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## Colleen Jones: The Journey to Big Girl Jobs

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## **Colleen Jones: The Journey to Big Girl Jobs**

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### **Abstract**

As interpreters, we must stretch ourselves and reach out beyond our comfort zones in order to improve not only ourselves but our field. That is exactly what Colleen Jones has done and will continue to do. Colleen is taking on more challenging interpreting assignments, working with other highly respected teams, and presenting at prestigious colleges and universities. Colleen has just started her journey and will continue to leave her mark on the profession by continuing her research on orientation. Be on the lookout for when the United States elects the first female president, because Colleen strives to be right there to interpret for her.

### **The Beginning**

As with any story, we will start at the beginning. Colleen Jones, much like other interpreters, attended a high school alongside a Deaf classmate who utilized sign language interpreters in the classroom. There was an interpreter that taught a sign language class in hopes that more hearing students would be able to communicate with the Deaf student. Colleen took this sign class and it seemed to be working for her. She began to pick up the language and found a love for it.

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However, after high school, Colleen didn't go to college for interpreting. Going to college to become an interpreter didn't happen until later.

Colleen attended college and received her bachelor's degree in kinesiology. "Kinesiology is the science of human movement, applying the latest evidenced-based research to improve function, health and wellness of people in all settings and populations" (What is Kinesiology? (n.d.). She set out to build a career and began working in the special education setting. Fairly quickly, Colleen realized that special education was not the best fit for her and she wanted to do something that brought more happiness into her life. However, she doesn't regret her kinesiology journey or wish she had taken a different path. Each experience was a learning opportunity to her. By going through that journey, she not only gained important life lessons but also long lasting friendships that she still maintains today.

At the age of 26, Colleen said goodbye to kinesiology and rekindled the relationship with her love of language. During this time, she went through her first interpreter training program at Seattle Central Community College. This interpreting program is no longer available at Seattle Central Community College. She graduated in 2011, with an associates degree. This program provided her with more language classes, got her into the field, and helped her connect with a lot of people in the community. Colleen says that these connections were "key" to her journey to be an interpreter. The next stop in her journey would be at Western Oregon University. Colleen began the Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies in 2016 and graduated in December of 2017.

### **Reflection**

"I was just thinking about this the other day. I'm so glad that I have a job that I love. I mean, I don't love it every single day but in general, I love my job. And that's nice because I don't think a lot of people have that (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019)." While Colleen loves her job as an interpreter, she also makes mention of the fact that if she worked 40 hour weeks that she might not enjoy it as much. She is able to recognize that she is lucky in regards to

the fact that she is able to make her own schedule. The flexibility is definitely a perk of the job. The downside, with this, is that she finds there are times when she will over-commit herself and that impacts her life. However, the pendulum also swings the other direction. There are also other times when she under-commits to work. She does this in order to “give herself space” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019) but then she quickly realizes that she might need to return to work because we all need to earn a living. Overall, Colleen thinks that swing of the pendulum works in her favor because “inconsistency keeps things interesting” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019).

Confidence and self awareness are two things that Colleen has improved on since entering the interpreting profession. She has a clear understanding of her skill level and her abilities. She knows when to stretch her abilities and she knows when to pass on an assignment. Another strength that she possesses is communicating about her limitations. By far, one of the most impressive qualities about Colleen is that she is able to sell herself. “I can own what I am good at. This is something that as women, we are not necessarily good at. If you have a skill, it is ok to say, this is one of my strengths” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). As a new presenter, Colleen is still working on increasing her confidence, but hopes to see it progress as she experiences more. Right now, as a presenter, she feels “unconsciously incompetent” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019) which is a relatable feeling to those who are trying something new. In these situations, she has learned to use positive self talk and to lean on her mentors and community for support.

### **Lessons Learned**

When Colleen looks back at her interpreting journey, she reflects on one lesson that we can all learn from. “Not everyone is going to like you. You are not going to be a good fit for everyone, even if you are skilled and a reasonable person. That is a lesson that I am still learning, and I have to be okay with” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). Even with that being so, she realizes the importance of communicating and assuming positive intent of others. It may not be the easiest part of the journey to take but it is definitely worthwhile in her eyes.

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Another lesson, we could all learn from her is one of honesty and responsibility. Hearing interpreters are human, Deaf interpreters are human, and consumers are human. So why is it that sometimes we do not communicate as humans? Colleen believes that this is where honesty and responsibility take hold. “We need to be honest with consumers. Deaf interpreters are not afraid to say, “Hey, as a human in this situation, here is a hint about what is going on right now. They step ‘out of role’ more often” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). Hearing interpreters tend to not do this, but Colleen is attempting to be “more human” more often and believes that it helps build trust between her and the consumers. Like some others in the field, she is moving away from the thought process of “what would happen if I wasn’t here?” and more to a humanistic approach to miscommunications.

Everyone makes mistakes, but not everyone owns their mistakes. Colleen owns her mistakes, sees it as an opportunity, and learns from it. She instantly began to laugh, when asked if there was anything about her journey that she regrets or would change. She tells a story about a job, that in hindsight, she shouldn’t have gone to and ended up being kicked out of. If she could go back, she would “turn the job down” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019).

Would you believe it if I told you that there are still assignments that still scare Colleen? To her, those assignments are called a “big girl job” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). Those are the kinds of jobs that require you to dress up formally or the assignments are with a person that is an influencer, someone that has a higher power or authority, or people with a big name or reputation to be upheld. But it’s not just consumers that make her nervous. Working with teams, that are highly respected but don’t know Colleen, makes her feel intimidated. To combat those intimidating and nervous feelings, Colleen uses positive self talk as a strategy.

### **Respecting your elders**

Colleen plans on being in the interpreting field for a long time and looks up to several interpreters that have been in the field for a while. There are certain qualities that she sees within them and hopes to possess herself for many years to come. She wants to continue to be: passionate, open minded, open to new information, caring about the people, gracious with newer interpreters, compassionate, and she jokingly thinks that “communication skills might be nice” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). It isn’t surprising that Colleen wants to avoid qualities such as: being stagnant, grumpy, and burnt out.

Colleen’s interpreting journey has been filled with encouragement and support by others. As interpreters, we all have milestones we are working towards and sometimes we have to stretch ourselves to get to the next milestone. When Colleen would be asked to do an assignment that would be a stretch for her, her mentor or team would tell her “I’m here for you” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). She knew that this was true and could feel it. How nice would it be, if as a profession, we would all lift each other up in this way? Colleen’s community has a positive impact on her reaching different milestones in her career and has had a huge hand in getting her into platform interpreting. In fact, she wants to make sure it is known to the community and her partner that she “couldn’t have done it without them” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019).

### **From death to the spotlight**

When speaking to Colleen, she appears calm, cool, and confident. But it hasn’t always been that way. She tells a story back from one of her first days of ITP. Her professor told them to write down any burning questions that they need answered. All Colleen wanted to know was the absolute worst thing that could happen on an assignment and how to work through that. Once she knew what the worst-case scenario was, she felt that she would then be able to work backwards from that, and everything would be fine. Jokingly, Colleen said, “I’m definitely going to kill somebody. Tell me how to not kill someone. Tell me how that could happen because I don’t even know how that could happen. And then tell me how not to do that. Then I

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can focus and move on” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). Colleen said this out of anxiety and the fact that she felt like this job would have a tremendous amount of responsibility riding on her. Colleen never did get her question answered by the professor.

One would think that Colleen would consider presenting at a university to be one of her biggest accomplishments, but it’s not. When asked about her biggest accomplishment, she responded by saying “I work with a lot of Deaf interpreters and they trust me” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). Gaining trust of others is a huge accomplishment in her eyes and presenting at Gallaudet was “pretty cool” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). According to Colleen, the only thing that would be cooler than that would be to interpret for the first female president.

### **Making Space for Orientation**

Colleen might downplay how cool she really is. Her thesis was written on orientation and she recently presented on that at Gallaudet. “I wish everyone knew about my research. I’m actually writing an article for VIEWS now because I think it’s important and it needs to be out there. I wish men understood their privilege. I mean, I wish all of us understood our privilege. That is a journey we are on as a society, profession, and a community. And it’s important” (Jones, C., personal communication, August 21, 2019). Colleen’s thesis is titled *Perception in American Sign Language interpreted interactions: gender bias and consumer orientation* and was done to look at gender bias towards the interpreter and the impact it has on the Deaf consumer.

The age-old question was asked to Colleen, about where you see yourself in the next 5-10 years. Obviously while she waits to interpret for the first female president, she plans to keep herself busy by interpreting, presenting, writing, and researching. Researching on orientation is what she would like to focus on, but as many people know that research after graduate school can be

difficult to do. The profession needs this kind of research and we are anxiously awaiting to learn more on orientation.

### **About the Author**

Stephanie Ehrlich is a certified Ed: K-12 interpreter and received her B.S. in Interpreter Training at Troy University with Magna Cum Laude honors. She did their educational interpreter internship with Wichita State University, and her community interpreter internship with Florida State Mental Health Hospital. She is currently working as a staff interpreter at Unified School District 261 and has been in that capacity for the past nine years, and has been working in Video Relay Service setting as an interpreter for the past three years. She is currently attending Western Oregon University to obtain her M.A. in Interpreting Studies with an emphasis in Teaching.

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