

ASL interpreter interview - Transcript



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Faculty of Media and Creative Arts

(upbeat guitar melody playing)

AZAD NAJFI: Hello. I wanted to introduce this gentleman here. This is Christopher, and he is the owner of Toronto Sign Language Interpreter Service, and it has been running for several years.

CHRISTOPHER DESLOGES: And this is Azad and here is his sign name, and he is a professional Deaf interpreter whom I have worked with for several years interpreting in several different places, and through this Humber College project he has been one of the primary interpreters. So I just wanted to ask Azad a few questions about the concepts and roles of being a Deaf interpreter because I want to clarify some things that may have been unclear for some people, so perhaps he can explain some of the things and I'm also curious to some of his answers.

NAJFI: Okay, sure. Go ahead.

DESLOGES: So first is in regards to training to become a Deaf interpreter. I know that with hearing interpreters, they go to college, they go to post-secondary, and there's a few programs across Canada that they have

the option to do. Now, do Deaf interpreters have the opportunity or are they required to attend a post-secondary program or how does somebody become a Deaf interpreter?

NAJFI: Well, that's a great question. With Deaf interpreters... well, here in Canada, it is fairly new. It is not something that has been very popular for too long. So I started about 10 years ago, but it wasn't yet recognized at that point. It has started to become much more of a popular profession in the last two to three years, correct? So, to answer Christopher's question, is there isn't really formal training to become a Deaf interpreter. Many hearing people will hire a Deaf interpreter based on their sign, their ASL skill, and if they have some proficiency, they could be hired. So, for example, if they went to a Deaf residential school, have a deaf family, or are very skilled with sign language, often people think that they can interpret. But after some time, it is realized that some formal training is necessary for the cognitive processing is the most important part, and so there is more and more training programs that are starting to emerge, and George Brown College is one of the first to offer a BA program in interpretation. So that is one training program available.

DESLOGES: So I just wanted to add to that. I went to college, and after several years I graduated, but I noticed that when I started college, from when I started to when I finished, there was a significant reduction in students from beginning, to how many graduated. Because what happens is a lot of people may be proficient in sign but are unable to process two languages at the same time. So you were just saying about people having an elite skill or proficiency in sign language. Would you mind expanding on that for Deaf interpreters?

NAJFI: Well, when I went to training, there was about 30 deaf individuals who were in the group, and then as the training went on, it was reduced to 7 people who were actually successful. So why is that? Well, with signing is one, but the actual processing is different. So for hearing people, we hear it, hearing people hear it, and then they translate into ASL, whereas we have to see it visually. Different people have different levels of ASL. So some people can do from a basic to a very gestural sign language. So my job is very reliant on being able to understand the information provided and to be able to interpret it, but the key to that is the cognitive processing ability.

DESLOGES: Okay, so you became a professional Deaf interpreter and have been

for some time, and I know that there's different roles of interpreters. So, for example, for a DI, some specialize and have a very high level of skill, but some prefer settings like on-stage interpreting. Another is being more of an intermediary or a moderator between two individuals. So there's a few different kind of specifications for DI's. Would you mind explaining that a bit?

NAJFI: Yes, that's a great question. So when a Deaf interpreter is hired, most of the time they can't just do simultaneous interpreting for a long period of time. A lot of people don't realize that it's not the same requirement for all different settings. So, for example, when you are on live stage on the media and you are across from a hearing interpreter, what they're doing is they're providing feeds of language, and what we have to do as Deaf interpreters is we have to interpret right away. It's not shadowing, it's actually an interpretation. So that is a very difficult one because you don't have the same lag time. You need to almost provide the language instantaneously, the interpretation. Now, for my second example, you do have the opportunity to have more lag time where you can consecutively interpret by receiving the source message, processing

it, and then delivering a target message. So that is most common for Deaf interpreters. Example: If you're working in a medical setting with the police, in a court, settings like that, is you're doing more of a mediation side. So you're controlling what each party is actually saying and how much timing you have in-between that, so there's a little bit more tangibility to that. The final is when you are working with a hearing interpreter and a Deaf patient, for example, and the hearing interpreter will interpret to them and what the DI will do, the DI being the Deaf interpreter, will just monitor. So they'll watch the interpretation and see if there's any misunderstanding of some kind or something. So, for example, if the Deaf person doesn't understand the hearing interpreter might be an example. What we'll do is have the hearing interpreter hold on and the Deaf interpreter will take over and clarify. Exactly. So what you're doing is you're moderating between hearing interpreter and the Deaf person and clarifying for both and making sure there's clear understanding. So those are the three main roles of a Deaf interpreter, but more often than not, Deaf interpreters work in that consecutive, that second example that I gave, but now the media interpreting is becoming much more

popular.

DESLOGES: Well, many times I've worked with interpreters and a Deaf interpreter is booked and it's so much relief to have a Deaf interpreter in that process because sometimes with the Deaf person that we're interpreting for... You know, I could be a skilled interpreter, but I don't know their life experience. I didn't grow up deaf. So what their innate skill is or what their knowledge base is and so on, but it's absolutely amazing to have a Deaf interpreter who has the same lived experience, the same first language, and often, for a hearing interpreter, we could go through a post-secondary education program, all of the professional development, but one thing that we don't have is the entire story of what it means to be a Deaf person. So sometimes having a Deaf interpreter could actually save a life. Perhaps you were talking about medication, and are we talking about "disagree" or "allergy" which are very similar signs? But right away, Deaf people understand each other so well, and this could be a life-or-death situation that is reliant on communication, so it's an amazing role, skill, and job that Deaf interpreters have.

NAJFI: Well, just to let you know, being a Deaf interpreter is not an easy job

by any means. Some Deaf interpreters have to... Uhm... So, you know, they grow up visually learning different things and going to, you know, gatherings or Deaf events or meeting Deaf children or seeing all these different places and environments where you learn sign, but you need to be able to see the spectrum of sign, from older people to younger people, but developing a skill in the language itself. So what is so important is to have an understanding of all of those different settings, being well socialized, and becoming an interpreter with all of those gained experiences.

DESLOGES: Well, thank you so much for your time, for your skill, and watching you work through this project was absolutely brilliant, so I have to thank you from the bottom of my heart, and it's absolutely amazing to work with you, and I really appreciate your time to explain this, letting me ask you a few questions, and clarifying a few things, because sometimes I may know the answer, but it helps me to see the answer again and it clarifies for me and helps make me a better interpreter.

NAJFI: Well, I have to thank Christopher, his team, and for establishing Toronto Sign Language Interpreter Service. They've done a really

great job and if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here. The establishment of this company has created an allyship with interpreters, and it gives clear communication to the general community and nationwide, and in a sense, it does have an international impact as well, and I know his dream is to encourage that profession, and he has a great heart. So thank you.

(upbeat guitar melody continues)

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