

# **How a Russian Professor Professionalized United States Healthcare**

## **Interpreting**

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### **Abstract**

Natalya Mytareva is an undervalued yet pivotal contributor to the translation and interpreting community. Beginning her career as a university professor teaching interpretation and translation courses at Volgograd State University in Russia, she came to the United States as an immigrant and had to change careers entirely more than once upon arrival. Her experience as Communications Director at the International Institute of Akron, a refugee resettlement agency, deepened her understanding of the critical need for qualified interpreters in healthcare settings. As one of 13 founding commissioners of the Certification Commission for Healthcare

Interpreters (CCHI), Natalya's work led to the first healthcare interpreting certification exam that was nationally accredited for spoken language interpreters. Furthermore, through CCHI, she was later able to develop an English-only exam—the first of its kind created by any federal, state, or private organization—that could reliably test the interpreting skills of all healthcare interpreters. Her work revolutionized the healthcare interpreting profession by giving interpreters of all languages credentials that would put them on the same level as their colleagues in healthcare. Much can be learned from Natalya's grit, determination, and leadership style, which led to a truly transformative feat in medical interpreting history in the United States.

*Keywords:* Healthcare interpreting, certification, leadership, professional standards, CCHI, NCCA accreditation

### **The Foundation: Where Standards Began**

Prior to her arrival in the United States, Natalya formed part of a rigorous interpreting and translation culture that required individuals to have a master's degree before earning either title. She had experience teaching interpreting and translation courses at Volgograd State University, starting in 1991. Since Volgograd was a relatively young university, Natalya was able to participate in curriculum development and program planning, innovation that excited and challenged her as a self-motivated, high-achieving lifelong learner.

Later upon her arrival in the United States, her work with refugees at the International Institute of Akron highlighted a stark contrast between the level of professionalism in both countries. She

became apprised of a jarring reality that “anyone” could call themselves an interpreter and that training of any kind was almost nonexistent (N. Mytareva, personal communication, March 14, 2025). Instead of falling in line and accepting this new reality, Natalya immediately felt called to change it. Her first step was to listen to her employees and understand the difference between immigrants and refugees—namely the decision to become interpreters by choice or out of obligation to serve their communities. Working with refugees, she realized that their struggles "could not compare" to anything she had experienced as an immigrant, and she witnessed firsthand how interpreter quality directly impacted the most vulnerable populations. The contrast was stark: in Russia, rigorous training prepared interpreters for their responsibilities; in America, the profession operated without meaningful standards. Listening to understand before taking action would prove to be a key to Natalya's eventual success in other areas. Once she understood the challenges of her specific situation, she began to take strategic action.

### **The Architect of Change**

If you ask Natalya how she would describe herself, she will tell you that she is a shy person by nature who truly does not see any special qualities that allow her to accomplish things others do not. Quite an interesting way to describe oneself, considering that once Natalya became apprised of the utter lack of training for medical interpreters, she promptly realized that to create effective change, she would not be able to do so alone. Therefore, this self-declared shy person started to travel far and wide to attend conferences, where she not only saw and identified change makers she wanted to partner with, but she sought them out and offered her service to assist them with initiatives. A practice that eventually proved fruitful as she made lasting connections with like-

minded friends who would become future collaborators in CCHI efforts. Her philosophy was simple: "If you truly want to do something, they will take your help."

As her story unfolded, Natalya became one of the 13 founding commissioners of CCHI. While Natalya's leadership skills continued to evolve, she still didn't see the potential in herself that fellow commissioners saw in her. In April 2012, when fellow commissioners approached her in a hallway and told her they wanted her as chair, she felt unprepared. Yet their belief in her capabilities gave her the confidence to accept—a pivotal moment that illustrates how leadership often requires others to see our potential before we do.

With confidence from others she admired, Natalya accepted and persisted in her efforts to raise the bar of medical interpreting in the United States to a professional level. In her mind, it was very clear: interpreters needed a credential that would allow them to prove their skillset like their colleagues in healthcare. Without it, interpreters could not show that they were specially qualified to perform duties that bilingual people without training could not.

### **Creating Lasting Change**

Shortly after Natalya's appointment as CCHI chair, the CHI-Spanish exam was accredited by the National Commission of Certifying Agencies (NCCA) (Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters, n.d.). This historic event signified that CCHI was the first and only organization certifying healthcare interpreters to receive NCCA accreditation. During her time as CCHI Chair and later as Executive Director, Natalya immersed herself in understanding the accreditation process. Once again taking on a new role, Natalya came to learn about all the technical

requirements and specificities required of organizations and exams that are necessary for accreditation. Eventually, this work earned her an invitation to form part of the NCCA board, one of the achievements she is most proud of today.

Natalya witnessed the effects of her efforts from the ground level and worked diligently to incorporate what she had learned about institutionalizing procedures to ensure lasting change for those who would come after her. Her approach was methodical, creating what she calls “blueprints for how to be a certified, successful interpreter” detailed, step-by-step processes that others could follow. Throughout her work, Natalya learned the value of documentation and the institutionalization of procedures. This approach allows for longevity of work and ensures that even with turnovers in leadership, processes live on through documentation, increasing the likelihood they are perpetuated even after her departure. A prime example of this principle in action: the interpreter contract documentation she created during her work in Akron still exists, and she later came across a modified version of it, demonstrating how proper documentation enables work to continue serving the profession long after the original creator has moved on. Through her monthly open Q&A sessions for CCHI, Natalya began observing a profound shift. Students were now choosing interpreting as a profession rather than immigrants simply “falling into the job.” The field was attracting people who wanted to excel, not just survive.

When asked about the essential qualities of leaders, Natalya shares that essential qualities include “knowing the profession from top to bottom” and starting “as a practitioner from the lowest level, until eventually gaining mastery.” These are all qualities that she exemplifies in her study of accreditation—a subject that she never saw herself pursuing, yet one that fell in her lap, and

she tackled with determination until eventually becoming an expert herself. This begs the question, then: what is it about Natalya that has allowed her to lead successfully where others have failed, and what can we learn from her wisdom and experience?

### **The Essence: Humble Excellence**

What makes Natalya remarkable isn't her accomplishments alone, but her perspective on them. She genuinely believes “there is nothing special about her” and that “anyone could do the same thing.” This humility is not false modesty—it reflects her core belief that excellence should be accessible to everyone willing to do the work.

Natalya's leadership philosophy helps explain her effectiveness. She divides leadership into two categories: skills that can be learned and qualities that must come from within. Her approach to both reveals patterns that, while she may not recognize them as unique, distinguish her from others who have attempted similar transformations.

Regarding learnable skills, Natalya believes all leaders should not only have experience as frontline practitioners who eventually gain mastery, but they should also educate themselves by taking courses on “leadership, management, group dynamics, and conflict resolution.” More importantly, leaders must learn to apply this knowledge effectively. If they are leading an initiative and it isn't working, they should stop and ask “why.” If the answer is because “this isn't a change that people want to make, but rather just need to check a box,” they have their answer and can divert their energy accordingly. What Natalya doesn't highlight about herself is how

consistently she demonstrates these qualities: she is discerning, takes action, follows through, and adjusts when necessary.

However, Natalya recognizes that another key ingredient to leadership is intrinsic and much more difficult to acquire through coursework. She believes firmly that to be a leader, you must do so with passion and out of a desire “to do right and to do good.” In her opinion, leaders “don't do things for money,” and people who do, often do not do what is right. Most tellingly, Natalya acknowledges that “passion cannot be faked,” inadvertently revealing that there are inherent qualities she possesses that others in her position would not. This represents an interesting paradox: while insisting anyone could do what she has done, she simultaneously identifies intrinsic qualities that are clearly not universal.

The synthesis of these learnable and intrinsic qualities appears in Natalya's approach to mentorship and leadership succession. Her mentorship style, learned from Kathleen Diamond, combines friendship with professional guidance. She values the moments when she sees “someone you have mentored do what you taught them,” understanding that true leadership multiplies itself through others. Perhaps most remarkably, she believes that “when other people can do what you do as well or better than you are,” it's time to “let them do it.” This philosophy demonstrates her understanding that great leadership includes preparing for succession, a perspective that requires both the learnable skill of strategic thinking and the intrinsic quality of genuine humility.

## **Breaking New Ground**

Natalya is still the Executive Director of CCHI, and her work continues to make interpreting history. On February 11, 2023, CCHI held the New Credential Launch Summit: Equitable and Inclusive for All, officially launching the new ETOE exam and CoreCHI-Performance Certification (Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters, 2023). This launch made interpreter testing history as the first healthcare interpreting performance exam available to interpreters of all languages, including American Sign Language. This transformative work has the potential to revolutionize testing and accelerate credentialing in other areas of the interpreting sphere.

If you ask Natalya, simply having the steps to certification is not enough. Effectively incorporating this credential as a valid, recognized standard in healthcare requires more work, and she is rolling up her sleeves to get it done. One thing about Natalya that makes her adept at leadership is her ability to learn from experience and incorporate the past into the present to effectuate change in the future.

Pondering the public relations challenges Natalya faces with making CCHI credentials an accepted and widely required credential, it would not be surprising for her to call on lessons learned from her past mentoring of a young refugee woman. This young woman came to her for advice after doctors claimed they could not understand her English because of her thick accent—a fact that Natalya found ludicrous since she and this young woman communicated perfectly in their shared language of English.



Natalya encouraged this young woman to give a group of doctors a presentation about refugees from Myanmar. The young woman was petrified with the prospect, but reluctantly agreed as long as Natalya would be willing to coach her and help her refine her English grammar and pronunciation. Natalya believed that regardless of minor issues with grammar or pronunciation, the mere fact of sharing this story would be powerful enough to change the doctors' hearts and minds.

The young woman told the story of how, as children in the refugee camp, there were soldiers patrolling the Thailand and Myanmar border. Sometimes they would have guns and shoot the children, and other times, they would use metal stakes when they ran out of bullets. Sharing this horrifying scene with the doctors, regardless of language, earned the young woman and her colleagues the respect accorded to those who have endured unimaginable trauma.

It will be interesting to see if Natalya uses this lesson from the past—that powerful, authentic stories can change hearts and minds—to focus her efforts on publicizing and promoting certification to the larger healthcare and governmental audience.

## **Conclusion**

Natalya's story demonstrates how the strategic application of skilled leadership, lifelong learning, perseverance, motivation, and determination can transform a profession. She applied her teaching skills and university-level knowledge while leading with compassion and understanding to become one of the primary figures to completely revolutionize the healthcare interpreting landscape. As she would put it, “success is deliberate, intentional work that does not come easily.”

Central to Natalya's success was her understanding of the power of community and mentorship. Her story reveals the importance of collegiality and the courage to take leaps when others see potential in us that we may not recognize in ourselves. She learned early in her United States experience that strategic positioning matters. When “there was a change in leadership that wasn't doing the best for the organization” at the International Institute of Akron, she realized that “she could do more good in a different place.” This lesson in adaptability would prove crucial to her later success.

Thankfully for the healthcare interpreting profession, Natalya had the know-how to seek out and surround herself with encouraging mentors and colleagues who recognized the value she brought to leadership. Her community guided her into taking that first step into leadership, a step that ultimately led to a transformative leap in testing for healthcare interpreters. Her story is one of resilience, adaptability, and remaining open to opportunities that allow us to use our gifts where we can make the biggest impact.

Ultimately, Natalya's legacy teaches leaders that we all possess gifts we may not see in ourselves, but when encouraged in just the right way, these hidden strengths can lead to revolutionary changes for ourselves and our colleagues. The transformation of healthcare interpreting in the United States stands as testament to what can be accomplished when skilled leadership meets unwavering commitment to excellence, proving that the most profound changes often come from those who lead not because they believe they are special, but because they believe the work itself is essential.

## **About the Author**

Marisa Rueda Will is pursuing a Master's in Interpreting Studies at Western Oregon University and has been a healthcare interpreter since 2006, certified CHI-Spanish since 2012. She currently serves as a CCHI Commissioner (2024-2027) and is the owner of Tica Interpreter Training and Translations, LLC. Her expertise in medical interpreter training and leadership development provides unique insight into the transformational leadership within the healthcare interpreting profession.

## **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to express deep gratitude to Natalya Mytareva for graciously sharing her time, insights, and experiences during our interview on March 14, 2025. Her willingness to reflect on her journey and provide candid perspectives on leadership made this case study possible. Special appreciation also goes to the healthcare interpreting community, whose dedication to professional excellence continues to be inspired by leaders like Natalya. Finally, thank you to Western Oregon University's Interpreting Studies program for fostering the academic environment that encourages this type of meaningful research into our profession's history and leadership.

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