

**Diane Fleming** is employed as a bus monitor in the Transportation Department at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. She graduated from the Model Secondary School for the Deaf, also on Gallaudet's campus, in 1997. Fleming is the proud mother of two, a daughter and a son.

# Reflections on Success from a High School Graduate

*Q&A with Diane Fleming*

*Diane Fleming gets up at 4 a.m. every morning and leaves her young children still sleeping to start her job by 5:45 a.m. Once there—the Transportation Department of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.—she climbs onto a school bus and begins her day's work. As the bus winds through the District of Columbia and the surrounding streets in nearby Virginia, Fleming makes sure that the children who scramble on board for their daily commute to Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES), on the Gallaudet University campus, are safe, cared for, and picked up and deposited in the correct places. A former KDES student, Fleming once rode the bus herself. Here, she reflects on what she valued about her experience and what made her a success, first at KDES and then at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD).*

**ODYSSEY:** When did you enter KDES?

**FLEMING:** They found out I was deaf when I was about 1 year old. I started Kendall in 1978, when I was 2 years old.

**ODYSSEY:** Is there anyone who especially influenced you during elementary school?

**FLEMING:** I had fine teachers, but my best memory is of a person who worked on the staff. Ms. Liz Jackson, an older lady who worked in the Kendall cafeteria and, I think, managed it. However, Ms. Jackson did so much more than that! She took a real interest in the students. She taught us manners and the etiquette of formal dining—where to place a knife and fork, how to use a napkin, that kind of thing. She cooked very well, too!

*Photos courtesy of Diane Fleming*



**ODYSSEY:** She died on the job ...?

**FLEMING:** Yes. I was still in elementary school. They called us into a room and the counselor told us that she had had a heart attack. We were distraught and so were our teachers. We all cried. We cried together. It was a big loss. Everyone in a school can contribute to the success of its students.

**ODYSSEY:** Do you have other memories?

**FLEMING:** I was fortunate to participate in the Special Olympics. It was in bowling, and we traveled to Minnesota for the competition. It was exciting. I've always loved to travel.

**ODYSSEY:** You were in a special program at KDES?

**FLEMING:** I was in the Special Opportunities Program for students who were behind their peers in academics due to learning disabilities or other disabilities, including

developmental disabilities. I learned to read slowly so that is why I was put into that program. Our teachers were good. Leslie Brewer, Don Mahoney ... I still remember them. However, the label was not nice. Other students made fun of us. I am happy that I finished school with honors from that program.

**ODYSSEY:** What is your best memory?

**FLEMING:** In eighth grade, as we got ready to graduate from Kendall, we learned of a special award. The award was for an outstanding Kendall student ... a student who received good grades and no detentions. All the smart kids thought one of them would get it. Of course I thought one of them would get it, too, but when the name was announced, it was mine! I saw the words and I was shocked and pleased: "The 1992 KDES cup goes to Diane Fleming." My mom jumped up and down and clapped. It was embarrassing,

**Above (clockwise from left):** Diane Fleming at age 3; with her parents at the Special Olympics; on graduation day in 1997 with Fred Beam and Clerc Center dean Kathy Jankowski; with her mother, Phyllis; during a trip to Romania with the MSSD Road Show.

but I was so proud. I was the top Kendall student. The trophy was huge. I cried!

**ODYSSEY:** When you graduated, you went to MSSD, also on the Gallaudet campus.

**FLEMING:** Yes. I went into a regular program there—no "special opportunities" for me or anyone else. I liked it much better. It was hard, but I was able to keep up with the other students.

**ODYSSEY:** Did you live in the dorm?

**FLEMING:** Yes! I was excited and nervous





**Left:** Fleming enjoys her work as a bus monitor in Gallaudet's Transportation Department.

**ODYSSEY:** Your mom had the same job you have now?

**FLEMING:** Yes, my mom began working in the Transportation Department when I was 5 years old. She was still working there when I started six years ago. She has retired, but she worked at Gallaudet for 32 years!

**ODYSSEY:** Of what are you most proud?

**FLEMING:** I am most proud of having people who believed in me (my mother, father, brother, and others), of growing up and having a job I enjoy, working with many, buying my own home and car, raising my children, and having the ability to face everyday life changes while having what I need to keep going.

**ODYSSEY:** Do you consider yourself a success?

**FLEMING:** Yes, I do. From the very beginning when I started school, I knew I had to work a lot harder to do things, just to understand what was happening to me and around me. Yet I've finished school; I have an interesting job and a family; and with help from my family and others, I have everything I dreamed of. It is a wonderful blessing to know I could do this.

**ODYSSEY:** Do you have advice for parents and educators of deaf and hard of hearing children?

**FLEMING:** Yes ... learn sign language. Sign language enables communication—and communication is so important for all children. Please try to understand the deaf or hard of hearing child's point of view. For deaf parents with hearing children, it is not easy either, but deaf parents need to take the opportunity to learn more about the hearing world—just like hearing parents should take the opportunity to learn more about the deaf world. We all must do the best we can for our children whether they are deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing. As parents, we are the most important contributors to our children's lives and their success.

but happy to do that. It meant that I was succeeding in being independent. At Kendall my mom had checked on me every day. When I had the option of moving into the dorm at MSSD, I wanted to do it. I told my mother I would be fine. I was ready to be independent.

**ODYSSEY:** What were your favorite classes?

**FLEMING:** I loved math—Fred Beam taught it—and he works at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf now. And I always loved my counselor, Bill Saunders. I learned a new word, *obese*, and I told Mr. Saunders that he was obese. He laughed and laughed. He was a good man.

**ODYSSEY:** And your best memory of MSSD?

**FLEMING** (smiling): At MSSD, I took general classes and I had to work hard. A tutoring program was part of dorm life, and I took full advantage of it. Still, I have to say that one of my best memories was again participating in the Special Olympics. I was on the volleyball team that time and we went to Connecticut. That meant another great memory! I also participated in the MSSD Road Show, a drama group under Tim McCarty and Paul Harrelson. We got to perform in Romania. I learned so much. It brought history home. I loved it!

**ODYSSEY:** Because it was so different from the U.S?

**FLEMING:** Yes. It is good to learn about people around the world. The Romanian deaf people had seen Africans and they had seen white Americans, but they had never seen African Americans and we astounded them. There were three of us in our group. We didn't wear African garb but typical teenage American clothing. They signed beautiful. They touched our skin and hair. We were not offended. They were just curious.

**ODYSSEY:** Did you graduate from MSSD?

**FLEMING:** Oh, yes. Then I went to the University of the District of Columbia. I wanted the challenge of taking classes in the "hearing world." I began work in photography, and I worked in a photography store, too, for a while but photography was changing. We were learning about film and photography was becoming digital. The store was forced to close.

**ODYSSEY:** And now?

**FLEMING:** Now I have two wonderful kids. When I sense negative feelings, I don't express them. I try to stay positive for my children. My mother lives with me and helps me so much. I feel lucky to have a good job and to work with young children who remind me of myself. I hope to be like my mom.