

Gary Olsen, Nevada's Deaf Grandfather

By Andrea Juillerat-Olvera

On a sunny, cold October day in 2006, I met Gary Olsen. From the moment we shook hands in front of his office on Telegraph Street in downtown Carson City, I knew that Gary was different. He hails from Nebraska, but most people in Nevada state politics have met Gary Olsen: he's deaf, with a fringe of white hair and a perfectly groomed beard. He is well-dressed in pinstripe suits and festive ties and always has at least one personal interpreter with him. This makes him an unmistakable character in the Nevada legislature.

I needed a job the day we met and was relieved when he hired me, but it wasn't until later that I realized I'd hit the jackpot. Gary is "Deaf-World" famous, a name well-known in the annals of deaf history. So, how did he come to be in a tiny office in Carson City, Nevada? The NVAD (Nevada Association of the Deaf) tapped Gary Olsen to help establish a statewide, non-profit agency serving the needs of all deaf and hard of hearing Nevadans. Gary named it the DHHARC (Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advocacy Resource Center.)



Gary Olsen. Photo provided by the author.

Gary's reputation as a transformational leader began in 1969 when he co-founded the Youth Leadership Camp of the NAD (National Association of the Deaf) with Frank Turk. The two were called a "dream team" and together developed the most prominent Deaf leaders of their generation. Gary received numerous awards and accolades for his tireless work organizing and running the camp year after year. Before serving the NAD, Gary worked as a teacher at the Kendall School for the Deaf in Washington D.C. and the Indiana High School for the Deaf, where he was first a teacher, then the director. The students dedicated their Yearbooks to him three years in a row, to honor of his positive impact on their lives. Gary coached intermediate football, ran the scouting program, worked with the student council and the Boy's Club. He poured his heart and soul into those students. Remarking on the history of NAD's Youth Leadership Camps, Frank Turk said of Gary Olsen, "Throughout my 16 years as the national director of

JrNAD, the Indiana School for the Deaf chapter, under Gary's leadership, easily reigned as the JrNAD Capital of the World."

Gary Olsen was a catalyst in the adult deaf world as well. He began serving on the board of the Indiana Association of the Deaf, where he quickly rose to become president. Gary was an active member of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf, and the Gallaudet Alumni Association. He joined the board of the NAD in 1976. His goal was to establish the first state branch-office of the NAD in Indiana, Indianapolis, which he did in 1978. The same year he was appointed assistant executive director. His next goal was to establish annual regional conferences for the group, which he also succeeded in doing. The NAD thrived with Gary in positions of leadership. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan appointed him to the three-member "Commission on Education of the Deaf." By 1984, he was named the interim executive director of the NAD, and the following year in 1985, he became the official executive director of the NAD. From this position, he was able to help set in motion the most significant civil rights triumph for deaf people in the history of the United States: the "Deaf President Now!" Protest at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.

Gallaudet is the only deaf university in the world, founded by a land grant from President Abraham Lincoln in 1864. Since its inception, the school had appointed only hearing presidents, some of whom could not even sign! On the evening of March 6, 1988, the Gallaudet university board left fliers around the campus to announce the appointment of yet another hearing candidate as university president. Two equally qualified deaf individuals had also applied for the position, but they chose the hearing person. The students were angry that their demands for a deaf president had gone unheeded once again. The fact that the board had refused to announce the decision in person was a further slap in the face. About a thousand angry students gathered and staged a sit-in on campus. In the PBS documentary *Through Deaf Eyes*, Fred Weiner recalled with awe how Gary Olsen started the march:

"He stood up and signed: "We're standing here in the middle of the street, in the middle of the cold and we don't know what to do. The board is over there at the Mayflower Hotel drinking their fancy wine, eating delicious food, and laughing at us." Talk about inciting a group of people! Then we just all started to move."

The New York Times ran a story on the protests March 8, 1988, and interviewed Gary, "We won't give up until we win," he explained to the journalists and students. After two weeks of unrest and disruption on the Gallaudet campus, the board capitulated to all of the student demands and appointed a deaf president, Dr. I King Jordan. One of those students, Roberta J. Cordano, later became president of Gallaudet University. She recalls the protest as the "best of the deaf community" explaining that the "passion for change – it came from the students....but behind the young folks were a group of alumni who were advisers and friends, continually counseling the young folks on systems that they needed to change. It was beautiful."

Gary Olsen continued to work for legislative change and working with Justin Dart, was instrumental in the passage of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) in 1990. His advocacy for deaf rights was constant, as was his career in deaf education. Before coming to Nevada, Gary had been a principal for the California School for the Deaf in

Fremont. He also taught and supervised at Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf and other deaf institutions in Mississippi, Indiana, and Washington, D.C. His credentials are impeccable. The NVAD chose well.

During the 2007 session of the Nevada Legislature, Gary and I spent many afternoons frequenting the halls of the Legislature. At that time, Gary was pushing a proposal for a magnet school in rural Nevada. With the help of Senate Majority Leader Bill Raggio, the bill was passed, but never funded, so Gary moved on.-

Gary was a study in activism – persistent and informed. He held a seat on the Nevada CSPD (Commission on Services for Persons with Disabilities) from 2009-2015. He was meticulous at gathering data and finding people inside state government offices to get it for him. After building his case, we would go down to the Legislature and see all the representatives who sat on relevant committees. I'd interpret while Gary politely but passionately made his pitch. Interpreting for Gary was like going onstage with a seasoned showman. He was a man of great words, even if those words were expressed with sign language. Gary was nonpartisan in practice, both inside and out of the LCB. He approached people on both sides of the aisle, treating them all with equal regard and equal respect.

In the sessions following 2007, I would watch Gary work to pass bills regulating deaf education and access rights in all areas. He had a hand in the passage of SB 481, which created a state commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing issues. But even before that great victory, there were many smaller ones. Gary's consistent presence at the legislature forced Nevada to comply with the ADA.

Every time he discovered a barrier, he would politely explain what needed to change. Gary worked closely with Legislative Counsel Bureau director, Rick Combs, to make all legislative sessions captioned and accessible to people with a hearing loss. He was instrumental in the creation of a state interpreter pool to assure that interpreters would always be available for deaf and hard of hearing people. He fought for deaf access to the full spectrum of government services and information.

Being a life-long learner, Gary took advantage of every opportunity to improve his skills. During the time I knew him, he trained in "Emergency Responses for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing," "Disaster Preparedness and Protocol," "Medical Interpreting," "School Safety," and "Mass Fatality Preparedness." His walls were covered in awards and acknowledgments for volunteer work, and legal advocacy. He led and won a class action suit against The City of Henderson, Nevada's Law Enforcement agencies, making them accountable for communicating with their Deaf and Hard of Hearing detainees. He was on an investigative committee that uncovered abuses against deaf seniors in Las Vegas.

Gary Olsen isn't from Nevada, but Nevada won his heart. He felt a deep appreciation for the landscape, the wildlife, the cowboy-flavored history, and the rugged, self-reliant headspace of Northern Nevada. I enjoyed experiencing Carson City through his eyes. He talked about "The West" in a way that made it seem more romantic than usual. In his expressive signing, I could see the imaginings of a Nebraska boy who grew up and

came out West. His concern for Nevada's deaf children was their isolation in distant rural corners of the state. He wanted to bring them together, in a designated location to be educated collectively by someone who knew sign. We drove out to Elko and Ely every month or so, to visit the DHHARC satellite offices and check on the staff there. Gary held town hall meetings so that these rural deaf Nevadans could have a voice in the direction of their service agency. "The challenge in Nevada is to provide service excellence for a population that is small in number," Gary once declared on a long drive to Elko, "Even one child is worth the effort."

It was my privilege to work with Gary during that time, and what I learned is more valuable than any paycheck. He showed me how to improve the law and how to access government. He demonstrated civic engagement on a level seen only in the tireless advocate that he was. Driven by real moral vision, Gary Olsen engaged in the complicated process of advancing deaf civil rights.

Although Gary has now returned to Indiana, where his family resides, a piece of his heart remains in Nevada. He continues to be involved in the Nevada legislative process, advising and supporting from afar. Will Nevada's future deaf children know that they had a real deaf "Santa Claus," a man who believed that their small numbers did not make them any less deserving of excellence? Gary was their champion, a metaphorical grandfather, an advocate of enormous stature who understood that "The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit."

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