

What Was Deaf President Now?

Deaf President Now (DPN) was a student-led protest that took place in March 1988 at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. The protest demanded that the university appoint its first Deaf president after over 120 years of always having hearing leadership, even though it was a university created for Deaf students.

The protest lasted 8 days and resulted in a major victory for the Deaf community — and a new chapter in Deaf empowerment and civil rights.

Background: Why the Protest Happened

- Gallaudet University was founded in 1864 as the world's only liberal arts university for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students.
- Yet for 124 years, every president of the university had been hearing.
- Many people believed that only a Deaf person could truly understand and represent the needs and values of the Deaf community.

What Sparked the Protest?

In March 1988, Gallaudet's Board of Trustees interviewed three finalists to become the next university president:

1. **Dr. Harvey Corson** – Deaf
2. **Dr. I. King Jordan** – Deaf
3. **Dr. Elisabeth Zinser** – Hearing

Even though two of the three candidates were Deaf, the board chose the only hearing candidate, Dr. Zinser, who had no experience in Deaf culture or ASL.

This decision outraged students, faculty, staff, and the broader Deaf community. It sent the message that Deaf people were not “ready” to lead their own university.

The Protest Begins

Led by students, the Deaf community rose up and launched the Deaf President Now movement.

The protest was:

- Peaceful but powerful
- Held across campus, including sit-ins, marches, and media events
- Supported by students, faculty, alumni, and national organizations

The main organizers became known as the **DPN “Big Four”**:

1. **Greg Hlibok** – Student Body Government President
2. **Bridgetta Bourne** – Student activist
3. **Jerry Covell** – Protest leader
4. **Tim Rarus** – Student organizer

These student leaders used sign language to give public speeches, did interviews on national TV, and organized thousands of protestors.

Protesters Had Four Demands

1. A Deaf person must be selected as president.
2. Jane Spilman (the hearing chair of the Board of Trustees) must resign.
3. At least 51% of the Board of Trustees must be Deaf.
4. There must be no punishment for students or staff who joined the protest.

What Happened During the 8 Days?

- Day 1 (March 6): Dr. Zinser is announced as president. Protests begin immediately.

- Day 2–5: Campus is shut down. Students block entrances and hold rallies.
- Day 6–7: The media covers the protests across the U.S. and worldwide. Support grows.
- Day 8 (March 13): Victory!

The Board of Trustees gave in to all four demands:

- Dr. Zinser resigned.
- Dr. I. King Jordan, a Deaf man, was appointed as the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University.
- Jane Spilman resigned.
- The board agreed to increase Deaf representation.

Why Was DPN So Important?

A Civil Rights Milestone

- DPN was not just about one school — it was about the right of Deaf people to lead, represent, and speak for themselves.
- It was a major victory in the Deaf rights and disability rights movements.

Representation Matters

- The protest showed the world that Deaf people are fully capable of leadership.
- It shattered old stereotypes about Deaf people needing hearing people to make decisions for them.

A Global Impact

- The success of DPN inspired Deaf communities around the world.
- It increased respect for ASL, Deaf culture, and the importance of Deaf education.

Legacy of Deaf President Now

- I. King Jordan served as Gallaudet's president until 2006.
 - Deaf awareness and Deaf pride grew in the years after DPN.
 - More Deaf leaders, educators, and activists took on leadership roles.
 - DPN is still taught today as a powerful example of peaceful protest, self-advocacy, and community power.
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Summary Chart

Topic	Details
When	March 1988
Where	Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C.
Why	Board chose hearing president over two qualified Deaf candidates
How	Peaceful student-led protest, media support, public marches
Outcome	All 4 demands met; first Deaf president appointed
Legacy	Major turning point in Deaf rights, pride, and representation