

Unexpected

By Catherine Klatzker

The technology frightened me a bit, not teaching the class itself. What if the power went out? What if the PC behaved radically different than the Mac I was used to? Winter rain beat against the classroom's double windows. I knew the foothills would be in trouble later and there could be floods. A few stragglers rushed in, then back to punch the time-clock outside the door before settling with their coffee in the rows facing the oversized screen announcing "Effective Language Interpretation in a Clinical Setting."

My expertise was my life of PICU nursing. My claim to credibility was my twenty-two years of reliance on Diversity Services at a children's hospital, where an average of thirty languages are still supported every month. The uniformed medical assistants in front of me all wore name tags but I still asked everyone in turn to introduce themselves and to say what their hopes were for the morning's class. I knew it was mandatory, I told them, but since they were here, did they have any particular things they wanted to learn? It was clear that the compulsory aspect drew most of them. Only a few voiced concerns.

"I need to communicate the patient's needs better."

"I can't control interruptions when I'm interpreting."

"Sometimes I'm embarrassed to interpret the actual words when they're impolite."

Distant thunder punctuated their remarks.

They came from underserved clinics all over the Northeast outskirts of the city. Family Clinics, Women's Clinics, Homeless Clinics, Adolescent Clinics, and Pediatric Clinics. The Language Line was available, but in most clinical situations, in-person language interpretation was more efficient. I had put together a curriculum with a PowerPoint, handouts, videos, small group discussions, a quiz, and stories that included the professional standards and ethics of medical interpretation in a clinical setting.

My videos had them laughing in recognition, then cringing at how non-English speaking patients were treated—immigrants in general. They nodded their heads when I mentioned regional variations of language, that Mexico alone has twenty-one dialects, and what that means in the Emergency Department in the middle of the night. I gave them a few short scripts to memorize and to use in uncomfortable situations. We spent a long time on nine key ethical concepts, for them to own.

They opened up.

I watched as the importance of their work was confirmed for these medical assistants, who started out with nothing, just as I did; as they detected their own importance in the world. In my mind, I recalled the first time someone saw my life as having value so long ago: that I was bright and capable and able to help myself and others, even to stand up to others who wanted to dismiss me—that I was not nothing. I intuitively recognized myself in my students. I had been them. I did not expect this connection to my own life, to my heart.

Knowing where to stand, to always speak in first person, how to deflect side conversations—this essential information by itself was not that powerful. These medical

assistants were already important. They already were somebody. This work, done well, could help others so much more, and lead all of them to a place of greater respect. I saw that knowledge happen in their faces. The seed was planted. The sun peeked out.

As a monolingual RN among bi-and tri-lingual students, our imaginary divide had shifted and they were up for it. Dreams awakened in Language Interpretation Class. They crowded around me afterward, asked about further certification, and one or two hesitantly talked about nursing school. They said how much they learned and how much more they wanted to accomplish.

This must be the Art of what we do.

Catherine Klatzker is a writer and RN in Los Angeles, California, retired after twenty-two years in pediatric intensive care. Catherine Klatzker's work appears in mental health anthologies from In Fact Books and from Lime Hawk Literary Arts Collective, as well as a range of other publications including Intima, Fall 2013 "Range of Vision," Spring 2015 "What We See When We See Each Other," & Fall 2017 "Order"; and most recently in Atticus Review and Please See Me. Her memoir, "You Will Never Be Normal," is forthcoming from Stillhouse Press in May, 2021.

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