

Changes in the Heirs



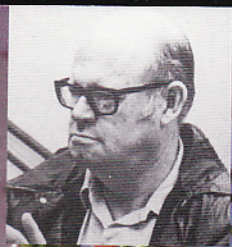
Mallory Malzkuhn (pictured here), '09, and Melissa Malzkuhn (opposite page), '04 & G-'08, represent a "typical" kind of Gallaudet student—one who learns about Kendall Green while still in the cradle, and arrives 18 years later to inherit his or her parents' and grandparents' legacies.

BY RHEA YABLON KENNEDY

LAST SPRING, Mallory Malzkuhn, '09, joined generations of thespians who have performed Greek tragedies as part of Gallaudet's production of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The curly-haired alumna with a big smile and pierced lip may not closely resemble her grandfather, legendary performer Eric "Malz" Malzkuhn, '44, but she was following his lead across a Gallaudet stage that showcased his classic theatrical style decades before.

This summer, Melissa Malzkuhn, '04 & G-'08, another granddaughter of Malz, will lead the second annual Deaf Youth USA camp. She will strengthen the movement she co-founded two years ago, mobilizing deaf people 30 and under to advocate for themselves and become leaders in the community. Always on the lookout for new organizing ideas, Melissa Malzkuhn's spirit evokes the work of her grandmother, Dr. Mary Malzkuhn, '77, whose teaching of constitutional law at Gallaudet began before the Americans with Disabilities Act became law in 1990, and encouraged students to fight for the school's first deaf president in 1988.

Families like the Malzkuhns have come to Gallaudet for decades, representing a "typical" kind of Gallaudet student—one who learns about Kendall Green while still in the cradle, and arrives 18 years later to inherit his or her parents'—and often grandparents'—legacies. A 1979 *Gallaudet Today* magazine article, "Heirs of Alma Mater," estimated that the student population of 1,500 included "two fourth-generation, eight third-generation, and 26 second-generation students."



Eric Malzkuhn



Mary Malzkuhn

PORTRAITS BY JOHN T. CONSOLI

Thirty years later, the next generations of Malzkuhns—and Sonnenstrahls, Holcombs, Moers, and many others—have continued their family traditions by studying at Gallaudet (see box, page 34).

Now, however, Gallaudet is changing, and the heirs to the University are changing with it.

Mary Malzkuhn herself pinpointed some of the changes. It was the difference in students' educational backgrounds that she noticed first. When she first started teaching in the late 1970s, she said, the vast majority of students came from residential schools. By the time she retired in 2001, that ratio was turned on its head, with far more coming from mainstream programs where they either used spoken English or an interpreter.

Dr. Catherine Andersen, Gallaudet's associate provost, is charged with watching and quantifying the changes on campus. She is not only an expert on Gallaudet enrollment, with 26 years at the school, but has published in numerous journals about recruitment and retention, and consults both nationally and internationally on the topics.

When Andersen analyzes data and confirms trends, she backs them up with knowledge of best practices from across the higher education scene. Coincidentally, her assessment and numbers from Gallaudet's Office of Institutional Research back up the trend that Dr. Malzkuhn noted.

The trend toward mainstream education has continued steadily over the years. In 2003, about 25 out of 100 deaf or hard

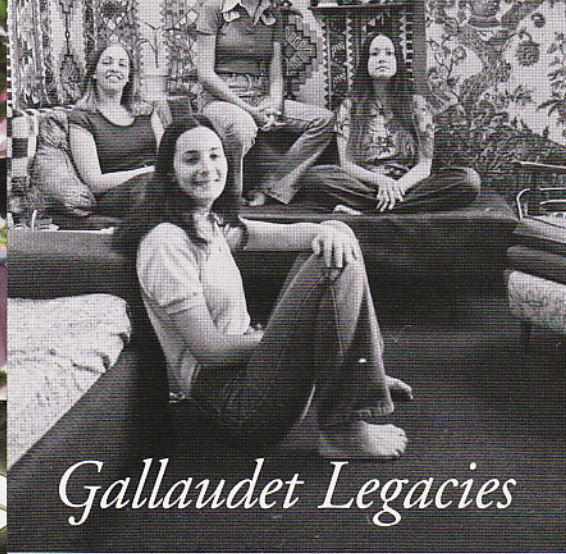
of hearing first-time freshmen were mainstreamed in high school. The next year, that number jumped to about 45 percent, and has hovered between 35 and 45 percent ever since. This is likely to continue, as funding constraints continue to shut down deaf residential schools.

With this mix of backgrounds comes both opportunities and challenges. Some students have spent their lives signing at home, in class, and around their dorms, while a growing number are learning ASL for the first time as college freshmen. Communication choices aside, even the student body itself represents a wider range of backgrounds than ever before,

and Gallaudet is dedicated to the task of offering something that will appeal to each of them.

Andersen lists other changes having an impact on Gallaudet: Other college programs for deaf and hard of hearing students that didn't exist in Malz's time are competing with the University for the best and brightest high school students; some mainstreamed students are exercising their preference to continue in a hearing environment after high school; students from residential programs are responding to academic and athletic scholarships that other universities are offering; and state schools are offering lower tuition or schol-





<< Beth (Sonnenstrahl) Benedict '80 & Ph.D.-'03 (foreground) poses with her roommates in a 1979 photo. Thirty years later, Benedict is teaching at her alma mater and watching as daughter, Rachel, a freshman, follows in her footsteps toward a Gallaudet degree.



Gallaudet Legacies

The *Gallaudet Today* magazine article "Heirs of Alma Mater," published in 1979, profiles students like Diana Moers, '82; Beth Sonnenstrahl (now Benedict), '80 & PhD-'03; and Tom Holcomb, '80, who enrolled on the heels of parents and grandparents who also attended the school, and arrived steeped in the deaf community and Gallaudet traditions.

This spring, 30 years later, Moers (now Covell) has seen her daughter, Patricia, finish her first year as a Gallaudet undergraduate. Tom Holcomb's daughter, Leala, is a rising senior. Beth Benedict is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies and her daughter, Rachel, just finished her sophomore year at the school.

The author of that article, Robert Weinstock, '77 & G-'83, went on to become a faculty member and then special assistant to the provost, and saw his own daughter, Ludmila, go off to Gallaudet.

Not only do these students from Gallaudet families and deaf schools come to Gallaudet, they excel and become leaders—two of the factors on Associate Provost Catherine Andersen's checklist for attracting and keeping students.



Rachel and Beth Benedict

A penchant for academic excellence among these legacy students has continued over the years: Weinstock alluded to this tendency in his article three decades ago. Here are some examples of today's heirs to Gallaudet who are making their mark on the University:

Patricia Covell was tapped to participate in the online recruitment tool "gBlog: How We See It," where articulate students post their thoughts about life on Kendall Green. Leala Holcomb helped found the environmental organization Green Gallaudet. Rachel Benedict played a key role in organizing Gallaudet's 2009 regional and national Academic Bowl competitions for high school students. Ludmila MOUNTY-WEINSTOCK is an athletic phenomenon who has led the Bison volleyball team to an unprecedented number of victories.

"We're all trailblazers," Mary Malzkuhn, '77, said of her family of Gallaudet graduates. She could have been talking about any number of Gallaudet's legacy clans.



Robert Weinstock, '77, and Ludmila MOUNTY-WEINSTOCK

arships to in-state residents.

To ensure that colleges and universities keep up their enrollment figures, they must act strategically, said Andersen. They have to move with the trends and reach out to a wider range of students. What they cannot do is focus on any one type of student, or hope that previous generations will do the work by recruiting their children. What Andersen is seeing in the demographics of tomorrow's Gallaudet student is far removed from yesterday's focus on the legacy group—namely, rising seniors from

deaf schools. "We are casting a wider net," she said, to make sure no potential students are overlooked.

To arrive at a new approach for recruitment and retention, Andersen listed the top factors that keep students at a school. First, they must feel that they are making academic progress. Second, they must have a sense of belonging. Both of these come easily for legacy students, who often come from academically-minded families and arrive already familiar with the Gallaudet milieu. It is more of a challenge to bring

that to the new generation of students.

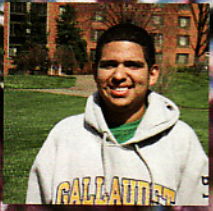
Other factors that boost student success, Andersen says, include a strong sense of self, and leadership opportunities. And there's something more: "The [nonlegacy] students who come here have that same desire to be part of something bigger, that magic," she said. Can students who arrive at Gallaudet without a legacy—and in some cases without much knowledge of the school or even of sign language—readily become part of the University community?

Andersen is confident that they can. Her unit is focusing on drawing in students who can find all of those benefits at Gallaudet, including the magic, and acclimate naturally without forcing it.

"We have to be honest about recruiting students who are a good fit," she said. "To go out and get students who wouldn't fit with the culture, or who have expectations we could not meet... they aren't going to stay." But, she added, "For any students who feel they belong, or who we can help feel that they belong, the sky's the limit."

Luckily, the pool of potential candidates and the ways a student can fit in have both broadened. Andersen caught a glimpse of the new face of higher education when she met Gil Estrada and Trevor De Rosch. She first made the acquaintance of Estrada at an open house for prospective students. At his table sat his mother, grandmother, sister, and a new baby. "The family was speaking Spanish, but when I came over, Gil turned to me and signed," Andersen recalled.

When Andersen first started working at Gallaudet, she likely would not have seen a trilingual, first-generation American student at an open house, nor would the students' families have been so involved. She predicts more students from Spanish-speaking homes will come



Gil Estrada



Trevor De Rosch

>> *Dr. Catherine Andersen, Gallaudet's associate provost, is charged with monitoring and quantifying the changes on campus.*



to Gallaudet in the future. Families are increasingly likely to stay close, too, either because they want to see the place where their tuition payments are going, or they're simply used to being more connected to their children.

Andersen met De Rosch when he played on his high school's Academic Bowl team. A successful mainstreamed student who did not sign, he didn't really consider Gallaudet an option at first. After he took part in the academic competition with other deaf students and learned more about the University, however, it became an attractive possibility. He applied, was accepted, participated in the New Signers Program over the summer, and then jumped into Gallaudet life. Andersen reports that both Estrada and De Rosch are doing well.

Although Mallory Malzkuhn is not privy to the cutting-edge recruitment tactics or changing demographic numbers, she recalls noticing the new demographics as a first-year student. "I was amazed at how many different kinds of students there were," she said. She described her group of fellow students as one incorporating mainstreamed students, those with cochlear implants, and non-signers, as well as students of diverse family backgrounds, races, and sexual orientations. Andersen has identified this broad range of learners as Gallaudet's future student body.

Reaching beyond students who fit a certain profile can be nerve-racking. Their names are new and their potential is unknown. But that variable is likely to work in Gallaudet's favor. In fact, students who would have skirted recruiters' radar a generation ago are already doing Gallaudet proud. Nickson Kakiri, '05, (see "In My Own Words," page 48) did not grow up in a deaf family, attend a deaf school, or even know other deaf people as a child in Kenya. By the time he enrolled at Gallaudet, he had already

been in the work world for several years. As an undergraduate at Gallaudet, he quickly became a success. He was the first to receive the World Deaf Leadership Scholarship, created for international students with leadership potential. He has gone on to do self-empowerment and HIV/AIDS prevention work with deaf communities in Kenya and Mongolia, and lead the Kenya National Association of the Deaf.

A glance into Gallaudet's history shows that the hints of atypical students' ability to succeed actually appeared long ago. In 1949, when a Latino student had yet to graduate from the school, Gallaudet accepted a Mexican-born immigrant from California. His parents had not attended Gallaudet. In fact, they had not attended college at all. This, of course, was Dr. Robert Davila, '53, who went on to advocate for people with disabilities on the national level in the U.S. Department of Education and assume the presidency of Gallaudet.

Though the Gil Estradas and Trevor De Rosches of the world may deviate from the type of students who came before them, they could very well play a role in shaping the school's future, and perceptions of deaf and hard of hearing people.

Even legacy families like the Malzkühns show a surprising amount of variation. Malz, who brought ASL to Broadway and became a star of the National Theater for the Deaf, did not grow up signing—he attended an oral school. And he did not immediately wow Gallaudet with his acting prowess. According to Mallory Malzkuhn, the only role he could initially get was opening and closing the stage curtain.

Mary Malzkuhn started college not in a straight line from her deaf school, but at the age of 45, after seeing one of her sons receive his Gallaudet diploma.

"Although my family is probably considered a typical deaf family, we aren't," said Mallory Malzkuhn. "And there is no such thing as a typical Gallaudet student because the University has all kinds of students."

There is little question that the current generation of Gallaudet students is blazing its own trail rather than fulfilling a traditional role. Born in the year of Deaf President Now, Mallory Malzkuhn has inherited a different world than her grandparents did, and the next generation of Gallaudet students will inherit yet another one.

The new crop of students—the typical, the atypical, and everyone in between—are heirs to a new era. It is an uncertain era of diverse student backgrounds, but one that shows early signs of success. The National Survey of Student Engagement showed that 70 percent of Gallaudet students have a sense of belonging at the University—a rate much higher than average. It may even hover higher than the sense of belonging felt by the Malzkühns' predecessors. In addition, more first-year students are persisting through to the second semester—a crucial gain from the past—and a larger number of students are competing for spots in next fall's entering class. The Class of 2013 will be made up of some of those familiar last names, but also shine with new faces.

"Gallaudet is a place for the deaf community," said Mallory Malzkuhn, expressing a common sentiment that a growing number of students has come to feel. "It's a university and a community. It's our home." **BT**