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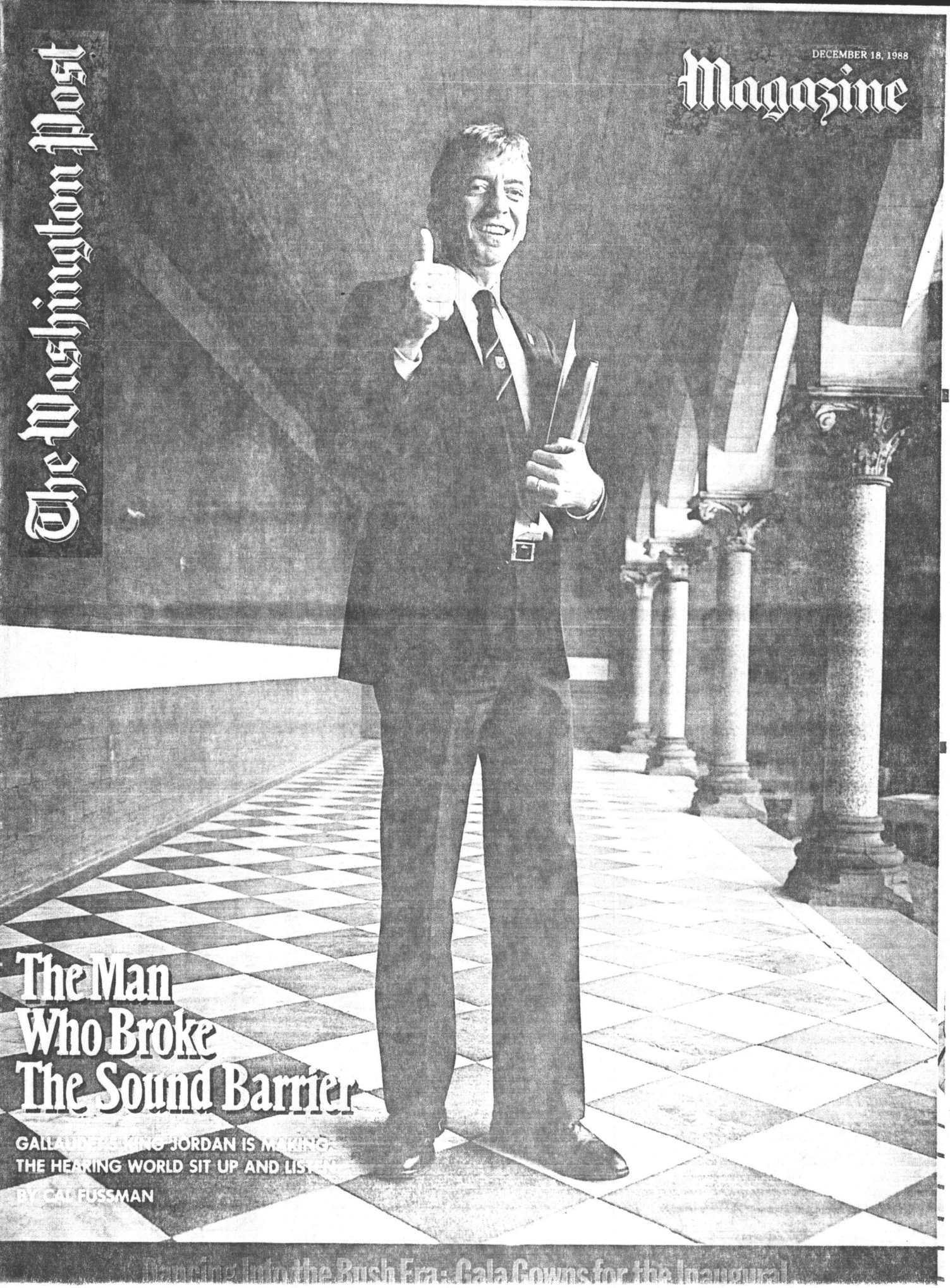


The Man Who Broke The Sound Barrier

GALLAUDET'S KING JORDAN IS MAKING THE HEARING WORLD SIT UP AND LIST...

BY CAL FUSSMAN

Dancing Into the Bush Era: Gala Gowns for the Inaugural

A FEW MONTHS AGO, KING JORDAN WAS A man. He had a wife he liked to sling an arm around and kiss, a teen-age son he'd sweat with on runs around Silver Spring, a teen-age daughter he sang '50s songs with as they washed the pots and pans. His friends weren't acquaintances, they were friends for life.

And then he became a god.

It's awkward being a god. People offer themselves to you. Like that woman who stepped out of the crowd of worshippers in Texas not long ago and timidly approached, her hands beginning to waggle. "I promised my sister that I would touch you," her fingers said. "Can I?"

King Jordan forgot. He responded as a man. "*Touch* me?" his hands said. "You can *hug* me."

He threw his arms around the woman and felt her body tremble with sobs. Then he looked over her shoulder and saw hundreds of hands reaching out to him.

Slowly, King Jordan was beginning to understand the bittersweetness of man becoming god. Every hug you give a stranger 2,000 miles away is one less hug you can give at home.

KING JORDAN, THE FIRST DEAF PRESIDENT IN THE 124-year history of Gallaudet University, was only a quarter-mile away from a nap. If he could just walk from the hors d'oeuvres tent through the auditorium to the car, he'd soon be home relaxing before that evening's inaugural ball in his honor.

How much sleep had he had all week? Better not to think about it. At midnight, when this day began, he was still working in his office.

He had finished at 2 a.m., awakened at 4:30, run around the sleepy campus with his Dalmatian, Rufus, showered, dressed and headed downtown for an interview on the "Today" show, arriving home just in time to greet guests for a breakfast reception.

Then had come the inauguration, as emotionally draining as it was moving. For centuries, the deaf had gone unheard. Then last March, students closed down Gallaudet, demanding the resignation of a hearing president and the selection of a deaf one. Finally, the deaf had everyone's ear.

Jordan's voice had cracked during his speech when he introduced his wife. He'd cried when a small deaf boy gave him a rose. A U.S. senator had called those who brought about the changes at Gallaudet his "heroes."

Afterward, friends, alumni and students had surrounded Jordan. His fatigue did not show; in fact, the animated glow that suffused his face when he used sign language made the 45-year-old look childlike. But now, after four hours . . . "King," his wife, Linda, was saying, tugging at his arm. "Let's go."

Soon she was far ahead. Pose for a picture, King! Sign an autograph! A hug! A security guard tried to wedge a path through the crowd, but each hand that reached out to King Jordan was a hand that had to be grasped. He was the leader of a movement now. How could he say no?

When he reached Linda near the car, she raised her arms in a signal that looked vaguely like that for a foot-

The Nons

King Jordan is surrounded by students before Gallaudet's homecoming game on Oct. 22. The sign they are making means "I love you."

nstop Hero

King Jordan, Gallaudet's first deaf president, is an inspiration to the disabled all over America. But he and his family are paying the price

By CAL FUSSMAN

Photographs by LUCIAN PERKINS

Above: Jordan, his wife, Linda, and their daughter, Heidi, enjoy a pizza on a rare night at home together. Right: Jordan runs in the Marine Corps Marathon with friend Paul Kelly, also from Gallaudet. Opposite page: A poster from the Gallaudet homecoming.

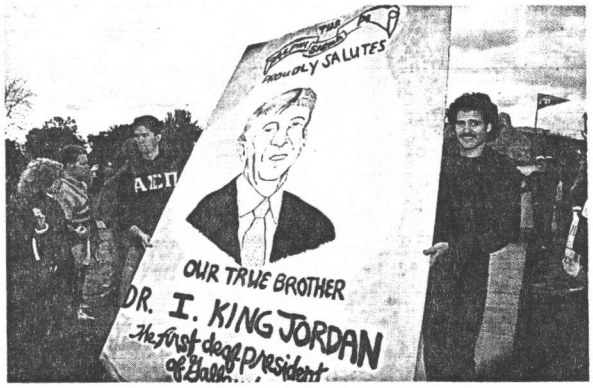
ball touchdown and mouthed the word "pah." It means, in deaf culture: *finally, success.* They slapped a high five.

Then King Jordan turned to a friend walking behind. "Hey, why don't you come to the house with us?"

"But there's only a couple of hours before the ball. Don't you want to rest?"

"If I go to sleep now," King Jordan said, "I'll never get up."

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, KING JORDAN COULD HEAR. He was riding his motorcycle from a part-time job in downtown Washington one night when a car heading in the opposite direction turned across his path. Over the



hood he was hurled, through the windshield. The rearview mirror cracked open his skull.

One of Jordan's friends rushed over from a block away. "When I saw him lying there, I started backpedaling," says Phil Moore. "Somebody took his pulse and thought he was dead. A priest was saying last rites."

His parents rushed from Glen Riddle, Pa., to his bedside at George Washington University Medical Center. They looked at him lying there, a hole bored in his throat to help him breathe, a broken jaw, a skull split in two. Then they looked at each other.

Work in a small-town factory all your life and what else is really important but your children? Meals were eaten as a family, evenings were for board games, Sundays for drives through the country and song.

Okay, everything was not idyllic. The boy had no direction. The guidance counselor in high school couldn't understand why he refused to take academic courses. King said he didn't want to go to college and insisted on sitting with the girls in stenography and typing. Maybe he didn't want to compete with his older sisters. Peggy always brought home straight A's, Betty rarely got a B. Homework? After school, King would jump on a trampoline.

Higher and higher he'd bounce, somersault and flip, flouting the laws of gravity. Freedom. Sure, he could get A's if he really wanted them. But why study when he could joke with all those girls in stenography? Why be forced into anything, why compromise his freedom? He never did a research paper. Never set foot in the library. And people loved him. He graduated with a C average and, the yearbook noted, one honor: class clown.

Perhaps his stint in the Navy would be the answer. Maybe he'd find direction there, working in the Pentagon—even if he was only a yeoman pouring coffee for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Yes, he could tolerate a little discipline, but after work . . . One snowy night, he and his friends tore the hood off an old car and used it to sled down a hill.

He would whip around D.C. on a motorcycle, feeling the wind run its fingers through his hair, staying up to dance and hoist brews until the clubs closed and the clock sent everyone home, then getting that trampoline glint in his eyes, refusing to obey the moon and sun and heading with his friends to a steak-and-eggs joint at 5 a.m. to tease the waitress, tear into the food, tell stories and laugh.

And now all those who loved him because he prized freedom and friends over promotions and career were pouring into the hospital, arguing their way past nurses to see him and being told that all that freedom had been narrowed to this:

To be a dead man. Or a vegetable.

"If you're praying," the neurosurgeon said. "Pray that he dies."

AN ODD THING HAPPENED. KING'S 19-YEAR-OLD brother entered the hospital room licking a lollipop just after surgeons had wired King's jaw shut, and King laughed out loud. He wasn't a dead man. He wasn't a vegetable. He was a living man who was deaf.

After 14 months, he was released from the hospital. No more motorcycles. No more car-hood toboggan rides. Now he had to reconsider his definition of freedom.

King hadn't minded trampolining away an afternoon

when he knew he could get A's. But without his hearing, how could he be certain? In the Navy, he hadn't minded pouring coffee for admirals when he *knew* he was as sharp as most of them. But now that his skull had been fractured and a cranial nerve severed, now that he would need a hearing aid just to receive vague vibrations of his own voice, now that he was *scared*—how could he be certain?

He enrolled at Gallaudet, and soon he was eating meals with an open book at the edge of his plate, falling asleep at night with an open book on his chest. "You would think the accident would have narrowed my world, limited me," Jordan says now. "It did the exact opposite. I started to pay attention to the world instead of taking it for granted."

He graduated with a degree in psychology and then entered a doctorate program at the University of Tennessee without the use of an interpreter. A master's dissertation was not necessary. He wrote one anyway. The teen-ager who had never set foot in the library now arrived there at 5 every morning. In four years, he received only one B. Every other grade was an A.

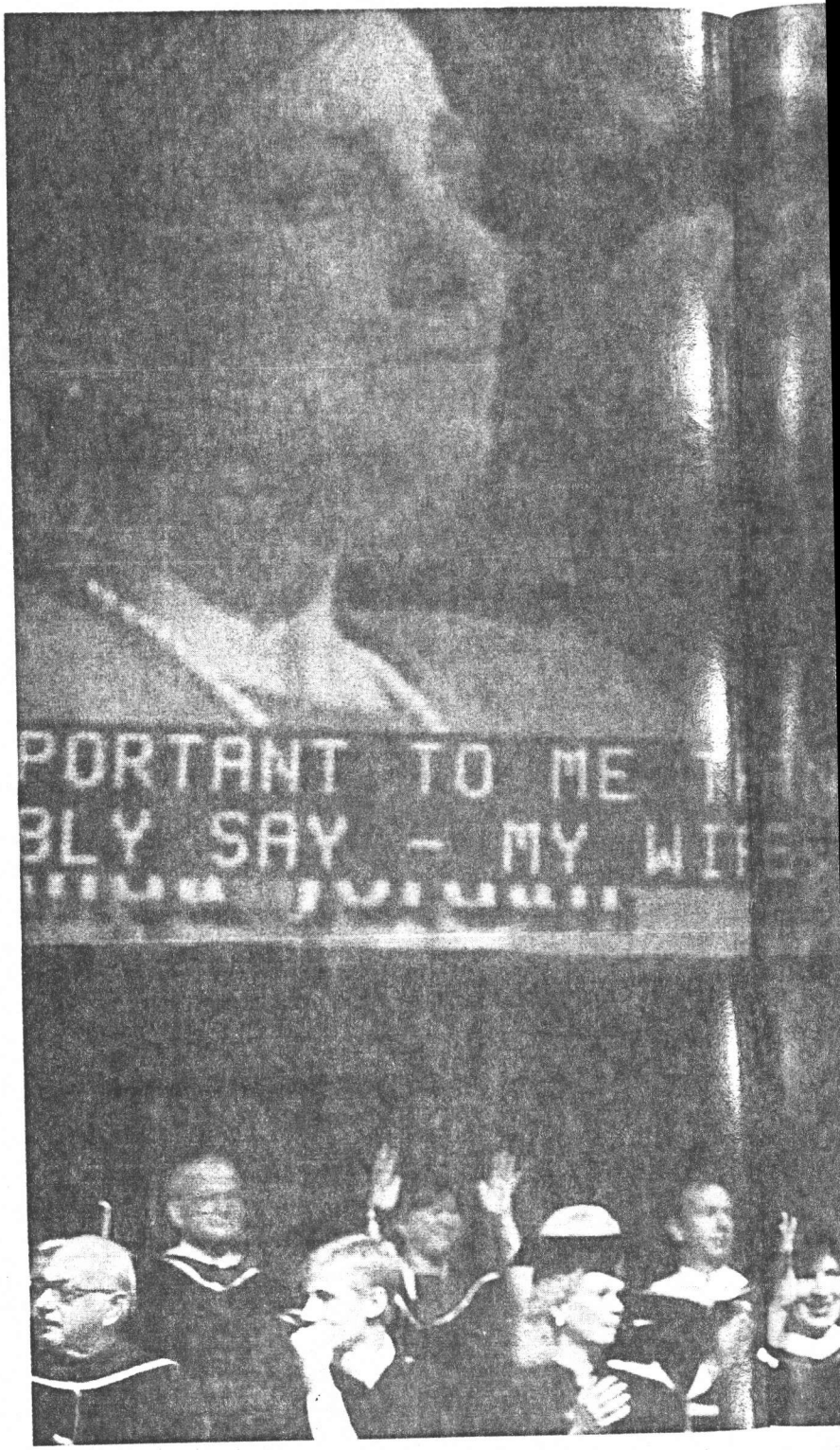
THERE'S KING WORKING IN THE GARDEN AT THE house in Silver Spring. Oh, that's King on top of the table reading Robert Burns' poetry during our annual Robbie Burns party. And there are Heidi and King Jr. up in the treehouse King built. There's King doing the Hula-Hoop.

Linda Jordan smiles nostalgically as she riffles through the family photos, remembering a time when she and her husband didn't have to plan months in advance to spend a Sunday with friends. It was Linda who helped King find a balance between steak-and-eggs and the card catalogue.

She met King at her part-time job in 1967, two years after the accident. Linda hadn't thought much about the problems that came with marrying a deaf person, but King had been warned against intermarriage by deaf friends. Love didn't matter. Day to day, they said, the deaf and hearing worlds simply couldn't coexist under the same roof.

Just what was it about hearing people that made them treat the deaf so strangely? They'd scream as if a deaf person could understand volume. Or mouth words with a slow, neanderthal exaggeration. Even King's mother, who knew him and loved him. She'd say a simple sentence like "I think it's difficult," and if King hadn't read her lips properly and asked her to repeat it, she'd say: "I . . . think . . . it's . . . *hard*."

Simplify things for them. *Help* them. It was like that statue sculpted 100 years ago at the university. Carved in bronze is Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, the man who brought sign language from Europe to America, dressed



in a long frock and frill-sleeved shirt, sitting with his arm around a young girl—his first deaf student. With one hand she clasps a book to her chest, and with the other she signs the first letter of the alphabet. Kindly, like a proud father, the hearing teacher looks down upon her. And the deaf girl gazes up at him, on her face a look of gratitude and helplessness.

Could it be that the helper, even with the best of intentions, was perpetuating the helplessness?

Deafness confounded the hearing. The waitress in a restaurant would describe the specials of the day, Linda would sign them to King, and then the waitress would turn to him, thinking that his wife was deaf.

Despite their confusion, it was always hearing people who made decisions for the deaf. It was like a scene in that play King Jordan later saw at Gallaudet. Bewildered deaf students were circled by a comical parade of hearing teachers, some speaking, some signing, others screaming through microphones or holding up printed messages. How could deaf people be educated by hearing teachers who couldn't agree on what and how to teach?

Aristotle said that those "born deaf become senseless and incapable of reason," and the march of civilization had done little to enlighten this perspective. And yet King Jordan found a life in Silver Spring that Aristotle

Opposite page: Jordan and his son, King Jr. Above: During Jordan's inaugural address on Oct. 21, closed-circuit television projected his wife's reactions and captioned his speech. Left: Tears came to his eyes at the ceremony when a deaf boy gave him a rose.

and his fellow Greeks would have smiled upon—tending equally to his body, soul and mind.

Students recall him as an excellent professor of psychology, one who would return papers with comments on every page and whose office door was always open. But his greatest asset was his ability to inspire. He once invited to dinner a student on the verge of dropping out. Twelve years later, the student wrote that Jordan's words that night had convinced him to stay. The student was now a PhD.

Take something from King Jordan and he grits his teeth and snatches back twice what he lost. At 32, he sprained an ankle and decided to start jogging to rehabilitate it. Soon he'd lost 40 pounds and was running in marathons.

Marathons? What about the annual JFK 50-mile race? Last year, the bottom half of his face froze midway through. The chill and wind made his lips feel as if they'd been pumped full of Novocaine, and his mind couldn't will open his jaw to drink. As he tilted a cup, fluid spurted down his chin and over his chest. Soon his jacket was a pane of ice. Yet he had to keep going, he had to set down one foot and then the next.

Was it the sense of achievement that kept him going? Or the fear of shame? Once, he'd started a marathon with the flu and quit after 11 miles. Quit! Could he ever forgive himself the look on his teenage son's face? And all those people along the path back to the start/finish line—were they staring at him? A quitter! Or was that just his imagination?

The flu—that's how it felt after 40 miles in the JFK race. The muscles in his arms, shoulders and thighs screamed, but he would not listen. Nor would he look at his watch. In order to finish this race that started over the snow on the Appalachian Trail in Virginia, cut into the wind along the C&O Canal and finished in pelting sleet in Williamsport, Md., he would have to run for more than eight consecutive hours.

"Stop and eat," begged his wife. She braked the car, hopped out, winced at the chill and for a moment ran alongside him. "Stop and drink, King. Just for a second."

"No," he shook his head into the wind. "If I stop, I'll never get started again."

That was how King Jordan moved at Gallaudet—resolutely. Assistant professor in 1973. Associate professor in 1977. Professor in 1982. Psychology department chairman in 1983. Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences in 1986.

But it was not easy being a deaf scholar who knew about DNA and psychological linguistics and could recite Lewis Carroll by memory when hearing people spoke to you as if reading aloud from a Dick-and-Jane primer, not believing a high level of scholarship was even possible for a deaf person. And deaf people, fearing it *was* possible, often resented you. It was like crabs being boiled. When one tried to climb out of the pot, the rest clawed it down.

Still, Jordan was ascending—not because he was a climber, but because he was a valuable human being. Both worlds embraced him. He could speak, so hearing people didn't feel discomfort around him. And the deaf saw that he was not interested in either crawling above or clawing down others. He was a bridge.

When he interpreted the expertise of a deaf soccer coach to hearing kids on a public league team, everyone felt comfortable.

At the Jordans' annual dessert party, a man wasn't judged by the way he made his sentences, but by the way he made his chocolate mousse.

KING JORDAN WAS WAITING IN HIS kitchen for the call. Any minute now. In his mind and in the minds of those throughout the deaf community, the position of Gallaudet president—vacated by Jerry C. Lee in December 1987—was about to be filled by one of two people: the deaf supervisor of the Louisiana School for the Deaf. Or King Jordan.

Surely the board of trustees knew of the students' candlelight vigil and the afternoon rally in support of hiring a deaf president; surely it felt the winds of change. The students at Gallaudet in March 1988 were not like their grandparents who worked in the typesetting rooms of newspapers and silently hid their anger and shame when over and over the hearing people they trained became their supervisors. Gallaudet had educated 95 percent of America's deaf college graduates. More than half had been recycled back into the deaf community as educators. But now some were proving themselves in the hearing world as lawyers, stockbrokers and corporate executives. After 124 years of hearing rule, wasn't it time for a deaf president?

The phone rang.

Elisabeth Ann Zinser—a vice chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro? How could the board have selected a hearing person whose first task as president would be to learn sign language?

The campus went berserk. Students marched through the streets, stopping traffic on their way to the Mayflower Hotel to confront the board of trustees. Police cars skidded in front of the crowd, officers jumped out with bullhorns and ordered everyone to halt. Bullhorns did not stop the deaf. Nothing stopped them that night.

At the Mayflower, students shouted down Board Chairwoman Jane Bassett Spilman. The next morning, they locked the campus gates. No class. That evening, television around the country showed mobs of students thrusting up clenched fists and chanting, "DEAF PRESIDENT NOW!"

The faculty voted to join the students. Vice President Bush, Sen. Robert Dole and presidential candidate Jesse Jackson came out in support of a deaf president. The students burned both Spilman and Zinser in effigy. Buses were hot-wired, moved in front of the campus gates and left immobile, with deflated tires.

Deaf students and the hearing board chairwoman faced off, arms crossed, each refusing to blink. While the deaf students marched on the Capitol and the administration struggled to maintain control, King Jordan remained at a distance. The gulf between the hearing world and the deaf world had grown so large that a bridge could not touch either side.

Then Board Chairwoman Spilman pulled Jordan aside two minutes before a press conference and asked him to publicly express his support for Zinser. Jordan stood in the back of the room while attention focused on the podium.

If he didn't support the decision, would he lose his job as dean, would he have to move his family and break up the life he loved? If he did support the decision, could he face the students at the campus gates? Could he face himself in the mirror?

He stood, dazed, trying to think. As a deaf person, he ached to cry out against the decision.

As a losing candidate, he knew any cry would be considered sour grapes.

And as a longtime administrator and loyal Gallaudet man, he realized any cry that incited the students to harm property or lives would break his career and his heart.

Before a room jammed with cameras and reporters, Spilman read a statement of support from the other deaf candidate, Harvey Corson, and then called Jordan to the podium.

He was bewildered. His face sagged. "Good morning, uh, afternoon. I've spent all morning meeting with Dr. Zinser and I met with Dr., uh, Mrs. Spilman." He composed himself. Then he supported the decision.

The deaf community was devastated. King Jordan's wife was stunned.

"That wasn't King up there," said mathematics professor Harvey Goodstein. "That was a tired man looking for a way out."

That night, a tired man couldn't sleep.

The next morning, he called a press

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KING JORDAN

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conference and, with his wife at his side, declared that he was with the students for a Deaf President Now!

THE MOVEMENT SWELLED. THE OLD walls collapsed. Zinser resigned. Spilman resigned. A deaf chairman of the board was named. And King Jordan became Deaf President Now!

Deaf people everywhere danced and hugged. Jordan and his wife and children celebrated with students and alumni into the night. The next morning, he awoke with a problem. He was the leader of a revolution. But he wasn't a revolutionary.

He didn't want to show the door to the hearing members of the board, as some of the deaf would have liked. He didn't want Gallaudet to become an island of proud deaf people. He wanted Gallaudet to be what he had been—a bridge between the two worlds. His task was a delicate one: to expand the hearing world's new consciousness of the deaf but not to allow the deaf world's zeal to race out of control.

He hurried from faction to faction, channeling euphoria, calming fears, healing wounds. It was not easy. In the wake of the revolution, many hearing members of the administration departed. When he filled the vacancy of dean of arts and sciences with a hearing man, rumors of a protest circulated on campus.

And then Jordan began to learn that hearing people were not applying for the opening of principal of the university's Kendall Demonstration Elementary School because they thought the job would surely go to a deaf person. The university faculty was two-thirds hearing and one-third deaf. There were many important positions to fill, including the university's chief academic office—provost. What would King Jordan do?

"I may identify a hearing person who in my gut I know is the best person. And then, there may be a deaf person who's good, but not as good. Politically, the deaf person is the answer. My gut may say the other person is the answer. What do I do? I'm in trouble no matter what I do.

"Everybody is looking at the provost," he sighs. "I need to look at the individuals and do what I think and feel is best for Gallaudet. I'll make a decision and go with it. Let people be mad. *I can live with that.*

"There is dissatisfaction with the fact that there are no academic deans who are deaf. I share that dissatisfaction. This university is for deaf people.

"I anticipate that there will be a lot of deaf people named to positions of responsibility and authority. But there will also be a lot of positions filled by hearing people. Revolutionaries want to see changes right away. Don't try to make me make changes in one month, two months or six. Look back five years from now, 10 years from now. Then you'll be able to see results. I need time."

That has always been the one thing King Jordan does not have—time. His job is two jobs. King Jordan, president, is overseeing a $70 million budget, establishing academic programs, maintaining accreditation, selecting administrators, raising private funds and making sure the university runs smoothly.

King Jordan, advocate, realizes that his constituency is far greater than 2,500 students, that his mandate stretches beyond the campus gates. Now, when he isn't in his office, he is either on Capitol Hill testifying before congressional subcommittees on behalf of all disabled people or jetting around America speaking for the deaf.

No matter how many hours he works, King Jordan never has enough time. And he knows it. His first executive decision was to change the brand of coffee in his presidential office—from decaffeinated to regular.

WHILE HEARING EARS WERE OPENED, he seized the moment, conveying to business leaders across the country that *You can't answer the phone* was no longer a valid excuse not to hire a deaf person. TDDs, keyboard computers that allowed the deaf to communicate by phone, were available. Corporations were hiring interpreters. Look! Even the hearing president of Boeing Computer Services no longer used the telephone. He could receive five messages at once on the computer and answer them when he pleased. The computer age was upon us, and there were thousands of deaf people prepared for it because they were already skilled at communicating by keyboard.

"Deaf people can do anything . . . except hear," King Jordan said over and over again. His message was to people on both sides of the bridge. *Why work hard if I won't have a chance to succeed?* could no longer be an excuse for the deaf.

He didn't have to speak or sign any of this. His presence was the message.

As he boarded an elevator in Rochester, N.Y., a woman clutched her chest. "It's him!" she exclaimed.

He never imagined he'd be lifted to the level of a god. While it made him laugh, the accompanying responsibility made him shiver.

Columbus, Providence, Utica, Memphis, Fresno . . .

Cameras, speeches, lines, hugs and tears.

His schedule became frenetic, his life became theirs. People wore King Jordan pictures on their buttons and his autographed T-shirt on their chests. How could he tell them no?

"If I fail," he told himself, "all deaf people fail. If I stop, I'll never get going again." So he kept running, putting one foot in front of the other . . .

In the first six months of his presidency, the Jordans had only five family dinners. After a series of trips and 16-hour work days, he was greeted in his office by his daughter. "Hi! My name is Heidi Jordan," she signed. "It's nice to meet you."

Arts and Sciences Dean Skip Williams no longer sent friendly messages to Jordan's computer. "There are 50 there already," he figured. "Why add to his load?"

And friend Joe Fritsch didn't come by on weekends anymore now that Jordan was either traveling or working. "King becoming president was great for the deaf world and for Gallaudet," Fritsch said, "but I don't see my friend."

THE DAY WAS OVER. HE'D AWAKENED IN darkness, run around the cold streets of Rochester, packed, flown and driven to Flint, Mich., for his 11 o'clock speech to students at the Michigan School for the Deaf, shaken hands, signed autographs and given interviews, attended the Rotary Club luncheon and the afternoon meeting with teachers, gone to a dinner reception with Gallaudet alumni, and now, after 9 p.m., he was weaving back to his hotel room to rest before starting over the next day.

He entered the lobby. Two people threw out their arms. Old friends from way back—Navy days. They hadn't seen him in 17 years, but when they heard he was in town they had driven three hours to say hello.

They headed to the hotel bar to knock down a beer. Soon they were laughing at those old car-hood toboggan rides, and with each memory the weight of work and travel lifted from King Jordan and his face looked younger and younger.

At 2 a.m., one of the friends smiled sadly. "Guess it's time to be going . . ."

King Jordan looked at his watch and sighed. Suddenly, an impish look lit his eyes. "Hey, I know!" he said. "Let's go out and find a steak-and-eggs joint . . ."

"You know," he would say the next day, "I'm beginning to become aware. I've traveled so much and worked so hard that I've cheated my family and friends—and probably endangered my health. But I can't stop now. I have to do this. The timing is everything. I'll only give it a year like this. Only a year . . ."

As King Jordan spoke, his secretaries in Washington were accepting speaking engagements for the autumn of 1990. ■