

Speaking in the First Person When



that First Person is Not You

By Jackie Metivier

I have always believed that using the media to promote the recognition of our professions is our duty as members of ATA and other professional organizations, such as my local group, the Carolina Association of Translators and Interpreters. I was thinking of this a few months ago while listening to “Tough Jobs,” a regular segment on National Public Radio’s *The Story*. This particular program featured an interview with a music DJ who was telling host Dick Gordon about the difficulty of choosing the right music to please everyone at a wedding—the bride, groom, guests, etc. I thought, “that’s not hard...my job as an interpreter, now that’s hard.” After the show, I wrote an e-mail to Dick Gordon that read:

“Dear Dick, I have a very tough job, but I love it! I bridge the communication gap every single day. My work takes me from construction sites to jail cells, from mental wards to executive boardrooms. I am my clients’ voice. Without me they would be left out, unable to understand or communicate. I have been

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a simultaneous English→Spanish interpreter in North Carolina for 17 years. I would love to participate in your ‘Tough Job’ series.”

To my surprise, Dick’s staff called me and said, “You do have a challenging job. When can you come in?” I went the next day.

The crew put me at ease the moment I walked into the studios on the University of North Carolina campus. They asked me to sit across from Dick, and as soon as he walked into the studio we began to talk about my work in general. Ten minutes into our conversation, I realized that the interview had already started and was being recorded!

As a Canadian and as someone who has worked at the United Nations, Dick Gordon is familiar with the difference between translation and

interpreting, and he explained this difference during the show. Overall, the interview was a great way to inform the public about the work we do as translators and interpreters. (A recorded version is available at <http://thestory.org/archive>. Go to Browse Archive by Date and select September 12, 2008.)

The interview focused on stories that would exemplify my tough job: interpreting assignments that were highly emotional, life-changing events or personal stories that would interest the audience. Here are some of the stories, challenges, and professional tips I shared.

Remaining Professional While Interpreting a Shouting Match

In the early 1990s, I had as a client a newspaper plate manufacturer in Raleigh, North Carolina, which,

thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement, was expanding its business to Mexico. I traveled to Chihuahua, Mexico, with the company owner. He was having problems with a Mexican representative who was faxing fake checks as proof of payment for orders, and the owner wanted to meet with this person and settle the situation. The meeting went on for several hours. The initially calm conversation became a heated discussion and a verbal fight like none I have ever experienced. It became extremely difficult to remain calm and find the right register for the escalating level of profanity. It is one thing to have to interpret for a business meeting, but to do so for a profane shouting match was totally unexpected.

Remaining Focused While Interpreting at a Psychiatric Hospital

During the past 15 years, I have had to interpret in uncomfortable, mentally demanding and difficult situations, many of which took place at a local state psychiatric hospital.

Once, I served as an interpreter in a session involving a young man from Puerto Rico. This was a particularly demanding session because the patient was deaf. He knew sign language and could communicate with the psychologist in English through the sign language interpreter. His mother was also at the session. He could understand his mother by reading her lips, and he could speak to her in Spanish, but his Spanish-speaking mom could not communicate with the English-speaking psychologist. I was called in to serve as the interpreter for his mother.

During the session, we—the psychologist, the patient, the sign language interpreter, the patient's mother, and I, as the Spanish interpreter—sat in a circle. Normally when

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I interpret, I rely on nonverbal communication to relay the nuances of the conversation effectively. However, as the patient communicated to the sign language interpreter and she in turn relayed the message, the interpreter's speech and motions were so distracting that I had to close my eyes just to hear the message in English; only then could I convey it in Spanish to the mother. Whenever the patient's mother spoke in Spanish, I would relay the message in English so the doctor and the sign language interpreter could understand. It was a very intense session.

Another time, a 14-year-old girl with depression was admitted to the adolescent ward. She came with her mother and stepfather for her first family session. After that, only her mother came to the appointments. It was during one of the last sessions that the girl confessed that her mother's boyfriend had gotten her pregnant. The mother was so upset that she yelled at her daughter and accused her of flirting with the man. She was blaming her daughter for getting pregnant! I wanted to scream at the mother and tell her that it was not her daughter's fault, but that was not my role. As an interpreter, my role is only to convey messages; I cannot express my personal opinions. At times, it can be quite difficult to bite your tongue.

Several years ago at the same psychiatric hospital, a young man, about 16 or 17, was admitted to the adolescent unit. His family brought him in because he stopped speaking. He

walked like a robot, he could not say a word, and his gaze was lost in space; he was catatonic. I had never seen anyone in that state and felt such compassion for this man. He was hospitalized for several weeks, but one day he started speaking again. He told me that the day he came into the hospital, he could hear me asking him questions and he wanted to answer me, but he felt trapped. Although he could see, he could not speak or move his body. It was absolutely amazing and extremely rewarding to see him make such progress.

After many interpreting sessions at the psychiatric hospital, I would walk out, get into my car, and just cry and pray to God that I would never have to go through something like that with my two daughters. I would sit and reflect upon what had happened. I wanted to make sense of things and analyze who was at fault, why these young people were having so many problems, and what I could do in my personal life to avoid these situations. I wanted to learn from their stories. Time and time again, I would come to the conclusion that these problems could be traced to the parents' lack of education, their cultural baggage, financial difficulties, or to the fact that they live in a country where they do not speak the language or have social support or easy access to needed pharmaceuticals.

Remaining Emotionally Controlled at a Law Firm

One of the most heart-wrenching interpreting sessions I ever had occurred several years ago at a ➡

law firm in Raleigh, North Carolina. After meeting with the attorney and his clients, two young men from Peru, I came home with bruises on my legs and wondered how I had gotten them. I later realized that during the interpreting session I kept pinching my legs to avoid crying.

Two years before our meeting, these two boys, who were excellent baseball players, were riding in the back of a van. Their father was driving and their mother was in the passenger seat. They were traveling from Atlanta to Charlotte on I-85 in the middle of the night. They had a full-speed collision with a truck that had broken down and had no lights on whatsoever. The parents died instantly, and these two young boys were in a deposition giving their testimony. It was heartbreaking to hear them talk about how their parents had saved their money to travel with them to their baseball games in the U.S.

I remember leaving this appointment and crying all the way home, anxious to hug my daughters. Pinching my legs was my way to cope and distance myself from the emotional situation, to avoid crying, and to remain focused. I kept reminding myself, "I am doing this for someone else, it is not my mother and father who have died in this accident, don't get emotionally involved."

Some of the things I was voicing in the first person were: "We got in the van, it was late at night, and my dad decided to drive from Atlanta to Charlotte. I was in the back seat of the car and next thing I know we crashed,

and I never got to hear my mom and dad speak ever again. Our lives were shattered." I became the voice for this tragic drama. It is times like these

story, like when a young man told his parents he was homosexual during a therapy session. Once, I experienced complete disgust: a judge told me at

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when it is the most difficult to speak in the first person, when that person is not you. You get dropped into a situation at a crucial moment when two parties need to communicate, but you do not always get to see how the story plays out.

Sharing Our Experiences

Working as a professional Spanish→English interpreter allows me to meet people from ALL walks of life. As emotionally difficult as it is sometimes, this profession grounds me. I feel such a sense of accomplishment after a meeting where the participants tell me that they would not have been able to communicate without me.

I feel like I have a front-row seat to a life-size picture show. One day it is a happy scene: I interpret for people getting recognized for a job well done, like at Goodwill Industries that employs and educates disabled people. Other days it is a dramatic

central prison to keep my distance from the defendant, because, as he put it, "he's had all diseases known to man."

I often have the opportunity to talk to high school or college students regarding our beloved profession. I usually tell students that being an interpreter is like taking a peek into someone's world for a few hours. It challenges your mind and spirit, and it allows you to learn something new at each assignment.

Several days after the radio interview aired, I received phone calls and e-mails from colleagues, neighbors, and friends. Stepping into the public eye to promote the recognition of our profession not only makes good business sense, but is our duty as members of professional groups. I hope I have encouraged you to do the same. As we all know, translation and interpreting are important professions, and radio shows are a great way to inform the public.

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