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## Activist = Interpreter = Activist

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## **Activist = Interpreter = Activist**

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### **Abstract**

Lianne Moccia has served as an activist within the interpreting community for many years. She has been a constant force in the interpreting communities of Vermont and New Hampshire throughout her career. Her roles have been both formal and informal in moving the profession forward through her thought provoking questioning of the status quo and her commitment to seeking solutions. Lianne has been committed to change within the system of structured formality of certification under the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, but more importantly, through remaining curious and questioning of the services being provided by colleagues on a day-to-day basis. This chapter is part of a collaborative project of the students and faculty of Western Oregon University's Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies. This chapter chronicles Lianne Moccia's path from curious student to change agent within the northern New England interpreting community.

### **The early activist**

In the late 70's, politically active anti-war activist, Lianne Moccia, owned and ran a collective restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was in this restaurant that she waited on a group of women who were signing and was immediately fascinated by how communication can happen in different modes.

Lianne Moccia is a curious person and when she is intrigued by something she seeks to explore it further. She educates herself. She works to satisfy that curiosity. The chance instance of having signing patrons in her restaurant led Lianne to one stepping-stone after another, eventually becoming an American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreter. Today, Lianne is the New Hampshire Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (NHRID) president, has maintained a 30-year

private practice as a professional interpreter, and has both formally and informally mentored dozens of interpreters in her communities. None of this was ever Lianne's intention when the signing patrons caught her attention.

Soon after the group of signing women had a meal in Lianne's restaurant, she found out that sign language classes were being offered at the local adult education center. A non-native hearing signer taught the classes where she learned some basic vocabulary. Even while taking the class, Lianne had yet to meet or talk directly with a person who was deaf and there was no mention that sign language was the natural language of deaf people. Nevertheless, she remained fascinated, was simply interested and, wanted to keep learning.

The Learning Center for Deaf Children (TLC) in Framingham, Massachusetts offered sign language classes around the time Lianne was looking to satisfy her curiosity and learn more. It was in a TLC community class that Lianne claims everything she had learned about signing, up to that point, was turned upside down. At TLC she had her first deaf teacher and felt very aware that she did not know anything about the language or culture of deaf people. Her interest was piqued even more.

Soon after taking the TLC class, Lianne moved to North Carolina where she worked as a secretary in an office that happened to have a deaf employee doing data entry. They would eat lunch together and a friendship began. The friendship encouraged more language development and more intrigue. The friendship encouraged more curiosity about sign language and the community that uses it. The friendship led Lianne back to school.

### **Curiosity opens doors**

In the late 70s, the only educational options for people interested in learning sign language or working with deaf people were to study audiology, speech language pathology, teaching, or rehabilitation counseling. Lianne says that she did not even know there was a thing called sign language interpreting and had never met an interpreter. Sign language classes were dictionary based and taught by hearing people with deaf parents, commonly referred to as Cudas, or hearing

people who were non-native users of sign language. Students went to class and were taught vocabulary, but not how to string signs together based on ASL grammatical structure. Lianne did not know any different at the time. She remained intrigued by communication and the people who used sign language. While in school at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Lianne completed a degree in Philosophy and found out about an opportunity to attend graduate school for rehabilitation counseling at the University of Arizona.

Lianne's move to Tucson, Arizona for graduate school put her smack dab in the middle of the federal government's efforts to improve access for deaf and hard of hearing Americans. Funding was provided to establish and maintain several training and university programs throughout the country to educate deaf, Coda, and hearing students in rehabilitation counseling, leadership, interpreting, and education. Lianne happened into one such program and received a tuition free master's degree in rehabilitation counseling. At the time, she was not necessarily interested in being a rehabilitation counselor but saw this as an opportunity to learn more about sign language. The experience proved to be pivotal in her understanding of the Deaf community as it was the first time she found herself in classes sitting next to and working with deaf people. Several classes, years, and states later Lianne started to get a glimmer of a Deaf-world view and the natural use of American Sign Language in various contexts.

While in Tucson attending graduate school, Lianne was offered the chance to participate in a six-week interpreter-training program that culminated with the taking of a certification exam offered by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). Again, with no aspirations of being an interpreter, Lianne took advantage of this opportunity as a way to learn more about sign language. She received a Transliterating Certificate (TC), one of the first certifications offered by RID. This program was Lianne's first foray into interpreting. She says that, at the time, she knew nothing about deaf people, their language, or what it meant to create equivalence between two different languages. Yet, she achieved certification and her name was automatically added to a registry of people deemed qualified to transliterate between the signing deaf community and non-signers.

Lianne moved back to New England to start a family without ever working as a rehabilitation counselor or as an interpreter. Lianne assumed that she had maxed out on her study of sign language until she received a phone call from someone needing an interpreter. They had found her name and phone number through RID's registry of certified interpreters. She still did not know what interpreting was but she accepted the assignment anyway. This decision set Lianne solidly on her path into the profession as it put her in the company of interpreters and an active deaf community.

### **Human rights circling back around**

In Maryland in the early-80's, MJ Bienvenu, Deaf, and Betty Colonomos, Coda, co-founded The Bicultural Center (TBC). TBC was a first of its kind think-tank of sorts that offered ASL classes and interpreter training. The interpreters in Lianne's Vermont and New Hampshire communities urged her to attend workshops at TBC. Lianne was curious. She heeded their urging and has not looked back or for another career since. For the first time, ASL was being talked about and taught as a language. For the first time, the deaf community was being described as a cultural minority. For the first time, Lianne had a frame for understanding the deaf community that made sense, felt right, and tied in with her experience as a politically active anti-war activist.

Cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1928) said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Lianne started interpreting in Vermont at a time when Deaf leaders were strong, assertive, and vocal about their needs and wishes. There were also a good number of interpreters who, like Lianne, were politically aware and active within their respective and diverse communities. Interpreters joined forces with Deaf people and together created standards and set a high bar for an interpreter that has remained the norm for Vermont and northern New England some 25-years later.

Of those early years, Lianne says, "In a small community, you either need to step forward or step away (L. Moccia, personal communication, July 25, 2014)." She stepped forward. She has

served the Vermont and New Hampshire chapters of RID as president several times during the course of her career. She has also held other offices and chaired every committee imaginable; mentorship, professional development, conferences, and community picnics. She has done it all but by her own definition; her service alone does not make her a leader.

Lianne Moccia believes that leaders are people who affect change. An apt description from someone who has a history as an anti-war activist and came of age at a time when a whole generation felt disenfranchised, were suspicious of leaders, and questioned authority. The leaders of Lianne's formative years were firmly entrenched in the church, government, and other institutions. They were viewed as leaders simply by their position or by the power they held over others. They were not necessarily agents of change. The community, led by activists, was.

### **What makes a leader?**

When asked what makes a leader, Lianne could easily be describing her own leadership style. Her leaders are: thoughtful, able to see the big picture, act on their principles, and serve as a morale compass for the community. They remain active and engaged. They invest themselves. They walk the walk and talk the talk. For 30 years, Lianne has done all of these things. She was a student that asked questions and sought to understand the larger context. As an early interpreter, Lianne acted on her belief in basic human and linguistic rights of all people by seeking to become more competent in ASL through resources that required significant travel and money to access.

Unlike what may be a traditional view of what a leader looks like, Lianne believes that a person is a leader even if they have a different approach than the majority. They may not have a large following or they may not hold positions of authority or formal leadership but they are agents of change in some other way. They buck the system. They challenge the community to think differently. They act on their principals. They earn the respect and support of their colleagues, even if those same colleagues disagree.

Again, Lianne has done all of these things.

Lianne has been a constant force within the interpreting communities of Vermont and New Hampshire over the course of her career. Her roles have been both formal and informal in moving the profession forward with her thought provoking questioning of the status quo and her commitment to seeking solutions. She has remained a tireless activist within the Deaf and interpreting communities. She has done this from inside the system of structured formality of certification under the RID, but more importantly, through remaining curious and questioning of the services being provided by colleagues on a day-to-day basis. Lianne has remained curious and open since that first pivotal encounter with signing restaurant patrons and our profession has benefitted tremendously from her activism. Our industry and the people we serve have benefited greatly from her leadership.

### **About the Author**

Amy Williamson is the daughter of Mary Ella Scarboro Williamson and Barney Williamson, both Deaf and both teachers for almost 30 years at the Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf. She has worked as a sign language interpreter since graduating from high school and credits the many interpreters that guided her into the profession along the way with her success. Amy holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology with a minor in Linguistics from the University of Arizona and certifications: CI, CT, SC:L, and Ed:K-12 from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. Amy is currently a Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies student at Western Oregon University and works as a freelance interpreter. She LOVES the work she does and is an interpreter by choice, not by birth.

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Lianne Moccia's genuine curiosity of what I am thinking, feeling, and motivated by has continued to propel me into new and uncharted waters for the 15 years I have known her. Thank you for asking the questions and sitting in quiet while I found my own answers. You are a gift.

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