

## **Pam Wilson: Driven to Learn, Committed to Serve**

Mikaela M. Jordon

*Western Oregon University*

### **Abstract**

In the American Sign Language (ASL)-English interpreting profession, many interpreters report feeling a sense of competition and worthlessness because of comments or actions of their colleagues, known as horizontal violence. Horizontal violence includes any action that diminishes the worth of another interpreter and is perpetrated by members of the profession causing undue harm to the affected interpreter (Ott, 2012). Interpreters like Pam Wilson have striven to make a difference in their communities. Pam is a leader who is eager to learn, people-centered, and humble. Her dedication is exemplified by her work ethic and how she interacts with colleagues and consumers. She continually shows care and compassion for those she works with by making them feel seen and heard. Pam is driven by her desire to pass on what has been

done for her. By following Pam's model of leadership, the occurrence of horizontal violence can be greatly reduced.

*Keywords:* sign language interpreters, leadership, humility, people-centered, learning, horizontal violence

In a community known to "eat its young," where interpreters are constantly competing to one-up each other, a concept known as horizontal violence<sup>1</sup>, it is not always common to find interpreters whose sole focus is supporting others and who strive to raise the standard of practice in a community in need of strong leaders. Pam Wilson is an American Sign Language (ASL)-English interpreter who exemplifies what it means to be a leader: someone who is eager to learn, people-centered, and humble.

### **An Eagerness to Learn**

Although Pam did not originally set out to be an interpreter, sign language was a constant in her life. She began her journey to becoming an interpreter in an elementary school classroom. Her teacher taught her class fingerspelling for a field trip they would soon take to a job site where many individuals with disabilities worked. Pam met a worker there who was Deaf-Blind and introduced herself by fingerspelling her name, immediately sparking a connection with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Horizontal violence includes any action that diminishes the worth of another interpreter and is perpetrated by members of the profession causing undue harm to the affected interpreter (Ott, 2012).

## DRIVEN TO LEARN, COMMITTED TO SERVE

DeafBlind worker. Pam fell in love with sign language and the connection that could be had between people with simply their hands, without the use of spoken language.

After numerous encounters with Deaf individuals in her work and within the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) organization, she developed a deep desire to learn more about sign language, Deaf culture, and interpreting by interacting with the growing Deaf community in her organization. She continued to develop her proficiency in ASL and was given the opportunity to interpret during some of the local and circuit meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses with support from other interpreters. As the organization shifted its focus to prioritizing the needs of the growing Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf-Blind JW community, the quality of the information presented was paramount. Interpreters were encouraged to improve their skills. Pam stayed the course. She looked for any way she to improve her skills and remain involved with the Deaf community. She was eager to learn and willing to actively pursue opportunities for growth because she believed that the best learning came from constant exposure to the language and the community. When she was again given the opportunity to interpret small portions of the meetings, she would spend hours upon hours preparing, due to her commitment to doing right by her fellow brothers.

As Pam's desire to develop her skills grew, her determination grew as well. She took a summer ASL course at her local university, where she and her friends would spend hours upon hours practicing what they had learned. She fell deeper in love with the language and seized every opportunity to learn and grow. She used the growing library of Jehovah's Witnesses' resources available to her to expand her skills, including the first Bible to be available in sign language (Jehovah's Witnesses, 2020).

She was encouraged to continue her education in interpreting but was apprehensive at the time due to a lack of funds. Fortunately, her summer ASL instructor informed her about a new grant that had recently been established that would allow her to pursue a degree in interpreting while still giving her some additional funds to support her while she worked towards the degree. From that moment on, Pam decided to focus solely on becoming an interpreter. She worked hard and was recognized with an award for having the highest GPA among minority freshmen – a distinction she earned as an African American student. After that, she became a staff interpreter at the university she attended, where she thrived. She loved being able to interpret all of the different courses and being involved with theater interpreting as well. Beyond her work in the university setting, Pam has also worked in settings such as Video Relay Service (VRS), K-12 education, community work, and Video Remote Interpreting (VRI).

### **A People-Centered Approach**

Pam leads from behind the scenes, by using her compassion and eagerness to learn to support those in her community. Being someone who is people-centered, she makes interpreters of any experience level feel welcome and supported. She believes that everyone should have a chance to be successful, no matter what their circumstance. As she stated, while certifications and degrees are important, the interpreting community gets so caught up in the “bottom line” and the money, that they forget about what is really important: the interpreters who are out there doing the work, day in and day out.

## DRIVEN TO LEARN, COMMITTED TO SERVE

For her, being an interpreter means finding the balance between supporting the people in the interpreting and Deaf communities while upholding the professional standards expected of the interpreters as outlined in the National Association of the Deaf-Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (NAD-RID) Code of Professional Conduct (NAD-RID, 2005). The Code of Professional Conduct (CPC) outlines principles of confidentiality and professionalism, but also places significance on respecting both consumers and colleagues. She believes that everyone brings something crucial to the table. It is important to her that she shares what she has gained and learns from those around her to better serve the Deaf community, while using the training she feels fortunate to have had, to encourage the growth of her colleagues.

This devotion to the profession and to the people is evident in her work from the moment she first started as an interpreter up to now as she works in her community. She has a heart for Memphis and wants everyone to have equal opportunities, no matter their circumstances. She refers to herself as the “idea person” who always brings new ideas to the table. Historically, West Tennessee is an underserved interpreting community that often does not have access to the same resources and training opportunities available to other interpreting communities. Pam explained that many people who are interpreters in this area are Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) and often do not have access to the same training and support that Pam had. Because of this, Pam has striven to bridge the gap in knowledge and training by creating a community of practice to study and prepare for certification exams. She also serves as a mentor in the Educational Interpreter Development Program, which started based on a grant from the Tennessee Department of Education with the goal of improving the quality of interpreters in education in the state of Tennessee. This program is the first of its kind in West Tennessee and has provided much

needed support to the community. Her efforts have ignited a commitment to continued development for interpreters in West Tennessee.

### **Leading with Humility**

While Pam seemed reluctant to identify as a leader, it is evident that she is a leader to the people she has worked with in both the Deaf and interpreting communities. Interpreters and Deaf consumers alike have praised Pam for her contributions to the community. Pam is a humble leader because she rarely looks for praise or admiration. She is often the one who celebrates those around her and lifts them up. A humble leader is someone who can:

... recognize and acknowledge the strengths of others; be open to learning and adapting from your colleagues; work towards putting others' needs before your own; be a good listener and ensure others feel heard and understood around you; continue learning and educating yourself in your career; [and] be open to changing, shifting, and adapting even when it is challenging. (The American Society of Administrative Professionals, 2023).

As evidenced by Pam's aforementioned people-centered approach and eagerness to learn, it is clear that Pam holds the needs of the community in high esteem.

She is beloved for her attentiveness rooted in compassion for others and her willingness to listen and support in times of need. During a phone call with an interpreter who had been sick for some time, Pam wanted to see how the interpreter was doing and if they needed anything. The interpreter responded nervously, saying they would be back to work soon. Pam replied by saying, "No, that is not why I'm calling. If you never interpret again, that's your decision. I just

## DRIVEN TO LEARN, COMMITTED TO SERVE

want to know how you're doing." Though she may not always realize the impact of this kind of compassion, it is evident that she leaves a lasting impression on those who know her.

Based on her focus on people, when asked about her perceived impact on the interpreting community, she highlighted how interpreters have shared big moments with her and the support she gives to them. For Pam, it is imperative that she does for others as she would want done for her. When someone needs support, she is the first to jump in to fill whatever the need is and when someone needs to celebrate a victory, she is the loudest cheerleader.

### **A Call to Action**

Pam Wilson is a leader simply because of who she is as a person. She consistently demonstrates a commitment to personal and professional development as evidenced by her commitment to expanding her knowledge and skills in ASL and in interpreting. Pam lives out her dedication to a people-centered approach by listening, seeing, and supporting interpreters in any phase of life. Even though she may not always acknowledge her impact, Pam has significantly changed the lives of those around her. Leaders in the ASL-English interpreting field should aim to emulate Pam's leadership style. In closing, Pam gave the following advice: If you lead, you have to love. There is no way around it. Value the person as more than a number or a title; see them for who they are and what they bring to the table. If interpreters can follow Pam's advice, the horizontal violence that occurs within the interpreting community could be greatly decreased and interpreters would feel a stronger sense of belonging within the ASL-English interpreting field.

### **About the Author**

Mikaela M. Jordon, B.A., NIC, BEI: Advanced attended Bethel University – Indiana where she obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Sign Language Interpreting. Mikaela currently works as a freelance interpreter in Tennessee. She primarily works in post-secondary education, medical, and performance interpreting. Currently, Mikaela is pursuing her Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies at Western Oregon University where she has developed a special interest in mentoring.

### **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank Pam for all of support and guidance she has given to me on my journey as an interpreter. She is truly one of the most friendly and welcoming people I know. Because of her, I know what it means to truly care for people.

### **References**

The American Society of Administrative Professionals. (2023). *How to Be Humble: 10 Pro Tips from ASAP*. [https://www.asaporg.com/leadership/how-to-be-humble-10-pro-tips-from-](https://www.asaporg.com/leadership/how-to-be-humble-10-pro-tips-from-asap)

asap

Jehovah's Witnesses. (2020). *World's first complete sign-language Bible now available*.

<https://www.jw.org/en/news/region/global/Worlds-First-Complete-Sign-Language-Bible-Now-Available/>

NAD-RID. (2005). *NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct*. Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. <https://rid.org/programs/ethics/code-of-professional-conduct/>



Ott, E. (2012). *Do we eat our young and one another? Horizontal violence among signed language interpreters* [Master's thesis, Western Oregon University].

<https://wou.omeka.net/s/repository/item/4302>