises of all surprises, they accepted all ten of us in the university, and that's where I started the love affair with this university and with the students. With you, and your help, all of us together, we can become an even better place, in terms of what we do, the services that we provide, and quality education that can be provided to the students. This university has a responsibility to all students who come here.

If we admit a student to this college, we need to know we're doing that because we have programs available to provide them services they need and that we have the abilities to know how to serve these students. That's a basic guiding principle that should guide our activities and our work, and that will not change, but we need to improve ways in which we provide that kind of service.

So I want to establish a better mechanism, or several mechanisms to allow for better communication and interaction to take place. Because this is what promotes healing. I know many people were hurt as a result of the recent protest. And I'm not questioning whether it was right or wrong—that's no longer at issue. The issue that we face now is how can we create an environment where people feel better about themselves and better about being here—feeling better about the people they work with every day. We need to be careful that no particular group of employees or students feels disenfranchised from their involvement and their participation in campus life.

So with this, I've decided to propose some ideas later. You'll be hearing more about these ideas when I begin my work. And I plan to propose that we establish a university council. This would be a group of individuals that will include representatives from a variety of different groups. For example, faculty reps, staff representatives and many others to make sure that every major unit on this campus has a voice and that includes students as well.

Students need to know what's happening, and they're the ones who know a lot of that information and we need to open up that communication. And the key to doing that is to have communication forms in place to allow students, faculty, staff and everyone who has a role here on this campus, a place to come together and exchange ideas and interact with one another. I've done this sort of thing in the past, and I'd like to do that again here at this university. Obviously, you'll be hearing more about the details of this plan as to how I'll put it into place. Certainly I can't decide to do this on my own, in isolation, without consulting groups out in the community. I would want to talk to a variety of groups later once I come on board on January 2nd.

Also, I want to establish an ombudsman's office [*applause*]. That will allow a place for an individual who perhaps doesn't feel comfortable sharing information or concerns that they share with someone—that they would have an opportunity,

or a place where they would be able to go and be heard—that somebody would be there to be able to listen to them, to engage in a dialog with them. A process would be in place for bringing resolution to problems that disturb individuals— That we would have a system. I know this system worked very well at RIT and I really liked the idea.

So that being the case, I would like to propose having that same sort of thing here at some point in time, making sure we could have an opportunity for students to come, first, and then modifying, so that faculty and others can join in as well. So once again people would have an opportunity to voice their concerns about the top administration of the university.

You know, sometimes students don't feel they have that freedom. They maybe go to a professor to share a problem, but then perhaps the teacher would often perhaps feel caught in the middle between the student and some other faculty member. So this is very difficult. What I'd like to do is remedy that problem by having an individual who people can go to—an independent source, so people can feel free to share information and concerns.

I know that this university has many, many hot plates on the stove right now. And I plan to talk to different groups within the campus, to establish focus groups, representative groups of individuals of people who have different expertise in a variety of different areas that tie into a particular area that we're investigating. We can look into the issues, analyze the issue and then come out with recommendations for resolutions. This way we can get the entire campus involved in determining what the best answers and resolutions are to our current problems and open up the whole communication environment.

Many of you will have real opportunities to participate and get involved. I also want to establish an e-mail hot line, so that people can share any concerns, share information or whatever they want to through a particular contact person. Of course, we need to have good guidelines set up, because otherwise we'd probably have somebody tied up all night and all day just trying to respond to issues that can't be resolved. So we'd have guidelines governing exactly how this would actually happen. I certainly wouldn't be setting those guidelines on my own, but instead in collaborative dialog with all of you.

We need to open up communication—open up things for people. We need to make people feel that when they speak on this campus they will be heard. And I want to put into place this sort of an environment, so that when I leave this position 18 months from now, I will feel that established systems have been put in place that will be helpful, so that the next president will be prepared.

One other thing... there are several real, pressing issues and problems that would have to be part of any priority group of issues, and that's the fact that presently we're being questioned by the Middle States Association because of recent problems in reporting and as a result of all this our MSA accreditation is on hold, while the MSA investigates further.

The MSA accreditation is our license to operate. Like any doctor or lawyer, you have to be licensed. Without this MSA accreditation, or positive accreditation, potential students would certainly give us a second thought as to whether or not they want to come here for their education, if this university is not recognized on the same level as others. And that would explain why we would have to have so many rejections should that be the case.

So we need to work hard, focusing fully on getting ourselves prepared for that group of individuals who will come here, pulling together on our campus a group of experts who can respond to the various areas, representing different programs who will work with me and other administrators to respond and resolve to these longstanding issues with the MSA.

Second, I don't have all the details yet, but I know that you're in the process of developing a strategic plan, and that includes a diversity plan, which is a wonderful idea. I think it's a wonderful process. So where are we with that process right now? What needs to be done? How will this impact on next year's budget. These are critical kinds of questions, very important ones that we need to push forward towards—keep ourselves on the right track—pushing along that diversity plan.

So there are many things: MSA, strategic plans— The third, you may know that the Department of Education through OMB have expressed concerns through the PART evaluation of programs that receive federal money, and they've found Gallaudet in their report to be in deficiency. So, President Jordan responded to the concerns, went to the Hill, requested reevaluation through much dialog, but nevertheless, we must always be in the front with any external evaluation, with any concerns that are expressed about our university.

We don't want the world looking at us in a very critical way. We ourselves need to be our own worst critic, because if we're not, other people will take that role, and of course that's not the position we want to be in. We need to have honest and in-depth questions asked of ourselves in terms of what our standards are. How do we measure graduation rates, outcomes and other sorts of questions? Those are the kinds of questions we need to be asking ourselves, and we need to do a lot of database information collection, so that we can have informed and knowledgeable decisions being made internally in an effort to continue to improve our programs.

Another thing that I plan to do in the very immediate future, I need to go to the Hill, which, fortunately is timely, because as you know the Democrats are taking over Congress in both the House and the Senate, and committees are being set up and formed. Those committees are changing in January, so this is a wonderful opportunity for me to walk in the door as those other new people will be coming, to go there and establish communications and reassure our funding sources.

We need to show that them we are fine. This university has experienced a bump on the road, but we're doing very well and plan to move forward based on the plans that we have in the works. So we need to share these kinds of messages with the outside world to give them reassurance that their concerns can be resolved.

So we need to work with the Department of Education, to sit down with the Secretary Spellings and tell her, we understand that an evaluation is to be done at Gallaudet. OMB has given the Department of Education \$750,000 dollars to perform an evaluation of Gallaudet. So we need to be able to tell that Secretary how we're going to do that alongside of them, working closely with them through this evaluation. Because if we don't act—unless I get more information from President Jordan in the next few days and come to learn that things I don't know now as I'm standing here—my sense is that we will want to be a part of any external review that takes place. We want to be able to come up with ideas as to how this process should happen. We want a place at the table. So these are just three things that are going to be requiring attention of me as I come in.

Fourthly, I need to make contact with potential and significant donors. The individuals who have given money to Gallaudet. Dr. Jordan has done a wonderful job of raising funds for this institution. Those donors have given money to Gallaudet in the past. They, of course, are very aware of the recent protests, and they share concerns or questions as to—if everything is back to normal, if everything is moving along well. And before they give more money, they're going to want to know what's happening with us first. So, we need to go out there, not to ask for money the first time, but to go out, sit down and have a dialog with them, talk the plans through with them so that they know what's happening, to know that we're doing well. But this requires a lot of communication.

In order for me to be able to do all of these things and make these kinds of contacts, I need to have a good team working with me within the university community. So we can focus, of course, on establishing that sort of team to help us—all of us together—all of us members of this community, be a part of this team, working together, so that I can leave campus a day or two at a time to take care of external groups, knowing very well that the internal groups are functioning very well. With the technology we have these days, I could talk to any single one of you no matter where I am, so I think that's great.

And now, I know my time is up and I've gone a bit over. I apologize for that. I want to share with you that I am open. I am not threatened in any way. I've *always* had an open-door policy. People can come to me, even fairly late in the afternoon, you know. My preferences would be that, because I will be very busy working throughout the day, but I want to hear from you.

And don't be surprised if you see me walking around your areas of work, because I want the opportunity and the pleasure of being able to visit classrooms, but before I do that, I would want to sit down with faculty committees and ask for their permission to do so, because I respect faculty governance

systems [applause]. I have a deep regard for them. I was a faculty member here, and I worked with and under those systems. Not only here, but in other places as well, so they'll be no problem there with me.

With the staff here, as far as I've come to understand, they have not had the same opportunities to provide input. And so I would like to see, as I mentioned earlier, the establishment of a university council. And perhaps we can talk a bit more about that idea and come up with guidelines as to how that committee will function.

I want to close now by paying respects to my two dear friends, and the recent finalists for this position, Steve Weiner and Bill Marshall. I know and love them both. Steve was my student when he was in junior high school up there in New York, and Bill Marshall and I worked together in the pre-college programs. I am honored to have had the opportunity to compete with them for this position. They have special knowledge and skills, as I do. And those are the kinds of skills that Gallaudet needs. And I will do everything I can to tap into those skills and that knowledge [applause], because those are the kinds of skills and knowledge bases that I need.

When I was appointed as the first [modern-day] deaf director of Kendall School back in 1974, I was one of three finalists. The other two were hearing people. I got the job, and the first thing I did was appoint one of the other finalists as principal, and appointed the other person, who had competed for the position, as chair of our national advisory committee—to send a message to Kendall School people that I'm here to work with you. And I want to send you that same message: I want to work with you. And hopefully, you'll want to work with me, too.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm closing now. But I want to say first thank you, and lastly, I want to salute my friend, King Jordan. He's here. Is he not? How could I miss him right there in the front? I guess it's the lights. King, I want to thank you for your friendship and your support over the years. He and I have bumped into each other in the hallways up there on Capitol Hill—gone to different professional meetings around the world in different places and bumped into him. He's always been charming and always supportive, as well as helpful. I am happy to be here, and honored to be replacing him. And sir, I salute you.

Thank you all.

[*Standing ovation*]

[End]