



Playback Your Story asks the community around Gallaudet University to reflect on and unite through their connections to community, narrative, and place. Sponsored by Van Alen Institute and the DC Office of Planning, John Johnson conducted interviews throughout the community. The interviews culminated in a final performance by John Johnson's theater troop, Playback Theatre on the Gallaudet Campus in 2016. The initiative weaves together the stories of locals, inspiring us to cross the street, interact with one another, and understand the roots of our community.

Zachary Abbott: My name is Zachary Abbott. I'm from Arkansas. I am a first year educational neuroscience PhD student. We are sitting here on Gallaudet's campus adjacent to Faculty Row and College Hall.

John Johnson: What has been your experience here at Gallaudet?

Zachary Abbott: This is my fourth year at Gallaudet. I finished undergraduate here after three years. This is a wonderful community, perhaps one of the most free-thinking and inclusive communities that you'll ever come across, especially in America I think.

John Johnson: You say free-thinking. What do you mean by free-thinking?

Zachary Abbott: Well this is a liberal arts university. It is a place of discovery, a place of connection for people, and inclusion already mentioned. The whole premise behind Gallaudet is to break down barriers between hearing and deaf culture and to bring together these two seemingly separate pieces of humanity, and to realize that they are actually inseparable.

John Johnson: I think that's beautiful because part of this project is called "Crossing the Street". What are some of the things that your four years, that you feel like if you had to share that to a broader community, what are some of the mindsets that people would have to have in order to bridge these two communities?

Zachary Abbott: I think the difference between the hearing community and the deaf community could never actually be solved, or could never really be fully achieved possibly on the sheer size difference of the deaf community versus the hearing community; the notion of deaf existence, the entire qualia, the entire existence of a deaf person's life. It's much different than somebody who uses spoken language, somebody who takes in and processes information visually versus

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having someone who does it auditorily or through spoken language. That existence is hard to comprehend for hearing people. It's very difficult to think, "Oh, you can't speak. That must be so terrible for you." That's a very common thought, when in reality the brain of a visual learner operates with the same global features and the same intensity, I suppose is a word I might use for it, as hearing people.

John Johnson: What is it that the hearing community would need to know in order to even be sensitive or aware of all of the things you're talking about?

Zachary Abbott: The hearing community would likely benefit from learning American Sign Language as a general rule. I think that education has failed most people. If we didn't treat American Sign Language like a foreign language. In many schools, it is in fact a foreign language. To be honest with you, I believe that in many schools they don't even offer it as part of their foreign language curriculum. That's a mistake I think. I think it's important for us to teach Americans American Sign Language. It's a way to expand your mind, it's a way to expand your consciousness and your ability to use language. It also opens up, it destroys that gate, it allows you to cross the street.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity