A war of words is being waged at Gallaudet University, pitting the deaf against the deaf.

PART ONE

Should Gallaudet University, like Quebec, declare itself a separate linguistic enclave? Should American Sign Language replace speech as the *lingua franca* of campus? Ever since Gallaudet students won their first deaf president in 1988, the question has raged—silently, in sign—through the college’s Kendall Green campus. It surfaced this year, when teachers at the Gallaudet pre-college were abruptly told to turn off their voices and only sign.

“You have taught me your language,
And my profit o’er
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!”
—Caliban to Prospero, in *The Tempest*

It is a crisp, swift, easy movement. Thumb under forefinger, fist raised to the neck, and then a fast twisting motion as if turning a key in a lock. In the fluent and expressive form of deafspeak known as American Sign Language, the message thusly semaphored is: Don’t speak. Shut up. Literally, *turn off your voice.* Last year, this was the salute that greeted staff and faculty at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES) and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD), schools for deaf children located on the campus of Gallaudet University in Northeast D.C.

The day was Aug. 27, 1991—the tail end of another beastly Washington summer. The return of the urchins was imminent, and, as always, teachers felt that familiar abdominal knot of excitement and dread. Only this year, there was more excitement and dread than usual. Days earlier, the principals of MSSD and Kendall (as the two schools are usually called) had issued welcome-back letters; in the letters it was announced that “the expectation is that classes will take place in sign, without voice.” Now, the 300-odd staff and faculty members crowded into the MSSD auditorium watched as their bosses elaborated—in sign—on that abrupt and startling message. During a three-day professional retreat held in July, the 28 administrators had resolved to turn off their voices. Just zipped up their lips. And only signed.

The result was so gratifying that now, voices were to be turned off in both schools. “Turn off” was the new directive at MSSD and Kendall, which together make up the Gallaudet “pre-college.” Henceforth, “spoken” conversation would be conducted in American Sign Language, or ASL, without voice. This didn’t just apply to deaf faculty, for whom voices are often a cumbersome affair anyway; it also held true for the two-thirds of the KDES and MSSD faculty who are “hearing.” According to one teacher, the new approach was presented as a year-long experiment; if, after a year, you didn’t care for the silence, then you might want to look for a job somewhere else.

Whether or not you considered this a warm welcome back depended, needless to say, on who you happened to be.

“Deaf people were thrilled,” signs Kendall principal Nancy Shook, who is deaf, speaking through an interpreter. “I would say that for deaf people, it felt great,” affirms Cindy Bailes, the principal of MSSD, also deaf. “For some hearing people, it was a time of anxiety.”

And that’s putting it mildly. Within days, even hours, news of the change in “communication policy” at MSSD and Kendall rocketed through the Gallaudet campus and beyond, sparking a collective *frisson* through the nation’s deaf community and sending a shiver of astonishment through many “hearies.” The Gallaudet pre-college, is, well, *Gallaudet:* Created, like the university itself, by an act of Congress, the pre-college is a flagship, a national demonstration school that sets the standard for deaf education. As Gallaudet goes, so goes the country.

The day after the announcement was made, pre-college dean Michael Deninger says that
he received inquiring calls from as far away as California. Many of these inquiries ultimately found their way to the top: the office of Gallaudet President I. King Jordan. Jordan, who is deaf, had not participated in the voices-off decision. But it was Jordan to whom federal officials and other interested parties turned, wishing to know just exactly what kind of education U.S. taxpayers were now providing the 530 deaf children at MSSD and Kendall.

Was sign to become the sole and signal method of educating the deaf at Gallaudet? Were deaf children no longer to be taught to speak? What would happen to their voices? What would happen to their "speech-reading" abilities? What would happen to any residual hearing they might have? And what would happen when they entered the world beyond Gallaudet—the (for lack of a better term) hearing world?

"I heard from Congressional staff, I heard from the Department of Education, I heard from parents, I heard from board members," says Jordan. By law, some of the letters pointed out, deaf children in public school must receive an individually tailored education, one that usually includes both sign and speech.

The letters did not need to point out that the feds fund the Gallaudet pre-college to the tune of $22 million a year. All too aware of that fact, Jordan sent down a stop order in February. "We have a problem because of the perception that we have decided that American Sign Language without voice is used in our classrooms," he wrote to pre-college administrators. "We must deal with this problem." With that memo, teachers were once more free to converse with students by any means necessary: speech, sign, written English.

But Jordan's memo did not—could not—put a stop to the larger debate at Gallaudet: a debate about language and identity that has become, in his words, the "foremost" issue on the Gallaudet campus. Four years after deaf students won a major victory in their ongoing struggle for self-determination by securing their first deaf president, there is a powerful, if inchoate, movement afoot to take that self-determination one step further by making sign—not speech—the lingua franca of the campus. And not just any sign, either, but American Sign Language, described by author Oliver Sacks as "biologically and unsilenceably the voice of the deaf."

Hail the ascendancy of deaf culturalists: those who believe that deafness is not so much a handicap as an ethnicity. According to the National Association of the Deaf, there are 22 million people in the United States who have some hearing disability. Of these, 2 million are fully deaf. Among those 2 million, there is a wide range of hearing loss—some deaf people can hear a little, some can hear with the help of a hearing aid, many can hear nothing at all. In deaf culture, the shape of your hearing curve doesn't matter. Solidarity is what counts. Deafness is what counts. These days, deafness can actually be a choice.

"It's hard to say where deafness begins," says Debra Nussbaum, a Kendall audiologist. "You might have someone who on paper looks deaf but functions as hard-of-hearing. Or, you could have it the other way..."
around. There are many deaf people here who are audiologically hard-of-hearing, but choose to be culturally deaf."

What deafness is not, for deaf culturalists, is an impairment. The pathological or "medical" view of deafness has been rejected, and with it the view that deaf people are victimized, afflicted. One is not "hearing-impaired" any longer; one is simply deaf. "The word "impaired" means broken, something to fix," signs Janet Weinstock, a deaf history teacher at MSSD. "We have nothing to fix. We feel normal because we were born this way. There's nothing to fix."

By these lights, the deaf are, like African-Americans, like Jews, a cultural minority—a minority linked not by skin color or religion or political belief but by American Sign Language, a vivid, pictorial language in which deaf people communicate on a sophisticated and fully satisfying level, sharing jokes and slang and insults and terms of endearment that hearing people may not get even if they know sign. (The ASL sign for "hearie" is a twirling of the finger near the lips; the sign for "deaf person who wants to be a hearie" is a twirling of the finger near the forehead, to indicate snobbery and overintellectualism.) For this reason, ASL is not just unifying; it is isolating, too. And that's why, when the voices-off order went out last August, so many parents—deaf parents—were aghast.

When it comes to getting along in society, people need to know how to communicate in the King's English," insists Louis Williams, the hearing father of a deaf child enrolled at Kendall. Like many other parents at the D.C. and Arlington, Kendall is pretty much the only option. To many, it suddenly seemed as if the deaf culturalists were trying to steal their kids.

"It almost seems that some in the deaf community are saying he doesn't belong to me, that I have to give him up to the deaf community," frets Theresa Painter, a Woodbridge mother whose son, Brady, is the only deaf person in her family.

Hearing teachers were also unnerved—for good reason. Throughout Gallaudet, there is an increasing unwillingness, on the part of the deaf, to tolerate hearing teachers who can’t, or won’t, sign well. Even among those hearing teachers who do sign relatively fluently, many are pre-college, Williams lives in the D.C. metro area. While MSSD is a boarding high school that admits students from around the country, Kendall, a day school, takes only kids from D.C. and the Virginia and Maryland suburbs. Parents in counties like Montgomery and Fairfax have other alternatives, but for parents of deaf children living in

Three teachers told me they were told point-blank to use ASL or else—including they could look for a new job if they did not like it,” fumes a deaf Gallaudet professor.
Confounded by ASL: Most are accustomed to Simultaneous Communication, or sim-com, in which English-like signs are paired with spoken English. ASL is nothing like English. Its syntax and word order are entirely different. That’s why, to use ASL properly, you can’t use your voice. That’s why many hearing teachers were utterly lost. “You would come to these meetings, and they would be about ASL and the use of voice,” says one hearing teacher, “and half the faculty would be missing the information.”

For audiologist Nussbaum and her colleagues in the Kendall communications department—whojob it is to develop speaking and hearing potential in their students—the policy brought on a professional crisis.

“I remember thinking: What am I going to do next year; am I going to do speech, or am I going to sit in my office and write things?” says Bettie Waddy-Smith, a speech pathologist who has worked at Kendall for more than 18 years. For a hearing person, she says, the pre-college was “not a fun place to be.”

Yet there were hearing people who strongly supported the voices-off order—and deaf people who violently opposed it.

“Three teachers told me they were told point-blank to use ASL or else—including they could look for a new job if they did not like it,” fumes Gallaudet psychology professor Larry Stewart, who is deaf. Stewart immediately went on record in the Gallaudet newsletter, On the Green, opposing the change. The no-voice, all-ASL policy, he argues, amounted to an effort on the part of a small minority to tyrannize the entire deaf community, particularly—and most grievously—children. ASL itself, he argued, is no ur-language but a “political creation.”

Frances Parsons, a graduate and employee of Gallaudet, agrees; ASL, she believes, is a means of “terrorizing” deaf people, like her, who wish to remain part of the mainstream. Indeed, if DPN (as the Deaf President Now protest is commonly called) demonstrated the awesome unity and silent eloquence of the deaf community, the controversy over ASL shows that the deaf are also deeply divided. Since that first silent, signed meeting in August, the to-voice-or-not-to-voice question has both galvanized and fractured the Gallaudet campus. Unlike DPN, this is not a public protest but rather a familial argument, one that has taken place, with great but largely silent fury, over computers and in offices and among small cabals—and in sign. The pre-college dustup was a rare public surfacing of what has been, up to now, a sub rosa discussion.

Unlike DPN, the ASL debate lacks heroes and villains. In 1988, the warring factions were clearly defined: Outraged deaf students and their allies lined up against a board of trustees that had literally turned a deaf ear to their demands by appointing a hearing woman, Elisabeth Zinser, as Gallaudet’s president. (Zinser eventually resigned; Jordan was chosen to replace her, but only after the students shut down the school and marched on Congress.) ASL has pitted deaf against hearing, deaf against deaf, hearing against hearing. It has pitted Jordan against his own staff and stu-
settings. As such, it signals something like the schisms that occurred in the civil rights movement, when, after the first, heady victories, some of the more conciliatory blacks were muscled out of the movement.

"The bottom line," says Larry Stewart, "is that deaf people are going through an identity crisis."

Elen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, did see deafness as an affliction—the worse affliction of the two. "The problems of deafness," she wrote in 1910, "are deeper and more complex, if not more important, than those of blindness. Deafness is a much more misfortune. For it means the loss of the most vital stimulus—the sound of the voice that brings language, sets thoughts astir and keeps us in the intellectual company of men."

Oliver Sacks, in his 1989 tribute to deaf culture, Seeing Voices makes the same point. Alluding to Dr. Johnson's argument that deafness is "one of the most desperate of human calamities," Sacks agrees that deafness is a potential calamity because it separates humans from what many believe to be the species' defining characteristic: language. This is especially true for the "prelingually deaf"—those who are born deaf, or who, due to illness, become deaf before they learn to speak. Traditionally, the prelingually deaf were thought to be retarded (hence the dual meaning of "dumb") not because their minds were flawed, but because they lacked a means of expressing—even developing—their thoughts.

"To be defective in language, for a human being, is one of the most desperate of calamities," writes Sacks, "for it is only through language that we enter fully into our human estate and culture, communicate freely with our fellows, acquire and share information. If we cannot do this, we will be bizarrely disabled and cut off—whatever our desires, or endeavors, or native capacities. And indeed, we may be so little able to realize our intellectual capacities as to appear mentally defective."

English, fundamentally an oral language, becomes an alien thing—an enemy. "English! Love it? Hate it? Tell Us About It!" reads a sign outside an English classroom in Gallaudet's Hall Memorial Building. "The English Department wants YOUR opinion about ENGLISH TESTS, ENGLISH COURSES, LEARNING ENGLISH; Your Needs, Hopes, and Feelings about Reading and Writing." According to Gallaudet English professor Trent Batson, even his best students' writing is "flatter" than that of most hearing people, because they cannot hear the rhythm of the prose. In this country, Batson points out, the average deaf high school graduate reads and writes on a 3rd-grade level.

To understand just how crippling the language barrier can be—and what a relief, what a binding thing, sign is—it helps to visit Gallaudet. For a hearing person, passing through Gallaudet's wrought-iron gates is an experience similar to that of a white American in Nairobi, a Connecticut Yankee in remotest Alabama: throughout the surprisingly large, 99-acre campus, you, not them, are different. You, not them, are foreign. Everywhere students are signing and walking, signing and jogging, signing and eating.

Dr. Jordan, on his undergraduate days: "You just tolerated communication that didn't succeed. That's the way deaf people were. We understood that the communication problem was our fault. We can't hear, we can't speak, so we can't communicate well with hearing people because we can't do those things."

Because of all the signing, Gallaudet is a quiet campus, but it can be noisy when one least expects it. At night, students crank up the jukebox in the Ely Center to better enjoy the vibrations. Among themselves, many converse in ASL, and ASL is not a prim language. There is much table-slapping, sudden shrieks, the occasional unmuffled burp. One day when I entered Hall Memorial Building, I was brutally assaulted by the unmistakable swells of "Bridge Over Troubled
"Water;" beneath a stairwell, a red-haired student, hearing aid tucked behind his ear, was pounding flawlessly away on a piano. Around and above him, teachers were conducting classes in English, math, Spanish. Some were signing; others were lecturing. Voices clattered down the halls. Nobody cared. Why should they?

Not knowing sign, I was always relieved to come upon a person who could—and would—use their voice with me. Even so, it's not always easy to understand a deaf person who's voicing, particularly when you don't know the rules. I sat through an unsuccessful hourlong interview with Gallaudet University provost Harvey Corson, who, though he is prelingually deaf, prefers to sign and speak rather than have an interpreter "voice" his signs. New to the quality of Corson's voice, I was bewildered but loathe to say so. Only after the interview did I learn that not confessing to my confusion was actually rude. I had demonstrated one of the most annoying traits of a "hearer": I had written a deaf person off.

"Deaf people," Kendall Princi­pal Nancy Shook told me later, "are tired of having to figure out which hearing people can understand them."

If I found deaf voices difficult to understand, the converse held true. Even deaf people who speech-read expertly had to labor to understand me when I spoke. Cindy Bailes was "mainstreamed" in public schools as a child, and survived on the basis of her ability to read lips and adeptly guess at whatever meanings she missed. Yet speech-reading yields only partial comprehension; just 40 percent of the sounds in the English language are visible on the lips. When conversing without an interpreter, we were inevitably reduced to scribbling our messages back and forth.

And while it's true that technol­ogy has opened up a brave new world of communication for the deaf—namely, electronic mail systems and TDDs that attach to a telephone—even these are often flawed. For this story, City Paper acquired a modem that enables a personal computer to communicate telephonically with a TDD. It took several weeks before we ironed out the glitches in the program; even then, the TDD modem tended to intercept incoming calls that were not meant for it. With unnerving frequency the computer would "ring," and the screen would be mysteriously flooded with garbled characters; I would stare at it glumly, wondering if this were simply another rogue transmission, or—as did happen—a deaf person vainly trying to ring me up.

When I mentioned my frustra­tions to a hearing member of the MSSD faculty, he laughed. "Welcome," he said, "to the world of the deaf." For much of their lives, deaf people are subject to such half-understandings and downright miscommunications, until and unless they are introduced to the clarity of sign. For the deaf person, Oliver Sacks writes, learning sign is like coming home.

he calamity of confusion that is the deaf person's lot has been exacer­bated in the United States for nigh-on a hundred years, deaf culturalists argue, by the cruel and unusual punishment of "oralism." As described by ASL devotees, an oralist education—envisioned as a way of habituating deaf children to society by schooling them strictly with spoken and written English—is, in fact, a kind of torture. Indeed, the grade-school experience of many deaf people appears to have been much like that of the criminals in Kafka's harrowing short story "The Penal Colony," for whom language is actually lethal. In Kafka's grim vision, prisoners on an unnamed colo­nial isle are put to death by means of a great, needed machine that literally inscribes their crime on their backs, "printing" the offending word on the prisoner's body until it kills him—without his ever knowing what was written.

Intentionally or not, the story is a metaphor for the lot of indig­enous people—in Africa, Asia, the Americas—who have seen their own languages obliterated by that of colonizers, who have felt both their thoughts and their lives constricted by the hege­mony of English, French, Spanish, Chinese. In much the same
way, deaf culturalists would say, Kafka's story is a metaphor for the experience of the American deaf.

It didn't start out that way: In the United States, the first school for the deaf was a cradle of sign. In 1815, a young educator and Yale graduate, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, traveled to Europe looking for a school on which he could model this country's first public school for the deaf. Gallaudet's mission derived from personal interest: A close friend of his, Mason Cogswell, had a daughter, Alice, who was deaf and yearned to be educated. By that time, some European countries—namely Britain and Germany—had developed "oral" schools where the deaf were miraculously taught to speak. One of these was the famous Braidwood school in England. Oralists, however, often do not wish to divulge their lucrative methodology, and Gallaudet was not allowed to observe Braidwood to the extent that he had hoped.

Instead he sojourned in Paris at the more hospitable Royal Academy for Deaf-Mutes. The world's first public school for the deaf, the Royal Academy was founded in the late 18th century by the Abbé Charles Michel de l'Epée, who was concerned that the deaf could not know the word of God. To facilitate their salvation, the good abbé did a remarkable thing: He learned the indigenous sign language of deaf Parisian children. Assuming (wrongly) that French signs did not have a grammar of their own, l'Epée constructed an elaborate system that matched signs with French grammar. He then used this signed French to instruct deaf children in all other subjects—including written French.

Many of these students became teachers in their own right; one of the greatest of these was Laurent Clerc. During his visit, Thomas Gallaudet persuaded Clerc to return with him to the United States. In 1817, they founded the American Asylum for the Deaf, a publicly funded school for deaf children in Hartford, Conn. The school adopted the same strategy as de l'Epée's. Deaf children were taught English and other subjects in the language that is easiest for them to understand—the language of signs.

It was from the Hartford academy that something like American Sign Language developed. According to Oliver Sacks, deaf people will inevitably take a "sign system"—like l'Epée's signed French—and adapt it to their own hand shapes, their own vocabulary and culture, what Noam Chomsky would call their own internal grammar. The deaf students in Hartford did precisely this with the French sign imported by Clerc. Subsequently, other states founded residential schools where deaf children could congregate and communicate in sign. Many of the teachers were deaf people who had been educated in Hartford. Thus "American Sign Language" (though as yet, it had no name) was disseminated nationally and became a powerful link among the American deaf.

"After 1817," writes Sacks, "there spread throughout the States not just a language and a literacy, but a body of shared knowledge, shared beliefs, cherished narratives and images, which soon constituted a rich and distinctive culture." One example of this was Martha's Vineyard; settled by a group of people among whom deafness was inherited, the island was a virtual bilingual community embracing speech and sign—at least, until the tourists arrived.

Not long after the Hartford academy was set up, however,
oral schools were also established in the U.S.; sometimes, though not always, by charlatans catering to wealthy parents' desire to have their children "cured" of deafness. As Harlan Lane, a psycholinguist at Northeastern University, notes in his history of the deaf, When the Mind Hears, there has always been a market for people who offer to teach the deaf to speak. For centuries, doctors have conducted experimental and usually execrable "cures"; in 19th-century Britain, John Kitto, deafened in an accident at age 12, wrote that doctors "poured into my ears various infusions, hot and cold; they bledd me, they blistered me, leached me, physicked me; and, at last, they put a watch between my teeth, and on finding that I was unable to distinguish the ticking, they gave it up as a bad case."

Often, Lane says, oralists' methods involved—though they would never admit it—the use of crude signs.

In the United States, the oralist philosophy was supported by such noteworthies as Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe. It found its avatar, however, in Alexander Graham Bell. The ultimate technocrat, Bell was born of a deaf mother, took a deaf wife, and, as his father had done, devoted much energy to trying to teach the deaf to speak. (Bell also spent a great deal of time trying to teach his dog to speak.) Bell's efforts to make speech visible didn't help the deaf much, but it did result in the creation of the telephone.

Bell was also keenly interested in genetics. Something of a eugenecist, he believed that the deaf should assimilate rather than propagate their own, deviant culture. "I am sure," he told a deaf audience, "that there is no one among the deaf who desires to have his affliction handed down to his children." Bell therefore opposed residential schools for the deaf, preferring small-day schools where they would be allowed to return to their families; opposed the use of signs; and opposed allowing deaf people to instruct their own. Bell, who founded Science and National Geographic, also left the world another legacy. The Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, headquartered at 3417 Volta Place NW, continues to propound his assimilationist philosophy.

For much of his career, Bell was at loggerheads with Thomas Gallaudet's son, Edward. Their legendary feud is recorded in Never the Twain Shall Meet by Richard Winefield, published in 1987 by Gallaudet University Press. Like Bell, Edward Miner Gallaudet had both a deaf mother and a deaf wife; unlike Bell, he was a stalwart supporter of sign. Born in 1837, Gallaudet fils taught at the American Asylum in Hartford for several years, and in 1857 came to Washington to head up the nation's first (and, to date, only) liberal arts university for the deaf.

What would become Gallaudet University started out as a ruse: A rogue named P.H. Skinner came to Washington with a passel of children—some deaf, some blind—and prevailed upon Amos Kendall, then a member of Congress, to set him up with a school funded by the federal treasury. Kendall had made a mint as the business manager of Samuel Morse (who also had a deaf wife, and, according to Harlan Lane, communicated with her by tapping out Morse code on her hands). Kendall got the bill passed—only to discover that Skinner had taken the money and fled, leaving the deaf children alone in a locked house. Kendall broke down the door and took over the school, which became known as the Columbian Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and the Dumb and the Blind, with an initial enrollment of 17 students.

Edward Gallaudet was hired as the director, and in 1864, together with Laurent Clerc, persuaded Congress to attach additional funds to pay for a college. (In 1865, Congress moved the blind students to a Maryland asylum; the name of the Washington school was changed to the Columbian Institution for the Deaf and the Dumb, while the college took the name National Deaf-Mute College.) Several years later—over the howls of Bell—Congress authorized and funded a "normal" school to train teachers of the deaf. In 1894, the college was named after T.H. Gallaudet; his statue can be seen in the courtyard outside Chapel Hall, embracing little Alice Cogswell.

If E.M. Gallaudet won a victory
by founding a national school for the deaf and winning annual appropriations for it, A.G. Bell won the war. In 1880, the International Convention of Instructors of the Deaf was convened in Milan, Italy. Drawing up the notorious "Milan resolution," educators voted to banish sign from their schools. According to Winefield, the convention "gave the oral movement considerable credibility and infused its leaders with an almost messianic belief in the rightness of their approach." Gradually, the oralist policy was adopted by the same residential schools in the U.S. where sign once flourished. Deaf people ceased to be hired as teachers. In oral classrooms, deaf children were wired into great hearing-aid-like systems; in speech classes, even the most profoundly deaf children were encouraged to spit "P's" into handkerchiefs and blow "TH's" onto feathers, trying to see something—sound—that they could not hear. Usually, the students trotted out for display were the ones who could perform best at speaking and hearing—not necessarily the smartest.

And the speech produced? Intelligible—sometimes. Other times, unrecognizable. The deaf student had no way of judging. "Many deaf people are not comfortable using their voices," signs Gallaudet professor Lynn Jacobowitz, "because they can't hear themselves. They can't hear the inflections, the intonations of the voice. They don't know. Like my voice, it sounds terrible; I'm embarrassed to use it."

"It didn't work for me," recalls MSSD employee Patricia Yates of her own oral education. "It does work for a few kids, but not for me....Even with speech therapy, 15 years—nothing. I couldn't comprehend every word; I'd pick three words out of a whole sentence. Words, words, words, words. Thinking skills—I didn't have any. Self-esteem—I didn't have any."

Sign did not die out entirely. It went underground. "I learned signs under the bed, behind the stairwell, in the bathroom," signs Jacobowitz, who attended one of the most famous oral schools in the United States, New York's Lexington School for the Deaf.

"If I signed, a ruler would be hit on my hand, my ear would be pulled....It was forbidden." As Sacks puts it, the years from 1817 to 1917 saw "the rise and fall...of Sign in America." By the 1880s, sign resided only in "isolated pockets" of America.

One of these places was Gallaudet.

Which is not to say that sign flourished at Gallaudet. One of the things that few people realize about Gallaudet (when they think about it at all; it seems safe to say that few people did before the nationally televised uprising in 1988, and that few have afterward, except when they drive past it) is that deafness is, in a sense, incidental to the Gallaudet mission: A liberal arts university like any other. Gallaudet hires faculty based on their expertise, not on whether they are deaf or how well they sign.

The results of this policy have been mixed. In the past, communication between professors and students has often been poor. When hearing teachers were hired, they were given a quick course in sign and turned loose in the classroom—with predictable results. According to I. King Jordan, who took his undergraduate degree at Gallaudet, students assumed the blame for their own befuddlement. "You just tolerated communication that didn't succeed. That's the way deaf people were. We understood that the communication problem was our fault. We can't hear, we can't speak, so we can't communicate well with hearing people because we can't do those things." In this, the sensibility of the deaf students seems remarkably like that of the deaf journalist, Harriet Martineau, who wrote in the mid-1800s that "the special duty of the deaf...is to spare other people as much fatigue as possible."

But in 1955, the Gallaudet English department hired a hearing professor named William Stokoe, and nothing would ever be the same. Because it was Stokoe who discovered, named, and re-legitimated ASL.

(To be continued)

Deaf Life By Liza Mundy

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PART TWO
Should Gallaudet University, like Quebec, declare itself a separate linguistic enclave? Should American Sign Language replace speech as the lingua franca of campus? Ever since Gallaudet students won their first deaf president in 1988, the question has raged—silently, in sign—through the college’s Kendall Green campus. It surfaced this year, when teachers at the Gallaudet pre-college were abruptly told to turn off their voices and only sign. Part 2 of a 3-part series.

The experts said that sign language ... was a pretty poor way of communicating; that it only approximated to the precision of the [English] language, and so it was better left alone,” recalls William Stokoe, now retired and living in an immaculate Silver Spring saltbox. Back in 1955, Stokoe was a young medievalist with a degree from Cornell University and no experience with, or particular interest in, the deaf. Recruited by Gallaudet, however, Stokoe was captivated by a lecture delivered by a deaf professor who could speak only tolerably but who lectured brilliantly, because, as Stokoe recalls, he “made everything visible.”

When he arrived on the Florida Avenue campus, Stokoe was dismayed to discover that the Gallaudet administration took what might euphemistically be called a “paternalistic” attitude toward students. “My first few months on campus,” Stokoe recalls, “there was a reception at the president’s house, and the college nurse said, ‘Bill, you’re going to like it here. The students are so nice and comfortable to get along with. . . . They sense what you want, and do it for you, just like dogs and niggers.’”

That nurse’s attitude was “extreme,” Stokoe says, but it didn’t come from nowhere. The view that “deaf people are just a little below normal in intelligence, educability, humanity, common sense, and so forth” was widespread on campus. Stokoe discovered, to the contrary, that there were more “genius-level” students in his classes than he had ever encountered in one place before. The reason, he realized, was that the deaf community was concentrated at Gallaudet: There were few places where a bright but profoundly deaf person could go except Gallaudet. “You get a genius-level person, and they can probably choose between scholarships at Harvard, Yale, Berkeley, Oxford, the University of Chicago, or something like that. They’re going to be spread all over the world. You get a deaf person like that, and chances are, it’ll take them to Gallaudet.”

Stokoe did not know any sign language when he was hired. So, like other incoming professors, he took the course provided. There, Stokoe says, they were instructed on how to make a sign for each English word—a system known as Signed English. Instructors were not, he wryly notes, taught how to read the signs of their own students. “New teachers and faculty were taught to make signs for words using the signs we had been taught—they were doing it in an entirely different way. Much like the difference between someone talking French from a phrase book and a native Frenchman having an argument with a taxi driver.”

Frances Parsons, who prefers Signed English, says that ASL advocates “went too far, and they’ve done just exactly what the oralists did to us. The oralists wanted us to talk; now the deaf don’t want us to talk.”
"It was obvious to me," he says now, "that these people were communicating, were interacting, in a completely satisfactory, self-satisfying, efficient way that had nothing to do with English—or speech."

His linguistic instincts aroused, Stokoe wanted to study deaf sign further. He was not encouraged to do so. At one point, he says, Gallaudet President Leonard M. Elstad tried to stop his research. But according to Stokoe, Dean of the College George Detmold convinced the authorities to leave Stokoe alone. In 1960, Stokoe published *Sign Language Structure*, in which he asserted that deaf sign is a language in its own right: as expressive and fluent and sophisticated as English.

"I was the first person to tell the world that deaf people had their own language, which was a language, which was the expression of a unique culture," Stokoe says. "They shared a physical condition—deafness—and values, traditions, experiences, and so forth, all of which made them a close-knit group. And their language, because they couldn't hear, was not a spoken language at all, but it was a language." At the time, he did not refer to the language as American Sign Language, but simply as deaf sign.

His revelation was met with ridicule. "When the book was published, my hearing colleagues and deaf colleagues alike had views of the book that ranged from unnecessary to actually pernicious," Stokoe persisted. In 1965, he published *The Dictionary of American Sign Language*; having visited Europe and discovered that deaf sign in different countries (including Britain) differs greatly from deaf sign in America, he felt it necessary to give American sign a name. Other linguists quickly picked up on his work. Researchers discovered, for example, that much information in deaf sign is contained not just in the hands but in the face: Syntax, meaning, intonation can all be conveyed by facial expressions, which are so exaggerated as to seem—to "hearies"—goofy, excessive, impolite. "Hearing people look at deaf people, saying that, you know, the way they sign, they look like a bunch of animals," complains MSSD's Janet Weinstock; in the past, many deaf people were ashamed to sign in public for fear of ridicule.

In fact, ASL is nuanced, vivid, and complex. One of Stokoe's linguist colleagues, Ted Supalla, showed that in deaf sign, the same sign can be a noun or a verb—depending on movement. For example, Stokoe shows, the sign for "airplane" is the same as "fly": The hand stays stable with "plane," and jerks when the word is "fly." Meaning can be changed in the most subtle and marvelous ways; to say that someone is walking, you put your hands out flat and make them "walk" up and down. To say that a woman is walking in high-heeled shoes, you simply extend the pinkie on each hand to create heels.

Deaf sign, linguists also discovered, is quicker and more fluent than the Signed English that Stokoe had learned. To demonstrate, Stokoe takes the phrase "My shoe is broken; can you fix it?" To say this to her deaf father, a deaf child might make the sign for shoe (hands balled into fists and knocked together), quickly separate them to signal "broken," then, almost simultaneously, make the sign for "fix" while moving her hands toward
Dad. At the same time, her face signals a question. There is no clear-cut “my,” no clear-cut “you,” but those concepts are contained in the motion, the signs, the expression. The sentence, which happens so rapidly that a hearing person cannot parse it, at least not visually, comes out something like Shoe-Broke-Must-Fix.

Stokoe’s work was a tremendous gift to the deaf community (and to many hearing linguists). It affirmed deafness as a culture in a way that Americans have a hard time appreciating, living as we do in a vast, monolingual country where most of us read the same best-sellers and newspapers and cereal boxes yet rarely think about the ways in which these attest to a shared worldview. For the deaf, Stokoe’s recognition of sign as the equal of English was immeasurably—there is no other word for it—empowering. “A lot of people, including deaf, thought he was crazy,” signs Gallaudet’s Lynn Jacobowitz. “Later on, we realized, ‘Oh, that really is a language.’ And we became proud.”

The result was a flowering of ASL, and of deaf culture along with it. Around the time that Stokoe was doing his research, his mentor, George Detmold, began encouraging student actors to perform in ASL. Stokoe maintains that ASL is better suited than modern English to convey the passions of, say, Othello, because the English of Shakespeare’s day was—much like deaf sign—a vernacular, unofficial language; Latin was the language of authority. Like Shakespearean English, Stokoe says, “ASL is a language of a small group of people, a very tightly knit, very small, closed society. For expressing human emotions and relationships, and degrees of feeling, it’s unexcelled.” Detmold’s efforts were followed, in 1967, by the founding of the National Theatre of the Deaf. Later, plays like Children of a Lesser God conveyed the vitality of ASL to the larger world. ASL storytellers and poets proliferated. The ASL movement and the surge in deaf civil rights were inextricably linked: In 1972, Barbara Kannapell (who now teaches at Gallaudet) founded a group called Deaf Pride. “My language,” Kannapell has written, “is me.”

“I was the first person to tell the world that deaf people had their own language, which was a language, which was the expression of a unique culture.” Stokoe says. “They shared a physical condition—deafness—and values, traditions, experiences, and so forth, all of which made them a close-knit group. And their language, because they couldn’t hear, was not a spoken language at all, but it was a language.” His revelation was met with ridicule.

At Gallaudet, ASL rules. Faculty must take a sign proficiency exam and a preparation course—in ASL. “It’s the only language,” says Jacobowitz. “We don’t teach anything else but ASL.” Teachers are encouraged to “think” in ASL, and to sign when speaking.

This March, in his State of the University address, Jordan acknowledged that communication has become the hottest topic on campus. Making the link between language and oppression, language and equality, language and self-esteem, Jordan described the old Gallaudet as a “plantation in which some enjoyed power at the expense of others.”

Jordan did not, however, deliver his speech in ASL. Deafened in a motorcycle accident at 21, he learned sign late and has retained his command of speech. Instead, he lectured in sim-com, speaking and using English-like signs. Across from him onstage was an ASL interpreter. The juxtaposition of the two made it possible to appreciate the gap between ASL and signed English: When Jordan spoke, his intonation was as expressive as that of a hearing person, but his face was immobile except for an occasional raised eyebrow. His signs were small and low-key, made with one hand.

In contrast, the ASL interpreter, a dark-haired man with a cleft chin and a double-breasted suit, performed what amounted to an exhausting pantomime. While Jordan was saying things like “the pathological model, the idea that deaf people are deficient, is going away,” the ASL interpreter would crumple his mouth, raise his eyebrows, grimace, sneer, wrinkle his nose, smile, tuck his chin into his neck, waggle his
eyebrows, turn his head, bend his knees, squeeze his face into a tiny knot, open his eyes wide, look this way, look that way, grin, frown, stick out his tongue, rear back, rear forward, shuffle his feet. His face, transformed anew with every sign, was in a constant state of explosion. Meanwhile his hands—both hands—moved in, out, in a circle, in a fist, fluttering, folded, pounding one another, always moving.

Sometimes I could make out the signs. When Jordan said “responsible,” the interpreter touched his shoulder as if carrying a burden. When Jordan said something about new library stacks, the interpreter gestured rapidly with one flattened hand, starting low and moving up, ladderlike. When Jordan took up the inevitable topic of “communication,” I could see the sign for “communicate”: two symmetrical Cs, made by cupping the fingers on each hand. When Jordan mentioned that people in the 19th century would be “amazed” to see Gallaudet today, the interpreter signaled amazement with his entire body. When King Jordan said “state-of-the-art,” the interpreter’s face was impressed. When—speaking about the construction on campus—Jordan said something about “fumes,” the interpreter looked repulsed.

Other times the correlation involved both self-expression and self-esteem.

“It’s an identity issue—respect,” signs MSSD principal Cindy Bailes. “When I learned to sign, I was so proud.”

The deaf are much like feminist writers, black writers, Native American writers, or—to use a better analogy—like the embattled and rebellious French Canadians. Hyperconscious of the way in which their culture and their language have been repressed, they want to create their own linguistic community. They also want to tell their own story.

Toward this end, Gallaudet is creating a department of “Deaf Studies and ASL.” Bill Stokoe is on the Deaf Studies Committee; so is Harlan Lane, whose new book, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community,* likens the relationship of deaf students and hearing teachers to that of colonized and colonizer. Recently, Gallaudet played host to the American premiere of a BBC movie based on a true story recounted in Lane’s earlier book, *When the Mind Hears*; in it, Joseph, a young 18th-century French count who is deaf, is disinherited by his evil hearing sister but wins his inheritance back after the Abbé de l’Épée teaches him sign. The movie is a rousing, if somewhat mythologized, affirmation of sign; the scene in which an evil hearing doctor pumps water into the poor count’s nose, while crowing “Speak, lad, speak,” elicited delighted snickers from the audience.

Lane, who introduced the movie, said that the tale illustr-
trates "the way in which hearing people have stolen the heritage of deaf people, and how deaf people can reclaim it."

Intent on such reclamation, the deaf are now telling their own stories in a smaller way. Several times, I was allowed to visit Janet Weinstock's deaf-history class at MSSD. In her classroom, everything is deaf-friendly: Photos and posted writings make for a "visual environment," and desks are arranged so that students can see one another sign. Only ASL is used. One day, students were signing aloud from autobiographies they had written. ("I was born deaf," read one. "I was adopted by my grandparents. They knew nothing about deafness.") Later, Weinstock asked the class whether, if a magic device existed that could enable them to hear, they would choose to have it. To a person, the students said no. They would prefer to remain deaf. They could not imagine not being deaf.

Another day, Weinstock asked them to prepare a debate. One side would argue for a manualist (or sign) education, the other for oral schools. The students assigned to the oralist team were horrified, fearing a visitor—me—would get the idea that they actually believed the pro-oralist argument they were supposed to craft. During class, one of them slipped over and signed something to my interpreter, Deb Tomardy. "They want to tell you that in all reality, they don't support this," Tomardy whispered to me. By the end of class, the manualists had filled their poster with pro-sign slogans while the oralists had yet to think of much to say in favor of A.G. Bell's method. But the posters themselves, which Weinstock displayed after class, gave evidence of the chief obstacle to deaf pride: the English language. These kids—11th- and 12th-graders—had written things like:

"Writing will be much better like hearing people."

"If deaf parents have deaf children they are expecting their children to signs."

"We believes in manualism because we understand by signs to communicate with."

"Easy to communicate and more strongly."

"Deaf people have enjoy things to do activities."

The ASL issue has thrown into relief one of the chief tensions inherent in deafness—its tendency to estrange parent from child. "For the deaf child of hearing parents," asserts Kendall principal Nancy Shook, "they would rather be with their deaf friends than with their family."

Hence the no-voice order. Better, Bailes and Shook felt, to get away from pseudo-individualism and do what public schools are best at. Normalize. Teach all students in ASL. If the hearing teachers turned off their voices, it was hoped, their signs would become more ASL-like; and taught in ASL, the students would pick up English more quickly.

"This has been an emotional issue," signs Bailes. "We can't emphasize enough: English is of equal importance. But for educational purposes, I would very much like ASL to become the primary language of instruction."

"We wanted to make the
classes 100 percent visually available," signs Shook.

As yet, there is no substantive research to bear them out; rather, administrators are going on gut feeling. That feeling is buttressed, however, by a 1988 presidential report, *Toward Equality: Education of the Deaf*, which begins by saying that deaf education in the U.S. is "unsatisfactory." The report criticizes the effects of mainstreaming deaf children in public schools, which, it says, often exacerbates their isolation; recommends enrolling more deaf children in special schools like Kendall and MSSD; and recognizes ASL as a genuine minority language that may be better for some deaf children.

The administrators could also find endorsement in the writings of Oliver Sacks. In *Seeing Voices*, Sacks makes the case for ASL instruction by pointing out that deaf children of deaf parents are typically richer, linguistically, and more advanced, cognitively, than deaf children of hearing parents. That's because deaf children of deaf parents are exposed to language—sign language—from birth. Their childhood experience is rich in stories, jokes, anecdotes, and intimate parent-child conversations; blessed with this solid language base, they readily pick up other subjects. In contrast, childhood can be confusing and grimly solitary for the deaf children of hearing parents. These kids, about 90 percent of deaf children, may go for years with little or no language, mainly because their parents don't realize—or won't admit—that the child is deaf. Deprived of language at this highly absorbent age, their brains may be permanently parched.

Sacks goes so far as to argue that the deaf brain develops differently. Receiving stimuli visually during the "plastic stage," it develops into a more visually oriented organ. Because of the "neurological limitations" of the deaf brain, he says, it lacks the short-term memory necessary to easily process a sequential English sentence. Thus even signed English may be too cumbersome for deaf children. But ASL, unlike English, is spatial, rather than sequential; nouns, verbs, subjects, objects, tenses can be communicated simultaneously. Taught in ASL, Sacks says, the deaf child will learn more quickly than a child who is struggling to read lips—or follow signed English. Well-versed in one language, the deaf child has better chance of mastering a second language: English.

It is a compelling argument. For years, pre-college administrators say, they have been surreptitiously discussing their ardor for just such a method of teaching English through ASL. With the liberation brought on by Jordan's appointment, they felt a sense of urgency, an unwillingness to wait any longer—felt empowered to, as Nancy Shook puts it, "go whole hog."

Problem was, they didn't communicate this conviction. Parents weren't brought on board; neither were federal officials. At the risk of over psychologizing the deaf (something "hearies" typically do), could there have been a sort of voluntary mutism at work here? Had voices been turned off on a psychological level as well? In a recent *New York Times Book Review* piece, feminist writer Andrea Dworkin describes such a phenomenon, recalling two times in her life when she "lost speech." One occurred after she was brutalized by prison doctors; another after she had been beaten by her husband. Both times, she says, she pleaded for help—and received none. Both times, her reaction to the chilly silence was a muteness of her own. She was truly dumbfounded.

"Speech," Dworkin writes, "depends on believing you can make yourself understood: A community of people will recognize the experience in the words you use and they will care." Thus it is that, when lovers split up, they say they have "stopped speaking." There is more involved here than silence; there is a psychic withdrawal that comes from bitterness, disappointment, cynicism, suspicion.

I would venture that something like this was at work in the pre-college. After a century of oralism, deaf people feared, probably rightly, that outsiders would not share their passion for ASL. Hence the policy change was downright secretive: The announcement was initially made in a single sentence buried in the fourth paragraph of the letters sent to faculty members in August. At the
subsequent schoolwide meetings, there was no clear explanation of when voices could and could not be used, no elaboration on whether voices would be allowed, say, during speech and audio therapy.

"It was like a comedy," says one hearing teacher. "You didn't know what you could and couldn't do."

What followed was a marvel of denial and willed obfuscation. Nor was it confined to deaf people. According to many, pre-college dean Michael Deninger, who is hearing, was an avid supporter of "voices off;" a Sept. 9 article in On the Green quotes Deninger telling teachers that they are "strongly encouraged to sign without voice and to use ASL in the classroom." Yet (unlike deaf administrators) Deninger downplayed his enthusiasm in an interview. "Was I in support of their decision?" he asked, uncomfortably. "Well, we talked about that." Deninger hastened to say that he quickly sensed the problems with the new policy and attempted to soften it. Instead of being "expected" to turn off, teachers were "encouraged" to do so. (As if, when your boss is telling you to do something, there's much of a difference.)

According to Deninger, the turn-off order never really took hold. Others, however, say that it did—particularly at Kendall, where the voices of hearing teachers no longer wafted down the hall. Incidental utterances were replaced by silence, and by an uncomfortable sense of peer policing.

And though—thanks to the lightning-quick phenomenon known as the "deaf grapevine"—deaf parents surely knew what was going on, hearing parents were initially kept in the dark. "The parents were the last to know, and that's what hit us hardest," says Rosaline Crawford, whose daughter is enrolled at Kendall. On Sept. 3, Deninger sent out a memo characterized by what Jorge Luis Borges might have called a "fundamental vagueness," telling parents that a "pilot project" was being conducted "related to the acquisition of English and American Sign Language in our students." On Oct. 15, a parents' meeting was finally held. But according to Theresa Painter, the administration appeared incapable of explaining what ASL is: "How can I support something I don't understand?"

Also in October, the Gallaudet Faculty Senate wrote to provost Harvey Corson, asking whether children at the pre-college were still receiving the individualized education assured them by law. Corson responded with a masterpiece of bureaucratic obscurity. In his elaborate, nine-page response, he pointed out that ASL is a "component" of total communication. Since ASL had been neglected up to then, he concluded, the pre-college was actually fulfilling its TC mandate.

Corson allowed that "operational definitions of communication and instructional procedures need to be defined in more detail; expected effects must be clarified; and valid quantitative measure of key independent and dependent variables are needed."

Not surprisingly, confusion prevailed. Hearing parents contacted federal officials. Federal officials contacted King Jordan. In a January meeting, Jordan drew his own telling distinction: "What actually happens in your classrooms is not the issue," Jordan is quoted in On the Green as telling pre-college faculty. "The perception is widespread that only ASL without voice happens in our programs."

In other words, perception is all.

Even now, there appears to be a yawning disparity between...
what’s said and done. Those who believe in ASL are still teaching in ASL: “There is a whole group of people who’ve always used ASL and always will,” says MSSD teacher Matt Goedecke. At meetings, voices are still discouraged—with the caveat that hearing teachers may now wear hearing aids through which interpreters whisper. In the Kendall preschool, deaf infants and toddlers are taught in ASL; watching them through a two-way mirror, I asked program supervisor Angela Bednarczyk about the philosophy of the class. “We have a total-communication policy at Kendall School,” she said, half-laughing, half-defensive.

Although much of the initial anger has dispersed, hearing parents remain shut out, nonplussed. At an April meeting to air grievances, Kendall parents were divided into three groups: African-American, Hispanic, and deaf. (There was no group for Theresa Painter and a couple of other white hearing women, who hung out on the periphery, wondering whether they should form their own group and, if so, what they should call it.) There was no overlap between the three groups, displaying one of the most striking things about the student body. At Kendall, half the students are black; that number, which is higher than the national proportion, reflects the demographics of the D.C. area. However, children born of deaf parents are almost exclusively white; there is only one black child at Kendall with deaf parents.

According to Nancy Shook, no one quite knows why this is so; the chief cause of deafness is genetic, but it can also be caused by prematurity as well as maternal and childhood diseases. What is certain, among black parents, is that ASL could turn into a way of discriminating against their kids; deaf children of deaf parents are by definition the most adept at ASL. “Things are very political here,” muttered one father at the April meeting. “And very racial.”

Moreover, many black parents feared that encouraging an all-sign environment could hinder their kids’ already compromised chances of mainstream success. “Realistically,” said one black parent, “my child is not going to be part of this world when she grows up. She’ll be outside of this campus, so not being part of that communication is really a detriment.” Many of the black parents evinced a powerful distrust of the deaf parents; when I told the African-American group that deaf parents complained that nobody was willing to listen to them, the African-American group collectively guffawed. “They run this place!”

At the end of the meeting, the three groups came together—in a manner of speaking. Black and Hispanic parents literally faced off against deaf parents, saying that they would join the Kendall PTA-equivalent (currently controlled by deaf parents) only if they not be “dictated to.” While the deaf parents assured them that all would be equal, in a separate conversation with me, a deaf parent, Carol Hirsch, extolled the virtues of ASL. “Deaf people,” she insistently signed, “we’re the boss on this issue. Deaf people, we’re the boss.” Standing near her was Theresa Painter, a skeptical look on her face. The ASL issue had thrown into relief one of the chief tensions inherent in deafness—its tendency to estrange parent from child. “For the deaf child of hearing parents,” asserts Nancy Shook, “they would rather be with their deaf friends than with their family.”

Kendall’s hearing parents—some of whom moved to the District specifically to take advantage of Gallaudet’s resources—don’t want to accept this. “I don’t want my son to hate me because I sign ASL in English word order,” objects Theresa Painter. “I want him to hate me because I won’t let him take the car keys.”

Within deaf culture, there are fissures that go beyond familial rifts; ASL proponents are going to have a hard time creating one unbroken linguistic community. For one thing, as Gallaudet professor Larry Stewart points out, all deaf people do not use ASL. Depending on how they were educated, they employ signed English, finger-spelling, speech, and other sign hybrids. Gallaudet students tend to segregate themselves linguistically: One
day when I visited the lunchroom of Kendall, the deaf children of deaf parents had collected at one table, and, signing furiously, were organizing their own club (rules: No lying. Be nice to the other people). In the Ely Center, I spoke with a Gallaudet student, Maya Yamada, who describes herself as hard-of-hearing. "I can't fit in with people who sign," Yamada said, signing and voicing. "Most of the time I communicate with people who are hard-of-hearing. . . . I'm just stuck in the middle. I don't fit in anywhere."

Some deaf people—like Frances Parsons—actually resent ASL, for much the same reasons that some black people object to street talk. Parsons is a staunch sign advocate; her sign of choice, however, is signed English, which she believes to be more refined and proper. When people use ASL with her, she feels she's being talked down to. "It's silly," she objects, flapping her hands and sticking out her tongue to mimic the ASL sign for "I'm very late." ASL, Parsons charges, represents the triumph of DOD (deaf-of-deaf) over DOH (deaf-of-hearing) people like her. "I can sympathize with DOD," she says. "They want to speak out and have their own thoughts put forward. I respect them for that. But they went too far, and they've done just exactly what the oralists did to us. The oralists wanted us to talk; now the deaf don't want us to talk."

It gets more complicated. Elsewhere in the U.S., there are deaf adherents of something called sign systems, which attempt to duplicate the structure and order of English. Signed Exact English, or SEE, is all the rage on the West Coast; here at Gallaudet, it is verboten. In an interview, Lynn Jacobowitz, acting chair of Gallaudet's sign communications department, decried the "corruption" brought on the deaf community by sign systems... A vigorous and beautiful signer, Jacobowitz noted that during a visit to California Emerson, a black MSSD employee who is deaf, pointed out that black ASL differs from white ASL, incorporating as it does street talk. In a vivid and funny performance, Emerson demonstrated, among others, the signs for "bad" (a kind of strut) and "girlfriend" (a come-hither pose).

"Is that," she asked, "ASL?"

Which raises the most ticklish issue of all: Nobody seems quite sure what ASL really is. "When I'm sitting with six different people, there are six different definitions of ASL," says King Jordan. "It's like modern dance," says Michael Deninger, "you know it when you see it."

But can hearing people ever see it at all? Trent Batson, a Gallaudet English professor, questions whether they can. Most deaf people can do something called code-switch—shifting their signs to accommodate the person they're talking to. When conversing with a hearing person like him, Batson says, deaf people invariably alter their ASL signs to more closely resemble English order (like Par- sians who insist upon speaking English with Americans). Batson believes that he "almost never" sees pure ASL. It's a deaf thing.

"I have been asked, in these exact words: Do you believe in ASL?" says Gallaudet President I. King Jordan. "It becomes almost like a religion, and anything that would suggest questioning the religion is taboo. You don't question God. You don't question ASL."

Continued in Deaf Life Plus
"TURN OFF YOUR VOICE!" PART 2
continued from gloss section

"It's an extraordinarily difficult situation to deal with," Batson says of the communication breakdowns that still abound on campus. "And in a way, it's amazing that we deal with it at all."

As I. King Jordan pointed out in March, Gallaudet is at something of an awkward pass now that the enemy is no longer plainly visible. "It is always easier to fight an enemy," Jordan observed. "Whether we are battling negative attitudes, ignorance toward disability, or bias against cultural difference, whether we are trying out a new method of teaching or working on a research paper for a class, it is always easier to blame than to act," he said. Left implicit but unspoken was the possibility that the enemy now lies within.

But the enemy does lie within, and it will take a powerful leader to unite the competing factions. So far, Jordan has shown a catlike ability to walk that fine line between deaf-o-centrism and deaf mainstreamism, simultaneously affirming deaf culture and reminding people that, as a creature of Congress, Gallaudet is subject to certain "restraints." With $72.3 million out of $92 million in total 1991 revenues coming from Congress, Gallaudet is one of the few U.S. colleges that merits a line-item in the federal budget. (Another is Howard University. And the two D.C. schools have something else in common: Howard was named for a white person—Gen. Oliver O. Howard, head of the Freedmen's Bureau—and Gallaudet for a hearie.) If, like Quebec, the deaf at Gallaudet want to declare themselves a separate linguistic enclave, the school would presumably have to give up the federal subsidies that provide the bulk of its livelihood.

In many ways, Jordan is the emblem of Gallaudet's betwixt-and-betweenness. He is deaf, yet speaks. He is careful to sign at all public events, yet it is surely his voice that has charmed and mollified legislators. Since being appointed, he has made immense changes—appointing the school's first deaf provost, seeking out and hiring deaf people at all levels, instituting a deaf "affirmative action" program that may, he believes, be tested in court. At the same time, he has enhanced Gallaudet's public image, smoothing relations with Congress and wooing private benefactors. Recently the college received its largest private gift ever, a $12 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation. Employers are flocking to Gallaudet's annual job fair in record numbers.

And, while Jordan firmly recognizes that Gallaudet must prepare students to make their way and earn a living in the mainstream world, he believes that the university—like all-black and all-female colleges—can best accomplish that by providing students with an "empowering" environment in which they may blossom and prosper without a sense of otherness. In this, Gallaudet is like deaf clubs, deaf churches, deaf sporting events; it's part of deaf culture. "Basically," he says, "people can put aside their deafness when they come here."

Thanks to this careful diplomacy, Jordan now finds himself caught in the middle of the ASL controversy. In an hour-long interview, Jordan said that he still receives letters and electronic mail messages, some of them anonymous, written in reaction to his February memo. "It's almost exactly 50-50: people who think that what I did by ... ensuring that we meet the needs of individual children is absolutely the right thing to do, and people who say I'm oppressing deaf culture and the deaf community."

Though Jordan understands the concerns of hard-core ASL advocates, he does not appear to be one of them—not fully. He has taken some heat for this. "American Sign Language is so much a part of the makeup of the self-esteem of deaf people that it becomes an emotional issue much more than it becomes a logical issue," he
explains. "For example, I have been asked, in these exact words: Do you believe in ASL? It becomes almost like a religion, and anything that would suggest questioning the religion is taboo. You don't question God. You don't question ASL."

"Ask me do I believe in ASL," Jordan says, "and my answer is yes. Ask me do I think that it's appropriate to sometimes sign in English-like signs, and I'll say yes to that, too."

Somewhat bemused by the brouhaha, Jordan is reluctant to acknowledge the ASL debate as a full-fledged controversy. "I'm a little sorry," he admonished me, "that you chose that word." But if controversy it is, then Jordan will—as always—give it a positive spin. Pointing out that he has directed the pre-college to begin a pilot program in ASL, he concludes, "It's really wonderful. We are in a position right now to do things related to education of the deaf that have never been done, never."

"If controversy doesn't happen on a university campus," he wonders, "where can it happen?"

Apparently controversy is the right word—and will remain so for some time. "I need to leave soon," Jordan said at the close of the interview. "I'm going to meet with the Assistant Secretary of Education for Special Education and Rehabilitation Services—the senior government official who has responsibility for oversight of the university."

"And guess," he said, smiling, all the while carefully signing and speaking, "what we're going to talk about."