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## Renaissance Man

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## **Renaissance Man**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter chronicles the career of Daniel B. Veltri, certified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter for over thirty-five years. A maverick that upholds language accessibility and authenticity, he was an early adopter of video production as a tool to assist in developing signed language interpreters. Significant as Dan's video work continues to be, his contribution to mental health interpreting shaped how practitioners view therapeutic triad relationships.

### **Early Years - 70's**

The profession of signed language interpreters is fortunate to have individuals who possess diverse skills beyond the pragmatics of interpreting. These individuals daily contribute to our collective understanding and enrichment of the work. Whether positioned on the cutting edge of the profession's evolution or quietly and steadily striving to implement change that challenges current paradigms, we owe a lot to those brave enough to step forward to meet the challenge. Daniel B. Veltri is one of these individuals whose thirty-five year career has expanded the footprint of ASL interpreting.

A native of Rochester, NY, Daniel Veltri, known to all as Dan, entered Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) as a science major in the fall of 1976; he distinctly recalls observing a professional interpreter on registration day and was riveted! If you ask Dan about this encounter, the name of the interpreter he saw rolls off his tongue as it happened yesterday. Dan grew up next door to a Deaf couple with hearing children and only used fingerspelling and written notes to communicate with them. He had seen sign language being used among them in their daily interactions, but he had not realized there were hearing people, professional interpreters, who could use sign language to bridge the two worlds.

Fate placed Dan in classes with deaf students with whom he struck up friendships, especially in a chemistry class with a passionate instructor who used simultaneous communication, signing and speaking English at the same time. The instructor, Ed Cain, eyed Dan's fascination for the language and encouraged him to apply for the Basic Interpreter Training Program (BITP) housed under the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). I had the privilege of being a friend of fate as well, by attending BITP '77 and meeting Dan – our friendship has flourished for over thirty-five years. Training meant participation in a 10-week total immersion program, with the expectation of working for NTID/RIT at the student employee rate of \$3.25 an hour - compensation unthought-of by today's standards.

Interpreter training in 1977 was squarely rooted in the conduit role framework. Contemporary thought of the time upheld that a Deaf person's path to empowerment was via an "invisible" conduit to information (Swabey & Mickelson, 2000). Almost simultaneously national legislation on education accessibility for children was making headlines. In 1975 the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P. L. 94-142) passed, legislating funds for accessibility and training of signed language interpreters in preparation to meet public mainstreaming demands. Hailed as landmark legislation, no one in BITP '77 could have predicted the far-reaching "normalizing" implications as oppressive and the impact legislation like this would have on Deaf America (Cokely, 2000). Living and learning in the times, Dan excelled at his craft, being the first RIT student from our cohort to achieve certification by earning his Comprehensive Skill Certification (CSC) from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in 1978, just over a year after producing his first signed sentence, a remarkable accomplishment.

Dan interpreted at NTID/RIT for the remainder his tenure as an RIT student; as a science major, Dan was assigned a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) course load. Dan made connections with the students he worked with and when it was apparent they were not following along, Dan deviated from transliteration and incorporated expansion techniques, radical for the day, so radical in fact he recalls being reprimanded by his supervisor. Dan was convinced there was more to interpreting than adhering to contemporary convention, an idea reinforced after meeting several interpreter trainees from California attending the 1980 BITP

who had excellent ASL skills. Fascinated by their tales of a vibrant Bay Area Deaf community, Dan left NTID/RIT for San Francisco, foreshadowing an accomplished career ahead.

### **A Career is Launched - 80-90's**

In a recent conversation with Dan, he was asked to reflect on a pivotal point in his career. Without hesitation he pointed to a single event in the mid 80's when he voice interpreted for an ASL storytelling at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont. Ben Bahan was featured, performing an early rendition of his now famous *Birds of a Feather*, a moving allegorical story of the Deaf experience. Dan marks that evening as the moment the Bay Area community at large recognized his exemplary skill in working from ASL to English. Community mentors came forward fostering his development, just in time as it turns out. In the mid-eighties a call to action galvanized the community as AIDS ravaged the Bay Area, and the Deaf LGBT community in particular. "People were dying; we had a sense of emergency," Dan recalls (D. Veltri, personal communication, July 23, 2014). He goes on to state, "We wanted to take responsibility for the message to assure people understood (D. Veltri, personal communication, July 23, 2014)." His involvement in Deaf community-based AIDS prevention work strengthened his ASL fluency.

The Deaf cultural explosion of the 80's affected interpreting outlooks and interpreting models evolved; the conduit model fell way to facilitated communication and bilingual/bicultural constructs (Swabey & Mickelson, 2000). As the community's perspectives were shifting Dan's work reflected a consumer-centered practice. In 1987, Dan along with mentor Sheila Jacobs, a founding member of Children of Deaf Adults (CODA), was selected to be a part of the interpreting team for the national RID conference in St. Paul, MN. Dan credits Sheila for teaching him in a concrete way how to conduct himself as a guest in the Deaf community. Later, Anna Witter-Merithew, RID President (and his previous BITP instructor) tapped Dan to service in RID by encouraging him to join the National Testing Board. He served on the committee for two years then chaired the committee for the following two years. Simultaneously, Dan chaired the Program Committee for the 1989 national RID conference in El Paso, TX.

Parallel to the cultural explosion in the Deaf community, federal research grants were awarded to institutions such as the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Center on Deafness, a mental health clinic where Dan held a staff interpreter position. He had the great fortune to work with incredible colleagues. Dan Langholtz, whose professionalism and infectious positive outlook on life and justice, has had a huge impact on him. The eleven years spent in this position honed Dan's interpreting skills, groomed his stature as a national presenter on mental health interpreting and facilitated his ability to conduct service work for RID – having access to a phone kept him connected to committee members and activities.

The Center on Deafness had professional video equipment available, which was very expensive at the time. Given the surrounding influences, Dan was interested in harnessing the power of video to educate. Thinking like a maverick, he identified gaps in video technology expertise within the community. Encouraged by the Center's supervisors Dan continued to pursue video production interests. Sensing a cultural explosion, Dan chose to pursue a Master of Arts. degree in video production. In 1993 Dan graduated from San Francisco State University with the Master's Hood for Outstanding Achievement, one of the university's highest awards.

That same year Dan established Treehouse Video, which has for the past twenty years brought leading edge educational materials to practitioners, designed and produced RID testing materials, and produced numerous videos for Deaf-centered projects nationwide. Dan Veltri is on the short list of names in video production work within the Deaf community.

## **Today**

Dan continues to practice and is well versed in current research trends. He has witnessed the field transition from its infancy. "Interpreting has changed since I first started; case in point: at a recent event I interpreted, a small army of interpreters were strategically positioned around the stage to handle every conceivable access point for interpreting. Years ago, I remember having to jump up and down from the stage to sign and voice a similar presentation," he chuckles (D. Veltri, personal communication, July 23, 2014). He further states, "Our language has changed as well; now there are specific terms for things we used to just do. The field was new and we were

making it up as went along. All of that has become codified and standardized (D. Veltri, personal communication, July 23, 2014).” Musing about now and then he continues, “The younger group of interpreters behind us has raised the bar and expectations. We have become more specialized; interpreters now train to excel in a specific aspect of the language and correlated settings (D. Veltri, personal communication, July 23, 2014).”

Dan’s advice for new practitioners is to seize the moment whenever possible, “When you find yourself in the right place at the right time – go for it (D. Veltri, personal communication, July 23, 2014)!” Dan humbly elaborates, “I was encouraged by people whom I admired – CODAs like Sheila Jacobs, my former instructors, and close friends like Dan Langholtz and many other Deaf leaders. Find a need and fill it... just think about what is needed (D. Veltri, personal communication, July 23, 2014).” Dan’s reflection is sage advice from someone who entered interpreter training thirty-five years ago knowing only how to fingerspell.

### **About the Author**

Laurie Reese Reinhardt, a practitioner with over 35 years experience is a candidate for graduation from Western Oregon University’s Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies program. Prior to pursuing interpreter education Laurie galvanized a group of practitioners to form SignOn, Inc., the Northwest’s largest interpreter agency (1997-2011). She lives in Seattle, WA with her husband, two daughters, and Miss Mille the household cat.

### **Acknowledgments**

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