

# Roberto Dávila: On the Move Again

by Marisella Veiga

**I**t's unusual for someone to come out of retirement at age 74 to become a president at an important liberal arts university.

But then again, Roberto Dávila, now president of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., is someone who is used to exploring the unusual.

He's been the "first to" many times: the first in his family to graduate from high school, first Hispanic to graduate from Gallaudet University, first Deaf Hispanic to earn a doctoral degree. He is the first Deaf person to be elected president of the following organizations: the Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf, Council of Education of the Deaf, and Conference of Educational Administrators of the Deaf.

It's a partial listing of the man's unique achievements.

"I'm a person who thrives on challenge," Dávila explains in a recent e-mail interview. This January, he took office as the university's ninth president. His term is limited to between 18 and 24 months until the university's board of trustees conducts a search and hires a new president.

Gallaudet University was established in 1864. The institution is known for both its undergraduate and graduate programs for the Deaf and hard of hearing, though a small number of hearing students are also enrolled. It is recognized nationally and internationally for its research on the history, culture, and languages of those who belong to the Deaf community.

Clearly, Dávila is open to accepting new challenges at this time of his life. Yet his actions are motivated by a desire to serve an institution with which he has had a productive association, as a student and as a professional.

"I've always had a great love for Gallaudet University, and it pained me to watch it go through the protests last spring and fall," he states.

Dávila is referring to the university's recent student protests and a brief closure following the submission of a Periodic Review Report to the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. Gallaudet's board of trustees rescinded the contract of the president who had been designated.

Then the board sought candidates for an interim president. Dávila writes that he felt compelled to offer his skills and services.

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Dávila continued studies toward a master's degree at Hunter College in New York City. At Syracuse University, he obtained a Ph.D. in educational technology and curriculum development. Eventually, he returned to work at Gallaudet. From 1972 to 1982, he worked on campus in various capacities, directed several programs, and taught classes.



Pam Holmes, who chairs the university's board of trustees, said Dávila was selected as interim president because he met the school's need for a candidate with proven leadership ability as well as higher education management experience.

The number "of Deaf or hard of hearing individuals who have the academic credentials as well as higher education managerial experience is not large, but it is steadily growing," she writes of the potential applicant pool for such a position.

During his tenure, Dávila hopes to meet the challenges of reuniting the campus community and restoring trust between the community and the administration.

"Dávila understands Deaf culture and is right in there with the students," says Maddy Reckert, president of ASL Associates, a 13-year-old Jacksonville, Fla.-based company. "That's a big deal in the Deaf community."

Reckert was born as a hearing child to Deaf parents and works as a Deaf interpreter. Some of her clients are students enrolled at colleges and universities in Northeast Florida, so she's familiar with their issues.

As part of a larger, trust-building strategy, Dávila hosts a weekly video show called *Bob's Vlog*. Interested readers can search the university's Web site to watch the program, which is signed, closed-captioned, and spoken. A link to the printed text of the program is also on the site.

At the end of February, for example, Dávila interviewed two Gallaudet students who also excel as athletes. Amelia Palmer, a junior, is a soccer

player on U.S.A. Athletics International, part of an American team that will travel to play in Australia this summer. Jim Crane is a senior and captain of a U.S. Hockey team that recently won a gold medal at the Deaflympics in Salt Lake City. The discussion focused on handling academic and athletic responsibilities.

Dávila says he enjoys hosting the *Vlog*, especially because members of the community find them informative.

Yet the *Vlog* is just one avenue for warming relationships on campus. Already he has hosted a reception for students at the President's Residence on campus; similar gatherings will be held regularly, he says. The same is true for the town hall meetings, where students are also welcome.

American Sign Language (ASL) is the main language used on campus. According to Wikipedia, there are between 500,000 and two million ASL users in the U.S.

Deaf, with a capital "D," is used to signify a cultural and linguistic group of people who use ASL. Those who for various reasons don't identify with the ASL group refer to themselves as deaf with a lower-case "d." Deaf and hard-of-hearing students attending mainstream colleges and universities are provided with ASL interpreters under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The law, which took effect in July 1992, establishes clear and comprehensive prohibition of discrimination on the basis of disability.

Dávila earned both graduate degrees before the ADA became law, so he has plenty of experience with the difficulties Deaf students have encountered and might still find on a mainstream campus.

"I had absolutely no support when I was studying for my master's at Hunter College and limited support when I was in my Ph.D. program at Syracuse University," Dávila explains. "I had no interpreters or note-takers, which meant I had very little idea what was happening in my classes," he states.

Yet he refused to let his deafness keep him from achieving his educational goals. He spent long hours in the library, he says. Other strategies included sitting at the front of the room, borrowing notes from others, and asking professors to recommend supplemental reading materials.

While the ADA has brought about extraordinary changes for people with disabilities, deaf students on mainstream campuses still run into obstacles. Dávila is aware of them.

Some lingering problems include institutions that are slow to comply with the law and don't provide students with ASL interpreters, Reckert says.

In the classroom, other problems emerge. Some professors think providing closed-captioning on videos is distracting to hearing-students' learning. When other technology is used

as part of a classroom lecture or discussion, some professors refuse a request to leave a single light on so the Deaf student can see the interpreter signing the information being presented.

No matter what course of study a Deaf student is undertaking, Dávila is adamant about that student's not settling for less than a quality education.

"Deaf people today are not shy about reminding professors, business colleagues, or the like that they have an obligation to provide full access to their Deaf students and co-workers," he explains.

Flagler College, a four-year liberal arts college in St. Augustine, Fla., is practiced in responding to the needs of its Deaf students. Interpreters are present in the classroom and often at college-sponsored events. In fact, because the city is home to the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind, ASL users are visible in the community. The 9 a.m. Sunday Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine, for example, is signed.

### Dávila Then and Now

Dávila was born into a Spanish-speaking household, one of eight children of parents who came to the U.S. from México and became migrant farmworkers. They followed the California harvests and did not have a permanent home. At age 6, Dávila lost his father. Two years later, he contracted spinal meningitis and lost his hearing ability. A social worker contacted Dávila's mother, and she agreed to enroll him in the residential California School for the Deaf in Berkeley. When Dávila arrived at the school, he thought in and spoke only Spanish.

In an autobiographical piece posted on the Rochester Institute of Technology's [RIT] Web site, Dávila describes his Spanish-only mother as someone who "knew she had to do something to help me get ready for the future, so she packed everything I had in one suitcase and put me on a train to Berkeley."

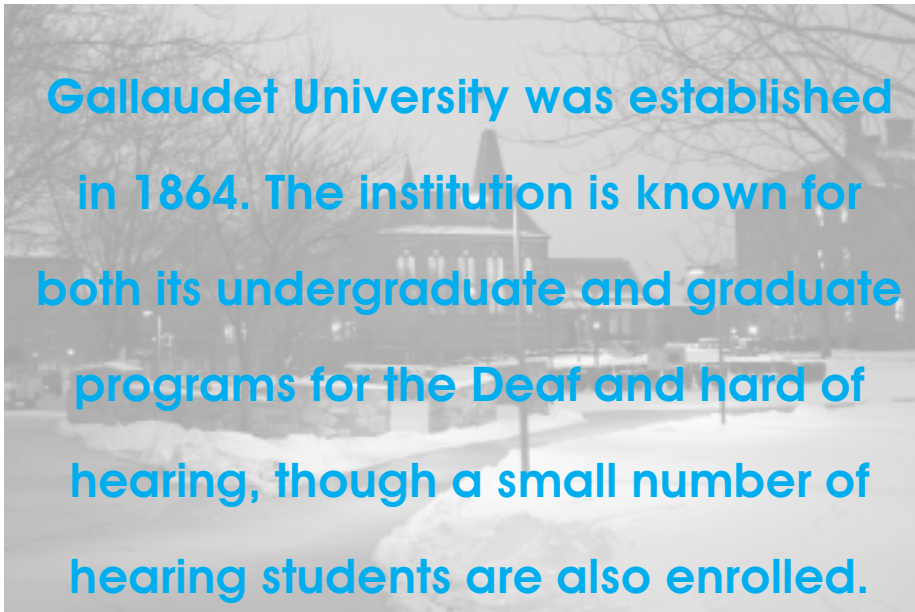
In an article in *Hispanic Link Weekly Report*, Dávila explains one dynamic in his family: "In most families, the Deaf members are coddled, pampered, and kept isolated because the parents imagine that Deaf people can't manage for themselves. In my family, it was the opposite."

According to [www.lifeprint.com](http://www.lifeprint.com), an American Sign Language online school, at one time there was widespread doubt about Deaf children being

able to master two languages. Furthermore, there was a "significant disbelief as to the likelihood of truly trilingual Deaf students." Again, Dávila proved to be an exception.

Dávila learned both English and ASL at the California School, becoming fluent in those two languages, he says, "in months, not years." He used his Spanish-language foundation to build English-language structure.

During a recent interview, he discusses some of the language dynamics





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in the household when he returned home during breaks in the academic year.

“Still, when I returned home to the San Diego area, my brothers and I always spoke exclusively in Spanish to our mother but occasionally switched to English among ourselves. We thought nothing of switching back and forth between English and Spanish. And while English is now my primary mode of communication in sign language, I am equally comfortable using English or Spanish,” Dávila explains.

Dávila explains he taught one of his brothers to fingerspell, and another learned to do the same from his Scout handbook. However, he does not recall anyone in his family seeing him use ASL until he brought his future wife home to meet the family when he was a college student.

Today Dávila still uses his speaking voice in both English and Spanish, and he signs simultaneously. The combination of speaking, no matter which language, and signing is integral.

“Some hearing people say my speech is good and ask why I sign at the same time. I tell them it’s the only way I can talk. My speech and signs are connected; they’re not separate,” Dávila explains on RIT’s Web site.

Dávila’s trilingual and tricultural life is certainly worth a solid biographical account. RIT’s president, Dr. Albert Simone, recognized the need for one. Dávila had been one of his vice presidents for eight years. When Dávila retired, Simone gave him a retirement present in the form of offering a team of volunteer writers to complete a biography.

The book is currently in its last stages with editors and will soon be going to the publisher, RIT Press.



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