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A Spirit of Service

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A Spirit of Service

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Abstract

From 2005 to 2010 Xenia Woods served as a leader and mentor in my rural community of Humboldt County, CA, and has paved the way for many interpreters to gain the skills they need in the profession. Her contributions to the community have been long-lasting and have had a huge impact on me personally. Her long term commitment to reach out and assist newer interpreters in the profession is impressive. Xenia has a giving spirit and is generous with her time and energy. Her passion to support the students she teaches, the profession of interpreting, and the Deaf community is exemplary, as I have witnessed first-hand and as her record demonstrates.

I was contemplating the question “What makes an effective leader?” on my way to a Salem coffee shop on July 23, 2014 to conduct an interview with my friend and mentor, Xenia Woods, to discuss this very topic. When I walked in I found her sitting at a corner table studying Japanese flashcards, taking advantage of the few spare moments she had in her day. I had not seen her in some time and was glad to have the opportunity to sit down with her in person and formally address the topic of leadership. Xenia is a seasoned teacher and professional interpreter and I was curious about her upbringing and exposure to the field of sign language interpreting.

An Interpreter in the Making

Xenia grew up in Berkeley, CA in a family of professors and polyglots. Her parents attended the School of Interpreting in Geneva, Switzerland as they both spoke several European languages. Xenia began learning American Sign Language (ASL) when she was about 11 years old and fell

in love with the language. She continued to learn ASL throughout high school by attending night classes offered at the local community college. She recalls, “When I was taking Deaf culture and sign language classes at Vista College in Berkeley, Ella Mae Lentz approached me one day at the end of class and said, ‘You know, I think you might make a good interpreter. You should apply to the interpreting program in Fremont.’ And so I did.”

Xenia graduated from the interpreting program and received her Associate of Arts degree in Interpreting from Ohlone College in Fremont, CA in 1995, as well as her Associate of Arts degree in ASL from Vista College in Berkeley, CA. She started interpreting professionally at the age of 20 at Laney College in Oakland, CA and began working as a team interpreter with experienced and certified interpreters. She eventually became a lead interpreter and began mentoring other interpreters she worked with. She saw and was exposed to a multitude of very skilled and talented interpreters in the Bay Area. She recalls, “I emulated their interpreting and I learned a lot that way.” Xenia went on to receive her Bachelor of Arts degree in Liberal Studies and her Masters degree in Adult Education and worked as an interpreter and mentor in the Berkeley area until she relocated to Humboldt County.

Change in a Rural Area

I met Xenia in 2005 when she moved into my community. At that time there was only one recently certified interpreter in the entire county and she was entirely devoted to providing interpreting services in the K-12 educational setting. There were a few of us providing community based interpreting services every once in awhile, however, we had no professional affiliation, were not members of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), and did not communicate with one another on a regular basis. I personally had no formal interpreter training as I had learned sign language from some close friends and had taken a few ASL classes. Xenia must have felt a bit of shock to relocate from a community with a network of certified interpreters to our community of non-certified interpreters.

At the time of her move to Humboldt County Xenia was serving as editor for the Northern California chapter of RID (NorCRID) newsletter and continued in that role after leaving the Bay

Area. She started interpreting and coordinating interpreting services at the College of the Redwoods and Humboldt State University. She single-handedly tracked down every one of us semi-working interpreters and created a network. She began mentoring me and the other local interpreters individually on her own time on a completely voluntary basis. She created and taught workshops and developed interpreting courses through College of the Redwoods, the local community college. To reach out to deaf people and signers in the Yupa-Hurok-Karuk community, she taught ASL on their reservation in the mountains east of Arcata. She also developed a formal mentoring program through Humboldt State University so that newer interpreters to the field could move into the area and provide interpreting services with her in teamed situations in order to acquire the needed experience and skills required to advance toward certification. When she realized that there was no qualified sign language interpreter for the court system within a four-hour drive of Humboldt County, she obtained her Specialty Certification: Legal (SC: L) from RID in order to better meet the needs of the community.

Xenia also engaged in an incredible amount of advocacy at local agencies in order for Deaf people to have better access to community services. At the same time she established Terp Savvy, a company which provides online courses for interpreters. She also designed and conducted a series of skill-building workshops for local interpreters in K-12 educational settings for the two counties of the North coast. Several K-12 interpreters and transliterators prepared for and took the EIPA. Eventually, four of us local interpreters took and passed the NIC test and became certified. Three other interpreters she mentored acquired certification shortly after moving out of the area. Xenia published her account of how she was navigating the long, slow road for change in Humboldt County in the July 2006 Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT) newsletter.

On Leadership

Xenia has since left Humboldt County and spent four years following her passion teaching many promising students at Portland Community College's Interpreter Training Program. In our interview she responded very candidly and honestly in all things. Her ability to articulate and

share her views so readily is further evidence of the amount of reflection and soul searching she has done while on her path as a leader in the field.

We spoke of who her role models have been throughout the course of her career. She named many, but one stood out particularly:

Sharon Neumann Solow is all about inspiring people. She's not about techniques, she's not about drills, she's not about any of that. But seeing her present and realizing how warm and peaceful and loving she was made me realize that I wanted to include that in my leadership style.

As a leader and a teacher, she explained to me a little bit about her approach to both:

My teaching philosophy is to always focus on what somebody can do, what their emerging abilities are, what their emerging skills are, and then foster those and focus a lot less on what they're not good at... They need to see incremental progress in order to stay motivated. The fact is that there are too many teachers out there who don't realize the importance of breaking things down into smaller and smaller pieces, and acknowledging every bit of progress that's made along the way... They ultimately have to choose what their professional personality is going to be and ideally it's going to be a balanced one, like I wrote about in the Street Leverage column.

What I really wanted to know from Xenia was what drives her as a leader and what is the motivation behind the sacrifice. She stated:

It's fulfilling to me to see people succeed and to see people learn and grow. It's fulfilling to me to see people satisfied by going through that process. And it's also fulfilling to me to know that the community is being better served.

As a leader, one will encounter obstacles and challenges. How does one face and overcome these challenges? How we face these challenges is what defines us as a person and a leader. Xenia's approach was insightful:

Take the long view. The kinds of questions I ask myself when I have a hard time making a decision would be like 'if I could travel in time and talk to myself 10 years from now, what would that person tell my current self. What would she say? What words of wisdom?' and try to imagine what that would be.

To those of us who want to take on more of a leadership role, she could not be more supportive. She firmly believes our profession needs more strong leaders. Her advice:

Know your strengths, know your weaknesses, know your boundaries. You need to establish your boundaries very clearly so that you don't get pushed and pulled. Many of us in the interpreting community just want to interpret. There aren't a lot of people who have the time or energy or resources to do more than that. It's that old 80/20 rule: 20% of the people in our community do 80% of the work, and I don't mean interpreting work. I mean the work that needs to happen, to effect change.

Xenia is currently serving as a mentor to interpreters in the Portland area, conducting workshops, and interpreting at conferences throughout the United States. She also continues to teach courses

online through Terp Savvy. But, first and foremost, she is a very loving and devoted mother to her beautiful and brilliant young daughter.

About the Author

Ali Ann Artis works as an educational and community interpreter in Humboldt County, CA. She is originally from the San Francisco Bay area where she was introduced to ASL as a child. She moved north and graduated from Humboldt State University in 2000 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Natural Resources and discovered the interpreting profession shortly thereafter. She is currently conducting research in English/ASL translation as a student in Western Oregon University's Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies program.

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