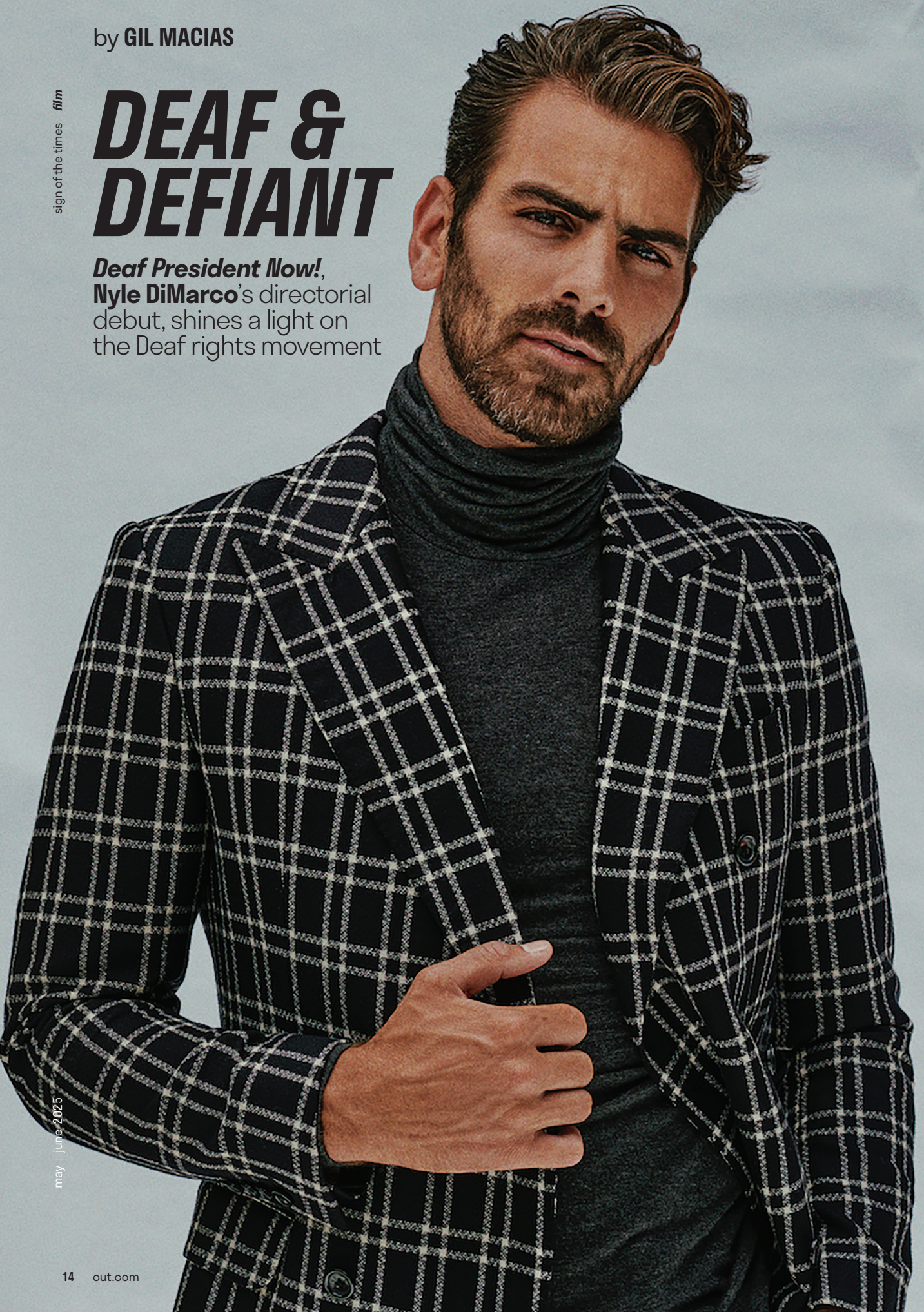


by GIL MACIAS

sign of the times **film**

# DEAF & DEFIANT

**Deaf President Now!**, Nyle DiMarco's directorial debut, shines a light on the Deaf rights movement



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The “DPN4”: Tim Rarus, Bridgetta Bourne-Firl, Greg Hlibok, and Jerry Covell in *Deaf President Now!*

It’s been nearly 10 years since Nyle DiMarco made history by becoming the first Deaf contestant to ever win two major competition reality shows back to back. First was *America’s Next Top Model* in 2015, and just five months later, he strutted his stuff on *Dancing With the Stars* season 22, eventually taking home the coveted Mirrorball Trophy. Since then, he’s published a *New York Times* best-selling memoir and attached his name to a variety of film projects as an executive producer, including *Audible*, a Netflix documentary that earned an Oscar nomination.

But now the dashing Deaf and LGBTQ+ activist is adding another title to his impressive list of achievements: film director. With his directorial debut, the documentary feature *Deaf President Now!*, he and co-director Davis Guggenheim (*Waiting for Superman*, *He Named Me Malala*) aim to shine a light on a milestone event in the Deaf community’s history: the Deaf President Now movement that rocked Gallaudet University in 1988.

Despite the historic significance of the student protest, which led to major institutional reform at Gallaudet and greater federal protections for Deaf people, the Deaf President Now movement has been somewhat obscured by time. DiMarco first learned about it from his Deaf mother at a young age and soon realized it wasn’t widely known.

“I went to a regular public school, and I was talking to some of my hearing peers, and none of them knew about the Deaf history that I knew about,” he says. “And they were learning about all the different types of civil rights movements, except for Deaf President Now. They weren’t talking about this Deaf revolution that actually helped lead to the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act. And it kind of marks that moment of legislation for people with disabilities, and hearing children weren’t learning about it. So I knew that it was a story that everybody needs to know about.”

## **EVENTS IN DEAF HISTORY “CHANGED AND SHAPED AMERICA, IF NOT THE WORLD. AND THOSE NEED TO BE DOCUMENTED.”**

Gallaudet, from which DiMarco graduated in 2013 with a degree in mathematics, is the world’s premier university for the Deaf — a cherished institution with a 161-year history. For 124 of those years, the school had operated under the leadership of hearing presidents selected by a patronizing board of trustees. But in March 1988, an eight-day protest erupted after Gallaudet’s trustees interviewed several qualified Deaf candidates for the role of president and then hired a hearing person who didn’t know sign language.

Utilizing hours of carefully edited and subtitled archival footage, DiMarco’s film transports viewers back to the events that unfolded on campus. The doc centers on the four students — Greg Hlibok, Jerry Covell, Bridgetta Bourne-Firl, and Tim Rarus, better known as the DPN4 — who stepped up to lead a group of their peers in successfully demanding authentic representation in leadership, thereby changing the course of Gallaudet’s (and America’s) history forever. The national media coverage of the protests brought vital visibility to the Deaf rights movement and helped spur the 1990 passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

To DiMarco, *Deaf President Now!*’s ultimate message about the power of protest to engender change is as relevant as ever.

“Honestly, I feel like we’ve kind of forgotten how to protest,” DiMarco says. “And I feel like right now this film is very timely, especially with all of the things that are going on with the political climate and all the protests that are happening around the country. There’s so many disagreements and polarizing opinions. And a lot of people think, *Oh, well, you disagree with me, I’m not going to work with you.* Or like, *You disagree with me, I’m not going to give you the time of day.*”

“During the film, you’ll see a lot of disagreements and that the [DPN4] didn’t actually fully get along. But they can move past that and work towards a bigger goal and have collective action really be something that is accomplishable. And so [I want viewers] to see that with the protests and that protesting is possible and you can be successful,” he continues. “So the power of collective action — I think that’s a hope for me. Obviously, I want people to learn more about Deaf culture as well.”

With protest scenes that echo the struggle for queer liberation, the film will particularly resonate with the LGBTQ+ community, DiMarco attests. “I feel like the LGBTQ community and Deaf community are kind of on parallel paths with the different types of protests that are going on,” he says. “I think there’s a lot of common ground.”

It’s been a decade since *America’s Next Top Model* catapulted DiMarco to stardom, and 2025 is already off to a momentous start for the multitasking model. In January, he premiered *Deaf President Now!* at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, and he wasn’t alone as a first-time Deaf director. Alongside him was Shoshannah Stern, who premiered *Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore*. DiMarco was in awe of the Deaf representation at this year’s Sundance but still thinks there’s more to do on-screen and behind the scenes.

“I’m all for more Deaf representation in this industry. I feel like we’re at a point where we can really build off of each other and build off the stories that we’re telling to be more creative with how Deaf people get into the industry,” he reflects. “*Deaf President Now!* had over 40 Deaf people working on set. Shoshannah’s film, I know there were a couple of Deaf people working on set and involved with production as well, and so I think I’m just really happy.”

“People are starting to become a little bit more open to real, raw stories and seeing those being told with authentic representation. We’ve had some in the past, but obviously, it hasn’t been enough,” he adds. “Obviously, I’m always happy to see more Deaf representation, just as long as it means that we’re able to get to a place where we have Deaf people who are in all different types of roles: acting, writing, producing, all of that.”

Producing and directing more films is indeed in DiMarco’s future, and *Deaf President Now!* is just the beginning. “There are so many Deaf stories and things in Deaf history that kind of changed and shaped America, if not the world. And those need to be documented,” he shares. “I’m really hungry to direct more. I have a couple of projects that I’ll be directing solo. And so I’m excited to be able to share them with people.”

*Deaf President Now!* premieres May 16 on Apple TV+.

Activist Greg Hlibok in *Deaf President Now!*



Activist Bridgetta Bourne-Firi in *Deaf President Now!*

