

At Gallaudet, Peace

As Tents Come Down, Protesters' Sense of Victory in Ouster Of Incoming President Contrasts With Some Officials' Concerns

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On the front lawn of Gallaudet University yesterday, tents were being taken down and sleeping bags rolled up. A day after the ouster of the school's incoming president ended a month of bitter protests, the campus was returning to normal.

But on a rowhouse across Florida Avenue NE from the main gate, a message written on a sheet showed that strong emotions remained underneath Gallaudet's new calm. It said:

First they ignore you

Then they ridicule you

Then they arrest you

Then YOU WIN.

A sense that the termination of the appointment of president-designate Jane K. Fernandes was a significant victory, and one that gave student, faculty and alumni demonstrators new leverage and unity at the university, was widespread. Protest leaders said they would make sure the next presidential search is more open and did not rule out further action if they don't approve of Fernandes's replacement.

"We need a person who is accepted by the community," signed Ryan Commerson, a Gallaudet graduate student and protest leader. "We need a person who respects us, who respects our -- excuse me, for lack of a better word -- voice."

While many on campus celebrated, others warned that a dangerous precedent had been set. The board allowed itself "to be whipsawed by various constituencies with a variety of agendas," said Anne D. Neal of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni in a statement. "Gallaudet's governance has now proven dysfunctional not once -- but twice. It's imperative that the board take time to learn from this pathetic episode, and reestablish credibility. . . ."

Since the beginning of this month, students have taken over a campus building, enforced a blockade of the school's entrances that ended with more than 130 arrests and briefly seized the administration building. Faculty voted that Fernandes should go and expressed a loss of confidence in the board and outgoing president I. King Jordan, and about 2,000 students, parents, alumni and others marched on the Capitol.

The board chair, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, did not return messages yesterday, and Jordan declined through spokeswoman Mercy Coogan to comment.

Coogan said disciplinary decisions regarding students will be made on an individual basis through the established judicial process.

Student leader LaToya Plummer said yesterday that the university had assured protesters that none of them would be expelled. Plummer said lesser punishments were possible, however, including such things as community service.

On Sunday night, some trustees were treated like rock stars when they returned to campus. After talks with protest leaders in the "war room" inside Fowler Hall, the board members who had pushed for a change emerged one by one through the door as the crowd screamed approval.

Pamela Holmes, the vice chairwoman of the board, sent a message by pager yesterday afternoon: ". . . may all those who have gone through the pain of this leadership crisis struggle feel the weight of that emotional burden lifted, and may all your energy be poured into vibrantly allowing our beloved Gallaudet to heal and prosper to new heights of excellence."

A Fernandes colleague and supporter, Janet Pray, said: "It's very dismaying to think what the future will be here. The board of trustees has sent a message that if you don't like a decision the board makes, you can just throw a temper tantrum . . ."

In an e-mail message last night, Fernandes wrote: "It is too soon to say what my future plans are. I am looking at possible opportunities."

Fernandes, 50, who has been at Gallaudet for 11 years, has long been a controversial figure on campus, and the protest concerned a range of issues. Some faculty were angry when Jordan appointed her provost six years ago without a regular search. Some said the presidential search process was stacked in her favor. And some said she wasn't the inspirational leader the deaf community needed.

Protests began the day her presidential appointment was announced this spring and resumed this month as the board continued to affirm its support for her, defending the search process as fair and inclusive.

Fernandes has said she became a symbol at a time when some in the deaf community want Gallaudet to be a haven for those whose culture has been based around sign language; she said she would make it a school open to all types of deafness and communication.

But demonstrations only intensified as she tried to define the issue -- incorrectly, protesters said, because the school has a diverse population -- and blamed them for anarchy and terrorism.

In a special session Sunday, the board of trustees voted to revoke her appointment. That set off a night of jubilation on the campus in Northeast Washington, including hugs, beer funnels, speeches about unity and a Gallaudet board of associates member arriving with a car full of T-shirts emblazoned with the sign language gesture meaning, "Finally!"

"I feel like I got my heart back," signed Christine Roschaert after what she said were 11 days on a hunger strike to protest Fernandes.

"We've climbed to the top of Mount Everest," Christopher Corrigan said.

Protest leaders said they would push to ensure that the next presidential search process includes the views of students, faculty, alumni and others important to the deaf community and that the candidates came from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible.

By evening, the banner across the street was gone, and so were other signs of entrenched protest, such as the blockades at the gates.

"The campus will never be the same," said Matt Goeb, a junior from Milwaukee, relieved to have the whole thing over. "But the upbeat feelings [are] back!"

Last night, with two hunger strikers just released from the hospital -- two remain hospitalized -- they cut through a strip of black crepe paper stretched across the front gates. Corrigan and the hunger strikers waded into the sea of supporters inside holding candles: Gallaudet had reopened.

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