

The Italian Deafness Program and Gallaudet: A Strategic Partnership that Changes the World for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People

I. King Jordan, Ph.D.
Istituto Statale Del Sordi Di Roma
Rome, Italy
May 22, 2006

Good morning, it is a distinct pleasure and honor for me to be here today to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Italian Deafness Program. Gallaudet University has been fortunate to be a partner in this venture from day one.

I offer my thanks to President Maragna for graciously allowing this event to take place here. I am also happy to see Gherardo La Francesca with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the President of the Italian Fulbright Commission and Mark Smith with the United States Embassy and Vice-President of the Italian Fulbright Commission with us this morning. Gallaudet is appreciative of your support of this very important program.

Of course, I cannot mention the Italian Fulbright Commission without recognizing the two people who have been instrumental to the success of the Deafness Program, Ms. Laura Miele who is the director and Dr. Elena Radutzky who is the coordinator and external advisor for the Deafness Program.

I am pleased to see that President Ida Collu of the Ente Nazionale Sordomuti (ENS) is with us. The involvement of this national organization serving deaf people is important to this program's success.

Finally, I would be seriously remiss if I did not recognize my good friend and long-time supporter of Gallaudet University and the Deafness Program, Mr. Roberto Wirth. Roberto is a Gallaudet alumnus and a member of our Board of Associates.

Gallaudet is the world's only university whose mission is educating deaf and hard of hearing students. This unique mission is spelled out in our charter that was authorized by the United States Congress in 1864. That charter was signed by President Abraham Lincoln. We were fortunate that there were some wise people in Congress who understood the importance of establishing an institution of higher learning that would allow deaf people to have access to a visual language and earn college degrees.

The history of the American deaf community is filled with deaf leaders who have changed the world for deaf and hard of hearing people. I am proud to say that the large majority of those leaders are Gallaudet alumni.

Gallaudet has also made an impact worldwide. We had our first international student in the 1880's, about 120 years ago. I would like to share with you some recent examples of international alumni who have had a significant impact on the lives of others, not just those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Dr. Yerker Andersson of Sweden was the first secretary-general of the World Federation of the Deaf. As secretary-general, he worked hard to promote the rights and well being of deaf people all over the world. He was the first deaf person to speak at the United Nations using sign language.

Mr. Gary Malkowski of Canada was elected as a member of the Ontario Provincial Parliament. During his tenure as MPP, he represented all his constituents well, not just those who were deaf.

Wilma Newhoudt-Druchen from South Africa spoke at Gallaudet's commencement more than ten years ago. During her speech, she talked about the oppressions she worked to overcome in her homeland because she was a black deaf woman. She said she was ready to go home and fight for her right to vote in an election. I am happy to tell you that today Wilma not only can vote in an election, she is a member of the South African Parliament!

This list would not be complete without Roberto Wirth. His excellent stewardship of Hotel Hassler is a wonderful example of how deaf people can do anything except hear. He serves as an inspiration for many business students at Gallaudet.

Roberto also demonstrates what it means to be a good citizen. In 2004, he created the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus to benefit the lives of deaf and deaf-blind children, concentrating on preschool readiness and employment readiness with the great motto: pronti per la scuola e pronti per il lavoro (ready for school and ready for work).

The Deafness Program has been made possible not only by the Mason Perkins and Roberto Wirth fund grants, but it has enjoyed the constant support of the Italian Fulbright Commission that is critical to the program's many accomplishments.

For many years, I have had the pleasure of meeting deaf people from Italy who come to Gallaudet through this program to tap into our wide array of resources relating to deafness and leadership. Italian participants in this program meet many of our faculty, staff and students and learn from the experts in their respective fields whether it be education, leadership, government, administration and other important topics. What is especially important is that the Italian Deafness Program participants have an opportunity to live and learn in a university environment where they have direct communication access.

I know that many deaf students face challenges in trying to get a college education in Italy. There are not enough qualified interpreters to meet the demand and there are not enough support services available for deaf students. This is true in many other countries as well.

As this program continues, it will motivate more deaf Italians to go to college and get their degrees. As more deaf people in Italy go to college, you can be sure there will be more interpreters and better programs and services for deaf students.

Gallaudet has also benefited greatly from this program. Italian students who come to Gallaudet help enrich our academic environment by bringing a different perspective and culture to our campus.

Through the years, many of our faculty and staff have come to Italy to work with deaf people. Gallaudet always strives to provide deaf Italians with the right leadership tools so that they become empowered to improve their own lives as well as the lives of others who are deaf and hard of hearing.

While we have had many people from Gallaudet participate throughout the years. I must recognize Dr. Ceil Lucas for her commitment to this program. Ceil was the co-founder of the project in 1985 and her enthusiasm and devotion to this program has always been strong. People inside and outside of Gallaudet often tell me how lucky we are to have Ceil in this program. No one has to tell me that, I know how important she has been to this program's extraordinary success.

You will have an opportunity to learn about what we do at Gallaudet later this afternoon when some people from Gallaudet lead a roundtable discussion.

Of course, all this did not happen just on our side of the Atlantic. I must recognize the wonderful work of Dr. Radutzky and Ms. Miele in making this program successful. I know that it is their dedication and passion for this program that allows us to be here today to celebrate the program's 20th anniversary.

Elena's dedication to the Deafness Program is remarkable. It is remarkable because she had the vision and the conviction necessary to make this program a reality. She started this journey alone two decades ago in a country thousands of miles away from Gallaudet, divided by an ocean. Since then, she has steadily gained friends and supporters for the program. Elena believes strongly in this program and she has been able to get others to believe in it too. Thank you Elena.

Now, it is my pleasure to present an award to the Italian Fulbright Commission and its director, Laura Miele, for their outstanding contribution to scholarship in the area of deafness in Italy and the United States, and for giving so many Gallaudet professors the opportunity to come to Italy and give intensive enrichment courses to deaf and hard of hearing professionals who work with deaf and deaf-blind children.

It is evident that this extraordinary partnership Gallaudet has with the Fulbright Commission benefits many people. As our collaborative efforts continue, I am confident that we will see deaf people of Italy continue to make strides and contribute to the well-being of Italian citizens.

As the program continues to thrive, I know you will eventually see more Roberto Wirths. There will be more deaf lawyers, actors, professors, corporate executives, doctors, and yes, someday you will have a deaf member of the Italian Parliament.

Thank you.