

## **Christine Nakahara: A Back-of-the-Bus Kind of Leader**

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### **Abstract**

Christine Nakahara is an American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreter, mentor, and educator located in the Bay Area of San Francisco, California. She has been in the interpreting field since 2008. Working behind the scenes rather than in the spotlight is her style, hence the self-identified term “back-of-the bus” kind of leader. Her passion and respect towards cultural differences and her efforts to support ethnically diverse communities of interpreters are at the center of her work, providing mentorship holistically and naturally to her mentees.

*Keywords:* empathy, compassion, justice, equity, interpreting

## **Background**

Christine Nakahara never planned on being a leader. It was one of the furthest things from her mind, after deciding when she was young that spotlight leadership was not her preference.

Getting attention as a leader was not something she felt comfortable with, and ironically this case study is focusing on exactly that area of her professional life. Nakahara believes her skill set to be focused more towards behind the scenes leadership, supporting individuals quietly and conscientiously and striving for inclusion and equity in her professional and personal life.

Nakahara is a third daughter of Okinawan immigrants and she saw her parents struggle with language access as a child. She did not fully understand the scope of their struggles until later in life, when she had come to understand the immense impact of living in an environment that does not prioritize equitable access to information. Her parents and even her grandparents were fighters for justice and liberation and taught her to follow the same ethics and fight for equity and justice as well. This background is part of what propelled her towards working with vulnerable communities where she discovered American Sign Language (ASL) for the first time.

Early on, Nakahara was taught and strongly believes that “empathy, compassion, justice, and equity are all part of [her] cultural values” (C. Nakahara, personal communication, May 25, 2025). Towards the beginning of her professional career, Nakahara worked at a center for children with special needs and one of the children she worked with at this facility was Deaf. This child had a Deaf mentor who worked with them one on one, which is how Nakahara was

introduced to ASL. At the prompting of this Deaf mentor, she enrolled in ASL classes and, at the mentor's further prompting, decided to pursue an interpreting career. After learning about all that would entail, Nakahara decided to enroll in Ohlone College's Deaf Studies program in 2004; she applied to their interpreting program in 2006 and obtained her degree in 2008.

During her undergrad, Nakahara remembers meeting her first Japanese American instructor, mirroring this aspect of her identity in a professional role. This reflection of herself in the professor gave her a role model and goals to strive towards. She also remembers, during her undergrad, a kind of favoritism that was given to athletes and other students the educators showed preferential treatment to. This was directly contradictory to her upbringing rooted in justice and equity, and she decided then that this favoritism was not something she was willing to perpetuate or allow to continue in her classroom as an educator or in her professional life.

### **After Undergrad**

After graduating, Nakahara describes herself as a nervous new grad. This was a scary, intimidating time for her but she counts herself fortunate for the support that she was given upon entering the interpreting profession. She recalls being placed with seasoned, experienced interpreters in her first year working that were supportive, provided feedback and tips, and generally looked out for her as a new interpreter. She believes she was fortunate for this experience with her mentors, which she has had many meaningful relationships with. Each mentor has something unique that they can provide as eclectic and diverse individuals, both teaching from their experience and perspective as well as helping Nakahara learn about herself. Not just as an interpreter and a professional, but also as a human being.

After working for some time, Nakahara decided to obtain her graduate degree from Western Oregon University in 2014. Preferring a teaching track over a formal research project, she went back to her alma mater Ohlone College; this time, however, she was returning as an educator in the student teaching portion of her degree. After her stint student teaching was completed and she obtained a Masters of the Arts in Interpreting Studies, Ohlone College hired her on as an adjunct faculty member. She has been there since, taking time off here and there and working as a staff interpreter at De Anza College throughout.

### **Mentorship**

Along the way, Nakahara has taken on mentees as well. As a mentor, she leads with sensitivity to intersectional cultural backgrounds and is constantly trying to show up authentically with her cultural capitals at the forefront of her everyday life. She realizes that everyone is coming into each environment with their own background, perspectives, experiences, and beliefs and is mindful of her own cultural intersectionality while being present for her mentees and operating with cultural humility.

Cultural sensitivity is at the forefront of her presence as a mentor because of her own experiences and cultural background. In her own words:

I approach this work with language access/equity and language justice in mind. Being the third daughter of immigrant parents, I didn't fully understand the struggles of my mom and dad (my mom especially as someone who never mastered English) and how that impacts your ability to thrive in the US. I see the parallels of those in Deaf

communities around the US and the world. I do this to honor my parents in the way that I never could when I was younger. I do this to make sure access isn't denied just because someone's primary language [isn't] spoken English.

(C. Nakahara, personal communication, May 25, 2025)

This cultural sensitivity and education about oppressed cultures and minorities are part of what makes her a strong proponent of cultural diversity in the interpreting field. She strongly suggests that interpreters who are also people of color root themselves in their identity, determining the difference they can make in the interpreting field as well as how they are able to be present in this world. She offers words of comfort to interpreters who are people of color who feel they must code-switch to accommodate their environment, reminding them that doing so is not always rooted in shame but rather feeling that code-switching is necessary for survival and navigating systems. "Don't be ashamed when that happens. Re-member, re-center, and re-claim yourself afterwards" (C. Nakahara, personal communication, May 25, 2025). She encourages interpreters who are people of color to find a community that welcomes them as they are and to challenge themselves continuously towards perpetual growth. Finding a foundation in your identity and building a community from it can make a world of difference; it helps us to feel grounded and continue growing. As Nakahara said, "Being rooted isn't about being stagnant; it means you will grow and change to become a better version of yourself. If you are cringing at any parts of your past self, it's a good sign you're growing in the right direction!" (C. Nakahara, personal communication, May 25, 2025)

When asked about what she believes to be the best pieces of advice for interpreters who wish

to make an impact on their profession and those around them, her response was consistent with her Socratic-style approach to mentorship, allowing an individual to come to the thoughts themselves through introspection and self-questioning. Her response, very apropos of this style, was a series of questions for someone to ask themselves when they consider wanting to have an impact on the interpreting profession. (C. Nakahara, personal communication, May 25, 2025)

1. What is your idea of impact? Is it about building relationships? Building movement?  
Creating or adding onto an idea? Is it visible or invisible or something in between?
2. Why do you want to do this? Is it a want or a need? And who wants or needs this?
3. What kind of impact are they looking to make and why? Impacts aren't always immediately visible and changes can happen very slowly. Are you patient enough?
4. Are you here for the event (credit and accolades) or are you here for the movement (long-term investment and change)?
5. Meaningful change doesn't happen in a vacuum, so who are you going to bring with you on this journey?
6. Do you know the history? Has someone tried to make these changes before and did it work? What were they able to accomplish and why?

These questions all speak to the same goal: entering into any decision that will impact others with as much knowledge as you can arm yourself with, from as many perspectives as you can. Although Nakahara may not self-identify as a leader or wish to be perceived in that role, she is an exemplary leader that has been instrumental to the success of others. Her reticence to identify as a leader is attributed to her desire to be behind the scenes, working to bring out the best in others and working towards equitable treatment of individuals in the spaces she

occupies as a back-of-the-bus type of leader.

### **About the Author**

Lauren Jourdonnais is an ASL/English interpreter currently working in post-secondary and K-12 educational interpreting. She also values empathy, compassion, justice, and equity and is working to become rooted in her identity and keep perpetually growing from those roots. She earned a bachelor's degree in 2023 and a Masters of the Arts in Interpreting Studies in 2025 from Western Oregon University (WOU) with a specialization in educational interpreting.

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### **References**

Nakahara, C. (2025, May 25). Personal interview.