

Breaking the Sound Barrier

A large, bold, black graphic of the word "Yes!" with a thick exclamation point. The letters are slightly slanted and have a hand-drawn, energetic feel.

May, 2000

Issue #8

Growing up in the United States, from teacher through to becoming Chief Executive Officer for the NTID, Dr. Robert Davila has not allowed profound deafness to affect his career.

Being first has been the rule, not the exception, throughout Dr. Robert Davila's career. Through years of persistence and dedication, he has earned recognition as a leader and innovative educator by directing national programs and causing positive change for people with disabilities.

One of many career highlights for Dr. Davila, a native of San Diego, California, USA, came when he was appointed by President George Bush and confirmed by the U.S. Senate to the position of assistant secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Dr. Davila is the first and only deaf person to hold this coveted post.

"Being the person selected to lead more than 750,000 professionals in special education and rehabilitation was a major accomplishment for me," said Dr. Davila. "It was truly the high point of my professional life, for which I am very proud."

Dr. Davila's efforts resulted in new policies for teaching deaf children. He secured increased funding for interpreter training, teacher and counselor training, and research and development. Twenty-five new Research & Development projects on American Sign Language were initiated during his term. Dr. Davila managed a \$5 billion budget to support special education and vocational rehab programs, monitored states for compliance, improved parent and family education, and prioritized key programs.

After completing his term as assistant secretary, Dr. Davila served as Headmaster of the New York School for the Deaf at White Plains, becoming the first deaf person to head the school in its 175-year history, and was the first deaf person to be appointed to the school's board of trustees. He also taught there early in his career.

Now serving as the first deaf Chief Executive Officer of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), a college of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), Dr. Davila, 67, has established an efficient and effective management team. Since his arrival to NTID just three years ago, access services to deaf students within all of RIT has greatly increased, as well as co-op and employment placements.

Davila's team secured \$11.5 million to bolster scholarship funds, enhance technology, and improve support programs during NTID's first fund raising campaign.

"It is my number one goal to provide scholarship support to our students," Dr. Davila said. "We want to do all we can to maintain an affordable, quality education for our students."

Dr. Davila is also responsible for creating unprecedented international collaboration to improve education and opportunities for deaf people. Under his leadership, NTID has established relationships with deaf educators around the world. Recent visits by professionals from Hungary, China, Japan, Ireland and Sweden all have one thing in common. They want to learn how NTID has experienced enormous success in educating deaf and hard-of-hearing people in a variety of technical programs, as well as prepare them for meaningful jobs.

"These partnerships demonstrate NTID's mission to prepare deaf people to live and work in a rapidly changing global community," he said. "We have much to offer the world, and we have much to learn from our colleagues around the globe."

He was elected president of the convention of American Instructors of the Deaf, becoming the first deaf president in the 125-year history of the organization. Subsequently, Dr. Davila was elected president of the Conference of Educational Administrators Serving the Deaf and the Council on Education of the Deaf, which is a consortium of the leading professional education organizations serving deaf people. Dr. Davila shares with Dr. Richard Brill, a renown-hearing educator and leader, the distinction of being the only people ever elected president to these three major education organizations in deafness.

Dr. Davila has been the featured speaker in numerous national and international conferences and forums. He was invited as the keynote speaker to both, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf and the World Federation of the Deaf. He has traveled throughout the world at the invitation of governments and national deaf organizations.

At eight years of age, as a result of spinal meningitis, Davila became profoundly deaf literally overnight. His widowed mother, a Spanish-speaking migrant worker raising eight children, made the difficult decision to send him to a residential school for the deaf 500 miles away. There, Davila was suddenly faced with learning American Sign Language and English.

Advancing through his educational studies, Davila would then graduate from Gallaudet University, with a B.A. in Education, Hunter College with a M.S. in Special Education, and Syracuse University with a Ph.D. in Educational Technology.

"Access to a quality education has made all the difference in my life," Davila explained. "I was able to get into a good program almost immediately after losing my hearing. I had teachers and staff who took a personal interest in me and helped me in many ways. Without a quality education, I could never have achieved what I have."

Dr. Davila believes that deafness, while a disability, is what you make of it.

"For me, it has always been an inconvenience - never the biggest issue in my life," he said. "Growing up in a family concerned with food, money, and shelter - deafness was a minor problem."

Millions of deaf and disabled people throughout the world benefit and are inspired by Dr. Davila's pioneering efforts to improve their lives. His personal ambition is to create a world where deaf people will eventually experience full access to all aspects of independent living and that deaf people will be judged by the quality of their character and abilities.

Dr. Davila's efforts are not limited to deafness. At a time when one might think he is looking toward retirement, his tireless efforts to help others prevail.

Davila's eyes are set toward a "future when all people, whatever their special identity or distinguishing characteristics, will have equal access to opportunities in education, training, employment, and community life...this is the vision that has guided my own personal and professional outlook.

"We have made remarkable progress, but much more remains to be done," he added.