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Always Look on the Sunny Side

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Always Look on the Sunny Side

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Abstract

This paper is a look into the life and accomplishments of Marilyn Mitchell. She has used role models to exemplify what it means to be a leader in an emerging profession. Through her involvement she has helped to shape the face of interpreting education and services to allow it to become what it is today.

The Beginning

When asked how she came to be involved in many of the important movements in the history of interpreting she responded, "...I received invitations to apply for positions, applied and was accepted to be involved in a small way." Marilyn strongly believes that involvement should start at the local level. (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). To tell the story of Marilyn Mitchell and how she has become a leader in the field of interpreting one first needs to know how she started. Marilyn was raised in a small town in Minnesota by hard working Norwegian parents. She did not find herself a part of the Deaf world until college when she started dating a man whose sister and brother are Deaf (1960). Marilyn recounts her story of meeting the siblings of her future husband. She was eager to communicate with them directly and not rely on her future husband to interpret. This was her invitation into the Deaf world that extended to various other communities and through numerous opportunities and hard work eventual job opportunities. The Deaf community welcomed her and she excelled, learning sign language directly from the people who used it and only taking one class offered at the school for the Deaf that taught vocabulary and the fingerspelling. "...we learned 20 or so signs in each class but not in context...I would go home and practice and practice..." (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). That was the only formal sign language training though she took numerous classes and workshops all throughout her career. In those years, ASL was not yet a

formal language. Marilyn's best teachers were those Deaf people at the school for the Deaf and the deaf club in Sioux Falls, SD. No formal classes could have equaled total immersion.

How to grow as a leader

According to Marilyn to grow as a leader one needs to trust in mentors and at some point stretch oneself. She points to three distinct opportunities that guided her in becoming an effective leader. In her first leadership role she found courage to take this role through looking back on the role models she had growing up (teachers). The first opportunity was her work with the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA). She was tasked with creating Y-teen programs and camping experiences through activities in the local middle schools. Through this leadership experience, she was able to bring together two interests by creating a club of the young girls in the South Dakota School for the Deaf (SDSD) in Sioux Falls and hearing girls from the public schools. After three years working at the YWCA with the Deaf and hearing programs, Marilyn was considered fluent in sign language and offered a teaching position at the School for the Deaf. At that time, she was offered a teaching job at SDSD, the beginning of a long career in teaching, a profession she never planned to enter and realized this was a very rewarding and challenging career. Without the support of the Deaf community, the cultural opportunities at the local Deaf Club and SDSD, she may never have been offered this opportunity. She is forever grateful to Jim and Janice Mitchell and Barbara Mitchell Morrison, the siblings of her first husband and to the many Deaf students and adults in Sioux Falls for welcoming her into their culture and community.

The second opportunity came when Marilyn and her family moved back to Minnesota where she started to work at the St. Paul Technical Vocational Institute. At this point she further learned the value of a good mentor. The director of the program for Deaf students, traveled often between Washington, D.C. and St. Paul on matters concerning Deaf education and federal budgeting. Marilyn took this opportunity to ask the director about his trips and who he had met. The director, a CODA himself, would tell her the names and positions of the high ranking people working in Washington, D.C. Marilyn took note knowing that one day she would meet each and every one of those people. "...He took the time to, I believe, mentor me. Without him spending

the time to teach me about the leaders in the field I might never have taken notice” (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). During her career, Marilyn met every one of the individuals. Many are great leaders in Deaf education and in the Deaf community and some became Marilyn’s good friends.

The third opportunity came about when Marilyn worked as an Interpreter/Actress with the film department at the St. Paul Technical Vocational Institute. This time, she worked under a supervisor who had no ties to the Deaf world other than a wife who worked in Deaf education. In the four years she was there she was able to thrive working as an Interpreter/Actress, a captioner, script editor, and author of two books. “I was able to stretch and do new things in that position because of the confidence my supervisor had in me and willingness to try new and different tasks.” (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014).

The Journey Continues

Marilyn’s journey then took her to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, NY. It was there that she worked as an ASL educator to Deaf and Hard of Hearing students who had previously accessed their education orally as well as teaching faculty and staff members.

She went on to chair the Department of Interpreting Services at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and eventually work as an assistant to Alan Hurwitz the Dean of NTID and a well-known national Deaf leader. It was in this position that she was invited, by TJ O’Rourke, another national Deaf leader, to teach a workshop on mainstreaming of Deaf students and eventually offered a job at the Louisiana School for the Deaf (LSD) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Marilyn’s dream was to change how Deaf children were mainstreamed in public education. This was her chance to be involved in those changes, in the appropriate environment and at a local and state level. Deaf students at LSD were being mainstreamed with other Deaf classmates; parents supported their decisions to mainstream; and social interactions continued at the School for the Deaf. The students were not alone with a room full of hearing students; their interpreters were qualified; they had Deaf adults to confide in and to model themselves after.

She took the position with two goals in mind, "...that no child should go through their education alone...[and]....interpreters should be qualified for the positions they held" (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). She did just that by providing interpreter training courses that resulted in the number of certified interpreters, (there were only two certified at the time that she moved to Louisiana), to increase exponentially. This was partly due to her taking the reins and walking into the Deaf Club and, "I stood on a table and asked the people at the Deaf Club if they had children who could sign. Of course they said yes." (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). Those children of the Deaf adults (CODAs) contacted Marilyn and interpreting classes began. Marilyn went on to design ASL programs, statewide interpreting services, state certification for interpreters, created the first sign language assessment for faculty and staff, and to increase the knowledge and skill base of all those involved in Deaf education in Louisiana. This was her first foray into establishing standards requiring state certification for interpreters that would serve her well on a later project.

A Leap and a Stretch

Upon her return from Louisiana to Rochester, NY, in 1983, Marilyn applied to and was hired as a faculty member with the interpreting education program (American Sign Language and Interpreting Education – ASLIE) at NTID. There she taught students in the two-year associate degree in interpreting until 2000. During the years with ASLIE, she received her master's degree and was awarded the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) Eisenhart Award for Outstanding Teaching. She loved teaching, interacting with students from entrance to graduation, and when the opportunity arose for her to design a change in mainstream education in New York State, she took it. Laurie Brewer, Marty Nelson-Nasca, and Marilyn wrote and were awarded a federal grant to, "...find, access skills and knowledge, design training, and deliver training to all (K-12) educational interpreters in New York State (approximately 1,000); with the intention of the interpreters becoming state certified" (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014).

Having took the leap to apply for the grant Marilyn then decided to stretch herself further by becoming the director of this 10-year, \$8,000,000 grant. She oversaw five independent centers each with their own coordinator. There she, and a team, designed workshops and curriculum for

local and distance education for interpreters across New York State. Interpreters even had access to a bachelor's degree track offered through Empire State College.

Raising the Bar

Having a strong foundation in designing and implementing competencies and standards for interpreter education, first in Louisiana then in New York State, Marilyn found herself invited to join the task force on entry to competency standards put together by Leilani Johnson. It was because of her work with distance education that opened the door to this opportunity. The grant program Marilyn was directing also allowed further opportunities to design standards leading to two publications, one learning outcomes educational interpreters needed upon graduation from an interpreter education program. The other publication designed the learning outcomes students in ASL classes needed from level one through level four. "...Think tanks, with the Drs. Marty Taylor, Carol Patrie and Kim Brown Kurz leading. This brought us together to share and decide what competencies were needed..." (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014).

When the opportunity for designing and creating a new national certification for interpreters, through RID, Marilyn applied to serve on the RID committee to develop the interview portion of the new National Interpreter Certification (NIC) test. She had previous experience from her work with passing certification standards through the Louisiana State legislature and knew she enjoyed test development. "...we were at a time in which we needed a new test. We had outgrown the CI/CT" (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). Her work, along with many others, helped further professionalize the field. "...no test is perfect but neither is the bar exam that lawyers sit for, it is a snapshot in time" (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). The NIC became the most appropriate examination at the time and was appropriately tested by qualified researchers proving to be valid and reliable.

Some of Marilyn's other proud achievements were tenure at RIT, Master's degree at RIT, Eisenhart Award for Outstanding Teaching, Genesee Valley Region Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (GVERRID) Outstanding Service Award, RID Judie Husted Award for RID Region I. All of this Marilyn attributes to being surrounded by many outstanding role models to do what

she felt needed to be done, stretching in the profession, and working to the best of her ability, always in tandem with others.

Looking from the past to the future

All the while Marilyn has worked to stretch her strengths and abilities. She did work through the GVRRID, the Registry for interpreters of the Deaf (RID), the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT) conferences as often as possible. She currently serves on the Sacramento Valley RID Professional Development Committee and has served and serves as a reviewer/rater for the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE). “We often didn’t get paid but we didn’t expect it either. Most of the work was volunteer work. No monetary pay was expected. The professional and personal growth was and is sufficient compensation.” (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014). Times were different then, according to Marilyn, and the interpreting field has changed over time. It has become more professional, more manicured. This has had a positive and negative impact on how interpreters are welcomed into the Deaf world. That warm welcome that Marilyn experienced and is so grateful for, is something that is becoming a thing of the past. However, according to Marilyn, if interpreters will maintain a positive outlook and not “burn their bridges” the possibilities for growth and success are endless.

For advice on becoming a leader Marilyn states, “Every leader should have problem solving (focus on the solution not the problem) and critical thinking [skills]. We all have our own PTSD. If there are road blocks, due to traumatic experiences, it is valuable to look at what the opportunity in the situation and not feel prevented from success.” (M. Mitchell, personal communication, July 26, 2014).

About the Author

Cari Carter MA, NIC Advanced has been a practicing freelance interpreter and interpreter educator for eleven years in the Sacramento, CA area.