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President Davila:

Hello, I'm Robert Davila, president of Gallaudet University. Welcome to "*Bob's Vlog.*"

Gallaudet is proud to be located in the nation's capital, Washington, D.C. The proximity to the arts and cultural events available in this large city is a great benefit to Gallaudet students. They have opportunities--especially to be involved in the political process--that would not be available to students in other places, or in other parts of the country. Last week, I had the special honor of attending the inauguration of President Barack Obama. The first presidential inauguration I attended happened while I was a student here and President Eisenhower was inaugurated. That was a long time ago! This time, I was an invited guest of 20 students and seven teachers from the Illinois School for the Deaf who were lucky enough to get a large number of tickets from their congressional representative. They saved one ticket for me and invited me to join them. I was really proud to be able to join them and to go with the group. And I think that was probably a very special experience, largely because it was the largest crowd in the history of presidential inaugurations in Washington, D.C. in so many years. And it was very cold! We went very early in the morning and we stood for a very long time waiting. We mingled with almost two million people who came to Washington, D.C. to watch the inauguration. So, it was a special event. I was proud to be with those young people from the Midwest and very impressed with their performance and their level of knowledge and understanding of the political process and their enthusiasm about becoming involved.

Today I have two very special guests on this program. I have invited

Leah Katz-Hernandez, a fourth-year government major from Maryland, and Alim Chandani, a Ph.D. student in administration and supervision from California, to be my guests. Both were involved in inauguration activities prior to and leading up to the day of the inauguration. I want them to share more information about their experiences, what they felt and observed, and what they learned, with all of you. So, first I want to welcome Leah and Alim to the program. I'm glad to have you here.

Leah Katz-Hernandez:
Thank you.

President Davila:
First of all, I'm curious how were you able to get tickets? Those tickets were really hard to get. Tell us how you did that. Did you get tickets for that event?

Leah Katz-Hernandez:
Yes, I got a ticket, but unfortunately it was a purple ticket. There was a lot of media coverage about the mix-up at the purple gate. Altogether, over 5,000 people did not get into the inauguration, and I was one of those people. But it was still a wonderful experience, anyway. I went to the inauguration. I was part of the big crowd on that historic day, and I battled the crowds--which was an exciting adventure. I was close to the gate when it closed at noon, so I walked over and watched the inauguration on TV. I felt so inspired and so honored to see that moment when he was sworn in. People were laughing and crying. It was inspiring. I could hear the thundering of the 21-gun salute. It was a very inspiring moment for me.

President Davila
That's wonderful. Leah and eight other Gallaudet undergraduates and their professor, Dr. Frances Marquez, joined over 650 other college students from all over the U.S. for the presidential inauguration. That was a special program planned by the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars. Those students who participated in it were selected by the Department of Government and History faculty, and they represented a wide range of interests and study areas. Ten days before the inauguration they were involved in a variety of activities designed to help them understand the political

process better and to understand how our government works. They visited different places all around the city. They visited embassies, completed academic assignments, volunteered for different inauguration activities all over town, and met many others, with a desire to also become involved in the political process. Now, I'll show you a short video about that seminar so that you understand the kind of experience that they went through. We'll see that now.

(video)

That was very impressive and it was wonderful that you were involved in it. That was great--really fantastic. I'd like to ask you, Leah, can you tell us more about what you and the other students experienced? The film showed us some ideas, but can you describe it in more detail?

Leah Katz-Hernandez:

It was fascinating. The presentations provided an in-depth analysis of the presidency, the evolution of responsibilities and duties and the purpose of that office, as well as the role that the media plays in the presidential political process here in America. There were a lot of distinguished speakers who gave us a lot of in-depth information. We learned a lot and I really enjoyed it very much. For site visits, we were able to go to a number of different places around the capital of Washington, D.C. which had never been opened up to me before, such as the Chinese Embassy, the Libertarian headquarters, and Congress. We went into a congressional hearing. The experience was extremely accessible and it was amazing to me to experience all of that. I enjoyed it very much.

President Davila:

What made you interested in politics?

Leah Katz-Hernandez:

I have always been fascinated by politics--something drew me to it early on. But really my interest started to get going through another academic seminar with the Washington Center. That was the Democratic National Convention in Denver last August 2008. I went to that; it was a similar academic seminar. I really enjoyed that

experience. It was great. So, when I came back here my interest kept increasing and it's been worth it.

President Davila:

And you were honored with an award at one of those inaugural events for your activism and participation. Tell us about that.

Leah Katz-Hernandez:

Before I talk about it I will show it to you.

President Davila:

Nice.

Leah Katz-Hernandez:

Thank you. This award is given by the Latino Inaugural Celebration Committee for local grassroots leadership. The award is given for a number of things, such as demonstrating commitment, activism, and involvement in the political process. I got this award by demonstrating activism all through the semester. I was involved in canvassing and encouraging other deaf people to get involved in the political process. I feel it is important for everyone to exercise their right to vote. One of the most important things you can do in your whole life is vote.

President Davila:

Excellent. Alim, I have a question for you. I know you were also very busy prior to the inauguration. I see that you organized a special event for deaf people who came to Washington, D.C. from all over the country. Please tell us about that event.

Alim Chandani:

Yes. Sure. My good friend is Rachel Arfa, a deaf lawyer from Wisconsin, and I wanted to host a celebration for deaf people to attend. We decided to host it at SOVA, an espresso and wine bar. We wanted to get the word out for deaf people to come. At the same time, President Obama had announced that he wanted us to serve on Martin Luther King Day, so we decided this was not any party but it was a gathering where we could share our excitement and hope for the future. We were surprised that 150 people showed up at the event to share in the excitement. We met old faces and new faces. It was amazing to see that happen. We realized that a small thing can

make a big difference. It wasn't only that, but we stayed awake all night and into the next day, which was the inauguration. We got purple tickets, but even so we knew we had to show up early in the morning. We went at about 4:30 in the morning and the line was already there. We were amazed to see all the people, cold and shivering. We stood there too, for about an hour, and then realized it was freezing. My hands and feet were already frozen, but I knew it was a special moment for Obama to be sworn in and to witness that moment. So, it was an amazing experience to go through that.

President Davila:

Wow, that is wonderful. You know the concept of "a day of service," or doing something to help your community. It's a concept I know both of you know about and have experienced. Can you tell us about your experiences in the past related to community service?

Alim Chandani:

Yes, let me explain my background first. I was born in Mumbai, India and I moved to London and went to a boarding school for the deaf. I moved to the U.S. when I was eight. I went through college. After that, I decided I needed to do some self exploration, so I joined a human rights program in Cambodia. Through that experience I was inspired to change a lot about myself, plus I found my passion. So I decided to establish an organization, of which I'm the founder and director. It's a non-profit organization called Global Reach Out, GRO. The mission is to create a sustainable community of deaf advocates through establishing peer-to-peer programs in developing countries that provides role models for each other, makes a difference, and improves the rights and lifestyles of deaf people in third world countries. That experience taught me that community service is something I want to commit my life to.

President Davila:

I have a question for both of you. What do you think of President Obama and what do you see as the meaning of his presidency? We will start with you, Leah.

Leah Katz-Hernandez:

To me, President Obama is the ultimate symbol of opportunity. He means to us, to the American people, and to the rest of the world that

you can succeed. You can become president if you work hard enough. Now, nothing is impossible. Really, his presidency means a lot more than just an election of another leader. It means to the world and to us that there is a leader within every one of us.

Alim Chandani:

True. I'd like to add that I was inspired by Obama because he wants all Americans to be part of the process, going through his journey of challenge and innovation for our future. I admire him for actually wanting to hear our opinions and thoughts for future decisions that he will make. That makes me reconnect with politics again, and I've never been prouder, ever, to be an American, comparing before to now. So, that's a positive thing for me and for the people of this country.

President Davila:

Very well said. I think that's wonderful. I know the two of you are looking forward to the future. I'm interested in learning about your future plans.

Leah Katz-Hernandez:

I am working on getting a congressional internship this summer. I am hoping to work on Capitol Hill.

Alim Chandani:

In the president's inaugural address he said, "Starting today we must stand up, brush ourselves off, and begin to remake America." I know that I want to commit to being involved more in community service, understanding more about ADA laws and improving them, and studying the ADA laws in other countries, too, in order to help the deaf communities there. I want to finish my Ph.D. degree and teach in the future. Expanding GRO is also a big dream.

President Davila:

That's great. I know that when I started this program, I announced to our audience that we are lucky to be in Washington, D.C. That was very true when I was a student here and it is very true today. These are wonderful examples of the types of experiences that students who are going to college here in Washington, D.C. can get on an

ongoing basis. That's not possible in other places. We are truly fortunate to have Gallaudet here.

Leah Katz-Hernandez:

If you don't mind—for a while now, I've had a blog, "The Deaf Perspective," where I interview a great variety of different people about their views on politics. I know that you have worked under two presidential administrations in the past. How did you get appointed to those government positions? I am just curious about that.

President Davila:

Excellent question. I am really proud and happy to tell you that I received those opportunities by doing exactly what you two are doing now while you are young and still here in school. You are volunteering. You are getting involved. You are developing strong interests in the political process. You are reaching out to other people, offering knowledge and expertise, and your support and assistance. I think that is what is involved in becoming a good community individual, and I did a lot of that.

I was really committed to service and to volunteerism, not only here in the U.S., but in other countries as well, especially in Latin America and in the Far East. That came to the attention of other people who recognized me for my work and my commitment to service and that opened the door to opportunities. I'm really proud of that experience and I think the two of you will do much better than I did because you have so many more opportunities to be involved. Now the community is really diverse and more accepting of people who are different. So I really look forward to hearing wonderful things about the two of you and there is nothing--like you said before, Leah--nothing is impossible anymore. I look forward to reading about the two of you and your famous careers. Thank you very much for coming to join us for "Bob's Vlog" today.

We will be back with you again another time to give you more insights into the good work that is happening with our students and their teachers in the programs here at Gallaudet University. Thank you for visiting with us. I will see you again soon. So long!