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Debra Russell: A Leader for All Occasions

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Abstract

This article is part of a collaborative project by students and faculty in the Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies program, class of 2014, at Western Oregon University. The goal of the project is to recognize and honor leaders in the interpreting and interpreter education fields. Debra (Deb) Russell has a long history of serving in leadership roles in varying capacities from local communities to the international stage. She is known as a person of integrity and humanity with a passion for building and connecting communities at home and across the globe. I had the privilege of meeting with Deb to find out where her passion stems from and where she finds inspiration and the motivation to serve. What follows is an inspirational tale of one person's unselfish determination to engage in and foster collaborations across communities that serve to uphold the linguistic, cultural, and human rights of what have long been an underserved, underrepresented, and oppressed people.

Deb's journey began in a small farming community in rural Canada where she learned the value of contributing to the well being of the whole by seeing her parents unselfishly provide moral and physical support to the neighbors around them. When tragedy struck the family during her teenage years those same neighbors stepped up to ensure that Deb's family was able to maintain an integral role in their community. Not only did they provide food and emotional support, they assisted in the planting of crops and, months later, the harvesting of those crops in order for the family and their farm to remain a valued asset in the local community. At the same time, Deb learned the values of acceptance and forgiveness through the actions of her father who she reveres to this day. Without knowing it at the time these values, engrained at an early age, would drive Deb in her passion to build and connect communities to advance the cause of social justice from the local to the global level.

Deb's first encounter with the Deaf community and sign language came while she was attending college. Like many of us with the same experience, a whole new world opened up. She learned American Sign Language (ASL), discovered the richness of Deaf Culture, and eventually became an interpreter and later an interpreter educator. She began to take on leadership roles, much like her parents, where she saw the need. Deb was an integral part of the team that established the Alberta Chapter of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (ACRID). Later, she would also play a similar part in the founding of the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC) (AVLIC, n.d.). Deb saw herself as a builder working with other builders and took on various leadership roles, including President, in both organizations. In this endeavor, she recognized the power of collaboration to effect positive change across communities and used the experience to drive future efforts to advocate for working in collaboration locally and globally.

The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) was officially established in July 2003 as the result of a collaborative effort between interpreters from around the globe and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). The overriding mission of WASLI is to advance the profession of sign language interpreting worldwide (WASLI, n.d.). This mission cannot be accomplished without intense collaboration among interpreting and Deaf communities across the globe. With this mission in mind and a passion that was fueled by an already long list of leadership experiences, Deb stepped into the role of North American Representative on the WASLI Board of Directors. With two colleagues, she was able to work collectively to coordinate the 2011 WASLI Conference in Durban, South Africa. It was during this conference that Deb was elected President of WASLI with her determination to foster community connections on a global scale and advance human rights and social justice in underserved and underrepresented Deaf and interpreter communities.

Along with the building and founding of ACRID, AVLIC and WASLI, Deb has celebrated many other accomplishments as a leader in various capacities throughout her career. She is most proud of those moments when communities have come together on equal footing to collaborate on projects that accomplish the goal of addressing the needs in those communities. One of her fondest memories and proudest moments was the collaboration between the Canadian Deaf and interpreting communities that led to the development of the AVLIC Interpreter Certification

system for interpreters in Canada. “The shared development of that system and recognizing the power of collaboration was a big high for me,” she fondly recollects (D. Russell, personal communication, July 18, 2014). Recently, Deb traveled to Saudi Arabia to encourage and realize collaboration between the Deaf and interpreting communities there; a successful trip and another proud moment in her illustrious career as an effective leader. Her work with Critical Link to engage the profession of spoken language interpreting in collaborative efforts of training and sharing information and research is another endeavor of which Deb is proud to be a part of. As the profession of sign language interpreting and interpreter education continues to grow and evolve, connections and collaborative efforts with our spoken language interpreting colleagues will become imperative in order to advance research, assessment development, and the use of novel teaching techniques across both fields. Deb is, yet again, a pioneer in this current effort.

While Deb may make it look easy, taking on effective leadership roles in any field is not a trivial task and requires dedication, integrity, and commitment. Transformational leaders serve to motivate others to see the possibilities within themselves and work collectively towards positive change. Facilitative leaders encourage others to think outside the box and explore non-traditional ideas and ways to move organizations forward to serve the common good. Deb is a leader who incorporates both of these styles of leadership, along with a healthy dose of personal attention, into her everyday actions as a leader in both the field of interpreting and interpreter education. She has an innate ability to inspire and foster a sense of purpose in a group and unite people around a common cause. She models openness to novel ideas and encourages others to think of creative solutions and ideas and explore the possibilities they may afford. She is able to motivate others to find the best in themselves and use those attributes to contribute to championing common causes in the communities in which they serve. Deb listens openly and attentively to those that approach her with ideas and issues and responds with an uncanny ability to empathize as well as encourage. She attributes her development as a leader not only to her own experience and education, but mostly to those that have mentored her along the way, guided her, and provided models of effective leadership. She specifically acknowledges Phyllis Joynt as a mentor who took her under her wing at an early age as well as Richard Letourneau, Angela Stratiy, Liz Scott-Gibson, and Markku Jokinen. Colin Allen, President of WFD, is one of her current mentors. “Watching Colin work with the global Deaf community toward positive collaboration

from a human rights framework has had a huge impact on me recently,” she states (D. Russell, personal communication, July 18, 2014). Deb also pays homage to a long lineage of Yoga teachers, especially Val Petric, who have guided her in approaching the world and her work through a philosophy of Yoga. Also, outside the field of interpreting and interpreter education, Deb has great admiration for former Canadian Ambassador, Stephen Lewis, whose global work in the AIDS crisis and style of leadership exemplify a passion for humanity. Deb has been able to see the exceptional qualities of leadership in others and learn from them, adapt them, and make them her own. She is forever grateful to those that have had such a huge influence on her life and leadership journey.

When asked about current challenges that leaders of today face, Deb responds, “We have to actively work with and on our current relationship with our Deaf communities and not just assume that the relationship will always be there (D. Russell, personal communication, July 18, 2014).” Deb attributes some of the disconnection between the interpreting and Deaf communities to the way the profession and interpreter training has developed. In North America, especially, business and profit have taken over as drivers in the market and have led to the development of attitudes that do not value community and service which were once the motivating factors for most interpreters. A deep and heartfelt understanding that what we do as interpreters is, indeed, providing a service to the community would help rebuild some of the connections that have been lost over the years. Working in collaboration with our Deaf communities with the shared goal of advancing and realizing social justice, as well as the human and linguistic rights of individuals, would make a powerful impact on the world in which we live. When the scandal regarding the “fake” interpreter for the Nelson Mandela memorial broke internationally, Deb and Colin Allen worked together to respond with a joint press release from WFD and WASLI condemning the debacle; they published the release within 24 hours and worked collaboratively across 16 time zones to accomplish this effort. Deb says, “If Colin and I can collaborate like that on an international level, why can’t it be done between communities on the local level (D. Russell, personal communication, July 18, 2014)?” Certainly, the collaboration between WFD and WASLI, as practiced by Deb and Colin, is a model for communities everywhere.

For those aspiring to become leaders in the field, Deb suggests, first and foremost, find out what you don't know. Knowledge is power. When you know your community you can begin to understand its needs and work innovatively to build a strong team that will address those needs in creative and meaningful ways. Deb also stresses the importance of looking to mentors or advisors, persons that you can trust and honestly reflect with regarding your own journey to leadership. To be an effective leader one must be dedicated to seeing tasks through to completion and have the courage and integrity to admit when something is not quite working. It is important to learn how to communicate in whatever ways we can in order to inspire and encourage others to think creatively and step up to address the various challenges we are experiencing in the field and our communities. Supporting others in their leadership roles and acknowledging what we can learn from one another is a huge step in bringing our communities together in collaborative efforts that will translate into the power of making positive and forward moving changes to advance social justice for all. Deb exemplifies the qualities in leaders that serve to impact the communities in which they live and work. She is adamant that collaboration within and between our communities is the answer to solving social justice issues. She has jumped in to leadership roles from the local to the global community to model and encourage those collaborations. Deb is, indeed, a leader for all occasions.

About the Author

Christopher Grooms is an ASL/English Interpreter and Interpreter Educator currently residing in Houston, Texas (by way of Seattle, WA and Portland, OR). He has a passion for lifelong learning and recently earned his Master of Arts degree in Interpreting Studies from Western Oregon University. Chris has served in leadership roles at the local, state, regional and national levels and is thrilled to be a part of a project that honors the leaders he has learned so much from throughout his career.

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