

NAJIT'S 25th YEAR

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

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At the opening session of NAJIT's Silver Anniversary Meeting and Educational Conference in Denver on May 22, 2004, as I listened to keynote speaker Dr. Virginia Benmaman discuss the rocky path of judiciary interpretation in the United States, I could not help but take a second look at my career and my own place in our profession's history. Dr. Benmaman, distinguished Professor Emeritus and current director of the MA Program in Bilingual Legal Interpreting at the Graduate School of the College of Charleston, South Carolina, delivered an enlightening speech with an invitation few in the audience could resist: this is a time not to cry for our future but to pat ourselves on the back.

While the present status of judiciary interpreters and legal translators may be far from fair, perfect, or ideal, we are grappling with tough questions: What is our place in the judicial system? Why are we underpaid for working in increasingly difficult conditions? Why doesn't the public know what an *interpreter* does, or a *translator*, or a *linguist*? Why do people not consider judiciary interpreters and legal translators professionals? We want and need recognition, but how to get it and what form should it take? We want things to change for the better, but change will not happen tomorrow morning. First we need to work and persevere to make things happen. That is the key, and it was the key Dr. Benmaman handed to her audience.

Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Benmaman agreed to help out in a court hearing where "some Spanish would be spoken." It was the first time she set foot in the United States District Court in Charleston. She found fifteen Colombian and Panamanian defendants, ringed by fifteen attorneys and court personnel. A vessel laden with marijuana had been seized; the defendants, crewmembers, spoke Spanish only. Everyone was at a loss. One interpreter for 15 defendants, a courtroom where no one was familiar with the notion of an interpreter, let alone her role, and no one knew how to go about informing non-English speakers of their rights.

After that experience, Dr. Benmaman took it upon herself to study and research as much as possible. She first thought to attend a university program to learn about judiciary interpreting, but there were no interpretation programs available and no local resources to find a mentor. She found, as did so many other interpreters in those early years, that she was "forced to enter the field of judiciary interpreting not as a graduate of an education and training institution –but through the back door."

As I listened, I could not help but compare her experience with mine. How difficult it would have been to start my career as a legal translator without a graduate degree,

without attending law school or completing a legal translation program which opened every door. The intervening twenty-five years made a difference.

Education is a fundamental component of any given profession, and it is key to conferring authority in and trust of any professional. Our profession is pointing in that direction, even though our credentialing process may have developed somewhat differently. “In many ways,” Dr. Benmaman pointed out, “we have put the cart before the horse... Law degree before law school? Medical boards without first going to medical school? A CPA who has never formally studied accounting?” Today education is enabling new judiciary interpreters and translators to enter the profession through the front door.

Happily we fast-forward twenty-five years, where we find a Master of Arts program at the Graduate School of the College of Charleston, and the same woman who researched on her own is now the esteemed director of that program. True, currently it is the only graduate program in the field in the United States, but many more universities are in the process of developing such programs, which is certainly a sign of twenty-five years of accomplishment.

Education was not the sole component in the growth of our profession. Demographics, as Dr. Benmaman explained, also helped to advance professional judiciary interpretation. The 1980 Census reported that 23.1 million persons over the age of five spoke a language other than English at home; as of 2002, that number rose to 47 million. Obviously, the increase in need was and is vitally important. We have been able to secure an entry in the Department of Labor’s *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* which now lists “translation and interpretation” as a profession, and as Dr. Benmaman remarked, it is “right above the category of embalmers.” More importantly, we have been able to increase community awareness, and today there is an increasing sense of respect and trust for judiciary interpreters, who fulfill an obvious need.

Most importantly, perhaps, we have developed a professional culture of our own which was absent a mere two decades ago. As Dr. Benmaman stressed, this is evidenced in the “shared belief in the essential worth of the service provided, certain behavioral norms referring to every standard interpersonal situation expected within the profession, a commitment to a code of ethics, and shared symbols –jargon within the workplace... We are here today because of our common goals and beliefs in our profession.” There is no doubt that the outward symbol of this common culture is the creation of and membership in professional organizations like NAJIT.

“Some people make things happen, others watch things happen, and still others wonder what happened” as Dr. Benmaman remarked. Interpreters are bringing the promise of the American legal system to people who would otherwise be denied access to the courts. The Civil Rights Act of 1964; Executive Order 13166; Senate Bill 1733 –all resulted from people who did not want to give up.

So if you are tired and discouraged and thinking that our profession will always be in a state of flux, and you don't have the strength or desire to advance it, think of Dr. Benmaman's personal history as a pioneer in the field some twenty-five years ago, and understand. Understand that we are building on her efforts to create the next twenty-five years.

Now we are together. Together we can accomplish it all.

[The author is a Certified English/Spanish translator by the Certified Translators' Association of the City of Buenos Aires and the National University of Buenos Aires where she received the degrees of Legal Translator and Juris Doctor. She was recently appointed Editorial Advisor to the Alameda County Bar Association]