

Building Relationships to Strengthen Community

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Gallaudet Community Relations Council
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Welcome to Gallaudet University. "Building Relationships to Strengthen Community" is truly reflected by the presence and the spirit of the Gallaudet community and the Near Northeast community together here tonight. In our audience, we have heroes, we have people with vision and creativity, we have high achievers, and we have caring people committed to our community, deaf and hearing, young and some of us who were young once upon a time. My wife Linda and I are again honored and proud to be with you all to celebrate the achievements of members of our community.

This is my 29th year as a member of the Council and 19th year as President of the University. As many of you already know, I announced that I would be stepping down as President of Gallaudet University on December 31, 2006. It has been a wonderful experience and I am especially proud to have been part of this community as a student, faculty member, and President. I have had the opportunity to witness many changes, some great and others as we all know, not so great. Linda and I have lived here on campus since the spring of 1988 and we always emphasize when we meet people that we're from Washington, D.C. Not the D.C.area, but Washington, D.C. I explain that our house is a short jog from the Capitol building and the White House and the Washington Monument and the National Arboretum. I explain how from one window of our home we can see the Capitol, the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court, from a different window, the Washington Monument and from yet a different window, the National Cathedral. Finally, I tell people that as I jog around campus and outside the campus early each morning, I often see the same people, exercising and walking their dogs. We love living here. Thank you for being such good neighbors.

Now I want to talk about the great things we have seen happening in our community as we look forward to the even better things we believe are going to happen in the coming years. In 1988, the community joined with our students in a movement that is called DPN (Deaf President Now) and this movement changed the way people around the world see disabled people in general and deaf people in particular. Thank you for being part of that movement.

The Ivy City/Trinidad community was for a long time among the most neglected areas of our city. Today it is a bustling, active community with a new optimism that we will reap the benefits of housing and economic developments that are happening around us. I want to point out the efforts of the Advisory Neighborhood Councils and our committed Ward 5 and Ward 6 DC Council members who, collectively, have worked with us, members of the Trinidad/Ivy City community of which Gallaudet is a proud tenant. I noticed that the Atlas Theatre on H Street is being refurbished. I am also aware that a former member of GCRC, Mr. Bruce Robey, owner and director of the H Street Playhouse is enjoying much success, and I am pleased that sign language interpreters are provided, as requested, for most of the performances. It is important that the arts

are brought back into our neighborhoods so that we don't have to travel great distances to see a good play or to enjoy a good movie. I also understand that other plans are being made for a bustling revitalized H-Street corridor that will further expand entertainment and other offerings in the neighborhood. I am sure that most of you have seen the revitalization projects of the New York Avenue Corridor. These changes have already positively impacted the Ivy City section of our neighborhood. It is indeed an exciting time for all of us.

We are proud of our new metro station with in turn is attracting new business and therefore opportunities for our community members to be active contributors to the economic, cultural and civic development of our neighborhood. The Farmers Market on 6th Street was mentioned in the Washington Post recently as a target for development and we are all anxiously waiting to learn what the plans are. We are also aware that the article reported concerns among people who currently do business there that development (or re-development) of the Farmers Market would force them out of business and deprive the neighborhood of a popular place to shop. However, we hope that the planners will take these concerns into account and be sure that proposed development will benefit current residents of the community.

At Gallaudet University, you all helped make possible this very building that is hosting the awards program and you told us that you would like to see a memorial to the Division II School for the Negro Deaf which was the segregated school for black children - you can see the memorial as you head out of this facility. We went further though and named the auditorium at Ely Center, the Andrew Foster Auditorium and this is a bust of Dr. Andrew Foster, the first African American deaf student to graduate from Gallaudet University in 1954. Dr. Foster, an Alabama native, taught at the Division II School before he went to Africa where he set up more than 30 schools for the deaf. Dr. Foster is the first and ONLY Gallaudet University alumni honored with a bronze bust and one of only 2 deaf people on campus so honored. The other is Laurent Clerc who is instrumental in the education of deaf Americans.

Thank you to each and every one of you for making these important changes happen, in your big or small, but equally important ways. We must continue to build on our relationship and strengthen our community. Our neighborhood appears to again reflect earlier times when faculty, staff and students lived in the neighborhood and walked to campus. We are seeing that happen now and we must continue to learn to be good neighbors so that the relationship between Gallaudet University and its Near Northeast neighborhoods can continue to be a model for colleges and universities that have not been as fortunate as we have been to have wonderful supportive neighbors.

I could not talk about the importance of being good neighbors without telling you that we at Gallaudet are increasing our efforts to educate our students to be responsible citizens of their community, their country and the world. We want students and graduates of our university to be good neighbors wherever they live, study, work or play. We are also striving to increase the diversity of our faculty, staff and students and to create an environment ensuring that everyone affiliated with the university feels included, valued and respected.

The Board of Trustees had a leadership role in our efforts to achieve diversity. In May 2002, they adopted a diversity statement and guidelines that say, in part, "...the pursuit of excellence is

intertwined with a commitment to diversity at all levels." The Board's position reflects my own strong belief that a major commitment to diversity and inclusiveness is fundamental to achieving academic excellence. Currently, we are involved in major strategic planning and change towards achieving a truly inclusive, diverse community in which everyone is welcome and supported. We believe that by studying and learning in an environment that values diversity, our students will be better prepared for living and working in an increasingly diverse society.

The Gallaudet Community Relations Council is an excellent example of diverse communities working together with mutual respect to achieve common goals. Our long-term relationship with the GCRC has been a wonderful one that has benefited all of us.

Neighbors do help neighbors. Every day, they use their time and their gifts to keep their friends and families going. Many, especially those living in tough communities, work hard to deal with the challenges of communities where unemployment, violence and drugs take their toll. In the face of these obstacles, community residents look for the connections to vital resources that would improve their odds of succeeding. That's where the various civic associations, community organizations, Advisory Neighborhood Commissions and the like come into play.

There may be no better example of the spirit of getting involved and neighboring than the time-honored American tradition called a barn-raising. From the earliest days of our country, neighbors would gather at a homestead and work together to build a barn, often in a single day. Neighbors lent a hand when they became aware of neighbors they could help. They took responsibility for one another. More than barns were built in the process. True bonds of community spirit were forged. This is a true example of building relationships to strengthen community.

You might not think you've seen a good barn-raising lately, but they are happening around you all the time. The tools have changed, and what gets built may not be a barn, yet the spirit of community building and volunteerism - of neighboring in its truest, sincerest form - is alive and well in cities, towns and rural communities everywhere.

We need your help to tap into that irrepressible spirit of relationship building to address some of the most entrenched challenges in America's toughest communities today. You can provide a renewed sense of hope and the means to build a better future for individuals and families building on connections that arise from common goals, mutual respect, responsibility and ownership. You can provide the tools and use skills and talents to find collective solutions to create family supportive communities, networks and opportunities necessary to bring neighbors together.

Organizations and individuals working in communities need to see community members not just as recipients of services but as change agents and equal partners. Promoting real community self-reliance needs to be a clear objective of any initiative to enrich opportunities for residents to succeed.

I would like to congratulate the organizing committee, members of the GCRC, my Vice President for Administration and Finance, Mr. Paul Kelly, whose office and the leadership of Sharrell McCaskill have made this wonderful evening possible.

We are here together this evening to celebrate the hard work and creative efforts within our community. The awards to be presented reflect appreciation of the outstanding contributions and service of our citizens, businesses, agencies and community organizations. We, at Gallaudet University, are proud to offer this opportunity through the Gallaudet Community Relations Council.

Thank you for coming.