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Deb Russell

University of Alberta, drussell@ualberta.ca

Joneti Rokotuibau

Fijian Sign Language Interpreters Association, AustOceaniaRep.wasli@gmail.com

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Interview with Joneti Rokotuibau: Building Capacity in the Pacific Islands

Debra Russell¹

University of Alberta, Canada

Joneti Rokotuibau

Fijian Sign Language Interpreters Association

Abstract

This open forum article highlights an interview conducted with Joneti Rokotuibau, a signed language interpreter from Fiji. She has recently been elected as the Oceania Regional Representative for the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI). She highlights her path to becoming a Fijian Sign Language interpreter and teacher, and how she developed and interest in working with interpreters and the Deaf community. She also describes the ways in which signed language interpreting is developing in the Pacific Islands and how she is partnering with the national Deaf Association to bring about change. Her experiences offer interpreters and educators a glimpse in some of the many exciting developments in the region known as Oceania, which includes Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga Samoa, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, and Australia.

Keywords: interpreters and interpreter education; National Deaf associations; interpreting on television; Fijian Sign Language (FSL); policy frameworks.

¹ Correspondence to: drussell@ualberta.ca

Interview with Joneti Rokotuibau: Building Capacity in the Pacific Islands

Joneti Rokotuibau is an interpreter from Suva, Fiji. She has worked as a teacher of deaf students, as an interpreter and more recently as an interpreter trainer in the Pacific Islands. She was recently appointed as the Oceania Regional Representative to the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) for the term of 2019-2023. She looks forward to strengthening the interpreting skills of those she works with, in order to serve the Deaf communities more effectively. Her region is highly diverse, including countries with established interpreter training programs such as New Zealand and Australia, along with the many Pacific Islands where interpreters have had minimal opportunity to formally train as an interpreter or to be paid for their work.

Debra Russell is a Canadian certified interpreter, educator and researcher. As the previous David Peikoff Chair of Deaf Studies at the University of Alberta, her research interests include mediated education with interpreters, interpreting in legal settings and with legal discourse, and co-interpreting in Deaf-hearing interpreter teams. She is extensively published in the field of interpretation. Her interpreting practice spans over thirty-five years, and continues focus on medical, legal, mental health and employment settings. She has had a long history of leadership positions at the local, national and international level, serving several volunteer organizations. She is the past President of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), and a Commissioner with the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE). She loves to travel, having presented in 62 countries while maintaining a committed yoga practice over the past 40 years.

Deb: Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me while you're here at the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters conference in Paris, France. I know that the IJIE is very interested in how interpreters are trained in Fiji and the Pacific Islands. I think Della Goswell and Jemina Napier provided training in Fiji a few years ago – was that the first training? What was important about that training?

Joneti: It's my pleasure to talk with you, Deb. Yes, that was the first formal training we experienced with overseas trainers, with two volunteer instructors in 2006. Ruth Spencer from New Zealand and Kate Nelson from Australia offered our first trainings. The course was 12 weeks long and each class was three hours. Then Jemina and Della came for one week to close out the course, and what I remember most was learning about the Code of Ethics and how ethics guide my work. The training taught me how best to relate to the Deaf people whom I am serving and how to establish the professional boundaries that bring my work up to the standard expected by the profession. A second aspect that was important for all of us in that training was learning how to give feedback to each other so that we could all keep on growing and enable self-evaluation and progress in performance. Then we had a week of training with Zane Hema in 2014, and most recently we hosted the WASLI 2018 conference and training workshops.

Deb: Sounds like that training provided an important foundation for Fiji. How did you become an interpreter?

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Joneti: I became an interpreter through my friend, Inise Tawaketini. I met her through volleyball, and she told me that she taught deaf students. I asked her how she did that, and she said “through sign language.” I said, “What is sign language?” It was such a new concept for me. She got me very interested in working at the school. When I came into the school for the deaf I was so fortunate, because the school had a deaf Head Teacher, Mr. Olawale Alade from Nigeria, who was a qualified teacher of the deaf. Also, his wife is a qualified teacher and an interpreter. They are currently residing in England. Both of those people became my mentors, and they helped me launch my work with signed language and deaf people. I can remember the week that I started; my hands were all over the place trying to sign properly and make sense, and the Head Teacher observed me, nodding his head positively. He believed in us and was so supportive of our learning on the job! That was April of 2001, so it has been almost 20 years for me now. I taught until 2007, when I was chosen as the signed language interpreting chairperson for the Sign Language Interpreters Committee Fiji. I knew that it was an important role, and since my heart is with interpreting, I took up that volunteer role and began working with the Ministry of Education, the principals, the teachers and the interpreters in the schools. I was so fortunate, because as the supervisor of the interpreters, I could apply the knowledge that I learned from Della and Jemina. Also Kate Matairuvula and Ruth Spencer supported my work. At the same time, after school I was working with the Fiji Association of the Deaf, volunteering as an interpreter in many different settings; it was not easy though.

Deb: So clearly you have a heart for teaching as you were passing that along to others what you had been taught. And then in 2018 something important happened in your region. What was that?

Joneti: We had the WASLI Oceania conference in Fiji! For me it was a dream come true! People who believe in the work they do came to share their knowledge and experiences with us, and it brought all interpreters to a whole new level, where we can now discuss issues and challenges with the same mind set and work together to achieve best practice. The conference was wonderful, and then we had two additional days for just our region to be in training. We had over 50 interpreters from our region, who were able to work with you, Debra, and the other trainers, to ask questions, and to share their experiences. It had a profound impact on the Pacific Islands, because all of you brought the training to our level and made it easy to understand. This learning has shaped the philosophy behind our work and allowed us to take the next steps in establishing the profession in our region.

Deb: I loved being at the conference and post-conference training in Fiji! I always learn more than I can ever give, and I thank you for everything that your group taught me. I recall the panel presentation, where we had to talk through some very sensitive issues, and we were met with such open minds and hearts in those conversations. It was amazing to me. And then there are some really interesting things about Fiji, such as the televised parliamentary proceedings at which deaf people provide interpretation, something that other countries have yet to do. How did that come to be?

Joneti: It was through a discussion with the Fiji Association of the Deaf and the interpreters. We wanted the Deaf community to identify who was best to do the work, and they suggested names of some deaf individuals. We all agreed this was best, as the deaf people would give the clearest interpretation of the complicated Parliamentary information to our Fijian Deaf community, many of whom have not had a formal education.

Deb: I think Fiji is way ahead of many countries that have only used hearing interpreters. It doesn't matter whether the Deaf community has formal education or not. It is sometimes just not possible to understand the interpreter on TV, due to the pace, the lack of prosody, the lack of facial grammar. The hearing interpreter is often a second language learner of the signed language, whereas the Deaf interpreters have different strategies to manage the information and present it to the broadest audience. And somehow all of you knew that, and you collaborated with the Deaf association to find the best strategies for your community by pairing hearing and deaf interpreters. It is a great model that many countries could learn from.

Joneti: It's vital that we work together – the interpreters and the Deaf Association – so that, as in this case, viewers can benefit from seeing the interpreting on television.

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Deb: Yes that is the point, isn't it: to benefit those who are watching. Now you have been appointed as the WASLI Regional Representative, which is so exciting for WASLI! Do you have some ideas, hopes and dreams, for what you would like to see for your region over the next few years?

Joneti: I would like to see two countries in the Oceania region set up their interpreting associations, with advice and support from ASLIA and SLIANZ², in setting our goals and determining how to achieve them. We can raise the financial resources needed, and the training materials, to support our region. I hope that we see the establishment of a diploma course for interpreters in Fiji where we can provide access to solid training, and then we'd like to establish a certification system. We are also planning a 2021 conference to be hosted in Fiji or Samoa, as well as considering a "train the trainer" model to help bring training to other islands.

Deb: Your region has such a good foundation of collaboration with the Deaf Association, and it strikes me that it will be important to work with them to prioritize the needs, as there are many competing demands - deaf children need access to schools, access to signed language, access to deaf people who can be role models. And, of course, interpreters. It seems wise that you are working to figure that out together. It does seem that Fiji is ready for a more formal training process, whereas the other islands are just getting started with deaf schools and trying to include deaf teachers in signed language education.

Joneti: Exactly! Many deaf adults and deaf children in the Oceania region are still yet to access government services and education. Collaboration with stakeholders is important, working with the Deaf Association and the WFD Oceania Committee to identify needs. For formal training, the plan in the near future is that the University of the South Pacific will first provide training for signed language interpreters in Fiji, and then to open this to other interpreters in the Oceania region once they are ready.

Deb: When you look back over the past 20 years, what was your best interpreting experience?

Joneti: I was assigned to interpret for four deaf students from a Pacific Island country, who had scholarships to do training between 2013 to 2017. I can recall observing each of them the first week, seeing their confusion and fear even when holding the pen to write. Most of these students had only completed year 6-8 of primary education and then went on to vocational schools. I had to make sure that their learning environment was accessible and we were to build trust by making sure that they took credit for their work. One of them told me this story that later when he was home for the semester break, he went to the hardware store with his dad to buy him some tools. His father expected him to point and select his tools, but instead he asked for a pen and paper and wrote down all the tools he wanted. His dad was amazed and he could not stop talking about it. He was astonished at this independence. This boys returned to their home country with confidence, high self-esteem, independence and they got secure employment. I am blessed to be part of their education journey; it is fulfilling to know that you have made a difference in someone's life and that's the beauty of this profession. It was my best experience I would say!

Deb: Do you have any advice for people from overseas who sometimes want to come and teach? What might you tell them so that they can be better educators when working in international contexts?

Joneti: One has to understand our pace, which means do not compare the work from your country with ours. Sometimes it is the pace of teaching that needs to be adjusted, as well as teaching strategies. Be mindful of how we learn in our culture. We welcome any opportunity for interpreter education but it is also vital that trainers ask us for advice. We need to go through the same processes that other countries have gone through during their period of development. As interpreters, we will go through stages of learning and growth, and we will get there, but the pace may be different.

² ASLIA: The Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association; and SLIANZ: The Sign Language Interpreters Association of New Zealand

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Deb: That is such great advice. Sometimes those of us from Western or Northern countries want to move at a pace that doesn't fit the experience or the culture that we are visiting, so we do need to ask for advice and adjust to what is needed. Thank you for those words, Joneti. And if you had to give advice to a new interpreter, what would that be?

Joneti: Get involved in the Deaf community.

Deb: Get involved in the Deaf community; that is such a perfect ending to our interview. Thank you, Joneti.

Joneti: Thank you so much for taking time to ask about our region.