CLASS OF 2020 AND 2021

COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES

MAY 14, 2021 | VIRTUALLY 2 P.M. ET
VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENTS FOR
THE CLASS OF 2020 AND THE CLASS OF 2021

MAY 14, 2021 | 2 P.M. ET  GALLAUDET.EDU/COMMENCEMENT

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LETTER FROM PRESIDENT CORDANO

Dear graduates:

Congratulations!!

This is not the commencement we had hoped for you.

Last year when we postponed commencement, we expected to be back soon, to be able to gather and celebrate in May 2021 for both the classes of 2020 and 2021. As we are all well aware, a year later, COVID-19 is still with us. In order to keep our community safe, we need to hold this commencement virtually.

You have experienced many disappointments. Your junior and senior years were abruptly ended. A time of togetherness and goodbyes and creating memories... gone. You dissipated all over the United States and around the world in order to protect each other.

You adapted and adjusted, often with significant sacrifice. Different time zones, juggling family life and school work, so many challenges. But you finished strong. You defined what it means to be #bisonstrong.

The future is bright. It is bright because of you.

“Class of 2020 and Class of 2021” are unique labels that will carry significance for the rest of your lives.

People will know what you have endured. They will see your graduation date and immediately recognize that you are someone that persists. That you are adaptable. That you can endure.

This past year has also shown how inequitable our world is. Our systems and society discriminate and leave people behind. This must change. It is on all of us to create a world that is equitable and without prejudice. In your communities, your workplaces- always keep equity at the top of your mind. Recognize who is not being included and build systems that create equity, not discrimination.

Use your determination and unique gifts to impact the world around you. Continue to be the leaders, innovators, and changemakers we know you are.

Thank you for the light you have brought to Gallaudet. You are so valued, and you are so needed. We are proud of you. I look forward to watching your future and know you will do incredible work. Congratulations!

Our faculty and staff believed in you, challenged you and supported you while you were students. They valued each of you as individuals and as members of our community. They instilled in you the importance of citizenship and for caring for yourselves and each other. They worked with you to develop your mind, heart, and spirit. Now, take what you have learned from them, bring it out into the world, and share this with everybody!

Sincerely,
President
Roberta J. Cordano
This year’s commencement ceremony celebrates the graduation of both the Class of 2020 and the Class of 2021 students.

Last year, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, the Class of 2020 elected to defer their commencement to the year 2021, in hopes of an in-person celebration, and hosted a virtual conferring of degrees ceremony instead. As the end of the spring 2021 semester approached, it was clear that Gallaudet University had to prioritize the safety of our Gallaudet students and community. Gallaudet elected to host commencement virtually for both the class of 2020 and 2021 this year.

Charles CJ Jones

Charles “CJ” Jones will be keynote speaker at this year’s Commencement for the Classes of 2020 and 2021. He also will receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

CJ is a world-renowned Black Deaf performing artist, and a leading advocate and champion for the inclusion and representation of people with disabilities at all levels in all forms of media. During his illustrious career, he has been an actor, producer, director, writer, entertainer, emcee, storyteller, mime, American Sign Language song-signer, motivational speaker, African and Cajun drummer, dancer, rapper, and ASL and Deaf culture consultant. CJ played Joseph, the caring father to Ansel Elgort’s Baby in Baby Driver, and will reprise that role in Baby Driver 2. He also created the Na’vi Sign Language for James Cameron’s Avatar 2, due out in late December 2022.

CJ established Sign World Studios and its nonprofit subsidiary, SignLight, to promote the inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing people in cinema.
Aashni Kamra
Undergraduate

Aashni Kamra, from Los Angeles, California, graduated magna cum laude with University Honors from Gallaudet in 2020 with bachelor’s degrees in biology and public health. She also holds a bachelor’s degree in sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles. As a research assistant in the Department of Science, Technology, and Mathematics, Aashni studied Rett’s Disease protein mutations using computational chemistry. She presented her research at several conferences, including the University of Maryland at Baltimore County Undergraduate Research Symposium in Chemical and Biological Sciences. She served as a liaison leader for Gallaudet’s COVID-19 Student Response Team. In her Honors capstone, she investigated satisfaction rates of Deaf mothers, comparing hospital and home births. Her research touched a largely marginalized community and contributed to ideas on how to improve health outcomes for this group. Aashni gave a presentation and led a panel discussion at the United Nations Federation of Inclusive and Adolescent Responsive Health Services. She was an active member of the National Society of Leadership and Success.

Aashni is a post-baccalaureate research fellow at the National Cancer Institute in the National Institutes of Health. In her work, she focuses on understanding the genetics behind metastatic breast cancer. She has been an invited speaker for several panels, and has further realized her passion for providing effective scientific and healthcare intervention within marginalized communities.

Hunta Williams
Graduate

Hunta Williams is a Black DeafBlind Transman. He hails from New York City. He attended four different deaf schools and graduated from Lexington School for the Deaf. Hunta received a Bachelor of Science degree in culinary management at The Art Institutes International Minnesota. He furthered his education at the graduate level by earning his master’s degree in sign language education from Gallaudet University in 2020. Professionally, Hunta has worked as an American Sign Language teacher, tutor, sign model, Deaf interpreter, DeafBlind interpreter, and sign language specialist.

Hunta has put his professional skills to use in the community, providing his expertise on topics such as individual and disability rights advocacy, linguistic and cultural competency, sensitivity, and awareness. As if he is not busy enough, Hunta remains active in the community. He is currently board chair for the 20% Theatre Company Twin Cities, and serves on the 20% Theatre ASL Access Committee. Additionally, Hunta works tirelessly with the Transgender Equity Council and within the transgender community.
Lily Weir
Undergraduate

Lily Weir experienced severe language deprivation until seventh grade, when she was introduced to American Sign Language. She graduated from the University High School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing program in Irvine, California in 2017, and came to Gallaudet the following fall. A Deaf Studies major, she was on the Dean’s List every semester, received a National Society of Leadership and Success award, and was a winner in the Microsoft ASL + AI: A Future Casting Competition.

Lily has worked as a Department of Public Safety welcome ambassador, a Maguire Welcome Center student ambassador, and a remote camp counselor. She completed an internship at the National Association for the Deaf, assisting the Policy Counsel. This past year, while studying remotely, she worked as a school substitute at the Learning Center for the Deaf in Framingham, Massachusetts. She is now an elementary classroom assistant. This fall, she will begin to study for her master’s degree in language and literacy, with a focus in American Sign Language and Deaf Studies at Boston University. Lily is a strong advocate for American Sign Language, and seeks to work with deaf children and their families to end language deprivation.

Nageena Ahmadzai
Graduate

Nageena Ahmadzai will receive a dual master’s degree in international development and sign language education. Originally from the Bay Area in California, she earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology with an emphasis in social work at California State University at Northridge. She came to Washington, D.C., for an employment opportunity; later, she decided to enroll in Gallaudet’s graduate program.

A first-generation Afghan-American Deaf woman, Nageena has always had a passion for human rights advocacy, emphasizing sign language rights, gender equity and social inclusion, inclusive education, and disability rights. She acknowledges how blessed she is to have access to education, language, gender equity, and self-advocacy. Many countries, including Afghanistan, do not allow Deaf children, girls, and women to obtain an education. In particular, these countries create barriers for Deaf children to acquire language at an early age. Nageena is determined to work to break down these barriers. She is currently an intern with the Advancing Higher Education for Afghanistan’s Development (AHEAD) program at FHI360, a nonprofit human development organization.

Nageena firmly believes that her multidimensional identities as an Afghan-American Deaf woman have genuinely shaped her to this day. She hopes to continue advocating for human rights in her future endeavors and share her story to inspire young Afghan deaf girls and young Deaf individuals globally.
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DISTINGUISHED FACULTY

Dr. Daniel Lundberg
2019

Dr. Carolyn McCaskill
2020

Emertius 2020

Dr. Sharon N. Barnartt
Department of History, Philosophy, Religion and Sociology

Dr. Lynne E. Blennerhassett
Department of Psychology

Dr. Patrick J. Brice
Department of Psychology

Dr. Margery S. Miller
Department of Psychology

Dr. Janet L. Pray
Department of Social Work (posthumously)

Dr. Barbara J. White
Department of Social Work

Emertius 2021

Dr. Kathleen S. Arnos
Department of Science, Technology, and Mathematics

Dr. Roger L. Beach
Department of Counseling

Dr. Barbara D. Hardway
Department of English

Dr. Robert D. Harrison
Department of Art, Communication, and Theatre

Dr. Jane D. Hurst
Department of History, Philosophy, Religion and Sociology (posthumously)

Dr. Fat C. Lam
Department of Science, Technology, and Mathematics
Charles CJ Jones

Mr. Charles “CJ” Jones is blessed with one of the most precious talents any human being can possess — the ability to entertain. He has the uncanny knack of evoking in us a spectrum of emotions — excitement, suspense, tears, and laughter. Mr. Jones' rare gift has been a particular treasure over the past year as we cope with the ravages of a global pandemic, allowing us a brief respite from the world’s troubles and suffering to experience happiness, the joy of living.

In recognition of an immense talent that unites audiences young and old, transcending differences of color, language, or country of origin, Gallaudet University is proud to honor Mr. CJ Jones by awarding him the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, honoris causa.
Louise B. Miller

Louise Burwell Miller was an education activist and a mother of three deaf sons and one hearing daughter. In the early 1950s, she reached the end of her tolerance for the city’s biased regulations that forced parents like her to send their Black Deaf children away from the District of Columbia -- at their own expense -- to receive an education.

The injustice of sending their children great distances for an education, combined with the moral outrage and insult to human dignity that parents of Black Deaf children experienced, led Ms. Miller to initiate the process of challenging a law that was an affront to the core of democracy. She withdrew from her studies at Howard University to focus on her family, and filed suit in federal court against the D.C. Board of Education on behalf of her Black Deaf son, Kenneth, and other Black Deaf children who were denied admission to Kendall School, with the aim of ending segregation and having their Black Deaf children educated within the District.

On July 3, 1952, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ruled in their favor in Miller v. Board of Education of District of Columbia, stating that African Americans could not be sent outside a state or district to obtain the same education that white students could have within the state or district. This ruling led to the construction of Kendall School Division II at Gallaudet in 1953. Miller is thought to be a precursor to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, in which the Justices decided unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional.

A plaque recognizing Louise Miller’s efforts was installed in front of the Kellogg Conference Hotel at Gallaudet University in 2007, and groundbreaking is slated this year for a new memorial and walking path that will reflect upon four attributes: awareness of Black Deaf people and their lived experience; the freedom that Ms. Miller’s advocacy brought to the city’s Black Deaf students; remembrance of the courtroom struggle for justice in learning; and healing for past injustices.

Gallaudet University is proud to honor Ms. Louise Burwell Miller, by awarding her the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, honoris causa, posthumously in her name, and presents her degree to her family.
CLASS
OF
2021
CONGRATULATIONS

CLASSES OF

2020 AND 2021!