

As Columbus' foreign-born population has increased, so has the need for interpretation and translation services in languages far beyond the ones American kids learn in high school. But, as writer Joel Oliphint found out, it's not a gig for just anyone with good language skills. Interpreters play a sort of character as they work—one that must resist the pull to help a fellow countryman through what's often a difficult situation.

YANA KOMM IMMIGRATED to the United States as a Russian refugee in 1992 with her parents and 9-year-old daughter. She came prepared, armed with a doctorate in linguistics from St. Petersburg University. Her accent was thick, but she spoke English well enough to secure a job teaching English as a second language in Columbus soon after arriving.

But when her plane landed at New York's JFK International Airport, she was scared to converse with the airport staff. She longed for an interpreter.

"I wanted to ask for water for my daughter, and I was very nervous to even open my mouth to say, 'Can I have some water?'" she says. "I know how it feels not to be able to ask for directions or how to get to the hospital or how to apply for a job."

If it's that difficult for an immigrant who's fluent in English, imagine how hard it must be for someone who speaks little or no English at all.

Komm, who became Yana Schottenstein in 1993 after marrying James Schottenstein, helped fellow immigrants for years through a local ESL program, focusing first on the Russian Jewish population, then expanding in response to Columbus immigration patterns. Soon, her West African and Middle Eastern students were asking for help with doctor appointments, court appearances and immigration papers. With Russian and English as the only tools in her language kit, Schottenstein had to look elsewhere for assistance. After spending so much time tracking down interpreters, she eventually decided to start her own interpreting company.

With no entrepreneurial background ("I didn't have a business bone in my body," she

recalls), Schottenstein co-founded Access 2 Interpreters in 2006. At first, the founders did all the scheduling and recruiting themselves in a home basement. Today, Access employs more than 400 interpreters working on a contract, part-time basis who can speak 73 languages in person and about 180 languages over the phone, plus translation services. (Interpretation is spoken; translation is written.) Each day—24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year—Schottenstein and her dispatchers schedule roughly 300 assignments throughout Central Ohio.

Access isn't the only game in town. Seven or eight interpreting agencies vie for contracts locally. But Access grew quickly and made a name for itself, which Schottenstein attributes to a continual in-house training program and an emphasis on ensuring the accuracy of every last detail—from the time, date, location and language of an assignment to billing invoices that can exceed 200 pages.

In a little more than eight years, Schottenstein has watched the composition of Columbus change, and Access has had to adapt to the growing diversity. "You go to New York and you expect that, but Columbus is a melting pot now," she says.

The Hispanic community continues to grow, while the Russian community has diminished. West African languages are more in demand now, and Schottenstein has seen the Nepali community explode in the last two or three years. Recruiting interpreters from those populations is a key part of the business.

"All my employees are so obsessed with recruiting," Schottenstein says. "They go to restaurants and give out cards or go to grocery stores. It's funny. It's like a game for us



Yana Schottenstein co-founded Access 2 Interpreters when she saw a demand among students who were learning English as a second language.



Employees take calls at Access 2 Interpreters Brewery District office.

to find good interpreters." It's not rare for Schottenstein to ask during job interviews how someone found out about Access and hear, "You gave me your card at a gas station."

Schottenstein jokes she chases potential interpreters down the freeway, but the joke isn't far from reality. When stopped at a traffic light, if she notices someone in another car or on the sidewalk speaking an in-demand language, she'll hand out a card and holler out the window, "Call us!"

FROM WATCHING INTERPRETERS on TV crime dramas, you might assume the only

qualification for interpreting is fluency in two languages. Not so. Switching back and forth between languages with ease is a learned skill. It's not narration, either. Interpreters use the first person when speaking for both parties. If someone says, "I'm having some pain in my lower abdomen," the interpreter relays it exactly, keeping it in first person instead of changing it to, "The patient says she's having some pain in her lower abdomen."

The job also has thorny ethical ramifications. Picture this: An interpreter is interpreting a conversation between a doctor and a patient. After the conversation, the doctor steps out to look for some test results. The patient begins talking to the interpreter, asking about his country of origin, possible mutual friends, how long he has lived in Columbus and so on. They develop a quick rapport. Turns out they even live within a mile of each other!

"Would you mind giving me a ride home when this is done?" the patient asks. "My wife was going to pick me up, but now she can't, and I'm right on your way."

What should you do? Are you a bad person if you say "no"? Are you a bad employee if you say "yes"?

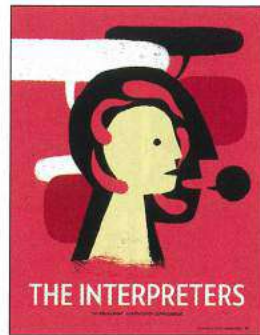
The stakes are high for interpreters. Access has relationships with hospitals, social service agencies and law firms. Interpreters may be called to a school or a jail. In those settings, a simple mistake can have dire consequences.

ON A WEDNESDAY NIGHT in January—one of the coldest in 20 years—a group of five men

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Access 2 Interpreters received requests for interpretation or translation in 73 languages last year. These are the languages, listed in descending order of requests.

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Spanish | 37. Tagalog |
| 2. Somali | 38. Uzbek |
| 3. Arabic | 39. Macedonian |
| 4. Nepali | 40. Italian |
| 5. American Sign Language | 41. Albanian |
| 6. Amharic | 42. Kinyarwanda |
| 7. French | 43. Hausa |
| 8. Tigrinya | 44. Polish |
| 9. Russian | 45. Krio |
| 10. Mandarin | 46. Taiwanese |
| 11. Fula | 47. Soninke |
| 12. Twi | 48. Azari |
| 13. Vietnamese | 49. Ewe |
| 14. Halka Chin | 50. Kusa |
| 15. Portuguese | 51. Kinandi |
| 16. Oromo | 52. Yoruba |
| 17. Masy Masy | 53. Bosnian |
| 18. Swahili | 54. Gorman |
| 19. Urdu | 55. Bulgarian |
| 20. Zomi | 56. Ga |
| 21. Cantonese | 57. Fante |
| 22. Fanti | 58. Croatian |
| 23. Ukrainian | 59. Malayalam |
| 24. Korean | 60. Asante |
| 25. Japanese | 61. Tamil |
| 26. Burmese | 62. Terno |
| 27. Haitian Creole | 63. Bhutanese |
| 28. Hindi | 64. Romanian |
| 29. Lao | 65. Telugu |
| 30. Gujarati | 66. Arabic (Moroccan) |
| 31. Mandingo | 67. Indonesian |
| 32. Wolof | 68. Kinnadi |
| 33. Punjabi | 69. Kurdi |
| 34. Bengali | 70. Mina |
| 35. Cambodian (Kmer) | 71. Mizo |
| 36. Serbian | 72. Thai |
| | 73. Tschonase |



and three women sit in three rows in a narrow office that's been converted into a classroom. A world map hangs on the yellow walls, and a computer at the front dings whenever the instructor rouses it from sleep mode to look up language-related questions.

This is Access Academy, an educational curriculum Schottenstein developed early on that includes intensive training seminars for candidates after the initial interview and screening process. The weeknight classes are held from 5 to 10 p.m. at Access's new headquarters on High Street in the Brewery District; the company shares the second floor of a red-brick building with Schottenstein Legal Services, the firm of Yana's husband.

After outgrowing a home basement, a Westerville office and then a previous Downtown space on Third Street, Access relocated here late last year. Larger permanent classrooms in the lower level were still under construction, so the cramped quarters had to suffice for these training sessions.

A few of the trainees come to the sessions straight from other jobs. A Nepali student wears a blue Wal-Mart button-down. A Spanish interpreter-in-training is still in the red uniform of a used-car dealership, complete with name patch. Some students are between jobs. Some want to make a career out of interpreting. Not everyone will pass.

This week, they are studying ethics and skills-building, and next week they'll learn medical terminology. In the third week, Access selects certain students for training in legal terminology.

Up front is instructor James Weller, an Access interpreter since 2008 and the head trainer. Weller, 48, initially got into interpretation to make some extra money, but he took a liking to it and has been training interpreters for more than a decade. He studied Russian and Spanish at Brigham Young University and later received a master's degree in linguistics from Ohio State. Training interpreters combines his affinity for languages with his love of teaching. "I enjoy seeing students succeed," he says.

In the classroom, Weller is authoritative and thorough but also friendly and approach-

able, and he doesn't hesitate to put students in what he calls "the hot spot."

"Come forward and assume the role of interpreter!" he repeatedly commands in a loud, faux-severe tone. In these mock sessions, students approach and act as interpreters between the "provider" (usually a doctor or nurse played by Weller) and the client (usually a patient played by another student).

The term "role" is intentional and apt. Trainees soon learn that while playing the role of interpreter, the self is gone, supplanted by "The Interpreter," who has no name, no nationality, no gender, no preference. The Interpreter is utterly neutral. These students must learn to be, as Weller puts it, "stone-cold interpreting machines."

To do this, Weller teaches them rules for being "in role." Body posture should be

"Your heart goes out to them, and you don't want to say no, but you must. You might give them advice that could be harmful. It's not your place."

—JAMES WELLER

straight. When Weller demonstrates, he looks like an armed guard—hands clasped in front, gaze fixed on a spot on the wall. That lack of eye contact is one of the hardest skills for interpreters in training to learn. Looking someone in the eye is a social skill most people learn from a young age, and to unlearn it takes a lot of concentration. Countless times in mock sessions, the students look at Weller, who pauses, points to his eyes and says, "Should this be happening?"

"When interpreters get in trouble, even if I'm not present, I can often tell what they did wrong that got them there," Weller tells me after class. "It seems comical, but eye contact almost always plays a role. If I'm having eye contact with you, that's how we start getting to know each other. We learn whether we can trust a person and what they're like by looking

in their eyes. Then I feel like it's my message and not the provider's."

Remember the hypothetical situation about the patient who asked the interpreter for a ride home? Interpreters won't find themselves in that awkward circumstance if they follow another rule: Never be alone with a client. When the provider leaves the room, the interpreter follows and waits outside the door. If a client beckons, the interpreter simply offers to find a professional to help address any concerns.

It sounds straightforward, but it often isn't. "The nurse walks out, and you're supposed to walk out," Schottenstein says. "Suddenly an older patient catches your sleeve and says, 'Can you help me, please? Can you tell me what else I can do?' And you have to say 'no.' Your heart goes out to them, and you don't want to say 'no,' but you must. You might give them advice that could be harmful. It's not your place."

The rules might seem standoffish and cold, but they serve the provider and client best, Weller explains to the class. If an interpreter is uninteresting, with no physical gestures and little discernible personality, the two parties attempting to bridge the language gap can focus on each other. The more robotic, the better. An interpreter's only job is to repeat, word for word, what is said—to speak for someone else. Exactly.

WELLER IS FLUENT in Spanish and Russian, so you'd think some of the students speaking Nepali and Arabic could get away with some shaky mock interpreting without his knowledge. But Weller says he can "get by" speaking German and Bosnian, and he can comfortably read in French, Polish, Latvian, Finnish, Hebrew and other languages. In class, he catches all kinds of mistakes. He'll talk about a word's European root or say, "I should have heard an 'm' in there." Sometimes he catches an English word in the middle of an interpretation.

"Class, how many of you think the Arabic word for 'peanut' is 'peanut?'" he asks during a mock session with Harun Abukar, a smiley 23-year-old Iraq native who sits in the back row. Abukar and his family took refuge in Jordan before immigrating to the States when he was 17. Before coming to Columbus, they settled in Kentucky, where they didn't know a soul. Abukar remembers being chummy with most of the interpreters his family used, but one interpreter was the stone-cold type, and it didn't sit well with him.

"We thought he was disrespectful, arrogant," Abukar tells me after class. "Every time we wanted to talk to him, he didn't want to

talk to us. If you just came here, and you see someone who looks like you, talks like you—you want him to help. We didn't know anyone. We needed him to be there for us."

So how will Abukar handle this when he's out in the field interpreting Arabic? He admits it will be extremely hard. He does believe setting the type of boundaries Weller describes is the better way, but how can you not help someone so desperate for friendly conversation in a native tongue? Abukar's strategy, he tells Weller, is to explain to clients beforehand why he's acting the way he is so they won't be confused or think he's disrespectful.

Yana Belan, a fellow student who came to the U.S. from Russia 11 years ago, sees it differently. She finds the impersonal aspect of the job to be a comfort—she actually avoided pursuing interpretation previously because of the assumed drama.

"I thought it would be very emotionally draining if you have to empathize with everyone," Belan says. "But here they teach you not to even look at them!"

Sylma Eckert, 47, has been interpreting Spanish for Access since 2010. She emigrated from Puerto Rico in the late '80s to finish her undergraduate degree at Ohio Dominican University. After working as a banker for a while, Eckert needed a gig with flexible hours so she could take care of her mother. Interpreting fit the bill. Soon she fell in love with the job, and the Access staff fell in love with her.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a warmer, more personable interpreter than Eckert. It's tough to imagine her dispassionate. Though Eckert says she's always aware of the parameters built into her role (you'll never find her alone in the room with a client), she does attempt to convey empathy.

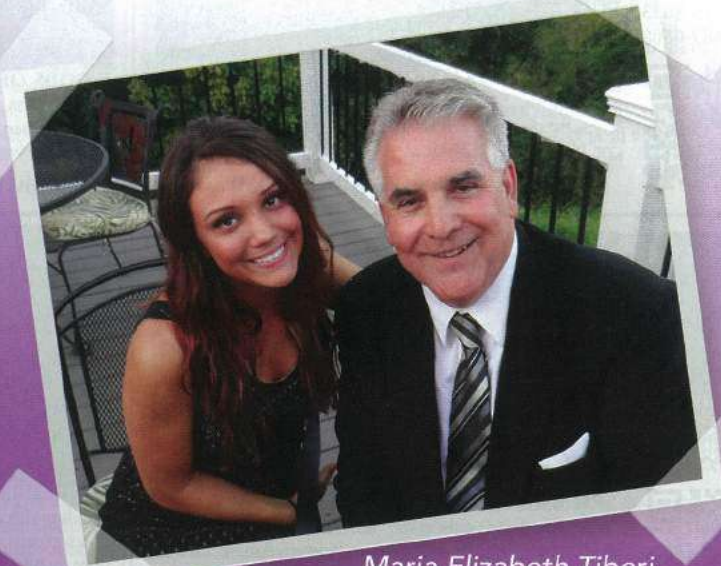
"We go into situations where a patient has passed away on the table," Eckert says. "It's terrible. You have to tell parents that their children are brain-damaged. Sometimes you feel like crying yourself. I try to convey at that moment that I'm there to help them. ... I think I do it with the tone."

Even Weller admits it's tempting to give into the emotions of certain moments and interactions while interpreting. The best thing to do, he says, is what Eckert described: Mimic the tone. At the highest skill level, interpreting is like voice acting.

"When the doctor or nurse is showing great warmth or sympathy or the client is at the point of tears, we convey that in our voice," Weller says. "I do get to show empathy frequently—it's just not mine."

Interpreting "is not as easy as you think," Schottenstein says. "It's a profession, not a hobby."

10 TV *Maria's* MESSAGE



Maria Elizabeth Tiberi
1992 - 2013

On September 17th 2013, I received the news that no parent is ever prepared for. My daughter Maria was killed in an early evening automobile accident. The investigation revealed that, at the time of the accident, Maria's phone was not in use and no alcohol or drugs were found in her system.

The cause of the accident:
"An unknown distraction."

Driving safety stories will run weekly in The Columbus Dispatch and on WBNS-10TV. Our hope is that central Ohio residents will use this information to help their teen drivers understand the challenges they face each day on our roadways.

For more information visit:
10TV.com/mariasmessage

