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## **Marginalization Within the Sign Language Interpreting Profession: Where is the Deaf Perspective?**

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Nancy presented, Marginalization Within the Sign Language Interpreting Profession: Where is the Deaf Perspective?, at [StreetLeverage – Live 2013 | Atlanta](#). Her talk explored how the intersectional dynamic between the deaf and sign language interpreting communities has literally been lost in translation amid dramatic and still-evolving changes within the field of sign language interpreting.

You can find the PPT deck for is presentation [here](#).

*[Note from StreetLeverage Curator, Brandon Arthur. What follows is an English translation of Nancy's talk from StreetLeverage - Live 2014 done by a third party. I would encourage each of you to watch the video and access Nancy's talk directly.]*

### **Nearly 50 Years of Advancement**

Where do we actually find the perspective of deaf people (deaf community) within the interpreting profession? Actually, the answer to this question may better be answered by asking, 'Who here is Deaf?' Please raise your hand if you are deaf. Point made. There are few of us here so where *do* you get our perspective?

There has been a large number of dramatic changes over the relatively short history of [RID](#) and we have come a long way in the establishment of the profession. When I say dramatic changes, I do not mean to imply that change is bad. There have been wonderful advancements and many, many very positive outcomes. I value my personal and professional relationships with interpreters and many in the Deaf community feel the same way. In spite of those sometimes very strong relationships, I would like to focus this presentation on how to better involve deaf people within the decision making structure of the sign language interpreting profession.

## **Marginalization-and Underrepresentation-of Deaf Persons**

I feel that just as there are few deaf voices represented here, there are just as few represented in other areas as well. Deaf people need to be not only welcomed but invited to the decision making tables of the interpreting field. At the profession's birth and infancy, the deaf voice had a stronger presence and over the 50 year history of RID that voice has been less and less present. We have been underrepresented in all aspects of the interpreting field and industry and I will share with you some ways that can change.

## **Deaf perspectives & Contributions Consistently Undervalued**

I opened my talk by saying that there have been many positive advancements in the interpreting field over the last 50 years but with those changes there have also been some inherent weaknesses that have become clear. One such weakness is not including deaf people in the evolutionary progress of the field and industry. This fact leads to the important step of asking ourselves why this has happened.

Before I go any further, I do want to apologize for depending on my notes so much. I have recently gone through treatment for cancer and the medications have left me unable to rely on my memory like I used to.

When I say that deaf people have not been involved in the evolutionary progress of the field, I am pointing a finger at the whole industry. I see the same trend in interpreter education, ethics, testing, certification, professional development, national, regional, and local service organizations, research, mentorship, interpreting service providers/agencies, and joint efforts by the deaf and interpreting communities, and so on. By not including Deaf people in all of the advancements within the industry, the field misses out on the benefits and contributions that can be gained by their inclusion. The Deaf-Gain.

The deaf community has not only felt unwelcome and unvalued, we have been uninvited. At this point, we need a personal invite to know that we are welcome and valued. I challenge each of you to invite a deaf person to the next StreetLeverage Live. Deaf people from within the field but also anyone that the industry could benefit from hearing from should attend. I intend to go as a participant and I hope to see an audience of half deaf and half hearing. Let's commit to making that happen so that we all can benefit from each other.

## **Duplication of Effort**

Another trend I have seen over time is duplication of efforts within the deaf and sign language interpreting communities. I would encourage everyone to look across the fence to see how you can create successful collaborations toward better outcomes for everyone. For example, I am aware that in some states the RID chapters have a close working relationship with the [NAD](#) state association but in other states that is not the case. Take a look at your own area and let the states that are doing this successfully be your guide. Work to establish strong collaborations in your local area in order to better support each other's efforts.

It is high time to weave deaf people into the tapestry or mosaic of the interpreting field. With a critical eye, we need to look within to examine why there has developed and remains such divisiveness between the deaf and sign language interpreting communities and between niche groups within both communities. We need to do that important work before we can move forward.

I have always viewed interpreters as my ally or my partner. I do not want to work with any service provider, whether they be my doctor or anyone else, unless they view me as their partner, too. The idea of partnering between the deaf person and the interpreter is not a

mindset I see enough in my local area, of St. Augustine, Florida. I lived in Maryland for 34 years and was very fortunate to work with so many interpreters that did approach our relationship as a partnership so moving to Florida where I have not found that to be the norm has been a little bit of a culture shock. I have taken it upon myself to share my experience and informally mentor a few interpreters with the hopes that they can change their model.

I do have a vested interest in seeing the field of interpreting grow. I say this because I see the domino effect of what can happen when the field includes more Deaf perspective (Deaf-Gain). It improves the quality of the work sign language interpreters, which in turn will make the efforts of both the Deaf and interpreting community more effective. We have not even begun to tap into the potential of that collaboration.

Deaf people can be valued, contributing, and equal players in the interpreting field's growth.

### **“For Hearing Interpreters Only” Mindset**

There are many examples where this statement plays out. I have been to countless interpreter events on local, state, and national levels where the predominant language being used is English. That simple act by the attendees leaves me feeling left out, unwelcome, and disrespected. The result is that I feel as if I am an outcast in my own community and if you have experienced this, you know it is definitely not a good feeling to have.



Nancy Bloch

I have been to some events where the speaker is using English and sign language interpreters are provided but there is someone signing ASL on one far side of the stage and someone else signing a different way on the far other side of the stage. As a participant, that scenario is confusing at best. I never know where to look when what I really want to be doing is looking at the speaker and an interpreter that I understand within the same field of view. A simple request but you would be surprised how often it does not happen. Over time, the trend to move the interpreter closer to the speaker has been occurring but it is still not as good as having the presenter sign for themselves. Seeing a message from the source is better than through an interpreter so I say the way to get beyond the 'for hearing interpreter only' mindset is to establish the expectation that at events for interpreters and deaf people, everyone will use the common language of ASL.

Unlike spoken languages that have a geographical location where the language is used, there are so few opportunities for sign language interpreters to use ASL exclusively for an extended period of time. Interpreting related events like conferences are the perfect opportunity for a language immersion experience. This creates a rich opportunity for learning, giving and sharing, and a win-win for everyone. When deaf people feel welcome at interpreter events, then the collaboration between our two communities has a better chance of occurring.

The unintentional consequence of using English predominantly at conferences and other events is that new and potential interpreters are getting exposed to and modeled a defacto standard that has to stop. If interpreters are not just giving lip service to wanting to be involve the deaf community more, then the predominant language needs to be ASL.

I'd like to share a scenario that I witnessed to illustrate the significance of an all- signing environment. I attended an RID conference while [Jimmy Beldon](#) was on the national board. He was the only deaf board member at the time and in the large conference hall where the board was sitting on the stage in a row behind tables. The meeting had not started yet and as I was sitting in the audience with about 2000 other RID members. I saw two hearing board members who were quite able to use sign language speak to each other over Jimmy who was sitting between them. I actually had to check myself to make sure I was seeing things correctly. It made no sense to me and I know that Jimmy felt incredibly awkward and unsure how to handle that situation. This happened because those hearing board members had

been using English to communicate during the conference and just continued to do so right in front of, literally, a deaf colleague.

I can not say it any more plainly, a lot of good things can happen if the playing field is simply leveled by providing direct communication access to every participant. Doing so creates a mutually respectful environment where everyone can participate.

## **Economics Over Culture and Community**

Since I only have 5 minutes left, I am going to tell you a funny...well maybe not so funny...story. While I was working at the NAD, a private company hired us to organize a few focus groups to do some marketing research. One of the groups was made up of signing deaf people but there was one participant that was hard-of-hearing and did not sign fluently so we hired interpreters for that person. When we hired the interpreters we made sure to tell them that this hard-of-hearing person needed to be able to see their mouth. Additionally, this particular focus group was of interest to the company so the company's executives were with me watching the focus group through a one-way mirror.

One of the sign language interpreters was slouching, signing sloppily, and I was concerned that the hard-of-hearing participant would not understand him so I wrote a note and had someone take it in to him to ask him to sign more clearly and to sit up. He complied but when the focus group ended, he came around to the room that I was in and complained that he should not have been asked to change his way of signing. He said that he wanted to talk to the person that was in charge and that hired him. When I told him that it was me that had asked him to change the way he was signing and that it was me that had hired him he continued to argue. Unfortunately, this situation did not end well because when I gave feedback to the agency we had hired to secure the interpreters, I was met with a curt response of, "We will take your feedback into consideration." This type of response was received by this agency more than once. I won't say which agency it was, even though [Anna Witter-Merithew](#) has been teasing me that I should say who it was. We laugh about it but the situation was unsatisfactory.

## **Transformation**

Since Brandon has asked me to keep my talk positive, what we have seen lately is that more and more deaf people are getting involved in hiring sign language interpreters and running agencies and that can only be a good thing.

This afternoon's workshop will focus more on how we can transform the profession. Transformation is not easy and certainly does not happen overnight. It has to start at the individual level to create a paradigm shift for far reaching, positive, and lasting impact. We also need to see active involvement of deaf persons and sign language interpreting-deaf community alliances throughout industry. Alliances that have been successful in the past, like the Allies conferences of the 90's, can be a good model for us. Involving deaf people on every level of the sign language interpreting field will ensure core "Deaf Heart" values, beliefs and practices are reflected throughout the industry.

Without this paradigm shift within the sign language interpreting profession, we would not be true to the original reason the industry was established. Together we can and should work together.

We, the deaf community, cannot be lost in translation.

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- See more at: <http://www.streetleverage.com/2014/04/marginalization-within-the-sign-language-interpreting-profession-where-is-the-deaf-perspective/#sthash.piZmPROc.dpuf>