



[Image Description: SuKyong Isakson, seated on the left, is a Korean-American woman with black hair curled just above her shoulders. She is wearing a black and white paisley, V-neck blouse with sleeves that end just above the elbow.

Melissa Smith, seated on the right, is a Caucasian woman with short gray hair. She is wearing a blue shirt underneath a light blue, collared, long sleeve shirt. She has a small, round, black microphone clipped to her shirt.

On a table, behind the arm chairs that the women are sitting in, is a green plant growing out of a square white pot that is being illuminated by a yellow light. The back wall is a yellow-beige color and there are two brown doors centered in the background of the video's frame.

When either woman is talking, a second video of an American Sign Language interpreter appears. The interpreter is a man with long, dark hair slicked back into a ponytail. He is wearing circular wire glasses. He has a thin, dark gray mustache. He is wearing a black button-down, long-sleeve shirt. He is standing in front of a dark gray backdrop.]

Melissa: Is that okay there?

Melissa: Hi. Thank you for joining me today.

SuKyong: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

Melissa: Sure. Absolutely. Um, to start out, if you would just introduce who you are—a little bit of your academic or work background as you feel is applicable?

SuKyong: Sure. My name is SuKyong Isakson. I am a daughter of a Korean immigrant who is Deaf. She moved to the United States in 1980. My stepfather is also Deaf. He is Korean. He immigrated to the United States in the mid 80s. I, currently, am an interpreter educator. I teach students who work from English to American Sign Language. Um, let's see, what else? I've been a practicing interpreter for 10 years between English and American Sign Language for the Deaf communities in the DC metropolitan areas as well as Alaska. So...

Melissa: From DC to Alaska?

SuKyong: Yeah. Well, actually, Alaska to DC. Yeah.

Melissa: Well, okay! Well, I'm interested in your opinion about—how you feel about interpreter education today. In the state of interpreter education, as it is, do you feel that it's currently adequate?

SuKyong: Um, I think interpreter education has overlooked a huge population that lives in the United States, the Deaf immigrant population. When we consider what interpreter education was originally established for, it was for Deaf people to obtain jobs back in the 1970s. But when we say Deaf people, we're actually talking about Deaf Americans. White Caucasian Americans, maybe African Americans, you know. But certainly not people that have immigrated to the United States. And so, um, I don't think, interpreter education over the years changed very much at all, nor have they considered the growing immigrant population within the United States and the needs that they have to be able to integrate, but then also be gainfully employed within the U.S.

Melissa: Interpreting with a Deaf person who has, is also an immigrant to the United States, carries with it would you say, um, an extra layer of complexities and requires additional skills and knowledge? How would you, how would you characterize that?

Melissa: I would like you to wait for that door to slam and give me a little smile?

SuKyong: Let me think about, can you just restate the question, quickly your question?

Melissa: Yes. Do you believe, as you're speaking, it sounds to me as if there's the skill of interpreting, given that an interpreter is interpreting between a Deaf American, who was born and raised in the United States, and an English speaking person, who was born and raised in the United States. Whereby if an interpreter were working with an immigrant, from another country, who is Deaf, and someone, who is hearing, who may be an immigrant or may be born and raised in the United States. Do you feel that interpreting in that situation, with one or more immigrants, actually might require an additional set of skills on top of what a generalist interpreter might be able to do?

SuKyong: Yes. I do believe that case, and I think that's a great question. But [it's] not only cultural competency to understand, of course, the person, where they come from and what they bring. In discourse, you know, we know that the way that we speak to people is heavily rooted in our culture—in who we are, in our identity—and that colors everything. And so to have somebody who understands your culture, I think is an important part of being an interpreter. Um, so that being said, I think one of the greatest populations that we might be able to tap are heritage speakers of these languages. Um, people who may have already immigrated here prior to, you know, the immigrant that we're talking about, the Deaf person that we're talking about, you know, knows American culture, has become bilingual or trilingual. Maybe knows the sign language of the country the Deaf person is from as well as American Sign Language to be able to work with that Deaf immigrant. So yeah, on top of English, American Sign Language, we also maybe talking whatever heritage languages that that Deaf immigrant has. Um, their spoken language and also their sign language as well.

Melissa: Is it, I wonder, is it possible that the language aspect of it and communication is, is one, definitely a vital piece in making sure that's clear, but also in really making sure that the interpreter knows when and how to step in, and when and how to step back.

SuKyong: Right. So um, that I think that's also part of the cultural elements you know what we think about um, you know when we think about, let's, let's take for example this growing Nepalese Deaf population that has come to the United States, refugee population. In Nepal, and this is just from what I've gathered from the community, apparently Nepalese Deaf individuals are not encouraged to cook for themselves or to be able to drive. So there are certainly cultural elements that they bring with them, even when they move to the United States. Um, and So an interpreter understanding those cultural elements may be very important, not only to respect where they're coming from but also understand the frame of reference from which they are speaking of. In terms of maybe advocacy, or trying to get them supports or education or anything in that manner.

Melissa: Do you, so it sounds to me that interpreter education is something that you feel is critical in terms of raising the bar?

SuKyong: Absolutely and absolutely. Yes, when we talk about current interpreter education, we're working with a population of students who are native English speakers oftentimes. Um, and American Sign Language is their second language that they're learning and so, oftentimes when they graduate from 2-year programs, and barely even 4-year programs, the language competency just isn't even there. So when we think about the immigrant populations, and the additional layers of complexity that comes with that—not only culture, but the additional languages, this population—this particular population within current interpreter education right now—I don't think we'll be able to get there in the time that we are allotted in training them.

Melissa: Both of your parents immigrated to the United States. Were they privy to good education in their countries before they arrived here? Did they have good access to language models and good, strong language backgrounds before they immigrated to the United States?

SuKyong: Yeah. That's a really important question, so, um, which also of course impacts the type of consumer that we're working with as an interpreter. My mother has six years of education. Um, was not able to access Korean Sign Language until she was about the age of 10. And moved to the United States in her 30s, when she was 35. So she's been a native signer of Korean Sign Language or maybe a late acquired Korean Sign Language user. And then in her mid 30s to early 40s, started trying to learn written English and American Sign Language by taking preparatory courses at Ohlone College, where there is also like a large, you know, Deaf population. Um, in, but since then has never really improved in her English or American Sign Language skills. And so, when I think about my mother and who's able to work with her in like when she needs to go to the doctors, or anything like that. She needs somebody who understands her culture, Korean Sign Language, understands that her American Sign Language may

be idiosyncratic, um maybe mixed in with Korean Sign Language, understands her cultural background and where she's coming from. She was born in 1945 in South Korea when there was a war going on. And not very many American Sign Language interpreters in the United States these days can work with her or understand that. Often times, my stepfather will actually go and interpret for her, act as a mediator interpreter. He, himself is Deaf. But I think this would be a great opportunity for him to be a Certified Deaf interpreter. This is what I'm speaking of, he's a native user of Korean Sign Language. But there's no training program for him to become certified interpreter, yeah.

Melissa: And even if, even the Korean Sign Language aspect aside, just a program, a really intensive, well-structured program for Deaf interpreters...

SuKyong: Absolutely.

Melissa: That's, at this point, I don't know of one.

SuKyong: Nonexistent, nonexistent, right. And Deaf interpreters currently, are, you know, speckled in between existing interpreter training programs where predominantly, 99% are those who can hear. And so the curriculum is not designed for them. They don't get enough, you know, attention from their teacher. We don't have interpreter educators, many of them, who are Deaf, who can teach the translation process. Um so I think that's a huge need in development in our work pool. Um, more heritage signers and Deaf educators teaching in interpreter training programs but then also more research done on the Deaf interpreter translation side and what that really means for pedagogy in teaching Deaf interpreters.

Melissa: What made you decide to be an interpreter?

SuKyong: My community needed me. So, Korean, spoken Korean and Korean Sign Language are my heritage languages. Currently, I don't work in those languages. Although, I have cultural competency, of course, growing up in a Korean household. And so this has come to be very useful in many aspects of my work. Particularly with my family and then also with our extended community. So when I think about people like me, in the United States, I can count them on one hand.

Melissa: Does that sometimes feel overwhelming?

SuKyong: It's...scary.

Melissa: Thank you for sharing that with me.

Melissa: You know, what, what can you foresee? Like how do we, how do interpreter educators, how do we reach out? How do we harness this, this knowledge and competency that's, that's like you said, so few of you have, without burning out, you know? You give so much and do so much, you're always advocating. You're advocating

for your parents, your mom, for your dad, for your community. Like, how do we help? How do we make it better?

SuKyong: Dedicating resources. This is, the Deaf community, in it of itself, is an underrepresented and underserved community. But when we think of the immigrant Deaf population, they're even further underrepresented and underserved. And currently not enough resources are being allocated to bring awareness about that community, to provide services to that community. They need recognition. If we wish this population to be gainfully employed, to be able to contribute back to society, to become full-blown citizens of America, to be one of us, then we also have to allocate resources to these individuals so they can get there.

Melissa: Yeah, definitely. Interpreter education in, in general has, it's gone through some growing pains. I think we've made some strides in some areas. And we have made video materials and books and those kinds of things but it seems like, if you ask somebody, "Well what was it that, what led you to become successful as an interpreter? What pieces of it were most important?" What would your answer be?

SuKyong: I'm community trained. I'm a community trained interpreter which means I've practiced with other practitioners. I needed those practitioners to be available to me. In Alaska, they weren't. It is remote. We don't have an interpreter training program in Alaska. I actually had to live in Washington DC for a year to get the training that I needed, and I wanted. And from the people that I wanted to train me. Which were other heritage signers. That's who I got my education from. You can't find that in an interpreter training program. They're not being hired. They're not being recognized for what they bring.

Melissa: You lived in Alaska in a more remote area?

SuKyong: In Anchorage, which is the biggest city. But even still, you know, in the state of Alaska there's 750,000 in population at the time but no interpreter training program. The nearest one probably would've been in Seattle, I suppose. Yeah.

Melissa: Quite a ways to go.

SuKyong: Yes. well.

Melissa: And Deaf people living in Alaska.

SuKyong: Right, right. Deaf people living in Alaska. When I was living there, I remember we had such a difficult time because, in the villages of Alaska, there are Alaska natives who are Deaf. Um, congenitally Deaf, you know, because of genetics. So it's not like the population is going to go away anytime soon. And yet there are no Alaska native trained interpreters for them. And so again, another underrepresented population. How do we reach them? How do we provide them the training to be able to provide access to the

children that are living in their villages. Because currently, those children are not getting education in their native sign language

Melissa: Yeah, yeah. I had the opportunity to go to Alaska and present an educational interpreting workshop, which was wonderful. I mean, the, the state Department of Education funded the interpreters to come into Anchorage for an extended workshop, multiple days. But one of the things that happened is a couple of special ed teachers came. They'd been assigned to work with a Deaf child out in the bush, out in one of the villages where they didn't really have access to great technology or Internet. The only place they had Internet was at the schoolhouse and, and the two people that had been working with him the last couple years didn't know sign language. So they came to pick up what they could, and said, said, "Well, he has maybe 200, 300 signs now. He's picking it up faster than us."

SuKyong: And the child was what, maybe 10? Which is unheard of.

Melissa: Yeah.

SuKyong: In American education, is unheard of.

Melissa: And it is immigrants and it is Deaf youth in rural areas in many of our states. So I thank you so much for your candor and it's been a pleasure talking to you.

SuKyong: Thank you so much for this. I appreciate it.

Melissa: Thank you.