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# Visionary Leader - November 2014, Boyce Williams

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For 38 years, Boyce R. Williams, '32 & H-'58, dedicated his career in government to advance specialized programs and services for deaf and hard of hearing people. As the first deaf man to achieve an administrative position in federal government, he is an important figure in deaf history. This is why he has been chosen as Gallaudet's Visionary Leader for November.

Williams is an international figure in the field of deafness.

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[< Back to Celebrating 150 Years!](#)

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He has made significant contributions to vocational rehabilitation services and mental health, leadership training, and interpreter training and certification standards. Williams' brief stint in one residential deaf school left him yearning to improve the quality of education and life opportunities for deaf pupils.

Williams was born in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1910. He didn't become deaf until 17 after a severe bout of spinal meningitis—one that kept him out of his final high school football season, where he was team captain.

He transferred to the Wisconsin School for the Deaf (WSD) for his remaining few months of high school, where he struggled with the lackluster attitudes and low expectations that teachers had for their deaf students.

“Once I began to communicate freely in sign language, I saw in many of these deaf youths the potential to excel, but because of the lack of educational opportunities and challenge, many never had the opportunity to go on to college,” Williams said in a 1970 issue of *Gallaudet Today Magazine*.

“Once I began to communicate free Williams enrolled in Gallaudet in 1929, where he was a star blocker on the football team. He taught for several years at WSD and Indiana School for the deaf and was quickly promoted to vocational principal.

In 1945, after receiving his master's degree from Columbia University, Williams became a consultant with several

federal departments on issues relating to deaf and hard of hearing people. He worked with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) in Washington, D.C., which was newly focused on deaf and hard of hearing programs. His job was to lay the groundwork for vocational rehabilitation service for the deaf. He also worked extensively with state vocational rehabilitation agencies, regional and national agencies, and community workshops and conferences to develop increased involvement and create a common understanding of deaf individuals' needs.

Williams' message was simple: deaf people have normal intelligence, strength, and mobility as employees, provided that they have the appropriate training and support systems. Every state now has trained rehabilitation counselors who can provide appropriate guidance and resources specifically to deaf clients, and Williams is largely to credit for this progress. With proper research and training, deaf people could access greater opportunities for jobs and post-secondary education.

Many of the projects, funded by Williams' efforts, resulted in legislative changes at both the federal and state levels to improve the lives of deaf people. Additionally, Williams organized funding for research and workshops that led to establishing the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York, in 1966, and four regional vocational-technical training centers.

Another important project that Williams was involved with was the graduate-level National Leadership Training

Program (NLTP) that was established in 1962 at California State University Northridge (CSUN). NLTP began enrolling deaf students in 1964, the same year Gallaudet University began accepting deaf students to its graduate programs. Williams's efforts extended internationally in Poland, Italy, India, Israel, and Egypt.

Williams was involved with consumer and professional organizations that serve deaf people. He made a strong push to relocate the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) to Washington, D.C., from its California offices. Having closer proximity to Congress, he felt, would lend more support, leadership, and visibility of the deaf agenda. In 1964, the NAD made a move to the Nation's Capital. He was also involved with the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). In 1958, he helped to establish the Captioned Films for the Deaf Program. He served as president of the Gallaudet College Alumni Association, and he was the first alumnus from Gallaudet appointed to its Board of Trustees.

In 1964, he initiated planning for and provided funding for a first-ever interpreters workshop during which the Registry of Interpreters was established. This organization's creation led to interpreter certification and standards for interpreter skills, conduct, and ethics. Williams also strived to improve and increase accessible mental health services for the deaf. Believing that mental health resources should be available to everyone, he facilitated the establishment of the Research and Training Center on Deafness at New York University, which provided extensive training for mental health personnel working with deaf individuals.



In December of 1966, Williams (center) attended an event with Joe Hunt, H-'69, and Mary E. Switzer, a public administrator and social reformer known for her work in promoting vocational rehabilitation.



Williams, as chair of Gallaudet's then Board of Fellows, visited a campus classroom and is pictured with student Ed

Bergstresser.

In September 1970, Williams was honored at a testimonial dinner at the Washington Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C. He is flanked by Nanette Fabray MacDougall, H-'72, Hollywood actress, dancer, singer, and an honorary trustee at Gallaudet University; and Gallaudet President Edward C. Merrill, Jr. (1969-1983).

Photo of Williams from his 1970 testimonial dinner that was published by the *Washington Post*.

Date and location unknown.

He received two honorary degrees—a Doctor of Laws degree from Gallaudet in 1958 and a Doctor of Letters from Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Williams was the first recipient of CSUN's Daniel T. Cloud Memorial Award for Leadership in 1968. He received distinguished service awards from WFD, the Council of Educational Administrators Serving the Deaf, the NAD, and the Rehabilitation Services Administration. He was also inducted into the National Hall of Fame for Persons with Disabilities.

“I feel that no person, deaf or hearing, in our country has done as much for the benefit of deaf people as Boyce Williams,” said David Myers, '61, a longtime friend and mentee of Williams who was also involved in rehabilitation and community service for 47 years because of Williams’

influence.

Williams married Hilda Tillinghast, '25, in Indianapolis where she was the principal at the Indiana School for the Deaf. They had three sons.

Williams' name is kept alive through GUAA's Boyce R. Williams Fellowship Fund, established in 1970. This fund provides deaf students with funds to complete doctoral studies at public colleges. The Gallaudet Board of Trustees meeting room in the Kellogg Center is named in his honor. He passed away in 1998.

*Photos courtesy Gallaudet Archives*

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## **Visionary leaders: Fifteen extraordinary Gallaudet alumni**

Fifteen extraordinary Gallaudet alumni were chosen to be honored each month as Gallaudet University celebrated its sesquicentennial anniversary entitled,

Celebrating 150 Years of Visionary Leadership, from September 2013 to November 2014. These individuals were nominated by the community and a selection committee of students, faculty,...

**Celebrating 150 Years!**

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 Leadership  
 History & Traditions  
 Accreditation  
 Consumer Information  
 Our 10-Year Vision: The Gallaudet Promise  
 Annual Report of Achievements (ARA)  
 The Signing Ecosystem  
 Not Your Average University

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Directory  
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 Technology  
 Support  
 Interpreting  
 Requests  
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