

# NTID Marks 40th Birthday

*Democrat and Chronicle* - June 14, 2005

Published in Rochester, NY's Democrat and Chronicle

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Forty years ago today, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed his name on a bill to create the National Technical Institute of the Deaf. That simple action forever changed the educational options for deaf students, and the choice of RIT to host NTID has helped the Rochester area become home to one of the largest deaf populations in the country.

NTID, one of eight colleges of Rochester Institute of Technology, saw 70 students in its first class in 1968, taking their classes alongside hearing students.

Some 5,500 students have graduated from NTID since its inception; 1,200 students attend the college or receive services through NTID today.

"At the time of the legislation, the circumstances for the deaf population in the country were not very bright," said Robert Frisina, NTID's director from 1967 to 1979. "There were three principal forces at play: restricted access to post-secondary education, employment history of the deaf, and the vastly changing world of technology. If something wasn't done at that point, the deaf likely wouldn't be contributing to the economic or social progress of the country."

In the mid-1960s, Frisina said, fewer than 1 percent of all college-age deaf individuals were enrolled in secondary education. Of those employed, many held unskilled positions, with a virtual absence of technical and managerial positions.

"It has meant the world to RIT in terms of broadening the educational experience for all of our students," said RIT President Albert Simone. "Folks that are deaf or hard of hearing have every bit of potential as hearing people. Our hearing population has learned that (deaf or hard-of-hearing) students can be the best students in the class, the best athletes on the field and the most fun to have at parties."

Simone has learned sign language and has signed his commencement addresses, demonstrating his respect and admiration of deaf students at RIT.

That awareness of the needs of deaf education has evolved over the years. When NTID started offering classes, the school recruited hearing children who had deaf parents to serve as interpreters.

As a result of the need for more interpreters, NTID began its own interpreter training program, the first in the world, in 1969.

About 100 students are enrolled in the interpreter program each year.

Sign language interpreters continue to be in demand in Rochester — with 120 working at RIT alone. Deaf students have been vocal about not being allowed to take courses at RIT when they'd like to because scheduling an interpreter could be a problem.

Frisina, who will be honored today with a garden at NTID that will bear his name, says creating NTID was a great experiment. He recruited Robert Panara, a highly regarded educator at Gallaudet University, a college for the deaf in Washington, to become NTID's first instructor. Panara, himself deaf, "was brought in early so he could acquaint the (hearing) student groups what deaf students do. He was a real good model for the students to know."

Panara, 84, of Henrietta, calls NTID "the great adventure" into uncharted waters. "I felt confident that the good ship NTID would

make its way through stormy waters."

Alan Hurwitz, NTID's current dean and CEO, joined the staff two years later. Now, he oversees NTID's \$68 million budget. Of that, more than \$55 million is approved by Congress. Of NTID's 544 employees, close to 20 percent are deaf or hard of hearing.

"The campus has grown to be a beautiful and accessible place for deaf, hard of hearing and hearing students to come to study, work and live together," Hurwitz said. "RIT has become more diverse than ever before. RIT is a lot more deaf friendly than in the past."

But he admits maintaining the enrollment can be challenging. When NTID was formed, 80 percent of deaf children attended a residential school for the deaf. Today, More than 80 percent of deaf high schools students now attend traditional schools, making it harder to market to them.

Eyob Zerayesus was a junior in high school when an NTID recruiter came to his high school in Columbus, Ohio. Now 21, he received his accounting associate's degree from NTID and will be a second-year marketing student at RIT in the fall.

"I really like the fact they have deaf and hearing integrated on campus," he said. "There's a big deaf community here, people from different states, which is really cool. You get to meet people from all over. And this mixing of hearing and deaf helps people to understand different cultures."

NTID Student Congress President Elizabeth Sorkin, 23, said: "All NTID did was open doors for me, and I have endless thanks. Coming from a mainstreamed program (I was the only deaf student in high school) and going to NTID helped me learn who I was. I have goals and dreams now."

Her father, Ken Sorkin, of Maryland, graduated from NTID in 1974. He retired after working for 29 years as a computer technologist for the U.S. Geological Survey.

"I'm thankful for the experience I had at school to help me get my job," he said.

Although problems getting enough interpreters to cover classes remain, and unemployment nationally remains higher for the deaf than their hearing peers, NTID has helped level the playing field.

"It's been an interesting development and we're all pleased with the way it's ended," Frisina said. "The kids, they're making it in the general world, which is all we wanted. It's been accomplished."

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