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Sharon Hill: Getting Off of the Bus

Kiarah E. Moore

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Abstract

Sharon Hill is an interpreter and interpreter educator born and raised in Houston, Texas. She is a natural born leader that has worked tirelessly to improve the professional quality and standards of interpreters in the Houston area. Her hard work and dedication have impacted numerous students and colleagues. For these reasons, Sharon was chosen for an interview in an attempt to shine a spotlight on leaders in the field of interpreting.

“Once you know who you are, you don’t have to worry anymore.” -Nikki Giovanni

In the Beginning

At a very early age, Sharon Hill was a business woman. She grew up in Houston, Texas with a tight-knit family and did her part to contribute to her father’s accounting business. She fondly remembers working on contracts, financial statements, long proposals, and whatever else her father assigned to her at only eleven-years-old. The work’s rigid and structured nature required a no-nonsense mindset.

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When Sharon was in the sixth grade, she began learning Signed English. Upon graduating from high school, she was made aware of an interpreter training program at Houston Community College. She decided to enroll in the program in 1995. In 1996, Sharon sat for BEI Level 1 Certification and passed. As she completed her studies, she also had the opportunity to work as an interpreter, which she admits was both amazing and frightening. This experience made her realize how little she knew at the time. Since completing the program at Houston Community College, Sharon has worked in the field as a freelance community interpreter.

Growing as an Interpreter

When someone spends over twenty years in a profession, learning and growth are inevitable. Sharon notes that over the years, her understanding of the Deaf community and the role of an interpreter has totally shifted. She has realized that interpreters are not the sole facilitators of communication. Sharon says that “communication happens without me all the time. In fact, I’m actually doing my job better if I can interpret less and get these people to communicate.” She has also recognized the great power interpreters hold, and is aware that she can manipulate that power to the advantage of whom she chooses.

Sharon’s growth as an interpreter did not happen overnight, nor did she become a better interpreter on her own. There have been multiple people supporting her on her path to success, including a Deaf mentor that may not have known they were mentoring her at the time. This person allowed Sharon the flexibility to experiment with her interpreting and develop a style of her own. Since she learned Signed English first, transliterating was naturally easier. Therefore, she was working to develop her expressive interpreting skills. Sharon developed a relationship with this Deaf mentor that allowed them to challenge one another. She practiced with her decalage (lag time), use of more complex English words, and concepts and phrases in ASL. Sharon chuckled as she realized that since she was not this person’s interpreter for the entire week, interpreting services and techniques were not consistent. “I don’t know that I did my fellow colleagues any good,” she said, “but it helped me.” The experience of having a Deaf mentor kept Sharon interested in the profession.

Breaking through Barriers

Sharon has not become successful without facing challenges. Two equally “ginormous” challenges she notes since becoming an interpreter are her shyness and her ethnicity.

There are times when Sharon is hesitant about meeting and interacting with new people. Although she realizes that, as an interpreter, avoiding new interaction is impossible, she still experiences spells of reservation. In order to cope with her introvertive tendencies, Sharon makes sure that her home is her sanctuary, only inviting peace into her space. She has learned to stay in-tune with her emotions and acknowledge her breaking point, allowing her to let go of elements that cause overstrain rather than push herself over her threshold. She told a story of accepting a lucrative, ongoing assignment, and thinking, “I would rather be anywhere but in here.” She let go of this assignment immediately because it was the best interest of both herself and the consumer. When feeling fearful or in the wrong frame of mind, she declines assignments. Sharon proclaims that she has built her life around the ability to let go of any job or assignment that she does not feel aligned with.

The fact that her ethnicity would pose a challenge came as a surprise to Sharon. She assumed that, as a Black woman, she would be a minority in the field, but she had no idea of the true lack of Black interpreters. Looking back on her career, Sharon remembers instances that her ethnicity had direct negative impacts. Colleagues, consumers, and employers have made assumptions about her competence and hiring worthiness based solely on her appearance. Despite the fact that Sharon is a highly skilled professional, there is nothing she can do about the misinformed perceptions of others. She says that instead of dwelling upon ignorance, she works diligently to prove herself with exhibiting her expertise and passion in everything she does. Sharon says that she never wanted to be “the Black interpreter that talks about Black people stuff,” but after a push from Dr. Cynthia Roy, she conceded. Sharon has realized the importance of sharing her experiences and knowledge gained over the years.

Raising the Bar in Education

As the Program Coordinator of a Bachelor degree program, there is an immense responsibility on Sharon’s shoulders. The University of Houston, a Tier One university with the only Bachelor

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degree program for American Sign Language interpreting in the state of Texas for many years, serves as a role model for other types of programs across the state. The rigor and quality expectations are high. Sharon and her team set standards so that students are prepared to sit for the BEI Basic certification exam and/or apply for Master degree programs upon graduation.

Sharon ensures that her students have a dynamic learning environment, which mirrors the life of working interpreters in the field. Every year, she seeks out for new venues to partner with to provide assignments that challenge both the students and herself. Whether Sharon is an expert in the chosen setting or not, she figures out a way to mentor her students effectively. For example, in the Fall of 2016, Sharon began a partnership between the American Sign Language Interpreting program and Main Street Theatre (Lindsey, 2016). Seniors in the program provided shadow interpreting services for a children's musical entitled "Duck for President". Sharon had witnessed shadow interpreting in the past, but had never participated in it herself. Furthermore, it had been many years since the city of Houston had seen a shadow interpreted performance. Sharon did not let any of this stop her. She utilized all the resources at her disposal and has continued to partner with the theatre as a venue for students to gain invaluable skills while providing a unique service for Deaf children and adults in Houston.

Sharon shared a story that lends to her current philosophy of educating and interpreting:

I remember that there was a year that we did the BEI Forum as TSID (Texas Society of Interpreters for the Deaf). At the time, I was a new chair of BEI and still trying to figure and sort out my way. Of course, I was overcompensating because that's what I assumed I needed to do. I assumed people would assume that I didn't know what I was doing – which they did. I was so frustrated because I wanted to change things, and they weren't moving as fast as I wanted them to move. I just thought, "this is so exhausting!" And my mom said to me, "If the bus was going in the right direction – if it was even moving – no one would have to get out and push it. So, push already!" I was like, "Oh, okay." So instead of sitting on a broken-down bus complaining about how hot it is and where you need to go, just get out and let's move. At least you will go one inch further than where you were before. And that manifests in the way that I educate and interpret. It's all about let's go, let's move, let's change, let's get to it!

Sharon's acceptance of the job at the University of Houston was because she saw a need for change in the interpreting community. She noticed several areas that could benefit from some "polishing" and increased professionalism. She hopes that her work will continue to impress upon people the need to be professional and put together when providing a service to the Deaf community. Above all, she hopes to encourage interpreters to respect all consumers at all times.

Some of Sharon's favorite stories about interpreting she shares with students are the ones that students can typically relate to. She tells stories of being petrified, but successful in the end. She also enjoys sharing stories of interpreting in happy, heartfelt settings, like weddings. Students often are blinded by the skills of an interpreter who has been working at their craft for decades. They think that they will never reach that caliber. Sharon believes that it is important for students to realize that she was once at their level, and that she is still not perfect.

A Leader in the Field

When asked about her work as a leader, Sharon immediately responded, "I don't think I am a leader... yet." Although she is an educator and many people in the field look up to her, she does not presently label herself as a leader. However, she does believe there are some qualities that every leader should possess. Leaders should be humble and open-minded. It is important to realize that no matter how much knowledge a person acquires, there are still things that can be learned. They must be receptive to the ideas of others and consider perspectives other than their own. Leaders should also be open to and encouraging of change, because without change, growth is impossible. Good leaders should have a heart that is not afraid to cry, laugh, be approachable, or show emotions. Lastly, great leaders are fierce. They have the strength to stand up and correct a problem. They are not afraid of seeming like the 'bad guy' for the greater good.

Sharon has utilized multiple avenues to aid in her growth as an interpreter and interpreter educator. She constantly tries new things, especially in the classroom. She is also continuing her education both formally and informally. While currently pursuing a doctoral degree, Sharon also makes time to read the news online and watch shows that she would not typically watch. She is intrigued by things unknown to her. Her informal studies have taught her lessons that have

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helped her in her work as an interpreter and beyond. She also engages in reflective practice and impresses the importance of it upon her students, requiring them to keep a reflective journal as they go through their internship. She saves these journals in hopes that, one day down the line, a student will ask to see their reflective journal and realize how much they have grown over the years. Sharon also expands her world knowledge by traveling either down the highway or to other countries, because traveling “helps you see the world from a different point of view.” She also sipped from the martini her dear husband made for her and declared that drinking also supports growth and “is a great stress reliever.”

As a leader in any regard, some conflict is inevitable. When asked about techniques for resolving conflict, Sharon answered that it varies greatly upon the situation at hand. There are times where she allows the conflict to happen so that it becomes a learning experience for those involved, as well as times where she relies on her people skills to resolve the conflict. She attempts to use multiple perspectives to help people understand reasons and rationale. There are times that gaining team buy-in is helpful – whether the team is a class of students, a faculty team, or a team of interpreters. When resolving conflict in this way, she presents the problem to the group and gains multiple perspectives about how to approach it. Reaching a consensus in this manner makes decision making and implementation occur much more seamlessly. Resolving conflict as a group also makes it easier to hold one another accountable for the decision that was made. Sharon mentioned that when dealing with conflict, a person must be creative. There are many components that go into handling conflict successfully, and it can be complex at times.

Currently

Sharon continues to fill her role as an interpreter educator at the University of Houston and as a freelance interpreter in Houston and the surrounding area. She is currently a Master level interpreter, the highest certification level granted in the state of Texas. She also holds the Medical certification offered by the Board of Evaluators for Interpreters. Despite a career spanning over 20 years (so far), there are still settings that she has yet to work in. She hopes to one day interpret the birth of a baby, work in the legal interpreting realm, and interpret in the insurance setting using knowledge gained from years of marriage to an insurance adjuster.

Sharon believes that when she no longer feels the healthy fear and doubt that happens before an interpreting assignment, she will know that it is time to retire. Until then, she will continue to “push the bus” towards positive change in the interpreting field.

About the Author

Kiarah Elyse Moore, BEI Basic, B.A. American Sign Language Interpreting and B.A. Liberal Studies with emphasis in Psychology and Health at the University of Houston. She has been working as an interpreter in the state of Texas since 2017. She is currently pursuing a M.A. in Interpreting Studies specializing in teaching from Western Oregon University. Her thesis will focus on developing and embodying confidence in novice interpreters. She currently works in settings that include community, K-12, post-secondary, VRS, and theatre.

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