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## **A failure to act for change**

BY OCTAVIAN ROBINSON

**“I never worry about action, but only about inaction.”—Winston Churchill**

I, as a deaf person, have grown tired of courts selling contracts to the lowest bidder and sacrificing quality and more important, justice. The lowest bidding agency does not assure certified or competent interpreters. This creates a situation where a deaf person’s legal right, regardless of guilt, to a fair trial is compromised.

Furthermore, many judges within the court system are unfamiliar with the challenges surrounding the provision of interpreting. They are often not familiar with linguistic variations that exist within sign language, the various modes of communication employed, the challenges within interpreting such as the interpreter’s ability to understand complex legal language, and situations where a Certified Deaf Interpreter is necessary (CDI).

Because of this lack of familiarity and peddling interpreting contracts to the lowest bidder, (not to mention lawyers who prefer to protect their profit margins rather than spend money on hiring interpreters for their own clients) I see so many deaf people lose out in the justice system. They risk their lives, reputations, records, imprisonment, unfair divorce, family, and civil court proceedings, and so on forth because of un/under-qualified interpreters.

Deaf people do not have access to true justice without appropriate and qualified interpreters.

Fortunately, some people have recognized this and identified an opportunity to act for change. In Ohio, the Supreme Court took it upon itself to be proactive and established an Interpreter Advisory Committee comprised primarily of judges, lawyers, advocates,

interpreters and court personnel to investigate and develop rules/regulations for the provision of interpreting services.

But I can't help wondering: why did we, deaf people, who stand to lose the most and gain the most, wait for action? Why let the Court take the initiative? Once the Court took the initiative, they invited members of the interpreting and deaf communities to participate in the process.

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Members from both communities declined the opportunity or showed mild interest and involvement. That appalls me.

For interpreters, especially the Ohio Chapter of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, this was a bonanza of an opportunity to gain greater recognition of your own organization, to gain credibility and recognition for the RID certification process (which ultimately benefits RID-certified interpreters' bottom line- more work, more money) not to mention the opportunity to adhere members of your profession to a higher standard and demand greater respect from the community at large. And you said no, thanks?

Too busy to work for social justice? For recognition of your field? Of your governing and certification body? To serve as allies for the community that provides you with your living? To be allies, as members of the privileged elite (read- able-bodied) to a population that has been historically disenfranchised? The African-American Civil Rights movement succeeded because of white allies- white people who joined the Freedom Rides, provided legal assistance to imprisoned activists, marched in solidarity, and acted for change. Women got the right to vote because of the support and activism of their male counterparts.

Deaf people can fight for their own rights but success is far more assured when people in privileged positions of power step in and contribute to the struggle for equal citizenship.

But wait, it isn't just the interpreters. Deaf people didn't show up either. This is an even bigger travesty. Your own rights and where were you? The Ohio Association of the Deaf and other organizations serving the deaf and hard of hearing population declined to participate in the Ohio Supreme Court's rulemaking process. This was a golden opportunity to stand up for deaf people's rights—the opportunity to make history—and without having to start from scratch, without having to do all the work or even having to go through the hassle of convincing the Supreme Court that this needed to be done. Half of the work, half of the challenge, was already accomplished. In Indiana, the deaf community is upset that they were not asked for their input on the ISD board appointments. They wanted input. The deaf community in Ohio was offered the opportunity and we did not take advantage of that.

Fortunately for us, [Hallenross](#), an interpreting agency in central Ohio operated by Ben Hall and Linda Ross, stepped in and volunteered to regularly attend the meetings and to consult on the Committee's process. They have been heavily involved and invested in the process from the very beginning, investing hundreds of hours and volunteering members of their staff. The Ohio Supreme Court has now approved new standards governing the provision and credentialing of interpreting for deaf and hard of hearing people. While these standards are [currently only a recommendation](#) for courts to follow, the Supreme Court is considering making the standards mandatory.

The next step for us is to make sure the Supreme Court standards are known to all courts in the state and to let them know, “we the people” are there, armed with the rules and will be watching to make sure “equal justice under the law” is there for every deaf citizen of Ohio.

It is because of a single agency that we have new rules that assure greater access to citizenship for deaf people. I, for one, am profoundly grateful for people who step up to the plate and act for change. It really only takes one or a few people to effect tremendous social change but imagine how much more power and change we could have, hold, and

effect if we acted more in concert as a community? As a community, we must have each other's backs and fight for those who cannot fight for themselves for after all, this is supposed to be a democracy with liberty and justice for all. Interpreters, allies, deaf, hard of hearing, signers, oralists, all alike.

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What if we took advantage of every opportunity to act for change? Sometimes the opportunities are offered to us. Sometimes we have to create those opportunities ourselves. But either way, we cannot afford inaction.

#### ABOUT OCTAVIAN ROBINSON

Octavian Robinson graduated from Gallaudet and is currently a Ph.D candidate at Ohio State. He lives in Ohio with his Weimaraner and three angry felines.