

## **Author's Note: Kerry O'Malley Cerra**

### *The Gallaudet Eleven: The Story of NASA's Deaf Bioastronauts*

Have you ever felt limited or been told you can't do something due to your body type or a disability? I remember my son being told he was too small to play quarterback in high school despite his success in that position for years. Rather than give up his dream of being on the team, he found another place for himself as the kicker, and his resilience led to a great career.

As a deaf person, I've spent many years aware of my own limitations and being told I can't do certain things. Growing up with Cape Canaveral practically in my backyard, I was enamored with all things space and desperately wanted to be an astronaut. But my hearing loss prevented it. Exploring the unknown—like outer space—requires strength, endurance, and adaptability: traits most disabled people possess since we navigate a world not built for us every day. Still . . . I eventually let the dream slip away. Many years later, I learned about The Gallaudet Eleven, whose hearing loss allowed them to serve NASA in a way no one else could! I imagined how much their story would have meant to me as a young person and knew it needed to be shared far and wide.

While many opportunities were closed to deaf people in the 1960s, Gallaudet College—renamed Gallaudet University when it was granted university status in 1986—offered each of these men important opportunities to pursue higher education and career paths. Little did they know, it would also allow them to serve their country—a dream many of them had previously abandoned—and help put a man on the moon! Their help made the astronauts' jobs possible.

When astronaut John Glenn heard about a group of deaf folks who never got motion sick, he said he “envied” them.

Through my research, I met Jean Bergey (retired Associate Director of the Drs. John S. & Betty J. Schuchman Deaf Documentary Center) who provided a critical read of this manuscript. I’m grateful for her expertise. In addition, I’ve been fortunate to get to know three of the bioastronauts well. Barry Gulak, who I am so incredibly blessed to have spent time with at my home in the summer of 2021, has become a dear friend. David Myers and Harry (Sonny) Larson are exceptionally kind people. All three clarified many of the events in this book. I feel immense pride to be in touch with these national heroes: men who worked selflessly for nearly ten years and whose contributions helped us win the space race and create motion sickness remedies for people worldwide. I’m personally grateful for this last one, and I’m sure many of you are, too! Dr. Graybiel once said, “Someday, I hope it will be possible for everyone to know both the nature and extent of your willingness to cooperate with us in carrying out what we consider to be a very important research project.”

It is my great joy to play a role in finally bringing their story to readers everywhere. And even though I may never travel to space in person, I can certainly write about it. Sometimes, that’s how dreams work . . . by opening yourself up to other possibilities.