

the parent and the advocate within

By T. Alan Hurwitz



Dr. T. Alan Hurwitz is the tenth president of Gallaudet University, the world leader in liberal education and career development for deaf and hard of hearing students. Previously, Hurwitz was president of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, a college within the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York.

During the course of his career, Hurwitz has been involved in a variety of professional and community organizations. He has served on the boards of several of those organizations, including the Rochester School for the Deaf in New York, of which he was also president. He is a past member of the board of directors of the National Captioning Institute. He is also a past president of the National Association of the Deaf and of the World Organization of Jewish Deaf. Hurwitz lectures extensively and has been widely published.

Hurwitz earned his bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri; his master's degree in electrical engineering from St. Louis University in Missouri; and his doctorate in education, curriculum, and teaching from the University of Rochester in New York.

My real introduction to education came when my wife Vicki and I welcomed our first child, Bernard, who was born hard of hearing. Later we adopted our 16-month-old profoundly deaf daughter, Stephanie. Vicki and I were fortunate to work with outstanding support services professionals, but parenthood was nonetheless a difficult journey as some of our decisions flew headwind into established policy or entrenched practice. We quickly discovered that as we grew into our parental roles, we also had to become advocates for our children. It was like being a 'tailor,' having to work with school professionals each year to 'tailor' an appropriate individualized educational plan for each of our children.

Fast forward several decades to April of 2012, when as president of Gallaudet University I sat through a panel of parents at the annual conference of the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (CEASD), hosted that year at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Memories of my experiences as a parent-advocate resurfaced when the panelists recounted early intervention trials in their local districts when advocating for the learning needs of their children. Many of their stories mirror mine and those that are shared in this issue of *Odyssey*.

Gallaudet is an active member of CEASD, whose current Child First campaign is immeasurably important. As its name indicates, the child is paramount; as its name suggests, education and intervention decisions need to center around the interests of the child. CEASD spearheaded Child First as a national campaign to ensure that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) appropriately addresses the language, communication, and educational needs of deaf and hard of hearing children. However, as stories provided in this issue illustrate, we are headed precipitously into a future where placement is prioritized over the student. This trend observed in the past decade threatens to

render irrelevant the 'I' in IDEA as well as in the Individualized Education Program (IEP), which was implemented by the IDEA to recommend placement but has increasingly become a result of placement in a mainstream setting without consideration for a student's unique language and communication needs.

Believing in individuality does not necessarily bear friction with believing in community. Anthropologist Margaret Mead said it best: "Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else." Indeed, studies conducted in Gallaudet's Brain and Language Laboratory, a unit of our Science of Learning Center on Visual Language and Visual Learning, and conducted elsewhere have shown that the brains of deaf learners exhibit differences from those who learn with aural input. This is not theory but fact. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing are unique, just like every other child.

We need teaching methods and classrooms that play to their inherent strengths. I often meet alumni from Gallaudet University who tell me that they struggled before arriving at Gallaudet, after where they went on to excel as professionals. Our alumni include a staff member in the recent Obama 2012 campaign, a seated member of the South African Parliament, a world-class hotelier in Rome, a standard-bred horse racer, San Francisco pizzeria owners with a Michelin rating, and many more whose diverse careers have redefined slivers of the local, national, and global communities.

From the signing of the University's charter by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 to the present day, the University has seen and made a landmark impact on education, communication, policy, culture, access, and the arts. In the summer of 2014, Gallaudet University will celebrate its sesquicentennial. This is 150 years of an unparalleled legacy that extends to individuals and their families, both here and abroad.

Evidently then, Gallaudet University has been a driving force for positive change. The more

important consideration, however, is how should the University continue to lead in shaping the landscape of deaf education? I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to celebrate our sesquicentennial with us and help us envision the next 150 years in which the University maintains its vibrancy, impact, sustainability, and relevance. What needs to happen? The world is richer for Gallaudet University's influence, and this must continue.

Opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing children in academics and employment have evolved along with the world's industries, politics, technologies, and commerce, but what has not changed in these 150 years is the critical role that the family plays in the educational opportunities available to the individual deaf child. As my parents advocated for me, and in turn my wife and I advocated for our first and then second child, it is also worth noting that although those successful alumni I mentioned all received their higher education at Gallaudet University, their education began at home and they had parents who advocated for them early on.

This theme of the parent as advocate is present

across the stories in this issue of *Odyssey*, and so this issue is valuable in that we see that other parents and professionals encounter the same struggles that compromise the spirit of the IDEA. I encourage every one of you to share this resource with others at your school, in your organization, and at home. Individual experiences and stories are what we need to drive the IDEA and inform the IEP. This year CEASD will hold its conference in Tucson with, fittingly, "The Power of Collaboration" as its theme.

In closing, I would like to share another quote from Mead. She famously said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The challenge, however, is how we intend to share our collective expertise to the benefit of students. Together, we can show the power of the individual.

The CEASD website is www.ceasd.org/ and more information on the Child First campaign can be found at www.ceasd.org/ideal/.

Visit www.gallaudet.edu/150.html to learn more about Gallaudet University's sesquicentennial celebration.

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Gallaudet will reach its 150th anniversary in 2014! From the signing of our charter by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 to the present day, the University has offered visionary leadership in education and cultural understanding. Follow the 150th anniversary events at:

www.gallaudet.edu/150.html

