

Tim Albert, MSW, is director of the Student Life Team at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in New York. Born and raised in New Orleans, Albert graduated from the Louisiana School for the Deaf, earned an associate's degree from RIT, and then earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Gallaudet University. He was director of the dorms at the Georgia School for the Deaf and dean of students at the Indiana School for the Deaf. A member of the National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) for over 19 years, he was NBDA president from October 2015 to October 2017. He lives with his wife, Stephanie Smith Albert, and Lucky, their beagle/Labrador retriever mix. Albert welcomes questions and comments about this article at txansl@rit.edu.

Passing It On: Counseling, Advising, and Mentoring Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students of Color

By Tim Albert

They say that “as a twig is bent, so shall the tree grow,” and this has been true for me. The people who helped me when I was young—at the Louisiana School for the Deaf (LSD), the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), and Gallaudet University—and my mother, who taught me how to read as a child, enabled me to counsel and effectively mentor students, especially deaf students of color, today. Counseling is a creative act; in a way, it is offering to others what was once offered to me.

As a child, my mother sat with me and taught me to write the letters of the alphabet, to count, and to read. While I practiced, I noticed something about my mother that would always inspire me: she was involved with her community. Every day she cooked delicious southern food—fried fish, fried chicken, red beans and rice, southern creamed corn, green peas, macaroni and cheese, and cornbread. She packed it in small boxes, drove to my father's job, and gave the boxes filled with tasty and nourishing meals to my father and his coworkers. My mother also ran a daycare program in our home, and as I watched her with the other children, I learned from her strength and activity. She loved her work, and I was grateful to see her doing something significant with her life; I was inspired by her passion and generosity in helping people.

I was born deaf and I went to various public schools until I was 16 years old. I was thrilled when I was approved to transfer to LSD, where I had the opportunity to meet and socialize with deaf, deaf-blind, deaf disabled, late deafened, and hard of hearing students. I fell in love with American Sign Language and Deaf culture. I did not like reading, but I realized its importance and I forced myself to do it.

At LSD, I found that I loved helping people, just like my mother. I found that everyone had different communication styles, and I learned to adapt to all of them. Communicating allowed me to advocate. I loved advocating for other people, and each person had individual

Photos courtesy of Tim Albert, the Lexington School for the Deaf, and the Texas School for the Deaf



needs. I dreamed about becoming a counselor or a social worker.

Other important opportunities opened up for me at LSD. I played football! I had not been allowed to play in mainstream programs, where I realized I had experienced discrimination due to my deafness. I also met deaf teachers—the first deaf teachers I had ever known. One of them, Nick Imme, encouraged me to go to college. He said that I had the skills to be a successful leader, and for this higher education would be necessary. Maria Stephens, a LSD counselor, agreed. With their support, I applied and was accepted into NTID at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT).

At NTID, I would meet individuals who were both black and deaf for the first time. These included professors Shirley J. Allen and Aristotle Ogoke; counselors Carl Moore, John “JT” Reid, and Ronnie Mae Tyson; staff assistant Martina Moore-Reid; and the late Reginald Redding, who was director of the Center for Student Resources. I was honored to work with William Olubodun, an African deaf man who served as coordinator for NTID’s Multicultural Student Program under the Department of Human Development. I worked under him as a cultural peer mentor. I enjoyed this position immensely as I was eager to work with first-year students of color. I got involved with various activities, events, and workshops. They gave me the opportunity to learn and grow

Above, clockwise from left: Albert with his mother, Floyd Lee Albert, and wife, Stephanie; with Youth Empowerment Summit participants at the 2011 NBDA Conference in Charlotte, N.C.; as president of NBDA, posing with past NBDA presidents in 2016.

personally and professionally.

I also explored my personal heritage, writing and directing plays about Frederick Douglass; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Thurgood Marshall; and Harriet Tubman—all American heroes who were African American. I met people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, and I was challenged to become more creative and confident as I prepared myself for the future.

The year 1994 was a turning point for me. NTID sent me to the National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) Conference, where I met Al Couthen. Al, the first educational leader I had known who was both black and deaf, paused the youth leadership part of the conference to make sure I joined. I remember I was talking to a beautiful woman when he found me and tapped



Left: Albert gives a presentation about recognizing prominent black deaf and hard of hearing individuals to students at the Lexington School for the Deaf.

talked to them about staying in school. I emphasized how important it was to get a degree. I knew that these students paid attention partly because of my degree and partly because I was black and deaf.

I also had the opportunity to be a mentor and a role model—and I felt this experience deeply. Once we were going to a nearby ice cream parlor. My students wanted to bring an interpreter to help with the ordering, but we didn't need an interpreter to order and I told them so. Instead I brought my Blackberry, and they each took a turn typing in their orders. They were so pleased. We all value our independence. Another time a teacher brought a black deaf student to my office who did not believe I had a master's degree. When the student confessed that he did not read well, I told him my own story—how I, too, had been a struggling reader until I was a teenager. After hearing my story, the student actually turned his own life around and became a better reader.

Below: Albert involves the Pre-K and elementary students at the Lexington School for the Deaf in an activity during a workshop.

me on the shoulder. I wanted to finish my conversation, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me away. When we entered the youth leadership session, I saw students from colleges around the county, all of them deaf and black. We discussed important topics and recommitted to staying in school and working for our communities. I realized how important it was to attend such meetings.

As much as I enjoyed exploring my African American heritage, many of my friends at NTID were white. When I showed a photo of us to my friend back home, he saw those white faces around me and gave me a smack on the back of my head. I guess he thought that since I grew up in New Orleans, I should hang out with black deaf folks more than with white deaf folks. However, I told him that LSD had beautiful and diverse students and staff, too, and I treasured *all* my friends.

After I graduated from NTID, I went to Gallaudet University. My goal was to obtain two degrees—bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. The internships I had while a student at Gallaudet were valuable in providing me with the opportunity to gain skills I needed to work with diverse people in the community.

Once I graduated and began working—first at the Georgia School for the Deaf, where I would supervise the dorms—I was surprised to see the effect that my presence had on others. Simply seeing a black male who was deaf in the professional position of social worker sometimes caused a strong reaction. In fact, when I was introduced, one student, himself black, told me he did not believe I was the school social worker. He—and so many others—were used to seeing black individuals only as housekeepers and janitors. They did not believe that a black person could be professionally successful until they saw it with their own eyes. When this student realized that I really was a degreed social worker, he wanted to learn more about how I had succeeded, and he realized that he, too, could become successful. With this student, and with others, the conversations were the best! I



Advising, Counseling, and Mentoring

The more I worked with students, the more I understood their challenges. Working with NBDA, I traveled around the country visiting students in mainstream programs and schools for the deaf. I worked with faculty and parents, and I felt myself becoming a seasoned professional.

After the first part of our marriage, my wife and I found jobs in different states, and for three years we were only together on weekends and school breaks. We were fortunate when NTID offered both of us positions, allowing us to finally work in the same city and be able to live together. Now I am director of the Student Life Team, and my wife is director of Diversity and Inclusion. With the help of four wonderful program coordinators, I am able to organize events and establish structures that support deaf and hard of hearing students, especially those who are Latinix or African American as well as other students of color. These include co-curricular activities and events and social and cultural programs.



We offer:

- **One-on-one mentoring sessions.** Students can use these to discuss joining clubs, to figure out how to contact departments, and to learn how to participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities.



- **Cultural heritage months.** Native American, Latinix, African American, Asian American, and others are invited to come as motivational speakers.
- **Student discussions.** We call it “Hot Lava,” during which students can learn how to maintain and improve their academic achievement, interpersonal communication skills, social skills, and leadership development.
- **Leadership retreats.** These are offered for the executive board members of clubs and Greek organizations.
- **Job opportunities.** We have full-time, part-time, and summer opportunities through which students can develop a strong work ethic and leadership skills and earn money.

Looking Forward, Looking Back

It’s been 20 years since I graduated from RIT and then continued my education at Gallaudet University, receiving both the bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work for which I aimed. When I look back, I know that part of my success is due to the people who supported me—my mom, who ignited

Above and left: Albert with students at the Texas School for the Deaf after giving a presentation about his accomplishments.

in me a passion for helping others; the teacher and counselor at LSD, who encouraged me to continue my education; and the people in NTID’s Department of Human Development, who enabled me to discover and explore my heritage as an American who is black, deaf, and male. In their separate ways, each of these people contributed to helping me succeed in life.

Now I have come full circle. It is my role to give back. I do this through doing my job well, supporting others, and being a role model for students at NTID and RIT. We—deaf and hard of hearing individuals, especially those who are African American, Latinix, or come from other underrepresented groups—are passing on the legacy of those who came before us. Once today’s students develop the personal, technical, and leadership skills to enter the workforce, they will pass it on, too.

The author wishes to especially thank his mother, who encouraged him not to give up on life and dreams, and individuals in NTID’s Department of Human Development for the encouragement and support that he feels allowed him to become the person he is today.