



INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL
INTERPRETERS ASSOCIATION
Leading the advancement of professional interpreters

2011 IMIA ESSAY CONTEST WINNING ESSAYS

(in alphabetical order by author's last name)

Marlene Cambroner (Florida)

Angel on duty...a medical interpreter

Communication is the strongest tool I ever had to build relationships, learn and become a business and language professional. Since my early childhood, I had the initiative to learn a second language well which allowed me to start my college education in my native country Costa Rica and complete it in the United States.

Becoming bi-lingual and maintaining a series of continuing education programs to make me a better international business and language professional lead me to pursue a career as an Interpreter. It has been a challenging but exciting and very fulfilling journey.

I wanted to be an interpreter because no matter what the situation is, I always feel the urge to help and share my experience, skills and talents with others around me. In many circumstances, I have been constantly offering my services as strong communicator to help resolve difficult situations that my customers and co-workers were facing due to the language challenge of a limited English proficient individual (LEP).

I decided to become a full time medical interpreter because I am able to make a difference in someone's life every day. It is very fulfilling to me to help someone understand the message and know the options available during the decision making process. To me, good health is the core of living a quality live and during my interpretation work in the last three years; I have realized how important it is to provide accurate medical interpretations between LEP patients and English-speaking hospital and clinics personnel. I want to be available to assist the patients that are suffering and under a great deal of stress in facilitating the conversation between them and the medical health care team. My everyday goal is to help save people's life, an angel on duty.

Last year, I learned about the International Medical Interpreter Association (IMIA) and became a member. Naturally, I am a person eager to learn and take every opportunity to better myself in every way I can. Last year in October, I attended the IMIA national conference and by attending the general meetings and several workshops I came back home empowered and very much inspired to become a certified medical interpreter and an active member of the Association. After many months of preparation, I successfully completed the Medical Interpreter certification process and I am now ready to start advocating for the medical interpretation profession and educating health care personnel and administrators of the importance to provide qualified language services interpreters to their LEP patients. I hope to continue to participate actively with the IMIA Florida State representative in disseminating information and goals to the health care facilities and health care department community programs.

Performing interpretation work every day is very rewarding to me because I am able to utilize my previous life and work experience to manage difficult situations by providing a pleasant and professional voice to the LEP patient. It's also a profession that engages my senses and the ability to concentrate, to stay detached from the conversation, and to remain neutral and objective at all times. It also inspires me to continue learning and improving my listening, retention and note taking skills while maintaining a high level of accuracy.

I am looking forward to attending this year's IMIA conference in Boston once again and have the opportunity to strengthening my relationships with fellow interpreters and the leaders of IMIA as well as learning the many ways to educate our clients.



INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL
INTERPRETERS ASSOCIATION
Leading the advancement of professional interpreters

Edimael Fernandes (Massachusetts)

When I do Interpretation, I do it with the utmost professional posture because I feel like I am extending a helping hand to people when they need it the most.

I imagine that the patient could be my father, my mother, a relative or a very special and close friend who is visiting from some other country without speaking a word in English; or maybe myself visiting a foreign country and in need of medical care. In a moment in which a person is most fragile, being helped by a very professional, friendly and caring medical interpreter, who pays close attention to details and is able to give a lot of affection can make a world of difference. I deliver the message to the best of my knowledge, so I can make the patient and the provider feel satisfied and assured, the same way I would expect someone close to me to be treated. The response of providers is always positive and remarkable because this personal approach establishes an atmosphere of comfort and trust for everyone involved.

It's also very important to advocate. Usually the patient is insecure about their need and appreciate when we can help them get clarification or solve a problem with their paper work, guide them through the process of setting up appointments and direct them to the right department and staff. Applying the Golden Rules, always observing and respecting the code of ethics, brings the best results. We must put our selves in the patients' shoes and understand their culture and objectives for the occasion and show personal interest without getting involved.

Some people tell me they can speak some English but prefer to request an interpreter because it's their life that is at risk, it's some aspect of their health they want to be sure about. They trust that an interpreter has knowledge of medical terminology and can do a better job than they would if they had to speak for themselves.

Throughout the years, I've accumulated a long list of patients who specifically request the interpreter service to send me to help them with their doctor's visits, because they say they feel comforted and assured with my presence. I don't mean to brag, I only state this because for me that is the biggest reward of our profession. Even when sometimes it gets hard to manage the schedules and demands of the interpreter services, this keeps me going.

Interpretation gives us an unique opportunity to help many people in various situations and people whose lives we touch in big and small ways through this profession, providers and patients alike, usually appreciate very much the work we do.

Being an interpreter is an act of balance. We have to be kind and at the same time neutral. We have to be friendly without compromising the work. We have to be humble, but take high pride in our performance.

I love this job because I feel useful to the community. It is immensely gratifying to be a bridge for people; to help them satisfy with dignity such important need as to overcome disease and get back to a healthier path.



Grisel Hart (Florida)

I must confess, my decision to study Modern Languages in my home country, was made because another University rejected my application for the career of International Relations. I wanted to be an ambassador somewhere. Disheartened but undefeated, I figured that learning other languages would give me an opportunity to interact with people in other cultures, so I started travelling around the world to test my abilities and pursue my self-appointed ambassador duty. I quickly realized that I deeply enjoyed being able to communicate with almost any person in countries that spoke a language different to mine.

At the many airports I had the opportunity to visit, I happened to start helping a lot of people that was not able to communicate in the official language, or that had less than enough proficiency to be accurately understood. Their desperate faces compelled me to offer my language skills, their gratitude was patent, and my good deed started inadvertently to shape my career.

When I came to the US, my multilingualism was put to work at non-profit organization translating forms and brochures for the Spanish speaking population, that before my arrival were not available, a were very limited. I also started to realize, that even these organizations were making an effort to serve diversity, the front desk staff were only bilingual people but lacked the capacity to accurately transmit the message, leaving out very important information when interacting with Limited English proficient customers. All of the sudden, I reached some sort of epiphany and decided to see how I could better assist Limited English Proficient people in a variety of settings.

I went to direct a language services department that served injured workers, and started evaluating the so called interpreters, where I became more and more worried about the capacity of some of the existing interpreters, and decided to refine my skills with health-care specific training.

I now render interpretation services in medical settings, and finally feel totally fulfilled, as I now understand, that yes, I made true my dream of being an ambassador. I am an ambassador of understanding, an ambassador of goodwill, I am a cultural ambassador.

But instead of focusing on political issues or represent one country as regular ambassadors do, I, as a medical interpreter, focus on health issues, which are the base of any thriving country, and I represent several countries, not only one, by bridging the gap of understanding, and by leveraging the flow of communication among people that do not speak the other's language, and do not know or understand the cultural traits present in the other's idiosyncrasy.

As a medical interpreter, I help connect people, I promote respect for and acceptance of all people, I empower people, and I contribute to the evolution of culturally appropriate practices in health care.

By becoming a certified medical interpreter, I am honoring my core desires, both of becoming an ambassador, and of continuing with my good deeds.



Maria Celia Torres (New York)

I had just finished reading the book “The Wheel of Life” by Elizabeth Kubler- Ross. The last sentence read: “After all, the most important thing in life is Service”. I hold a M.S. degree in Biochemistry, and at the time I was working as a Research Support Specialist in a University Medical Center. Although I enjoyed the laboratory work, I knew this wasn’t my passion. I felt the need to work with people - helping others was my dream. I, then, explored the possibility of using another one of my intellectual “assets”, the fluency in English and Spanish, and pursue a career as a Medical Interpreter. I was determined to get the necessary training, and I was lucky enough to find a full time position as a Spanish Medical Interpreter in the University Hospital adjunct to the Medical Center where I had been working.

It was soon after I started working in the new position, about five years ago, that I realized I had found my true passion. The sense of service, the smiling faces of the patients when they recognize the interpreter, and the blessings I am showered with every day, have been more than what I was expecting from my new endeavor. I often experience a deep sense of gratitude for having been able to find my true “place” and purpose, as I journey through this life.

Amidst this rewarding and satisfying experience, there are some frustrations as I have realized that the Medical Interpreting profession is not given, for the most part, the value and recognition it deserves by some health care professional and providers. I have attended two of the IMIA annual conferences in Boston, and it was then that I realized that I am not alone in this sentiment. These conferences have been an “eye opener” for me, and have given me comfort and encouragement, as I have become aware of the efforts that the members of the Association and others, have invested in raising the standards and recognition of the Medical Interpreting profession. The validation of the National Certification test is another tremendous effort towards achieving this objective. My short term personal goal is to become a Nationally Certified Medical Interpreter, and to participate more fully with IMIA to help further the value of this amazing profession.

A short personal story illustrates the mission we are all carrying out. After interpreting several times for a very ill patient, he said to me: “I really appreciate that a person as important as you are, takes the time to facilitate my understanding of what is going on with me”. I answered, somewhat naively: “Actually I am not as important as you think I am ”, meaning in the chain of hierarchical command in the Hospital. He replied: “But you are very important to me!”.

“Your life is about everyone whose life you touch, and it is about the way in which you touch them” -- *Neale Donald Walsh*



Karin Elliot Whitney (Maine)

Why I Chose to Become A Medical Interpreter

As I reflect on the last six years of my life, I would say that I probably need to amend the title of this essay and call it "Why did the Medical Profession Choose me to be a Medical Interpreter?"

For the bulk of my career from 1992-2000, I was a dedicated independent simultaneous and consecutive conference and seminar interpreter and worked all across the United States and in Russia in a wide range of scientific and technical fields. When I became a mom at the end of 2000, I realized that I wanted to be a mom first, and my interpreting was placed on the back burner for the most part.

A year later, I became a single parent, and had no choice but to completely abandon my independent interpreting career and all the travel that went with it, and I took what was then for me a full-time, non-pertinent 8-5 desk job to make ends meet. It was a frustrating time in my life, if only because I was trying to be someone other than who I was first and foremost -- namely, an interpreter.

Little did I know that my challenges with my own health would be the key turning point in me becoming an interpreter again, and this time to be a medical interpreter! In August 2004, a case of Bell's Palsy and the discovery of a large, but benign meningioma on the right tentorium of my brain took me away from my desk job and radically changed the way I lead my life.

I started getting unsolicited calls to interpret in the hospitals and clinics in the Washington, DC area. It was not enough to live on, so I returned home to Maine for some rest and relaxation. After some time, I received an e-mail about a 104-hour, year-long medical interpreter training being offered in Portland, Maine. Despite the hour-plus long drive each direction from where I lived, I signed up for the class.

The course was intense and information packed, but I passed the written and oral exams with flying colors, and the next thing I knew, I was commuting to Portland, Maine to interpret at the hospitals and clinics in the city. A year later, I moved from rural Maine to the city of Portland and have taken on not just in-person interpreting assignments, but also now work over-the-phone for two Portland, Oregon based interpreting companies. I have come full circle and now work country-wide again, only this time from my home phone.

Medical interpreting is a rewarding field for me for many reasons. It is intellectually stimulating, I enjoy being an equal member of the treatment team in so many different fields of medicine, I enjoy being a conduit for others to heal their patients, and for patients to be healed, and I love the challenge of new concepts, terminology and working in a critical field. In a word -- this is probably the most rewarding kind of interpreting I have ever practiced.

Over the last year or so, I have been able to give back to the profession through volunteering my time to participate as a subject matter expert and test builder in the national medical interpreter certification process, and I hope to reach my goal of becoming a national rater for the oral Russian national medical interpreter certification exams.