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Krystle Chambers

Western Oregon University, kchambers18@wou.edu

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Michelle Montelongo: Working With the Next Generation

Krystle Chambers

Western Oregon University

Abstract

This case study brings attention to the mentoring and leadership approach of Michelle Montelongo. She has worked as a certified sign language interpreter specializing in mental health, congressional, platform, and post-secondary education with an emphasis on STEM for the past 20 years. Michelle draws from her experience as an interpreter as well as various coaching methodologies from the MLB and the NFL coaches to mentor the students she works with.

Getting Started

Michelle Montelongo has been working with the Deaf community first as an employment specialist and then transitioned into a community and mental health interpreter and mentor. She has now been interpreting for 20 years. Growing up in the central valley of

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California, Michelle is the third generation here in the United States and youngest in her family. Her grandparents were from Mexico and came to the United States seeking a better life for their family. Michelle's grandmother immigrated to California and worked for a British family who taught her traditional European customs. Michelle's grandmother then passed these European customs to her children and then her grandchildren. "Growing up I took after Granny in following her traditional cooking, hosting, crafting, and moral compass" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). While growing up and learning from her grandmother, Michelle's parents instilled a desire for education. She was privately educated through high school and was first introduced to public school when attending college. "While attending the private schools it was my responsibility to ask my father for the tuition check, for books, clothing, etc. When I went to college, the first semester I asked my father for the tuition check he was so relieved to see it was cheaper than the tuition back in high school" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

While growing up Michelle's parents showed her the importance of giving back. When she went to college, Michelle learned how taxes can help the community and providing lower costs for higher education through state-funded schools. She kept that appreciation in mind through serving and volunteering in her local community. Michelle also recalls when she was younger how someone outside of her family and community could impact the people around her. Nixon was a topic of great discussion in Michelle's family while growing up and she recalls how it is interesting how "someone across the country could have such an influence on my family" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). She would stay silent and learn as much as she could about what was going on and looking at different perspectives before responding, remembering how much an individual could impact another person's life, such as Nixon had impacted her family's life. "This way of growing up has heavily influenced how I mentor, knowing my actions can have an impact on someone else" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

Becoming an Interpreter

Michelle's family also taught her that one's "education should be well rounded and not specific" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle attended college in pursuit of a degree in history to become versed in various fields. One of the courses required for the degree was a foreign language, she took American Sign Language. "Having a background in history helped with learning about Deaf culture and ASL. History provided a lens to view Deaf culture and the language by looking at other cultures and languages" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

Michelle continued her passion for community service through volunteering at a local Deaf agency, once she completed the first level of ASL. When she had completed her third level of ASL she started looking at requirements for becoming an interpreter and soon found all local programs focused of Deaf education rather than interpreting.

Michelle continued volunteering with the Deaf community, through which she continued to learn language and communication. As time passed the local university started a pilot program for interpreting, to which Michelle applied and was accepted into. She then learned that becoming an interpreter would fall mainly on her own shoulders to pursue.

She sought out a mentor in the interpreting field and started working with Patty Lessard. The biggest challenge Michelle faced in being an interpreter was her shyness. Through mentoring and research, Michelle found herself enrolling in voice lessons. Through voice lessons, she "learned how to project my voice while interpreting as well as overcome my shyness by exposing myself to various settings" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle's mentor encouraged her to attend as many workshops and seminars as she could to learn about various techniques in interpreting. "I would attend the same workshop three times: once for content, then to watch the Deaf presenter, and then to just listen to the voice interpreter" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle noticed this helped her learn how to interpret beyond the lexical level and has brought this approach into her mentoring. During her first several years of interpreting she learned "this is when work ethic and professionalism are being built" (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019) and wanted the next generation of interpreters to know this.

Mentoring

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Michelle started formally mentoring about ten years ago in Bakersfield, California. A student at a local college needed eight more hours to complete internship and the college contacted Michelle asking if she could offer the student the final eight hours. “It just so happened, an upcoming assignment I had was an eight hour fifty-one-fifty training course that the Deaf consumer had already taken and passed previously and was only taking this course as a refresher” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

Michelle asked the Deaf consumer if it would be all right to bring in the student interpreter. The Deaf consumer did not mind and so it was all set up. “About a week before the assignment, I emailed the student about what to expect regarding the assignment and what my expectations were for him” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). The student agreed and showed up for the assignment. “After the assignment was completed, I gave the student my analysis of the interpretation the only way I knew how, which was from working with Patty Lessard. The student said he had never seen this type of analysis before” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

When asked how she approaches mentoring, her response was it is “predominately based on how coaching is done in sports such as Major League Baseball” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle also includes a therapeutic approach to mentoring due to how often she works in the mental health setting. One of the coaches Michelle looks up to is Jimmy Johnson of the Dallas Cowboys. “He is what made them comeback in Superbowl XXVII, through his methodology of ‘treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is, treat him as what he could be and he’ll become what he should be’” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle also recommends anyone in a leadership or mentoring roles should look at “parenting books because I am responsible for them for the next 16-18 weeks and the impact they will have” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle also recommends any knowledge one can gain about customer service and coaching methodologies to mentor and lead. She emphasizes the need to incorporate customer service skills into interpreter training programs, as well as learning about business skills and gratitude. “Give a thank you to your contracts, like baked goods or a small gift basket” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). All of these things mentioned, Michelle hopes new

interpreters can learn from. “I want the student interpreters to become better interpreters than me and really the next generation of interpreters should be a step above us” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

When Michelle meets with a student for the first time “I ask where they are at and what their goals are” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). She also takes this time to assess how the student views internship “is it just another class to them or is this a pathway to a profession” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle also takes note of how prepared the student is “do they ask me questions or am I the one mostly talking, how much ownership do they have in their learning” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). She asks the students about ethics and how they approach ethical situations as well as their view on prep time for assignments. “As a mentor you can’t be afraid to call them on something and you need to be honest with them” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

Michelle emphasizes with the students that it is imperative they are fluent (not proficient) in the English language in order to interpret. “Often we think English being the L1 means fluent, this is not necessarily the case” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

Michelle goes on to recall a favorite memory of hers about a student. The student had experienced people labeling her with lower competence levels and unfortunately the student believed that about herself. Michelle mentions she had given the student a script to interpret and the student came back to Michelle saying she was struggling. The student told Michelle that she felt she was getting worse and explained that she watched herself interpret the script and saw it was wrong. The student tried again and then watched herself over and over and still thought it was wrong. “She told me since she wasn’t getting it right that means ‘I’m getting worse.’ I told her actually you have improved. Six weeks ago, you would have signed what you did and thought it was fine” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle explained to the student that since she had caught the mistakes that showed she was transitioning from interpreting at the lexical level and moving into meaning transfer. Michelle loves to see students grow and improve, and through that she sees herself grow. “Mentoring keeps me

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on my toes, helps me improve, and I am always learning. I get to see the next generation of interpreters” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

Moving Forward

Michelle believes it is important to tell inspirational stories to students and the next generation of interpreters. “There are enough stories about negative experiences, they are important but I don’t want to dwell on the negative” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Michelle loves to hear from former students about what they have accomplished since internship and how much they have grown.

When asked if there was anything in her career that she wanted to do but never had the chance, Michelle responded with “I don’t know” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). She went on to explain that many of her experiences she had never known about until she was called in to interpret. “I had the opportunity to interpret at the White house, that was something I never had on my radar and yet I loved it” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019). When prompted further, her answer was not interpreting related. “Ever since I was young, I have always wanted to conduct a symphony” (M. Montelongo, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

About the Author

Krystle Chambers is a community interpreter specializing in DeafBlind interpreting and also teaches at Merced Community College. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies at Western Oregon University.

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