

# Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies (MAIS) Case Studies

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Volume 2 *Recognizing Trailblazers, Leaders, and Mentors*

Article 7

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2021

## Nicole Shambourger: Why Not?

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### Recommended Citation

Moore, Kiarah E. (2021) "Nicole Shambourger: Why Not?," *Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies (MAIS) Case Studies*: Vol. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/maiscasestudies/vol2/iss1/7>

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## **Nicole Shambourger: Why Not?**

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### **Abstract**

Nicole Shambourger is a Washington D.C. based interpreter as well as a Western Oregon University alum. She has worked diligently to give back to the interpreting community through teaching and mentoring numerous novice interpreters. Her passion and leadership skills have aided in her successful career in interpreting. Nicole continues to help cultivate minority interpreters in an attempt to more accurately represent the Deaf community we serve.

### **Take Two**

Nicole Shambourger did not grow up immersed in the Deaf community. Interpreting was not the job she dreamed of having from a young age. In fact, Nicole settled on a career path in the accounting world. Nicole worked in finance for almost ten years before even thinking about becoming an interpreter. She recalls sitting in church and noticing the interpreters at work. Lead by her interest, Nicole took her first sign language class at her church. During that time, the leader of the Deaf ministry informed Nicole that Georgia Perimeter College was offering sign language classes and encouraged Nicole to enroll.

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Since she was enjoying acquiring the language and craved for more, Nicole thought “why not?” While enrolled in one of the final pre-requisite American Sign Language (ASL) courses, a professor, Marci Smith, urged Nicole to go further than just taking a few classes and pursue interpreting as a career. After a little thought, Nicole took the leap to take a placement exam and enroll in the school’s interpreter training program. Although she already had a successful career in finance, she found the work to be less than fulfilling compared to her new passion for ASL.

Upon graduating from the program in 2000, Nicole found herself trying to figure out what to do next. She did not feel like her skills were up to par to pass Georgia’s Quality Assurance exam, which was required prior to working in the field. While considering her options, a fellow graduate and friend, Pamela Collins, informed Nicole of a mentorship program she was participating in located in Washington D.C. Pamela suggested that Nicole apply for the mentorship, as well, through an agency named Sign Language Associates, Inc. (SLA). Nicole took the advice and planned to stay in Washington D.C. for the duration of her three-month mentorship session. But, plans changed, as they so often do. Nicole decided to do two sessions of mentorship that lasted a total of six months. At the completion of her second session, Nicole was offered a staff position with SLA and has lived in Washington D.C. ever since. She worked as staff for this company for five years before moving on to become a freelance interpreter. Currently, Nicole works part-time at the Department of Labor and part-time freelance.

### **Taking Success into Her Own Hands**

While attempting to become nationally certified, Nicole and a group of colleagues from SLA formed a peer mentoring group that they named “True-Biz” (Gallaudet University Regional Interpreter Educational Center, n.d.). It comprised of a group of about 6 or 7 women that gathered to improve their skills and work towards their goal of certification. Within a few years, each member was certified.

Within True-Biz, the members developed a deep level of trust between one another. They were comfortable enough to be vulnerable in front of each other. Nicole says that, “because of relationship, because of trust, and because of respect for one another, everyone let their hair

down in our sessions.” They were able to trust one another enough to be completely honest and receptive when giving and receiving feedback.

The group was very structured and determined. When they held sessions, they got down to business – hence the name “True-Biz”. All of the members of the group had a common goal and were willing to do whatever was needed in order to meet that goal. They would go from house to house practicing situations they may encounter in the field. Sometimes, they would even invite hearing and Deaf mentors into their sessions to present workshops and give them guidance to improving their skillsets. To this day, Nicole has maintained a close relationship with many of the members of True-Biz.

### **WOU Proud**

While working as an interpreter, Nicole set a goal to teach future interpreters in the classroom. When looking back on her own experiences as an interpreting student, she remembers that despite having professors that were kind and supportive, she did not see herself in any of them. She wanted minority students to feel like that if she could be successful, they could as well. She attended numerous workshops and conferences over the years to further her knowledge of the field, but she knew that these were not enough. There had to be more.

While working in Washington D.C., Nicole befriended Pamela Cancel. At the time, they were colleagues at SLA. The two lost touch for some time, and upon reconnecting, Pamela was now teaching at Western Oregon University. Nicole informed Cancel of her plans for furthering her education and her aspiration to become an interpreter educator. This discussion led to Cancel encouraging Nicole to apply to WOU’s Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies (MAIS) program. Again, Nicole said, “why not?” and pushed towards her goals.

As a graduate student, there were times Nicole wondered how closely the instruction she and her classmates were receiving would resemble the world of interpreter education. She was aware that, as a student, she did not yet know enough to predict all the skills and knowledge she would need after graduation. However, after completing the program, Nicole declares that WOU “prepared us in ways that we never could have imagined.”

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Nicole believes wholeheartedly that her experience at WOU opened the door to people and connections that she would not have had access to otherwise. For example, the co-directors of Project CLIMB (Cultivating Legal Interpreters from Minority Backgrounds) are two of her cohort-mates. She was hired as an external evaluator to conduct data collection, write reports and surveys, and provide guidance to the team. Nicole is adamant that without the relationships formed at WOU, she would not have had the ability to work on a national level grant. She remained in the position of external evaluator position for two years (2017-2019) and has now signed up to be a student in the legal interpreting training provided by Project CLIMB.

### **Expertise through Experience**

One lesson that Nicole usually stresses to any interpreter she is working with or mentoring is the importance of the Deaf community. Over the years, she has realized that many novice interpreters have not experienced exposure and growth through the Deaf community. They have learned ASL and the technicalities of becoming an interpreter only in the classroom setting, with little to no Deaf connection. Nicole says she is grateful to have started her journey with the very patient and gracious members of the Deaf Ministry at church as well as with the Deaf and DeafBlind community of the Atlanta Metropolitan area. She believes that interpreters' language fluency and sensitivity are heavily based upon having a strong connection with the Deaf community we serve. Nicole says, "we can't be effective in what we're doing if we don't prioritize [the Deaf community]."

Nicole also emphasizes that interpreting is a skill that must be worked at. Interpreting is not something that is easy or that comes haphazardly. She recalls a sentiment from her past professors at Western Oregon University, Amanda Smith and Elisa Maroney, who emphasized the importance of deliberate practice when improving and refining an interpreter's skill set. Nicole believes that deliberate practice entails more than just showing up to an assignment to do a job. It also involves interpreting videos for self/peer-critique and discussing ethical decision making with colleagues. She also uses reflective practice to improve future situations.

Although Nicole has become a successful interpreter, she still wishes that she could have become fully fluent in ASL before learning anything about interpreting. She critiques the current state of most interpreter training programs, pointing out that often you learn the language and how to interpret at the same time. She believes that this is one of the reasons that novice interpreters often struggle. They have not had the opportunity to fully learn ASL before they are catapulted to learning to interpret messages between ASL and English.

### **Facing Challenges**

Nicole describes one of the biggest challenges she has faced thus far as the inability to get out of her own way. Often, fear, doubt, and apprehension keep people from moving forward. Although she has had very supportive people surrounding her, she still has to allow herself to push past her own insecurities. Nicole says that this obstacle manifests itself not only in her interpreting role, but also in her leadership role. As a self-proclaimed introvert by nature, she prefers to lead from the background. But, sometimes, preferences are not reality. When she is thrust into the foreground, she has to allow herself to portray her capabilities and lead with confidence.

When conflict arises, Nicole tries to address it when it happens rather than waiting for tensions to build. She approaches people in truth and in love. She tries to be mindful of others' feelings while being honest about the situation. She expresses the situation from her perspective and has realized that most conflicts are actually just misunderstandings. It is important to realize that every individual is different and may see or hear things from different points of view. She recalls a phrase that her husband would always say to her: "If I ever say or do something that you can perceive positively or negatively, always think positively first." This has helped her remember that most people have positive intentions, but sometimes humans disagree – and that is okay.

### **Mentoring**

While still an interpreting student at Georgia Perimeter College, a workshop was held by Dr. Jacqueline Bruce that had a major impact on Nicole's journey as an interpreter and, later, a mentor. She and the two other Black ladies in her cohort were awestruck at the fact that Black interpreters existed. It was not something they saw in their program. While Dr. Bruce was visiting from Alabama, she informed the students about the National Alliance of Black

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Interpreters, Inc. (NAOBI, Inc.). Dr. Bruce told the students that she would be taking her students on a trip to South Carolina for the NAOBI, Inc. conference and graciously invited Nicole and some of her classmates to join. Attending the NAOBI, Inc. conference was a game changer for Nicole. She was able to meet and network with “all the Black movers and shakers in the field” and was shocked to see so many interpreters who looked like her.

Nicole has thrust herself into the upbringing of new interpreters in multiple ways. She has served as a mentor, both formally and informally. She is currently working with a mentoring group, called CORE Interpreters, and has been very involved in mentoring students at Gallaudet University. She has done some mentoring through NAOBI-DC, while also mentoring students when they have just approached her asking for guidance. She completed her student teaching at Gallaudet University and has taught in the interpreter training program at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC).

Often, you do not realize the impact that you have on others while you are doing the work to aid them towards success. It is also common for people to believe that mentor/mentee relationships are one-sided. Nicole believes that this sentiment is far from the truth. In her experiences, both parties inevitably learn throughout the process. Nicole says the feeling to have someone come back and say they appreciate the time you have given is amazing.

### **A Continuous Journey**

Nicole’s leadership style is team-oriented. She realizes she cannot do everything on her own, therefore she relies on the input and support of others. Nicole builds well-rounded teams with her own weaknesses in mind, finding people that are strong in her areas of limitation. Nicole also mentioned the importance of leading with a mindset of humility rather than arrogance. When a person is humble, they are better able to take in the ideas of others and learn from them.

Nicole strives to lead with a vision. She likes to have a goal to pursue, along with a plan to attain that goal. She makes sure to close her mouth and open her ears to those around her, allowing perspectives from others. She also takes time to encourage, motivate, and push others forward. Her goals are not filled with selfish ambition but rather with others in mind.

As Nicole continues to pave the way for new interpreters, she has no regrets concerning her interpreting and mentoring adventure. She says that it has “definitely been a journey, and the journey continues.”

### **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.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Nicole for being gracious enough to take the time to sit for an interview. I am super appreciative that my numerous emails practically begging her to participate in this case study did not cause her to think that I am a crazy person. I would also like to thank my cohort-mates and the MAIS faculty at Western Oregon University. Their support and encouragement have been invaluable to me during this journey. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for love and support through it all.

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