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Students joining Gallaudet protests

'Deaf enough' debate piques curiosity of some at NTID

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Staff writer

Rochester-area students are joining other deaf students in Washington, D.C., who are protesting this week's appointment of the next president of Gallaudet University, a college for the deaf there.

Jane Fernandes, Gallaudet's provost, was selected Monday to serve as its next president beginning Jan. 1.

All three finalists were deaf. Although Fernandes was born deaf, protesters have claimed she isn't "deaf enough."

She was mainstreamed in public schools with hearing students, used her speaking voice and didn't learn sign language until she was 23.

Students have blocked entrances at the school, although Gallaudet officials said final exams were held as scheduled Friday.

"I want to see for myself what's going on," said David Spiecker, 20, of Henrietta, who attends the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

He's one of the NTID students and staff members who were to drive to Gallaudet on Friday, camp out on campus and join in demonstrations today.

"I'm going for a lot of reasons," said Lizzie Sorkin, 24, NTID student president. Gallaudet students have asked for support from NTID and RIT students.

Sorkin is bringing along a video camera to document her visit and hopes to learn the reasons for the protest. She's dismayed about some tactics she read about this week at Gallaudet, such as a fire alarm being pulled.

She also knows of personal reasons people are citing for not liking Fernandes.

But until she knows more, Sorkin isn't going to support or speak against the protesting students.

Gallaudet's retiring president, I. King Jordan, became Gallaudet's first deaf president in 1988 after days of student protests demanding a "deaf president now." The protests were a defining moment to deaf people around the world who — some for the first time — became proud of their deafness and embraced their heritage.

Some protesting this week have the rallying cry "better president now." But whereas the 1988 protest was in March, this is finals time at Gallaudet, and students are preparing to go home. The protesters have numbered in the hundreds, compared with thousands in 1988.
Fernandes' appointment is the main topic of conversation among NTID students. Breana Chandler, 19, of Fredericksburg, Va., has been following the news and said, "I don't see why they're protesting. She grew up from a deaf family. How can she not be deaf enough?"

Kriston Pumphrey, 22, an NTID student from Seattle, would go to Washington if he had the time — not necessarily to protest but to learn more about the students' issues.

"It's hard to have a deep dialogue about it," he said. "I haven't heard a solid reason why they're protesting. Maybe they have reasons, but they aren't as unified as they should be."

Astrid Jones, a Gallaudet graduate now on staff at NTID, supports the Gallaudet students and plans to be there today.

"I feel it's right," he said. "They feel they have to be heard."

Those who said Fernandes isn't deaf enough are referring to those in the deaf community who make a decision to speak only in American Sign Language rather than use their voices, and resist attempts to "cure" their hearing loss through technology such as cochlear implants.

Many even capitalize the word "deaf" because they say such persons have their own culture, language and heritage.

Today's college students were toddlers in 1988. Sorkin, for one, learned about the deaf-president-now movement only two years ago, in a deaf cultural studies class.

The 1988 protest primarily involved students. This time, faculty and staff members at Gallaudet have joined in the protests and are considering a no-confidence vote next week. Some Gallaudet faculty members have resigned because of the appointment of Fernandes.

"That scares me," Sorkin said. "I need to know why they're not giving her a chance."

She has been told Fernandes is viewed as standoffish and cold by some students. "She never tried to win the hearts of the students," Sorkin said. "It's not about her being not deaf enough. She doesn't connect enough with the student body. The community does not want her."

Gallaudet officials said Fernandes is meeting with concerned students each day, but she vows not to withdraw.

NTID head Alan Hurwitz said students have the right to express their views, but he hopes "that the whole thing will be settled soon so that Gallaudet University may move on with its strategic goals. ... My intention is to work well with the president of Gallaudet University."

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Rochester's deaf connection
- Often regarded as having one of the largest deaf populations in the country, Rochester is home to thousands of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Rochester School for the Deaf was formed in 1876. NTID was created in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson
and remains the largest technical college for the deaf. Eighty students were in its first class in 1968; there are about 1,100 deaf and hard of hearing students annually at NTID, in addition to deaf staff, faculty and graduates who remain in the area.

- Established in 1864, Gallaudet University has about 1,700 deaf students. Both Gallaudet and NTID rely on funds approved by Congress (more than $51 million annually for NTID) to operate.
- Gallaudet and NTID share a rivalry, including sporting competitions each spring that alternate between Washington and RIT.

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