

Schottenstein's success in launching company not lost in translation

In less than a decade Yana Schottenstein has grown her business, Access 2 Interpreters LLC, into one of the largest translation agencies in Central Ohio.

The company provides interpretation and translating services for a variety of clients.

A linguist, Schottenstein studied at St. Petersburg University in Russia before earning her Ph.D. and traveling to the United States in 1992.

She came to Columbus with her daughter because she already had family here. For about 17 years, Schottenstein taught English at the Jewish Community Center's Adult Basic Literacy Education program.

Originally, the program only served Russian speakers but, in response to growing immigrant populations, the ABLE program expanded.

"That's when I started being exposed to all the different communities that were coming in," Schottenstein said. "I started getting students from different continents, from Africa, from the Middle East."

Soon, those students began relying on their teacher for help, asking if she could translate documents or come with them to a doctor's appointment.

"I only speak two languages, Russian and English, so I said I might find someone who could help you," she said. "By that time, I was pretty immersed in these communities. I knew people, I had friends and students who went through my program and I was able to connect people, to help them get access to what we call an 'ad hoc interpreter.'"

Eventually, Schottenstein said, connecting people to interpreters was becoming an everyday task, so she thought she would start a business out of it.

"Right away, before I started the business, I did some research on my own and realized that there are so many languages that communities need interpreters for," said Schottenstein.

She said the process was like the chicken and the egg: "You don't know what to do first — get the clients or get the interpreters — so I decided I should first build a good core interpreter group that would represent the top-needed languages here in Columbus."

That list of languages was surprising: Ga, Twi, Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya. They were, even to a linguist, entirely unfamiliar.

"At that point, I didn't even know some of those languages existed, it was so interesting to learn," said Schottenstein.

Of course, the popular languages were in demand as well. Spanish was high on the list and Russian, she said, was about fourth. But the area was also experiencing an influx of Somali and Ethiopian immigrants, heightening the demand for experts in Arabic, Somali and Amharic.

Finding qualified interpreters in languages she knew little about was one of the most difficult aspects of starting and running her business, Schottenstein said.

"One of the major challenges has been, and is, to find a qualified interpreter," she said.

Once a talented interpreter is found, it isn't simply a matter of throwing them into their first assignment. They need training in demeanor, ethics, professionalism and even in their own language.

"We tell them that they must continue learning because today, if you go to a hospital and interpret for a general physician or a surgeon, they expect you to know the terminology that they use," Schottenstein said.

Another challenge, Schottenstein said, was learning how to run her own business.

"I had to learn on the job. There is a saying that those who can, do, and those who can't, teach," she said. "Well I proved that wrong. I was a teacher in my adult life and I learned how to do. I just learned it on the job."

But Schottenstein, who is CEO of

Access 2 Interpreters, also said she wasn't alone in her endeavor.

She had lots of help from her husband, James, a well-known and successful area lawyer with extensive business experience, and her mother who she said, like all Russian mothers, pushed her and encouraged her to be successful.

Still, Schottenstein also had to overcome the obstacle of visibility.

"One of the challenges for us is to educate the business community, the social services community, the medical and legal community, that we do exist and we can help bridge that gap in communication," Schottenstein said.

Though it is a relatively new business, Schottenstein attributes its growth to her high-quality product.

"And with quality comes the knowledge that we really do help people," she said.

Schottenstein overcame her obstacles with the belief, as she says, that 99 percent of success is attitude.

"I think Columbus in particular, Ohio in general and the U.S. as a whole, provide good opportunities for people who have initiative, who don't stop, who try," she said. "As far as people who immigrate, I think that applies to them too. So many people come here. This country is built on immigrants, and I believe that those people who come here are so motivated to succeed." ■

~ Annie Yamson



Yana Schottenstein
Chief Executive Officer
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