

Interpreters: Gatekeepers for the Deaf Interpreter Community

Alisha Bronk, Oregon

The Deaf Interpreter (DI) profession is no longer new, yet many of the issues that were present when I first started interpreting in 1994 are still with us today. Thanks to the current RID leadership and my participation in the Deaf Members in Leadership (DML) Committee, it feels like the right time to share my experiences, and maybe that of many other deaf interpreters, in attempting to collaborate with hearing colleagues.

My path to becoming an interpreter started with Evelyn Zola. Without her unwavering support (and sometimes insistence), I might have given up. Evelyn was an RSC, and back then, it meant that she taught and evaluated interpreters but rarely worked in a team with hearing interpreters. She had a vision of what a deaf and hearing team could be. Because of her, I became a DI and a teacher of interpreters.

For reasons that don't always make sense to the community of DIs, some hearing interpreters are resistant to working with us. We can only guess why: perhaps this is because they are uncomfortable; are unnerved by the complications of including one more interpreter in the process; are native signers and don't see the benefit; and/or generally think their work is adequate without the addition of another interpreter. Of course, perhaps we have just not done a good enough job of explaining the benefits of using DIs.

Settings

Interpreters do seem open to DIs working with deaf-blind clients and in legal settings (though there is also resistance there). It is important to recognize the value of DIs working in many community settings too.

Remember that working with DIs is still new to many in the Deaf community. I've often had the experience of hav-

ing the deaf person resistant for the first appointment but then requesting a DI for all future appointments. DIs depend on hearing interpreters to help get us access to those jobs and allow Deaf community members to have the experience of working with us.

I often find myself in a situation where the communication has been challenging for a long time before it is determined to call in a deaf team interpreter. By then, there are often severe consequences, and it takes a long time to get things unraveled. It seems that interpreters are ready to call in a DI when they are afraid of legal liability but don't consider the impact for deaf people in their everyday lives.

Benefits to Hearing Interpreters

Not only does the deaf client/consumer have an easier time understanding the message, the hearing interpreter can learn a great deal working in teams with DIs. By seeing your interpretations reinterpreted by your DI team, you have an immediate opportunity to see a different way to construct the message, learn new vocabulary and grammatical features, and, often the biggest benefit, learn new culturally normative ways to construct ASL messages in the future.

What better way to enhance your bilingual, bicultural competence than the immediate experience of seeing how your messages are understood/misunderstood and watching your DI colleague recreate them for your mutual clients.

Benefits to the Deaf and Hearing Consumers

Both hearing and deaf consumers will have greater satisfaction resulting from enhanced communication when a DI is present. The DI can provide much more detail and clarity that might not otherwise be available.

Additionally, hearing consumers,

in particular, will have unprecedented opportunities to realize the impact of language and culture on communication. Whereas they might have previously thought that sign language is "simple" and that hiring a "signer" is adequate; now they have an opportunity to grasp how profound the difference is between ASL and English, between Deaf culture and hearing culture.

Qualified Deaf Interpreters

I was fortunate to spend a year in an interpreter education program back in 1993 and in a legal training program with wonderful instructors like Anna Witter-Merrithew and Theresa Smith. It has been important for me and, I think, for all DIs to get an understanding of how hearing interpreters are trained and how they think.

We can only have successful deaf and hearing teams with a pool of qualified deaf interpreters. The most important qualification is flexibility. This includes the ability to grasp varied language forms and the ability to distinguish meaning from abstract messages. Qualified DIs have the ability to adapt to the language needs of the consumer.

This is another place where hearing interpreters can help. No matter how much training any of us has, nothing is a better teacher than experience. DIs ask for your respectful support on the job, especially as newer DIs find their way into the professional world of interpreting.

We should all be open to sharing our experiences, frustrations and joys of our work in an effort to improve ourselves and our field. We know that deaf and hearing interpreters, working in teams, can provide the best service to many Deaf community members, enhance all of our skills, and bring what the Deaf community calls "Deaf-heart" back into our field.

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RID COMMITTEES

Ultimately, our goal is for all interpreters to become allies. We look forward to working together to make that happen. ■

Alisha Bronk comes from a strong background of experience in the interpreting field. Her credentials include a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from Gallaudet University in 1990. She has taken graduate courses in TESOL/Linguistics and will graduate in June 2009. Ms. Bronk has served as an interpreter instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and as an

administrator of the ASL diagnostic skills test for the state of Wisconsin. Ms. Bronk has also traveled as a research linguistic in Suriname, South America. Ms. Bronk has 16 years of experience interpreting in legal, hospital and immigration settings as a deaf interpreter. During those years, she also served as a deaf mentor and a tutor for interpreters and community students, as well as a presenter at various interpreting and ASL-focused conferences.

Bringing the "Deaf Heart" to RID

Lewis Merkin, CDI, New York

During the weekend of December 5-7, 2008, the Deaf Members in Leadership (DML) Committee met at the RID headquarters in Alexandria, VA, for an intensive face-to-face meeting. Over the course of 16 hours, the DML looked carefully at its two main responsibilities: bringing the concerns of RID's deaf members to the board of directors and seeking ways to foster participation of deaf members in the organizational structure, both at the local and national levels. To this end, we were very honest in recognizing that over the years, the input of RID's original stakeholders, the Deaf community and children of deaf adults (CODA) interpreters, has lessened significantly and has had an impact on how RID is viewed by those communities. We recognize that every current stakeholder in RID wants the best for the organization. The best approach to reminding members of the value of an "of Deaf" perspective is to create an atmosphere where this occurs naturally. We discussed "Deaf Heart" concepts (ASL, visually accessible information, collectivism vs. individualism, culture, history, CODA input, etc.) and looked at how this

can be incorporated (at the 2009 RID National Conference, collaborating with NAD, CIT and ASLTA to incorporate allies principles into interpreter training program curricula, revisit the wording of RID's strategic challenges, etc.) Finally, we looked at ways that we can encourage more participation within the organization by developing workshops which explain RID's structure and demonstrate how individual deaf members can take more responsibility in getting involved.

DML is the liaison for both the Deaf Caucus (DC) Member Section and the Interpreters with Deaf Parents (IDP) Member Section. DC and IDP are currently collaborating on a community forum to be held during the 2009 conference. This is a continuation of the

dialogue that was initiated at the 2007 conference in San Francisco, CA. As it was then, the forum will consist of a panel of experts (Deaf, CODA, and long-time interpreters) who will discuss matters crucial to the interpreting profession. The forum will then break out into small groups that will discuss specific action items suggested by the panelists to bring back to the full group. Again, as in San Francisco, this will be open to the local Deaf community. In this way, we strive to have an honest, respectful, collaborative event that enriches RID. Juliann Wasisco (chair of DC) and Laurie Nash (chair of IDP) are hard at work developing this forum.

I want to thank the hard working members of DML: Janis Cole (Region 2), Jimmy Beldon (Region 3), Kristin Lund (Region 4), Alisha Bronk (Region 5) as well as national office liaison Jennifer Apple and board liaison Cheryl Moose. I have been a member of DML since 2004, and I find it has really helped me understand RID and allowed me to feel I could make a difference. I strongly encourage deaf members from all regions to consider getting involved. ■



*Front Row: Alisha Bronk, Cheryl Moose
Back Row: Jimmy Beldon, Janis Cole, Lewis Merkin (Chair), Jennifer Apple*