

# Sign Language Interpreters – Complicit in a Devil’s Bargain?

Dennis Cokely | December 8, 2011 | 1 Comment

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by Dennis Cokely

Five decades ago those of us who functioned as sign language interpreters were allies of Deaf people, united with them in fighting for communicative access to the various services and opportunities offered to society at large. Working to overcome the daily attitudinal and communicative oppression that confronted Deaf people was a force that served to unite interpreters and Deaf people. Then the communicative access needs of Deaf people were provided by the mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, relatives, teachers, ministers, VR counselors and friends of Deaf people. Indeed, the interpreting scene for Deaf people then was in many ways like it is today for individuals needing spoken language access to society’s services and opportunities.

## Communicative Oppression

The communicative oppression Deaf people experienced enabled them to define the work of sign language interpreters in many ways – they vetted interpreters (there were no Interpreter Training Programs or credentialing procedures), they arranged for interpreters (there were no laws requiring provision of interpreters), and they shared their language (there were no formal sign language classes except perhaps in churches) and their “Deaf grapevine” made known to the Community who could be trusted as an interpreter and who could not (there were no referral agencies). For interpreters, supporting the struggle for communicative access was an “other-centered” activity that

focused on issues of justice for Deaf people and their rights.

Fifty years later, while [audism](#) still persists, the right to communicative access for Deaf people has been ensured by three federal laws ([PL 93-112](#), [PL 94-142](#) and [PL 101-336](#)). However, the cost to Deaf people and to sign language interpreters has been quite significant. For Deaf people who, beginning in the seventies and eighties, sought to be viewed as a linguistic and cultural minority, the price of legislatively mandated communicative access was that they were to be labeled as “disabled”; the price of legislatively mandated communicative access was that they would quickly lose the ability to define the work of interpreters; the price of legislatively mandated communicative access was that they would soon no longer be the primary source from which non-Deaf people would learn their language; the price of legislatively mandated communicative access was that reputation within the Community mattered less and less. To be sure, this was a true devil’s bargain, one whose terms may not have been fully made clear to, understood nor foreseen by Deaf people. Nevertheless, the cost to interpreters and to our standing as allies of Deaf people may have been even more severe.

## **The Consequences**

Certainly one consequence of the three federal laws was to create an “interpreter for hire” environment in which the overwhelming majority of hiring entities (school principals, interpreter coordinators, conference coordinators, etc.) would not be Deaf. Thus while we, as sign language interpreters, might hold certification from RID, a non-Deaf dominated certifying or credentialing entity, that fact alone does not mean that we have been vetted by Deaf people or had our skills honed in the crucible of the Community. Additionally these federal laws created the “business model” of interpreting which was a decided shift from the “service model” of interpreting according to which

we operated fifty years ago. Among other things, the “business model” has led to interpreters earning a national average of \$38.00 per hour (with a two hour minimum) and referral agencies billing on average twice that amount – a 100% surcharge. And when we consider that 51% of interpreters work full-time and 54% of Deaf people are unemployed, one wonders whether interpreters have materially benefited more from this legislated “Devil’s bargain” than have Deaf people.

Another consequence is that an enormous interpreter supply demand gap was legislatively created. While Deaf people used to arrange for and negotiate for the provision of sign language interpreting services according to their schedules, Deaf people are now forced to live their lives according to interpreters’ schedules and work availability. For example, it is worth noting that, according to national surveys, 78% of Deaf people report that medical settings are the most important situations in which they need interpreting services and yet those are the very settings for which they report it is most difficult to be provided with interpreting services. Little wonder since only 30% of sign language interpreters nationwide work in medical settings more than 30% of the time. Our work choices now dictate the rhythm of Deaf people’s lives. Our work choices constrain the life decisions of Deaf people. Our work choices either uphold or deny human rights and avow or disavow human dignity.

## **Our Roots**

Deaf people used to be the primary source of helping us learn their language and they did so by teaching it to us from birth, or because we had familial ties or because they extended opportunities for us to socialize with them. But now according to a national survey 49% of nationally credentialed sign language interpreters spend less than 10% of their time socializing with Deaf people; only 20% of us are members of NAD and only 8% of us are members of their state association of the Deaf. How

then do we keep abreast of changes in the language or changes in the attitudes/perspectives of Deaf people? How do we justify learning their language and profiting from it without giving back? In becoming a “profession” have we simply become parasites?

If, as a group, we interpreters are no longer as tightly bound to Deaf people as we were before, if there is no common uniting cause that binds us to Deaf people, if we have begun to view interpreting as a business rather than a response to personal connections, if we have materially benefited from laws mandating the presence of interpreters more than Deaf people, then the questions must be asked – what are we willing to do as individuals to become reconnected with Deaf people? Are we willing to adjust our work choices to accommodate the rhythm of Deaf people’s lives?

What should we be doing as a field/profession to give back to the Community?

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