The 1988 protest by deaf students at Gallaudet University was a defining moment for the disability rights movement. It was the closest the movement has come to having a touchstone event, a Selma or a Stonewall. True, protesters with a wider array of disabilities had taken over the San Francisco HEW headquarters in 1977. But that was just a blip on the screen of national consciousness. It had come a decade too early for Americans—even for many disabled—to view disability as a civil rights issue. The Gallaudet campus takeover, by contrast, was a made-for-television solidarity phenomenon, thick with drama. Cameras feasted on the sea of hundreds of outstretched arms signing "Deaf President Now," over and over, in a rhythmic choreography. A school that prided itself on preparing deaf students for the hearing world had decreed a deaf person not ready to lead a deaf university.

The uprising that followed resonated for people of all
disabilities, who empathized with the students’ revolt against the paternalistic care of well-meaning but insensitive people who were not disabled. Gallaudet gave Americans a new rights consciousness about disability. It was reflected in post-Gallaudet journalism, which focused less on “supercrips” and sad cases, according to a study by Beth Haller of Temple University. Newspaper stories began using the words “disability” and “rights” in the same paragraph. Lawmakers, too, made the connection. The Americans with Disabilities Act was introduced two months after the Gallaudet protest and, for a law with such sweep and so many potential enemies, took a rocket course toward passage. Argues Lex Frieden, then of the National Council on the Handicapped, “It would not have happened without Gallaudet raising people’s consciousness.”

The Revolution of Seen Voices

The Gallaudet student protest. That is how the March 1988 Gallaudet revolt is remembered. But the students were the last of the Gallaudet family to get involved. It was the anger of young alumni, battling the sting of prejudice and discrimination in the hearing world, who set it all in motion.

It began in August 1987, when Jerry Lee, the school’s hearing president, announced he would leave the university in December. In early February of 1988, six young graduates met, and their discussion turned to the Gallaudet search committee that was winnowing a list of candidates to succeed Lee. To be deaf, the friends agreed, was to struggle constantly against the low expectations of the hearing world. What an insult, then, that the world’s premier school for the deaf should buy into this underestimation. There had been brief talk in 1984, when Lee was chosen, of whether the job should have gone to a deaf man. Gallaudet’s six presidents over 124 years had served for an average of twenty years, although there had already been three
presidents in the 1980s. This might be the last shot for several years, the friends realized, at making a stand for a deaf president. Jeff Rosen, a young Washington attorney at the meeting, says the group decided to sponsor a campus rally to unite students, faculty, and alumni into a massive coalition that could not be ignored.

Support for the rally came from two local alumni entrepreneurs, John Yeh and David Birnbaum, who were bitter that the university had shown little interest in giving contracts to local deaf businessmen. Once out of the protective cocoon of Gallaudet’s Washington campus of Victorian red-brick buildings, these alumni had confronted the mindless exclusion and condescension of the hearing world. It was an outrage, Yeh and Birnbaum felt, that their school played into these attitudes by dismissing deaf businessmen. It gave the lie to the school’s mission of preparing students for the hearing world.

On campus, as Gallaudet alumni director Jack Gannon notes in his history of the strike week, students paid scant attention to the discrimination that faced them beyond the school’s gates. Replacing a president seemed little more than a campus administration issue. “Many deaf persons had been conditioned to accept limits—to believe that hearing is better,” explained Roslyn Rosen, dean of Gallaudet’s College for Continuing Education. Confusing, too, was that Gallaudet’s student body was made up not just of those with total hearing loss—who make up 10 percent of the 22 million Americans with hearing disabilities—but those with profound and severe hearing loss who could be helped with a hearing aid. The different groups often formed cliques, and those who used hearing aids felt more sanguine about integrating into the hearing world. The task for the rally’s sponsors was to crystallize the presidential selection as a civil rights battle.

“It’s time!,” said the fliers Yeh printed up to promote the rally. “In 1842, a Roman Catholic became president of the
University of Notre Dame. In 1875, a woman became president of Wellesley College. In 1886, a Jew became president of Yeshiva University. In 1926, a Black person became president of Howard University. AND in 1988, the Gallaudet University presidency belongs to a DEAF person." Yeh underwrote most of the costs of the rally, including the printing of thousands of blue-and-yellow buttons that said DEAF PRESIDENT NOW, which became the protest week slogan.

The civil rights theme was hammered home at the rally on March 1, an exuberant revival that moved from point to point on campus, followed by 1,500 excited students, alumni, and faculty, chanting and waving "high fives"—the deaf sign-language applause of hands stretched straight up and fingers fluttering that would soon be familiar on television screens across the country. It was a sunny day with brilliant blue skies, and the sense of deaf pride that coursed through the crowd was electrifying. Jeff Rosen, wearing a red sweatshirt with the words DEAF PREXY NOW, stood on the flatbed of a pickup truck and signed to the crowd, "People have died in the civil rights movement. People were jailed in protesting the Vietnam War. I stand here in 1988 asking, What do you believe in? What is your cause?" Another of the two dozen speakers, Professor Allen Sussman, drove home the point: "This is an historical event. You could call this the first deaf civil rights activity." This was a powerful cry. Even many of the students who listened to him had never thought of the way deaf people were treated as a civil rights issue.

By coincidence, moments before the rally, the names of the three finalists were announced. I. King Jordan, deaf since young adulthood, was Gallaudet's popular dean of the college of arts and sciences. Harvey Corson, deaf since birth, was the president of a Louisiana residential school. Elisabeth Zinser, the one hearing candidate, was an administrator at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Also by accident, it was the same day
that the new student body president took office. Greg Hlibok would become the national spokesman for the students, a reassuring symbol with his blond and preppy good looks. Tim Rarus, the outgoing student body president, along with Jerry Covell and Bridgetta Bourne, who before the rally had been campaigning for a woman president, would also emerge as leaders of the protest. All four had deaf parents and had grown up with self-confidence, not feeling left out because of their disability.

On Sunday, March 6, some five hundred students and alumni gathered at the main gate to the campus at 8:30 p.m. That was when they had been told to expect an announcement by the board of trustees. But the choice had already been made public, in a press release, two hours earlier. Hearing reporters had been told before the students: Elisabeth Zinser, the lone hearing finalist, was the new president of Gallaudet University. The eruption of anger was immediate. There were speeches, tears, burning of press releases.

Shouting “Deaf President Now,” the group spontaneously marched the few miles downtown to the Mayflower Hotel, where the trustees were said to be at a party to celebrate their choice. Policemen lined the hotel entrance as the students shouted and signed speeches. Hlibok, Rarus, and Jeff Rosen were invited upstairs to meet the board. There, they said, Jane Bassett Spilman, chairwoman of Gallaudet’s board of trustees, gave her insulting explanation that “Deaf people are not ready to function in a hearing world.” Later, Spilman vigorously denied making the remark, saying she had been misquoted by an interpreter. But even this excuse was an example of what the students saw as the school’s paternalism. Spilman had served on the board of trustees for seven years and she still couldn’t speak to the students in their language. Why hadn’t she learned to sign?

The next morning, Monday, students closed down the school. At 5:30 a.m., they began parking university cars and
buses, hot-wired by a street-smart student from New York City, in front of all the campus entrances. Gallaudet's provost got past the angry protesters only after security guards cut a hole in a chain-link fence. Classes were canceled, and a hastily assembled group of students, faculty, and staff took a list of demands to Spilman. Rescind the choice of Zinser, they ordered, and appoint a deaf president. Spilman must resign and a majority of deaf members be named to the board of trustees. There could be no retribution against student and faculty demonstrators. Spilman rejected the demands but agreed to address an assembly, confident she could explain the logic behind choosing Zinser.

But the meeting in the field house was a debacle. There were one thousand noisy students. They screamed and rhythmically swayed their arms to sign "Deaf Power," which was formed by holding the left hand over the left ear to signify "Deaf" and raising the other fist in the air for "Power." They signed "Zinser Out," using, as they did all week, the sign for the word "sinner" as a close and mocking approximation of her surname. Spilman and the other trustees waited onstage, protected from shouting students by a line of security police. Before Spilman could speak, mathematics professor Harvey Goodstein, a member of the delegation that had met with her, walked onstage to sign that she had rejected all of their demands. He encouraged the crowd to leave, and most took off, marching again to the Capitol and the White House, snarling rush-hour traffic. A policeman tried to control the crowd by shouting directions through a megaphone. Then, realizing he could not be heard, he disgustedly flung the megaphone into the back of his patrol car and slammed the trunk. Police were reduced to giving the students an escort downtown. A small group of students stayed behind to hear Spilman in what would be an emotionally charged meeting and one more stumble for Spilman.

As the remaining students yelled in protest, some of the departing ones pulled the fire alarm. "We aren't going to hear
you if you scream so loudly that we can’t have a dialogue. It’s very difficult to be heard over the noise of the fire alarm,” the hapless Spilman told the students. “What noise?” students shouted or signed back. “If you could sign,” one deaf student responded, “we could hear you.” Spilman took a hard line, declaring the choice of Zinser was “lawful, proper and final.” It was that scolding attitude that led Bridgetta Bourne to tell a newspaper reporter, “We want to be free from hearing oppression. We don’t want to live off the hearing world, we want to live as independent people.” That day, visiting professor Harlan Lane had scheduled a lecture on paternalism. It was canceled, along with all other classes. “Real life overtook it,” he explained.

The students’ ardor did not cool. Classes resumed on Tuesday, although all but about 10 percent of students boycotted them. Protesters burned effigies of Zinser and Spilman. Some 1,500 people gathered for another protest rally at the statue of the school’s namesake, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, teaching the alphabet to a kneeling girl. “We will not give up,” Hlibok signed to the crowd to cheers. “Now is the time to . . . show that we can help ourselves and control our own lives and our futures.”

Most important, the protest had grabbed national attention. Students at other deaf schools from Georgia to California demonstrated and sent letters of support. Some students and alumni even came from around the country to the Gallaudet campus to help out. Local businesses sent fruit baskets, pizza, soda, and other provisions. A linen company donated forty bed-sheets for banners. A local law firm offered pro bono representation. The students, improvising as the protest grew, put together a sophisticated operation. The protest leaders camped out at the alumni house, where, fortunately for them, the school had set up a bank of telephones and TDDs, telecommunications devices for the deaf, for the semiannual Alumni TDDathon. The students used these to make hundreds of calls to reporters and to people around the country to raise funds. Some seventy inter-
Interpreters arrived on campus to volunteer their services for the students when reporters and others arrived.

Zinser showed up in Washington on Wednesday, declaring, “I am in charge.” Full of bravado, and thinking the protest was the work of only a handful of disgruntled students, she believed she could end the unrest. “I like to rise to the occasion of a challenge,” she told reporters during a press conference at the National Press Club and hinted that she was ready to get tough with the demonstrators.

But Zinser never set foot on campus. To keep her out, students at the barricades thoroughly searched incoming campus security cars, even checking the trunks. Students even planned to stop Zinser from arriving by helicopter by lying on the ground, if necessary, to prevent it from landing. Zinser summoned a group of student leaders to her hotel but was refused a request to address the entire student body. The students did not recognize her as president, Hlibok explained, and would not give her such legitimacy by letting her address them. There was a setback for the protesters, however, when Zinser got backing from the two deaf candidates she had defeated. Spilman released a supportive letter from Corson. A stricken-looking I. King Jordan showed up at Zinser’s side at the press conference. Earlier in the week, he had given a moderate endorsement of the student protest, encouraging students to “continue this in a positive way.” Now, he explained, he felt an obligation as a dean to support the school first. Other faculty and staff members, however, voted to support the student demands by near-unanimous margins.

Wisely, the students had focused on taking their cause to Congress. Gallaudet is a federally chartered university, and in 1988 75 percent of the school’s budget, some $61 million, came from Congress. Many politicians, who already understood the political power of disabled people, were eager allies. Senator Bob Dole and Vice President George Bush, now locked in battle for
the Republican presidential nomination, had already urged the school to name a deaf president. So had House Majority Whip Tony Coelho. And Michigan Representative David Bonior was quoted on the front page of Wednesday's Washington Post warning that Zinser's appointment imperiled continued congressional largesse toward the school. On Wednesday morning, Democrat Bonior and Republican Representative Steve Gunderson of Wisconsin, both on Gallaudet's board, met with Hlibok and faculty and alumni protesters. Later that day, Zinser and Spilman called on the lawmakers, too, in an attempt to reassure members of Congress that they were in control despite the brief spark of revolt. Instead, Bonior urged Zinser to resign. That evening, Hlibok and Zinser faced off on the ABC news program "Nightline," which ran open captions for the first time. Zinser said that she believed "very strongly" that a deaf person would one day be the president of Gallaudet. "This statement, 'one day a deaf president,' is very old rhetoric," Hlibok shot back. "We've been hearing this for one hundred twenty-four years."

By the following day, it became clear to Zinser that she could not win. The board had reaffirmed its decision to appoint her, but the protest showed no signs of dying out as students pledged to stay on campus the following week, even though it meant giving up their spring vacation. A symbol of the changing tide had come when Jordan, smiling, showed up at the day's rally to recant his support of Zinser of the day before and express his "anger at the continuing lack of confidence that [members of the board of trustees] have shown in deaf people." It was a risky move for a university dean. Later Jordan would explain, "I realized I might just be dean for a week. But I would be a deaf person for the rest of my life." That evening at about 7:30, Zinser turned to Spilman and said simply, "I resign." Shortly before midnight, the university put out a press release to announce Zinser's resignation.

The next morning, Zinser read her resignation statement at
a press conference. She had concluded, she said, "that the best way to restore order and return this university to its business of education" was to resign and allow the appointment of a deaf president. She ended her statement by giving the sign-language hand signal for, "I love you." Even after this victory, the protest was not over. There was still a new president to name, and the students' other demands remained on the table. Shortly after Zinser's press conference, about three thousand cheering students and supporters left campus and marched once more to the U.S. Capitol, signing and chanting "Deaf president now" and "We will not back down."

On Sunday, one week after the protests had begun, seventeen members of Gallaudet's board of trustees met in a downtown hotel to choose a president. In the seven-hour meeting, they decided to give the students everything they were seeking, and more. Jordan, the popular dean, would become the school's first deaf president. The new chairman of the board would be Philip Bravin, an IBM program manager and the deaf head of the presidential search committee who had angered students earlier in the week. Half of the board of trustees would be deaf. There would be no sanctions against the demonstrators.

Outside the hotel, before ecstatic students and in front of television cameras that recorded the moment for the world, an exhilarated Jordan accepted his new appointment. "This is a historic moment for deaf people around the world," he signed, and spoke in his clear voice. "In this week we can truly say that we, together and united, have overcome our own reluctance to stand for our rights and our full representation. The world has watched the deaf community come of age. We can no longer accept limits on what we can achieve."

Spilman announced her own resignation, saying, "In the minds of some, I have become an obstacle to the future of the university. And because I care very, very deeply about Gallaudet's future, I am removing the obstacle." Even to the end,
however, she insisted that the “best choice [for president] was a hearing candidate.”

A few days later, Hlibok wrote a letter to Zinser, who had returned to her school in North Carolina. “You were, of course, an innocent victim and unfortunate target for our collective anger,” he wrote. Zinser would take to wearing a necklace with a silver charm shaped in the hand sign for “I love you.”

That it had taken until 1988 for such a stunning expression of deaf pride was no accident. Like other disability group protests, the one by deaf students reflected a growing sense of oppression. It gave voice to anger bottled up over years of being seen as pitiful and sick. Social, demographic, and technological trends, too, had created the sense of an emerging deaf minority group in the 1980s. It was not until 1971 that a television show—an episode of Julia Child’s “The French Chef”—was captioned for deaf viewers. Television news first became accessible in 1973 with the titled and rebroadcast ABC’s “World News Tonight.” By the year of the Gallaudet protest, some 180 hours a week of network, cable, and public television shows were captioned. Deaf people, as a result, were more informed and felt more a part of the world. Even more important, the telephone was becoming accessible. In the 1970s and 1980s came the development of portable, affordable TDDs. Interpreting grew as a profession, as deaf people became more numerous and more independent. Before, interpreting had been left largely to the hearing children of deaf parents.

The disability rights movement, too, had led to new opportunity. More deaf children went to mainstream schools and colleges. Many at Gallaudet would see mainstreaming as a threat to the separate schools that fostered a sense of deaf identity, but by 1985, 44 percent of deaf students were in mainstream public schools and only 29 percent in deaf residential schools. Still, civil rights protections for the disabled often had limited applications for the deaf. Few schools and businesses interpreted these laws
to mean they needed to hire costly interpreters for deaf students or employees.

Once again, medicine helped spur a movement by saving people, who then would live with a disability: the number of school-age deaf children doubled as a result of the rubella epidemic of 1964–65. This new generation of deaf, born in the middle of the civil rights and Vietnam eras and molded by the new technology and laws for disabled people, had higher expectations for themselves. They were more militant, too, and talked of their deaf identity and culture. Some were studying at Gallaudet in 1988; others were among the young alumni who had bankrolled the protests.

Yet there was great irony in the fact that it should be Gallaudet students who would succeed in equating disability with civil rights: to them, deafness is not a disability but a culture—like being Jewish, Irish, or Navajo. Some deaf people make this distinction by spelling deaf with a capital D when referring to cultural deafness, and with a small d when talking about an auditory condition. Deaf people argue that they share their own complex language, American Sign Language, as well as a culture and a group history. Disability is a medical condition, argued the Gallaudet student leaders. Deaf people felt they had long been oppressed by those who saw their hearing loss as a disability or pathology in need of correction. In concert with the broader disability rights thinking, they argued that they had been held back by those who pitied their deafness and felt them, therefore, less capable. As John Limnidis, a hulking Gallaudet football player from Canada who played a small part in the movie Children of a Lesser God, would explain: “Deafness is not a handicap. It’s a culture, a language, and I’m proud to be deaf. If there was a medication that could be given to deaf people to make them hear, I wouldn’t take it. Never. Never till I die!”