

## 2006 Protest: From the Black Deaf Side

Deaf Studies Conference Transformations Proceedings

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### **Abstract**

*Mr. Dunn will moderate a panel discussion of Black Deaf individuals who experienced the 2006 protest from different sides/positions/perspectives. This panel will discuss responses within the black deaf community to the screening out of Dr. Anderson's candidacy. This panel will explore the implications of the Selection Committee and the Board of Trustees decision and the aftermath including the role of digital media in engaging a cross section of the black deaf community in discourses related to issues such as racism, nepotism/favoritism and privilege within the deaf community within and beyond Gallaudet University.*

### **Keywords**

Deaf studies, black deaf, racism, nepotism, favoritism, privilege, digital media

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### **Presentation Transcript**

(Slide 1)

Lindsay Dunn: This event couldn't have happened without our participants who were willing to come and share their experiences. When we talk about the protest, often we don't think of the experiences of various people who were involved. During the Deaf President Now protest, people of color were there, but there isn't much documentation. It's as if we weren't there. In the 2006 protest, it was very emotional for us for a number of reasons. I will allow our participants to share their experiences. This is unscripted. This is emotional for us and still is. We'll quickly introduce our participants.

(Slide 2)

First is Dr. Mark Amisshah on the further left. Next is LaToya Plummer, one of the student leaders in the protest. This is Thuan Nguyen. She was an advisor to several organizations at the time of the protest. Arlyn Peneranda was who I believe really ignited the fire for people of color to get involved. Lastly, Niesha Washington was pregnant during the protest and led the Black Student Union. Her story is amazing. She'll have the opportunity to share her story with you.

(Slide 3)

We'll show a brief video clip, "Unity for Who?" by Roxanne Dummett and Andrew Jones.

[Unity for Who? By: Roxanne Dummett & Andrew Jones]

Text: Many protestors did not acknowledge Deaf people of color.

I am Black. I am Deaf. I am a woman. I am an alumni. I represent Gallaudet too! I represent my students of color too!

Text: ...nor address the added oppression Deaf people of color have faced for centuries...

Text: Letters Ignored by the Board of Trustees From: Coalition of Students of Color at Gallaudet University

Text: "Dr. Frances Kendall, a leading expert in white privilege stated that systems are designed to obtain the results they desire..."

Text: We believe this to be the case once again and believe that you had betrayed our trust in Gallaudet University and its ability to educate and protect deaf and hard of hearing students of color."

Student: The system is set to failure for Dr. Glenn Anderson.

Text: National Black Deaf Advocates Position paper, 2006

The announcement that Dr. Glenn Anderson was eliminated as a candidate sent a resounding shockwave throughout the Black Deaf Community and other communities of color.

Student: I can't, I can't, I can't until I know why he was not able to speak publicly. Why? I do not understand. I am still stuck on that. Still, still! Dr. Glenn Anderson is who I am fighting for.

Text: They felt that cultural diversity and equity were not being taken into consideration. Person: Because of this protest? No. It is because of the long history of oppressing Black people. Now, you are looking for diversity, saying you need diversity. Really, that is bullshit. Many students here are being used. White Deaf people still copy actions from society, from television and media, from police. What is happening with those actions become embedded in white Deaf people. After the protest, we saw how it helped raise the level of understanding in the Deaf community. Some people started disagreeing with it. Pah! This means there was a lack of education and lack of information before the protest. Some Deaf people already had knowledge, but in general, the Deaf community did not have any understanding. I am thrilled! I just counted and there are more students of color here across the crowd. I love you all more! Are we truly united? We must continue this dialogue.]

(Slide 4)

Lindsay Dunn: First question: What was your initial reaction when the board announced the three final candidates: Dr. Jane K. Fernandes, Dr. Stephen Weiner, and Dr. Ronald Stern? Do you remember that the announcement was given here? What was your initial reaction that that decision?

Mark Amissah: Ladies, do you mind if I go first? I have to leave by 2pm to teach a class. Do you mind? Thank you. Hello, everyone. Before I respond, I went to NTID recently for their 50th anniversary and shared some food for thought. Before I share my response, I want to tell you one thing. If I say something that offends you in any way, stop and ask yourself "Why do I feel that way?" Don't say "Kojo said that therefore I..." You can't do that. Please remember that. If you feel any mixed feelings about anything we say, analyze yourself and figure out why you feel that way. That is called unpacking and finding out why you feel that way. I was standing in the back when the announcement was made. At first I felt dejected. The man on that slide, Dr. Ronald Stern, was not a doctor at the time. At the time of the announcement, he did not have a PhD.

Now he does, and congratulations to him and cheers to having another Deaf person with a PhD. For me, as a Black Deaf man, my thought process was if a person with a PhD did not make the final three, what does that mean for me and my future? Should I pursue a PhD? Is it worth it and will it help me move up the ladder? My world was flipped upside down. I persisted nonetheless and got my PhD, thanks to Dr. Glenn Anderson. That motivated me to pursue it, not give up. But guess what? I now suffer from what he is suffering from. I can't move up the ladder. I can't move up the ladder. Imagine that. I'm in the same place as Dr. Anderson. He went through 11 years on the Board of Trustees as chair and couldn't become president. I've been working at Gallaudet for 15 years and have a PhD, but I can't move up the ladder. That's some food for thought.

Latoya Plummer: I was sitting right over there. When the announcement was made, I felt the same way as Dr. Mark Amisshah. It was like a slap in the face, because I grew up always being told that as a Black Deaf woman, I must work three times harder than my average class mate. I must work three times harder than my average counterpart. I was taught that if I work hard, I will get something in return. The message that was given was like all of my sweat, blood and tears to get my degree might not lead me anywhere. I would not be able to move up the ladder. I would not be able to be in a position to make a change or make decisions. Where does Dr. Anderson belong? This was not the first time Gallaudet faced issues related to racism. That was not the first time, but that decision was like the tip of the iceberg. It was so constant and long-standing that when this announcement was made, it made things worse and made us feel worse.

Thuan Nguyen Lakrik: When they announced the three final candidates, I was shocked. I felt deflated. I wondered if that meant Asians can't. I was the advisor of Black Student Union and Asian Deaf Association. I worked with Arlyn and Niesha. Niesha was president and pregnant at the time, too. I was speechless. I kept thinking, "Why?" I decided to postpone my PhD program in Capella University that had around eight courses remaining to another year. I was shocked.

Arlyn Peneranda: At that time, we had experienced racism here at Gallaudet towards people of color. Before we knew who the final three candidates were, I had a gut feeling that Dr. Glenn Anderson wouldn't make it. I was sitting in that area and I remember that when the announcement was made, students of color had already been crying about the racism, and how their lives were at will. And I felt numb. I was disappointed. Some people said to me, "You aren't even Black. Why are you complaining?" Racism is the same thing regardless of what color you are. At that time, that motivated me to get my MBA and MS because I know as a woman of color and as a Deaf woman, I wouldn't go as far in my life without an education. I would continue to face barriers. I felt like many people didn't pay attention to our protest because at the time, people felt like it was because he wasn't "deaf" enough, but the announcement of the final three candidates confirmed our fears that we're not enough for that position.

Niesha Washington: At that time, I was pregnant. I'll try. It's easier to cry when I'm standing up. If I'm sitting down, I can bottle it up easier. Right? My hormones slowly increased and became overwhelming. Before the announcement, people said Dr. Anderson wouldn't make it. I'm from Louisiana. I know that even though Black and white people became assimilated, the white power

mindset hadn't changed. I thought that in the North it would be different and that there was more opportunity there. Many people predicted Dr. Anderson wouldn't make it, but I remained confident that wouldn't be the case. He was chair of the Board of Trustees for such a long time and it could be a walk in the park for him. I don't remember where I was sitting, but I remember that I moved around. At the time of the announcement, I was blown away. Was this for real? Was he actually eliminated? I was in denial, but it was what actually happened. I was quiet for a while. The next morning, I was still feeling numb.

LD: I don't want to add to that. It would be too emotional for me to respond to that question. (Slide 5) Next question: what were your reasons for involvement in the protest and what was it that encouraged or convinced you to take action? Why didn't you just let it be? You decided to take action to get involved. Why?

KA: It took me a few days to decide that. First, it was because some students came to me and asked what to do about it. Should we protest? I wasn't sure if that was a good idea. I felt unsure, but ironically, before students of color could make a decision, the Student Body Government took over. SBG took over and it became a chase, like "What's happening?" Our students of color were pushed to the side. The white SBG president took over. It was people of color students' issue. Our voice was needed, to bring attention to this issue. I was willing to share my voice. I risked my job. I could have been fired. If I was fired, then so be it. Interestingly, I wasn't fired. I was surprised at that and wondered if they preserved me because they didn't want to lose another person of color. After time went on, it became worse and finally I had to have a meeting with the Board. I asked the board, "Excuse me, but you have to look at the history of the Gallaudet administration. How many people of color actually moved up and arrived at the top?" How many? I counted two. Only two even to today. Myself and Lindsay Dunn. We reported to President Jordan and President Davila. That's all, only the two of us. You have to think about that. The question becomes, who was DPN for? All Deaf people, or specific Deaf people? We need to ask ourselves that question. Is DPN for all Deaf people to be able to become the president of Gallaudet, or only white Deaf people? The history is apparent. Only Lindsay Dunn and I have been able to move up the ladder. Think about that.

LP: I want to make something clear. All of our paths might be a little different with how we got involved. You might think of me being on the opposite side as Niesha, but the reality is, we all were on the same side pursuing the same goals. I'm not sure exactly how to put it into words, but students in color came together and then there was another group that formed. I was part of it not because I disagreed with their feeling that we should have a fair process, but because I always wanted transparency, equality, and the opportunity for a Black Deaf man who was very qualified for the position. He worked with the U.S. President and was on university boards, not just at Gallaudet but at other universities too. The list goes on. To see him eliminated from the process, I felt I had to do something. I admit that before that happened, I didn't have much of an interest in who administrators were. I took it for granted. We had our first Deaf president and things seemed to be improving. I thought there was no need for us to be concerned until I found out about Dr. Anderson's elimination. I had to get involved and do something. We all had the same goal, but had different paths. That's all.

TNL: I remember that when it happened, Ron Stern was there in the audience. I was a staff and person of color and as Kojo said, I had to be careful since I had my job plus my role as advisor for BSU and ASU. Niesha and I discussed what we should do and what kind of action we should take. There was an idea about a coffin saying “R.I.P. Diversity is dead”. I had to manage my time and support and didn’t care what kind of targeting and treatment I got. I supported them through it. Remember that?

AP: Why did I get involved? Because I felt that diversity was dying here at Gallaudet at that time. Many of us students of color had been ignored. Our room for meetings were shared by two organizations, hidden from the SBG office. I felt like if a person like Dr. Glenn Anderson with the kind of qualifications he had was tossed to the side, how could we break that barrier? I felt that we needed to do something for our future generations, because our children of color will face those same barriers if we do nothing. It was staggering that Dr. Glenn Anderson with his qualifications was eliminated, because he was more qualified than all of the other three candidates. If we didn’t do anything, how could we have a better future for our children? That’s why I became involved in the protest.

NW: As I said, I felt numb. It took days to wrap my mind around it. Someone approached me about it to take action. I felt, what was the point of fighting? Someone paged me that I had a fire inside me. I hadn’t analyzed myself at that time. I thought maybe staff and faculty could take action, and us students could focus on work and school. I relied on vocational rehabilitation for my education, and VR had many requirements that I had to follow including getting all A’s in my classes. I had to do well, not party, and so on. I was a stickler for the rules. People told me that staff and faculty couldn’t because they were not tenured. I didn’t understand at that time. After more explanation, I realized how much power students had. The same was true for organizations. That’s when I started to realize things and took that step. I saw other people of color getting together, and I joined. The rest is history.

(Slide 6)

LD: I’ll let you respond to your experiences because many of us here on campus had a lot of very interesting conversations. Unfortunately, many of the conversations were never videotaped. I believe if those conversations were videotaped, it would be very educational for all of us. Those discussions were related to racism, audism, and what it means to be deaf. We People of Color were often asked if we were Deaf first or Black first, or Deaf first or Asian first and other stupid questions which felt offensive to begin with, because they asked me to decide which parts of me come first. I can’t. I am me. I’m Deaf and Black. I’m an African man. Don’t ask me to choose which comes first, second, or third. Those are all parts of me that makes me who I am. Those were many of the questions we were asked at the time. Most importantly, we dealt with the issue of qualification. People say “So what?” when it came to the issue of whether candidates had a PhD or not. You all remember that? I want you to talk about that. How did students respond to the position Deaf Students of Color took during the protest.

LP: White students had a similar response, that they weren't surprised. They had no idea about racism. They were not willing to understand our position. Many of them questioned what we were doing and thought it was already taken care of. They wanted specific candidates. They didn't understand or realize the position we were in and why we felt that way. For many students, they felt privileged. If the tables were turned and they were in our shoes, such as if Dr. Anderson was part of the top three, instead of Dr. Stern, it would be different. To be clear, the presidential search list of qualifications said having a PhD degree was preferred, not required. Now, if the top three candidates was Dr. Anderson, Dr. Weiner and Dr. Fernandes, students would be upset about that decision. They would not support that decision. They would be angry about it. Even if Dr. Glenn Anderson didn't have a degree, the root of it is that he's a Black man. Gallaudet was not ready for a Black Deaf man. I already could see that white students and faculty would not be happy. They would not. Did they even think about it? Did they put themselves in our shoes? They didn't care and wanted Ronald Stern, period. I understand wanting a certain person to lead the community, but we need to do it right, with the right process in the same way we would expect it to be dealt with for everyone else. We shouldn't make an exception for anyone. It was tough. Many students cherished and understood the topic of audism. As for racism, not so much. Their response was they wanted us to put racism aside because it wasn't important. Like Lindsay mentioned, they'd say, "So?" We didn't back out.

TNL: I remember meeting with Dr. Cheryl Wu who was involved in the protest. I was sickened with the decision. She wanted me to join. I told her no and she asked me why I wasn't protesting. I had to think about it. She told me that she learned it from me and that was why she was protesting. I didn't follow Dr. Cheryl Wu. Someone referred a white person to talk to me and this person asked me if, hypothetically, an Asian person has a Masters and a white person has a Masters and a JD, who would I choose? I said if an Asian person had a doctorate, I would choose them. The person said no, because perhaps the other person with a JD had more experience. I disagreed. The person fought with me and said if they had a Doctorate, that would be considerable. We argued for almost 15 minutes and I started getting angry, and I had to let it go. That stuck in my mind.

AP: Before the FSA, we already included students of color to write to the Board of Trustees letter after letter about the unfair process. We would spend all night at the English department or other labs writing. They supported us to write the letter because they knew that it's all about the process and we were focused on the process itself and how it was unfair. Many people did not understand us. They wanted Stern to be picked, and when Stern was not picked, that's when the protest happened. "Diversity is dead!" They thought it wasn't fair. We already had known that. At that time, they picked Dr. Fernandes. They exploited students of color and agreed with us that there was no diversity and no fair process, but we had already told them weeks before that. Even the Buff and Blue called Dr. Anderson "Koko" on their website. They wanted to insult us. That's what they called us.

LD: Yes. They looked at us as monkeys.

AP: When you're labeling them, you're labeling us, too. That's why it has been a very hot issue lately.

LD: Painful.

AP: Yes.

NW: That made our blood boil. When I joined a group, I was excited... they made a coffin to represent the death of diversity. We wrote on it and painted on it.

AP: They ignored us. They brushed us away.

NW: Right. They used our words. The next morning, there was an event at the football field. A group of us...

LD: During the rally.

NW: We gathered to discuss racism and plans. About three or four of us carried the coffin. We were dressed in black, like we were at a funeral. We were solemn. People laughed at us and mocked us. People spit at me. They spit at us.

LD: She was pregnant.

NW: They said we had no power. We went from HMB to the football field and past SLLC, and at the time we arrived, people were already there. When we carried the coffin and shared our words, people booed us. That's where we saw overt racism.

LP: One more thing. The root of the protest was the flawed process. I want to emphasize that. We noticed that first. Others ignored us hoping that one of the three candidates would win. When that didn't happen, they then ended up wanting to protest when we had already been taking action and trying to protest first. They kept setting us aside and minimizing us with that dismissive attitude. There was a sense of unity in that the system was flawed. All of us had the same goal of addressing the flawed system. I think the protest would have been different and more unified if they had recognized that.

LD: When that happened, when someone spat on her and booed and mocked them, I had to page and ask several big Black football players to go there and protect them. They were scared and didn't know what would happen, so several football players went to watch and protect others. I want to applaud Stern because he was the first person to mention that. The first thing he mentioned during his interview was that experience. He was there himself and saw what happened. Ron Stern was there and he witnessed what they went through. He said that that was the most impactful experience for him. That was the first thing he mentioned in his presentation. I remember that. I'm glad he recognized that. Unfortunately, not many people recognized that, what we went through in our fight trying to get a simple message through.

(Slide 7)

LD: Finally, after a while, Dr. Fernandes decided to resign. What was your reaction to her decision to resign and how did you feel about it?

LP: I am a Deaf woman. I want to make another thing clear. I was not happy that she resigned because she was Deaf or a woman. That'd be ridiculous. I'm Deaf and a woman. I support that. It's just that I wanted her to resign and run again because that would show that she was qualified. If she was really qualified, then she could run again. All we wanted was for her

to resign and then run again. That's all. I was disappointed with how things ended. Students, faculty and staff were arrested. That wasn't necessary and all of that could have been prevented.

TNL: I'm still thinking. Arlyn can go ahead.

AP: Dr. Fernandes was supported by many students of color. We never had enough room in the SBG office, and she voiced that. She knew our office was too small and wanted to do something about it, before she became President. She also supported every one of us students of color. Believe it or not, she encouraged us about addressing the unfair process because she knew Dr. Glenn Anderson should have made it. She supported us in that process being unfair. It wasn't perfect. Many people don't know that. Many people thought she was happy to become President. No. She knew the process was flawed. I was working for her at that time and she discussed it with me. She was open minded about many things at that time and agreed with our points. Dr. Anderson was qualified but at the same time, he didn't make it, and then she questioned everything. He was qualified, but he didn't make it. Why? She questioned everything.

NW: When she resigned, I was not there at FSA at the time. My baby had been born already. I had hope about the new election and process. At that point, it became more tense and problematic. There were many leaders all over the place. The goal was not clear. I started to realize that I had to back out. When she resigned, I wasn't too shocked. That means we would continue to be overlooked. The cycle would repeat. I still see that today. She's a woman. She was supportive of people of color and encouraged us to attend workshops and helped us be more open to our journey. If not for her, I might still be at Gallaudet and not reach my fullest potential.

LD: Yes, she was a very controversial person. Many would say Dr. Fernandes was horrible, but again, a lot of people of color - some might feel differently - but many people of color I know felt she was a strong supporter of diversity. She was the first to set up a program to see how Black students performed in school. You can see she did do something to stop that dropout rate. We know that. Many of us know that. Another thing is she helped us in many different ways, yes, but others would say she bought people of color. That kind of comment intended to take away our purpose and our values, like we were wrong. Audism was the primary focus. Yes, we experience audism just like you. Do you experience racism? No. We're talking about this that you don't understand. We will explain it to you. It's hard to get through. This woman was a deaf woman from a deaf mom. Some believed she wasn't important. I understand that point. We need to be clear with our desire for a person because this person represents our community. Now, going back to the question earlier this morning from Annelies Kusters' presentation earlier this



morning. We suggested questions for us and Dr. Bahan's question, too. Both of you suggested different important questions. The question is, where do we people of color all over the world fit? We talk about the Deaf body. Where do we fit? Keep that in mind people of color makes up maybe 90% of the Deaf population in the world. We don't talk about colonialism. Think about it. Ok? Think about it.

TNL: I want to add something. A woman named Disey took the responsibility to become the coordinator for Deaf Women of Color conference at North Carolina. I want to recognize her for that. Laurene Simms, Leticia Arellano, Francisca Rangel, and myself founded Deaf Women of Color. We moved on from what happened to Dr. Fernandes. At the conference we hosted, we saw Dr. Fernandes. She moved on. We respect her for it. We want to thank her for taking that responsibility for us. Ok. We'll give the audience the opportunity to ask us some questions.

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