

Protesters Vow to Keep University Barricaded

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Gallaudet students and faculty say they aren't moving until the new president resigns. Some say she's a bad fit to lead the school for the deaf.

By Moises Mendoza, Times Staff Writer

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WASHINGTON — Nearly 20 years ago, massive student and faculty protests at Gallaudet University led to the appointment of I. King Jordan as the first deaf president in the long history of the nation's only university for the deaf.

Now student and faculty protesters are demanding the resignation of the woman chosen by the school to succeed Jordan in January.

The months-long demonstrations against the appointment of current university provost Dr. Jane K. Fernandes, who is also deaf, escalated this week as students barricaded the campus in northeast Washington to express their anger over a selection process that some called discriminatory.

Although the controversy over the university's choice of leadership is a relatively new one, behind it lie long-simmering divisions within the deaf community over the meaning of deafness.

The campus shutdown began Wednesday, as protesters in blue T-shirts that said "Unity for Gallaudet" banged on drums while snaking a long yellow rope across the school's main entrance, blocking traffic. Joined by university faculty members, alumni and parents, the students said they would not move until Fernandes resigned and school officials promised not to punish the protesters.

They were still there late Thursday night, signing excitedly as eight District of Columbia motorcycle police officers eyed them from across the street.

"We will occupy this university until they reopen the presidential search process," said graduate student Ryan Commerson, who described himself as a protest leader. "If they decide to use force to move us, that would show another form of oppression."

Gallaudet's board of trustees selected Fernandes as president in May after Jordan announced he would retire at the end of 2006. Students began protesting immediately, and Fernandes received a no-confidence vote from the faculty.

Although Fernandes grew up deaf, she was raised mostly around hearing people and didn't begin learning American Sign Language — the preferred mode of communication at Gallaudet — until her 20s.

Some of her harshest critics have questioned her commitment to what they call deaf culture.

In the past, she has said that Gallaudet should include "all kinds of deaf people."

Some protesters have interpreted that to mean Fernandes wants to reduce the prevalence of sign language or increase deaf people's reliance on technology such as cochlear implants. Others have questioned her signing fluency.

There have been arguments that Gallaudet needs a president who has been deaf from birth, said Lawrence Fleischer, chair of the deaf studies department at Cal State Northridge. "People want to see a leader there who really belongs to the community and belongs to them," Fleischer said. "Dr. Fernandes didn't have contact with the deaf community or deaf schools until she went to college."

Fernandes did not respond to requests for interviews. She was quoted in the spring as saying that protesters questioned whether she was "deaf enough" for the job.

And Jordan, who supported Fernandes' appointment, has referred to the protests as "identity politics" and said in May: "We are squabbling about what it means to be deaf."

This week Fernandes insisted she would not step down. "Although the current situation is serious, if I abandoned my commitment at this point, which I have no intention of doing, it would only become worse for the university, in general, and for future boards of trustees and presidents," she wrote in a statement issued Wednesday.

University spokeswoman Mercy Coogan said administrators were unlikely to use force to disperse the protesters, although Jordan did not rule out arrest or suspension.

"If there is a confrontation, the dissenters will have caused it," Jordan said in a written statement. "They must take full responsibility for their actions, including possible suspension and arrest."

Some student protesters say the demonstrations are not just about deaf culture; they say Fernandes has a divisive and confrontational leadership style.

The presidential selection process was discriminatory, the protesters say, because it moved too quickly, included only white finalists and didn't include enough input from the deaf community.

Commerson said that Gallaudet — a mostly white school located in a predominantly black and low-income neighborhood — has serious racial problems that need to be addressed. He also charged that even deaf people face discrimination at the university.

Jesse Thomas, a junior from Philadelphia, said university police used excessive force and didn't use interpreters during a confrontation at Hall Memorial Building last week. And, protesters said, university officials were slow to provide them with interpreters, making it difficult for students to communicate with the press.

Several leaders of the deaf community have worried that the controversy at Gallaudet is affecting people beyond the campus and possibly damaging the entire community.

The National Assn. for the Deaf took the issue so seriously that it issued six open letters to protesters and university administrators urging them to resolve their disagreement.

"People look up to Gallaudet University because it's a pillar of the deaf community," said T. Alan Hurwitz, dean of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology. Hurwitz added that he thought the controversy had more to do with the selection process than a split over deaf culture.

As Coogan stood outside the university calling for dialogue and telling students to keep their cool, protesters insisted that they were not moving and their demands were nonnegotiable.

"New leadership is mandatory," said Gallaudet alumna Suzy Rosen Singleton, who said she had come from Bethesda, Md., to support the protesters. "Why on Earth does Fernandes think she can still lead?"

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