

Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies (MAIS) Case Studies

Volume 1 *Celebrating Leadership: Turning Passion into Action*

Article 11

2017

Chuck Gramly: Heart, Commitment, Respect

Grace B. Artl

Western Oregon University, gartl13@mail.wou.edu

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Recommended Citation

Artl, Grace B. (2017) "Chuck Gramly: Heart, Commitment, Respect," *Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies (MAIS) Case Studies*: Vol. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/maiscasestudies/vol1/iss1/11>

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Chuck Gramly: Heart, Commitment, Respect

Grace Artl

Western Oregon University

Abstract

Chuck Gramly has been an inspiration to several generations of American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreters in the Central Ohio community. His leadership, guidance, and passion for ASL and the Deaf community lives in the hearts of all whom have had the pleasure of knowing him. As an interpreter and interpreter educator, Chuck made his mark on the budding profession of interpreting that has come to be what it is today. Through his teaching, involvement in the local community as well as state and national organizations, Chuck's life work has ignited a passion in others that boils down to three things: respect for language and community, respect for the profession, and respect for one another.

The Heart of a Local Leader

It does not take long to bring to mind those who have had the most profound impact on my development as an interpreter, an educator, and most importantly, an individual. Their guidance and wisdom, however long or short a period of time I spent in their presence, continues to resonate with me and permeate through my beliefs, values, and interactions. One specific individual comes to mind, a genuine embodiment of what it means to be a leader, a guide, a mentor, and a friend: Chuck Gramly.

Farm Boy

Fondly referred to as "CG" by those who know and love him, Chuck was born and raised on a farm north of Mansfield, Ohio. His father was a self-taught engineer and part-time farmer and his

mother was a registered nurse and stay at home mom. Chuck attended a rural school with his older sister where he was a participant in a variety of sports, held several student council positions, and was an active member of 4-H. Growing up in a rural community, Chuck quickly learned the value of family love and support. His family farm was down the road from where his father was born and raised which fostered a strong sense of family togetherness. Chuck fondly recalls that, “Helping others was a *big* part of what my family was in this rural community (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).”

Chuck eventually enrolled in Ohio State University – Mansfield and, following in the footsteps of his father, majored in Engineering. Though he did fairly well, he changed his major during his third year of college to Industrial Technology Education with a minor in Comprehensive Sciences. Over the next four years, Chuck ardently worked towards the completion of his degree while also balancing a full-time job. Though he realized during this period that he didn’t really want to teach he was, nevertheless, required to complete a student teaching experience. Little did he know that this experience would be the one to change the course of his life.

A Happy Accident

Feeling disillusioned by the public school system, Chuck requested a student teaching assignment that would be “different.” It was then that his advisor suggested a placement at either the Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB) or the Ohio School for the Deaf (OSD). After initial contact with OSD, Chuck observed an elementary school classroom. Though he had absolutely no prior experience with deafness or signing he says he, “found the communication fascinating (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).”

In the spring of 1971, as Chuck progressed through his student teaching experience, he remarks he, “found himself quickly falling in love with the people, language, and culture (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).” Much of this love was fostered by the mentorship of two older Deaf gentlemen, Everett Kennedy and Jimmy Flood, who took him under their wings. As the end of his ten-week student teaching experience drew closer Chuck approached the superintendent of OSD, Ed Grover, about possible job opportunities. He knew he absolutely *had*

to work there and, upon finding out that there were no vocational education positions open, asked if they needed any janitors. As Chuck recalls, Ed took a glance at a list on his desk and then proffered, “You want to teach third grade (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014)?” With no training or background, he agreed.

As fate would have it Chuck was soon offered a position teaching vocational courses, specifically woodworking, photography, and driver’s education. During his time in this role, Chuck recalls, “I quickly made strong connections with students as I had something valuable to teach them and ... they had *much* to teach me (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).”

A Budding Profession

During the nine years he spent teaching at OSD, Chuck worked diligently to improve his ASL skills. “Though”, as he states, “it wasn’t really called that back then (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).” Regularly communicating with students helped him to become comfortable using the language and acquiring a skill that would come to feel natural to him. As it so happened, teachers at the school would take turns interpreting for the students when assemblies were held. Chuck readily admits, “I started doing this and took it seriously (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).”

Never having had any formal training, Chuck quotes Lou Fant in saying, “[He] graduated from the school of watch and do (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).” At the time of his initial development as an interpreter the concept of interpreter training was truly in its infancy. The majority of formal programs were ten-weeks long though some were beginning to shift into full-year formats. During the first year of the one-year program at Columbus Technical Institute (now Columbus State Community College) Chuck was recruited to teach ASL courses. As the program transitioned into being a two-year program he applied for and was offered a full-time teaching position.

During his time at Columbus State Chuck continued to teach ASL courses and dabbled in teaching interpreting courses, also. He developed a Linguistics of ASL course – his favorite subject to teach during his thirty-five year teaching career. One of the biggest struggles of this time was the incredibly limited amount of resources available to utilize in order to teach such courses. There were very few curriculum materials available at the time that reflected what Chuck felt to be “an awareness of what ASL really was (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).”

Over several years Chuck worked consistently to transform the interpreting program’s understanding and philosophy of ASL and the interpreting process. In the infancy of the interpreting profession the general consensus maintained that if interpreters could be *trained*, anyone could do it. Chuck worked diligently to grow and transform perceptions of the use of ASL. For instance, he recalls vividly an experience negotiating the program’s use of both ASL and Signed English. After teaching both courses for two years Chuck approached the program’s coordinator and, using his knowledge of ASL linguistics, expressed that teaching both courses just did not feel right to him. The Signed English courses were dropped from the curriculum shortly after this discussion.

Organizing for Action

Over the course of his career Chuck was involved with several professional organizations. He joined the Sign Instructors Guidance Network (SIGN), which has since evolved into the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA), and as he states, “was one of only two hearies” on the board at the time (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014). Parallel with his experience at Columbus State, Chuck wondered why the organization assessed and granted teaching certifications for the teaching of Signed English. After bringing this notion to the attention of the other board members, the Signed English certifications were soon dropped.

After being awarded Professional Level certification from ASLTA, Chuck served on the evaluation committee for over twenty years. This, he said, was one of the most rewarding things he was involved in. His passion and respect for the language and community were likewise

echoed in the goals of the ASLTA due to their mission of ensuring that ASL was being taught by qualified individuals (ASLTA, n.d.). Chuck worked tirelessly to make sure this goal was met. Locally, he was instrumental in working with Kellie Mills Stewart in bringing the first local chapter of what was then called SIGN to Ohio.

Chuck was likewise active in both the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT). He was awarded certification from RID around 1981 and was heavily involved with RID's Ohio chapter, having held several offices. In the mid-eighties Chuck became involved with RID on a national level and was asked by Dennis Cokely to chair the National Evaluation Board. During this time he was involved with making major revisions to the provision of the national certification test. He recalls, "The eighties were truly a crazy time for the field of interpreting (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014)!"

Though he never held any offices within the organization, Chuck greatly valued his experience as a member of CIT. Attending yearly national conferences gave him the opportunity to interact with his peers, exchange knowledge and camaraderie, and continue to grow in his own practice. As he states, he was present during "a time of many new ideas and research into not only interpreting but the process of teaching this complicated task (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014)." Each CIT conference continued to ignite Chuck's thirst for more knowledge. One experience in particular made a lasting impression on him. Danica Seleskovitch, well known for her work on spoken language conference interpreting, spoke at a CIT conference. Talking with her truly impressed upon him how little the ASL-English interpreting field knew and how far there was still to go.

Finest Moments

As an interpreter and as an educator, specific experiences are always bound to stand out among the rest. Still filled with a feeling of awe and respect, Chuck recalls interpreting for MJ Bienvenu at her request when she gave a presentation on ASL linguistics at the Ohio School for the Deaf. To add even greater thrill to this experience another prominent member of the interpreting

community, Betty Colonomos, was present in the audience. Chuck also fondly remembers interpreting for Patrick Graybill's poetry performance at a workshop in Indianapolis.

Chuck truly looks at his career, he states, as an “attempt to pay forward” following what his two mentors from OSD did for him in his younger days (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014). As a teacher his finest moments occur any time he sees one of his former students interpreting, or even yet, as he says “when I see a former student of mine following in my footsteps and becoming a teacher (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).”

Paying It Forward

Throughout his career Chuck consistently impressed upon his students the seriousness of the act of interpreting, how important it is to respect consumers, and to act in a way that brings respect to the profession. As a teacher and second language user of ASL he wanted to ensure his students had strong respect for and involvement in the Deaf community. Most importantly, he wished to serve as a reminder, in his own words, that the language “isn't ours. We've been granted use of it; never forget that! It's not ours to change (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).”

Chuck supported this philosophy by running Silent Weekend, a voices-off camping event sponsored by Columbus State, for twenty-five years. Each school term students of ASL and interpreting, interpreting practitioners, and members of the Deaf community gathered for a weekend of activities, friendship, and learning. This opportunity greatly benefitted students by promoting engagement in the community in a non-judgmental and open environment.

For new graduates into the profession, Chuck has this advice to offer:

Be humble! Continue learning and refining your craft. *Never* be content with [your] present skills or knowledge. Network with peers; they're the *only* people who understand what you do and appreciate the level of difficulty involved. *Balance* your life; don't

let interpreting consume you either mentally or physically. Get a hobby! Stay healthy! Have respect and admiration for the interpreters who have gone before you; who advanced the field of interpreting. Never look down your nose at them because you “know more” than they ever did or will. Above all: be grateful for all those who helped you get where you are today – let your old teachers know what you’re doing and let them know you really do appreciate all the work they put in *for* you and your success. (C. Gramly, personal communication, July 24, 2014).

About the Author

Grace Artl is a certified freelance interpreter and adjunct instructor at Columbus State Community College in Columbus, Ohio. She is currently finishing a master’s degree in interpreting studies with a focus in teaching interpreting at Western Oregon University. Her thesis focuses on gender socialization and its impact on the role space formation of American Sign Language – English Interpreters.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chuck Gramly for his invaluable contribution to both my development as an interpreter and to the field of interpreting in general. I would truly not be the practitioner I am today without his insight, experience, and giving heart. I would also like to thank the members of the Western Oregon University Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies 2013 cohort for their constant support and collaboration.

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American Sign Language Teachers Association. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.aslta.org/>