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A Passion that Leads to Destiny

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Abstract

In an effort to bring recognition to leaders in the field of interpreting and interpreter education, graduate students pursuing a Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies selected a local community leader to spotlight. Dr. Jacqueline Bruce, affectionately known as Jackie Bruce was selected for interview because of her commitment to the field of signed language interpreting and her passion for educating and mentoring interpreters. Dr. Bruce's educational opportunities served as a springboard for her successful journey. Although she never thought of herself as a leader, she exhibits leadership qualities recognized by everyone she comes in contact with. Her path to becoming a leader has been paved with a colorful patchwork of opportunities filled with twists and turns that have allowed her to settle into a comfortable place that serves the community who supported her along the way.

The Early Years

During the early 70's, Jackie lived in Perris, California and would often visit her grandparent's home. On one specific visit, she vividly recalls watching her Deaf aunt and friends communicating with each other in sign language. From this experience she developed a strong desire to communicate with them during her visits. She knew the only way to accomplish this was to enter their world through their language, American Sign Language (ASL). A few years later after graduating from high school, she moved to the Santa Ana, California area. At about the age of twenty-five, she enrolled in a six-week course in Signed Exact English (SEE) was her first classroom experience in pursuit of her quest to learn sign language. Intrigued by what she was learning, she later moved to Bakersfield, California and enrolled in another course, American Sign Language (ASL). Jackie stated, "This course was definitely different from the SEE course but I did not really understand the difference. My Deaf instructor accurately explained the different between SEE and ASL (J. Bruce, personal communication, July 24,

2014)." As a result, Jackie was well on her way to learning the language that would bridge the communication gap with her beloved family member. Whenever the opportunity presented itself to enroll in a course, she was always eager to attend and actively participate in the classroom setting. Her continued enrollment resulted in earning an Associates of Arts degree from Bakersfield College.

In the late 1970s/early 80's, Jackie moved to the Oakland area. She worked at the Berkeley School for the Deaf. After relocating to Fremont, California, the school changed its name to the California School for the Deaf. Although Jackie was not fluent in sign language when she landed this position, the administration trusted that she would learn American Sign Language (ASL) quickly while on the job performing her assigned duties. She worked as a night attendant in the dorm for elementary school age boys. Jackie fondly remembers one student who interpreted for her when communicating with the other students. This student provided her much needed support while she was adjusting to her new environment.

Jackie also worked as a staff interpreter at the Berkeley Center for Independent Living (CIL). Unfortunately, during this time in her career, she dealt with an annoying lack of self-confidence concerning her skills as an interpreter. This lack of confidence resulted in her feeling nervous all the time. She attributes her success in this position to the other staff interpreter, Joy, who gave her the necessary support and assistance during her tenure at the center. Because the other staff interpreter believed in Jackie more than she believed in herself, they developed a system when team interpreting to shorten her interpreting time so she could build her confidence level. Through her diligence and commitment to succeed, it was only a matter of time before she equally shared the workload. Joys' act of kindness and professionalism had a significant impact on Jackie. As a result she carries that same level of concern when working with novice interpreters who may feel the same way she did at the onset of working in this field. She encourages interpreters to take baby steps and reassures them their interpreting skills will improve over time if they make a firm commitment to continue working on their craft in addition to seeking guidance from Deaf and non-deaf mentors.

While working at Berkeley's Center for Independent Living, she enrolled in American Sign Language (ASL) evening classes at Berkeley City College, formally known as Vista Community College. Her professors were instrumental in developing the Vista Curriculum Series, Signing Naturally, a widely popular ASL curriculum used by interpreter education/training programs across the county. Jackie was trained by the best teachers and language models namely Ken Mikos and Ella Mae Lentz. Jackie stated, "While in college I was given the chance to learn from some of the best interpreters and attend an unlimited number of community events (J. Bruce, personal communication, July 24, 2014)". Her time at Berkeley City College proved to be the catalyst that established a solid foundation in her chosen career path.

Jackie attended numerous community events hosted by the Oakland Chapter of the National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA). In 1983, she became involved in the organization and established a greater connection to the African American/Black Deaf community. The members of the Oakland chapter took her under their wings and helped to foster her understanding of working with the unique needs of the community. As a result of their connection, she started attending NBDA national conferences for several years. While at the conference she met several African American/Black interpreters, established a rapport, and became involved with the National Alliance of Black Interpreters, Inc. (NAOBI). She supports their efforts in fostering development and providing support to African American/Black interpreters. Her interests in the education of Deaf youth lead her back to Fort Worth, Texas. While there she earned a degree in Deaf Education from Texas Christian University. Upon graduation, she transitioned into a teaching position. She taught Deaf students in Dallas, Texas for five years while maintaining a private practice as a sign language interpreter. Her passion lies in blending two things together; her love for deaf education and the youth as well as sign language interpreting and mentoring. She later moved to Houston, Texas and worked as a freelance interpreter.

The Shift

Although Jackie studied under some of the best trainers of American Sign Language (ASL) in California, she wanted to take her interpreting skills and knowledge to another level. To accomplish this goal her mentor as well as others suggested she attend Gallaudet University in

Washington, D.C as a fulltime student. Gallaudet's curriculum was attractive and rigorous but it helped her put all the puzzle pieces together. She relied on the foundational content she had already learned through classes and workshops to wholeheartedly embrace the fresh new curriculum this program offered. She admitted, "The program was challenging, but at the same time an amazing and rewarding experience (J. Bruce, personal communication, July 24, 2014)". In 1993, Jackie graduated with her Masters of Arts in Sign Language Interpretation; some think she was the first African American/Black person to graduate from the program. Additionally, while in Washington, D.C., she attended Shiloh Baptist Church where she gained invaluable knowledge while working with their Deaf ministry.

A few years after graduation, Jackie decided to leave the Washington, D.C. area to become the Director of the Interpreter Training/ASL program at Bishop State Community College in Mobile, AL, where she served in this capacity for five years. Teaching and instruction, academic counseling, staffing, curriculum and assessment development, student retention and recruitment, community involvement and workshop development were some aspects under her purview.

In order to effectively meet the needs of the community, Jackie deemed it necessary to improve her cultural awareness of the community in which she was serving. With this in the forefront of her mind, she applied and received a scholarship to attend Lamar University in Beaumont, TX. In 2009, she completed her Doctorate of Education (Ed.D) in Deaf Education/Deaf Studies. Her dissertation was entitled "The Use of Interactive Videoconferencing in Deaf Education: Perceptions of Instructors".

Mentor Moments

As Jackie spoke about her experience at the Center for Independent Living (CIL) in Berkeley, the word "mentoring" came to mind. The other staff interpreter provided her what she needed at that specific moment. This idea rings true when discussing the facets of mentoring. There is no one method or approach to follow but there are multiple avenues to provide support. Jackie spoke of mentoring in two veins. She feels some interpreters seek out mentors to simply have someone to bounce ideas off of or to receive guidance; this mentor behaves as a counselor and

provides sound advice. Mentoring in this capacity ensures their fellow colleagues are taking care of themselves so they can effectively deliver services to the community they serve. Other interpreters seek mentors to work on specific language skills. Jackie spoke a great deal about the concept of “mentoring from afar”. This simply means that the mentor and mentee do not have a formal relationship or they may not even know each other, but the mentee looks up to the “mentor” and watches their professional behavior, interactions, situational protocols and interpreting work from afar. Consequently, the mentor may often never know they are “mentoring from afar.”

I wanted to know more about her experience with various stages of readiness and varying attitudes about mentoring. She welcomes a mentoring relationship, but prefers to work with those who are persistent in follow-up and follow-through. Jackie strongly believes that mentoring is one of the key factors in interpreting success. She gives credence to those who mentor and provide important guidance to their mentees. Both mentor/mentee play an integral role and serve a specific purpose. Both can learn from each other. She strongly attributes her success to mentors who were willing to offer insight and guided her on a successful path for which she is extremely grateful.

As a Leader

When asked about the person who made the greatest impact in her career, Jackie quickly shared an event that happened in the early 1980's while she was enrolled in one of the sign language courses in Berkeley. The instructor who was Deaf informed the class that an interpreter would accompany them on their field trip. To her surprise the interpreter that boarded their bus was an African American female named Brenda Lacosse. Before this event, Jackie had never seen an African American/Black interpreter. Seeing the face of Brenda Lacosse was the inspiration Jackie needed to ignite her passion to continue learning sign language, become an interpreter, and later receive recognition as a leader in the field. A few years later, she had the honor of meeting Shirley Childress Johnson and hear about Zoe Paige.

Although Jackie never thought of herself as a leader, a number of interpreters look to her for guidance. She views a leader as someone who leads by example. She learned the importance of this character trait from her mother; the ability to be a "silent leader." According to Ms. Bruce a leader is a person of integrity, treats people fairly, and has a heart for service. Leaders are compassionate about what they do and encourage others to be and do their best. She developed her leadership philosophy and style by looking to leaders in all fields. She was drawn to personality traits of multiple leaders, especially those who wanted to see their successors achieve greater heights than their own. She feels her traits are a complementary blend from leaders she has emulated. She looked up to them and to developed the characteristics she wanted to embody.

There was a time when Jackie ended up leading, but not by choice. It happened when she attended a National Alliance of Black Interpreters, Inc. (NAOBI) business meeting at a national conference. She did not set out to lead the organization, but others observed her leadership abilities, nominated her for the position and she willingly accepted the nomination of President. The swift vote resulted in her becoming president of an organization with a mission: "to promote excellence and empowerment among African Americans/Blacks in the profession of sign language interpreting in the context of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual environment" ('National Alliance of Black Interpreters, Inc.', 2014). As a leader, she was able to recognize the skills in others and placed them in positions that would allow them to flourish. Jackie stated her presidency would not have been a success without the collaborative efforts of those she surrounded herself with. The team was talented, skilled in certain areas of expertise and ultimately successful. In the Tipping Point, Malcolm Gladwell talks about three personality types: connectors, mavens, and salesmen (Gladwell, 2000). Jackie is definitely a connector. She knows a lot of people and pulled them together to meet the needs of the organization. Her ability to place individuals in areas of strength, ask for help, and sound determination lead to a successful term.

Building Bridges

If you could envision a person who has passion for the language she holds dear, you would catch a glimpse of Jackie Bruce. She is deliberate in practice and strives for perfection. The appetite

Jackie exhibited when she starting learning the language is present today. She works tirelessly to support and encourage interpreters with her kind words, her smile, and her willingness to teach and mentor. She is a trailblazer and a true gem to the profession of signed language interpreting. Her mentorship and leadership will influence future generations of interpreters.

About the Author

Nicole Shambourger, CI/CT, is a graduate student pursuing a degree in Interpreting Studies with an emphasis in pedagogy from Western Oregon University. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Accounting and an Interpreting Certificate from Georgia Perimeter College. She is a member of NAOBI-DC, the Potomac Chapter of RID and served on the board of NAOBI, Inc. for five years. She enjoys mentoring students and discussions with her mentors about the profession. Nicole resides in Washington, DC with her husband Daryl.

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