

## **Autumn Esclovon: “It’s My Soapbox, It’s My Passion”**

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### **Abstract**

This case study was conducted within a larger project designed to spotlight leaders in the interpreting community. I chose to recognize Autumn Esclovon, who is a respected and accomplished American Sign Language/English/Protactile interpreter, educator, and mentor. Her love for the DeafBlind community shines through all aspects of her work, and the lessons she has learned from individuals within this community influence the characteristics of leadership she cherishes the most. She is a kind and encouraging mentor who leads with respect and courage and encourages growth not only for herself but for those around her.

*Keywords:* Interpreting, Mentoring, Leadership

## **A Personal Connection**

This is the story of an interpreter inspired by a friend to take a path she would not have chosen for herself, to embrace the journey, and to make a difference. Autumn Esclovon attended a middle school that hosted her county's Regional Day School Program for the Deaf (RDSPD). While in the seventh grade, she met a Deaf classmate through the school's volleyball team, and as they became friends, the lack of a common language became a growing barrier between them. Driven by her determination to communicate with her friend, Autumn bought and studied sign language books, teaching herself the language. During their classes together, the pair would sit and talk. As she learned more, Autumn eventually got to know more of the Deaf students, and it was through this 'kind of in the streets' education that she began to pick up the language.

Unfortunately, despite the encouragement of teachers and friends, Autumn had plans for her life; plans that did not include becoming an interpreter. She moved several times during early adulthood and occasionally ran into Deaf people, with whom she would sign and interact. These chance meetings and a continued friendship with her classmate allowed her to practice American Sign Language (ASL) and maintain her proficiency in the language. In her late twenties, a personal tragedy motivated Autumn to take another look at life and consider new possibilities. She called a good friend and posed the idea of going back to school for interpreting. The feedback she received was resounding encouragement from not only her friend but also others in her circle. With their support, Autumn became an accomplished interpreter, working across the state of Texas and beyond. She credits her success in the profession to her support network and specifically to her friend with whom she remains close.

## **A New Passion**

Years later, when Autumn volunteered at a DeafBlind retreat, she found herself in the world of Protactile<sup>1</sup> (a tactile language, commonly known as PT, developed in recent decades by and for the DeafBlind community). Here, Autumn learned another new language and was first introduced to the tight-knit community that DeafBlind interpreting had to offer. Interpreting can be an isolating profession, “it can be very lonely, you’re kind of like, am I doing things good? I don’t know. There’s nobody to tell me.” During her time at the retreat, she experienced a new kind of support. One where not only her team, but everyone present, wanted her to succeed and was willing to provide the feedback she needed to do that. Autumn explained this feedback and support by relating it to a concept called open process, “the idea that nothing is sacred in this [interpreting]”, that consumers will know when something is working or not and will be aware of potential issues. However, she explained, the DeafBlind community takes this idea even more seriously. In situations involving interpreters, co-navigators<sup>2</sup>, and consumers, the expectation is that all individuals present are valuable and expected to be involved in the interaction, even if their current capacity is only as an observer.

Autumn told a story about one experience where she was working, and an interpreter who was on break brought her some water, because she had been working for a while and looked like she needed it. She had explained that this happened early in her PT career and was a simple thing that made all the difference. This interpreter observed Autumn’s need and responded as a

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<sup>1</sup> Protactile is a unique and developing language, separate from ASL, that relies on constant contact between those involved in the conversation (Edwards & Brentari, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Co-navigators (often abbreviated CNs) are individuals working with DeafBlind consumers to provide situational context while ensuring the preservation of autonomy (Clark, 2023)

collaborator involved in the process, balancing their role as an interpreter, but also as a support system and an individual with agency. In another example, she explained that when she works with multiple PT users who may include DeafBlind consumers, interpreters, and CNs, they all walk in a clump, a “PT blob,” where each individual has input regarding what they see and choose to pay attention to as a group. This kind of “collaboration” is part of what drew Autumn to PT interpreting. The language, which prioritizes transparency, autonomy, and collaborative success, became a framework that guides her work as a practitioner.

Later, she was accepted to a highly selective DeafBlind interpreting program. This program ran on a five-year grant, accepted only three cohorts, and chose participants nationwide. Through this experience, she continued to expand her network and support system. In addition to her longtime friend, Autumn had found a new group of PT interpreters and CNs with whom she could work through challenges and learn new skills. She credits this group as people who could experience a range of emotions and shed many tears together. They became a community of practice<sup>3</sup>. Her experience in this cohort seems to shape the way she encourages others to work together and lean on each other; she often makes introductions and encourages others to find new experiences in the community.

Autumn gives further examples of collaboration and transparency in discussing that even confusion or misunderstandings are aired with the group. This promotes communication with each other and opens learning opportunities. In the DeafBlind community, mistakes are often

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<sup>3</sup> Communities of Practice are networks of individuals (the community) with a similar goal (domain) who engage in consistent learning (practice) to improve or expand their collective knowledge and understanding of a field, topic, or work (Mercieca, 2017).

received positively as an opportunity to educate. A trait that Autumn added to her leadership tool belt.

### **A Leader is Born**

Just after her time with the DeafBlind cohort, Autumn was hired as a designated interpreter (DI) in an interpreter training program (ITP); part of her job duties included taking on a mentoring role to students. Drawing on the principles of PT interpreting and the lessons she learned from the DeafBlind community, she developed a style of mentoring that holds transparency, autonomy, collaboration, and possession of a growth-mindset front and center in her work with mentees.

Though she admits she was reluctant to take on any student mentees, her dedication to personal and professional growth gave her the push she needed to try. She took on one student in the spring semester of 2021 and inadvertently became a trusted advisor to the student's entire cohort. When taking on formal mentor/mentee relationships, Autumn finds it important to interview mentees and to allow them to interview her. During this interview, both parties are encouraged to be honest about their goals for mentoring, expectations, and fears. This honesty allows both individuals to decide for themselves if this collaboration will work. Autumn expects that her mentees will go out into the Deaf community and build their own networks, but she is always the first and loudest to cheer for her students when they walk across the graduation stage. Her unique experiences under the mentorship of friends, professionals, and an entire community allow Autumn to meet a multitude of needs for her mentees.

During her more than five years as a mentor at the ITP, Autumn has led initiatives to create an interpreting student closet, introduce students to real-world interpreting experiences, and support students' mental and emotional health. In her interpreting closet, she keeps hair supplies (for various hair types), band-aids, a background, and any other supplies that interpreters may need. She has made her door accessible to students, interns, and even staff on campus who may have a need, making her an asset not only for her mentees but for the entire interpreting community. She has sought opportunities for student interpreters to interpret at large campus events and gently encourages reluctant students to find the confidence to take on the challenge. One of the biggest contributions Autumn makes to campus dynamics is her open-door policy. She believes no one is just an interpreter, and sometimes a student needs someone to talk to more than they need a mentor.

[...] sometimes a mentoring session in here [my office] has nothing to do on the surface with interpreting. It's more like what somebody's going through in their life at that point, but that affects our work and vice versa, right? And we're all people outside of interpreters. [...] people who start young as an interpreter, spend so much time being invisible, being neutral, that we forget who we are, or we don't know who we are outside of that space.

Part of her success as a mentor is a direct result of her willingness to take time to develop a relationship with her mentees. A skill she developed during her extensive training as a PT interpreter and getting to know the DeafBlind community.

## **A Unique Perspective**

What makes this leader special? How is her mentoring style influenced by her life experience?

The answer is simple: authentic connection, courage over fear, genuine respect, and a community-growth mindset. Autumn did not become a leader in the interpreting community through brute force, risk-taking, or some great cunning, but through her desire to see those around her reach their potential.

That same child who wanted to communicate with a peer badly enough to learn a second language through sheer grit and determination became the mentor who values mentees' personhood. Her experiences with self-doubt and a consistent friend who encouraged her every step of the way became a unique understanding of novice interpreters' feelings of inadequacy and struggles with impostor syndrome. Her desire for authentic connections compels her to meet with each potential mentee for an open conversation, getting to know them as people before building a mentoring relationship. The foundations of her leadership style are directly tied to relationship building.

Autumn mentioned several times experiencing uncertainty about her abilities; taking that assignment, mentoring these students, and becoming an interpreter at all. Her consistent courage has carried her this far, and it continues to carry her mentees. She is a staunch advocate for the DeafBlind community, often teaching workshops and leading training, but most importantly, she encourages all her students to get out into the community. She gently leads mentees out of their comfort zone, and for many, has been their introduction into the community she loves. Through

her connections, students have gone to DeafBlind camps, observed PT interpreters, and even begun their own PT journeys. Autumn is a constant source of gentle courage.

Autumn has worked hard to foster a community of respect, drawing inspiration from the DeafBlind community; she values autonomy and transparency. She understands that autonomy is the ability to choose something for oneself, but transparency provides the knowledge to be able to do so. Her values lead her to prioritize the open flow of information and ideas. Again, her mentoring style is rooted in the philosophies cherished by the DeafBlind community, the understanding that each individual has unique perspectives and insights, and that learning is inherently a respectful exchange of experience. Autumn approaches her mentees with this mindset; she is always willing to share, provided the mentee is willing to listen, and vice versa. She encourages dialogue and does not treat her mentees like children who need teaching, but as professionals who can contribute to the conversation in addition to learning from it.

As with mutual respect, community growth is deeply embedded in the DeafBlind community. When opportunities for teachable moments present themselves, the community takes the time to teach. Autumn approaches everyone with the same mindset. She values information and wants to see everyone succeed. For many student interpreters, when a problem arises, Autumn's office is the first place they seek advice. She often uses personal stories, with similar elements, to walk mentees through challenges and helps them discover solutions rather than providing a to-do list. She understands the power of self-discovery.

## **A Lesson for Others**

Autumn's leadership work may be a useful guide for interpreters looking into becoming mentors or leaders in their own communities. Each person will have a unique approach and philosophy, but the general lessons from this story may provide a path for others to follow. Interpreters can and should use their personal stories, passions, and experiences to benefit those they lead. This personal touch can make an often impersonal process more impactful for the people involved. Several students have asked Autumn to present them with their diplomas at graduation, an obvious sign of their respect for her and the impact she has had on their lives and careers. For Autumn, the DeafBlind community, Protactile, and PT interpreting are her "passion" and her "soapbox;" everything she does can find its roots in these relationships, and she leads and gives back with this same passion.

## **About the Author**

Meikayla Mixon is a full-time staff interpreter in Beaumont, Texas; she currently holds Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) Advanced certification and has three years of experience in the field. She graduated in 2022 with a B.A. in American Sign Language with a focus on interpreting from Lamar University. She is pursuing her M.A. in Interpreting Studies from Western Oregon University and anticipates achieving this degree in June 2026. She has worked in a variety of community settings and is currently working primarily in a post-secondary educational setting.

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