

# 'Advocating the value of qualifications, training and professional development'

– An interview with Laura Pistininzi – Translator and Interpreter of Italian, English and German

'Movers and Shakers' is a series of interviews with the interpreting profession's leading lights.

In November 2019, Laura Pistininzi (MCIL, DPI, CL) was presented with the 'NRPSI Award for excellence in the Diploma in Police Interpreting (DPI)' at the Chartered Institute of Linguists and Institute of Linguists Educational Trust Awards. The NRPSI Award recognises the achievement of the DPI student graduating with the highest exam score. Here Ms Pistininzi talks about what drove her to become an interpreter and translator, what motivates her still, and about the importance of qualifications and professional recognition.

## Why did you choose to become an interpreter?

I've always been interested in languages. From the age of 11, while at middle school, I studied English and French. I then continued with these languages at secondary school where I also studied German.



HRH Prince Michael of Kent GCVO presenting Laura Pistininzi with the 'NRPSI Award for excellence in the Diploma in Police Interpreting'

This love of languages was encouraged by my family. My mother is fluent in German, Italian

and French, and taught English. She would prepare her lessons at home, and when we travelled

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continued on next page

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abroad she could speak different languages. I found this fascinating.

However, it wasn't until the age of 17 or 18, when I was sitting the equivalent of the UK's A-level exams, that I became truly inspired to become an interpreter.

As a soon-to-be school leaver, I had the option of becoming a tour guide in Rome or studying philology at University. But I just knew I wanted to use my language skills in a different way.

It was around this time that I went on a visit to the National Research Council in Rome. During this visit we were given a presentation in English, so we wore headphones to hear this interpreted into Italian. The lady interpreter sat in a booth and simultaneously interpreted what was said from English into Italian. I thought this was incredible and it sparked my interest in interpreting.

After secondary school, I undertook a BA degree-level qualification in translation and interpreting in Rome. I then spent a year in Germany as a visiting student at University. I had hoped that I could continue with my language studies in Germany but instead ended up returning to Italy to do an MA-level qualification in conference interpreting.

### **When did you first start working as a translator/interpreter?**

In 2007, while studying for my MA in Italy, I did a summer internship in the UK with a translation company. This was a really useful way of gaining experience. I then went back to Italy to finish my studies and contacted the Italian branch of the same translation company and started to work for this on a freelance basis. The freelance nature of this work allowed me to take on interpreting assignments



as well. So, ever since then, my translation and interpreting activities have gone hand in hand. While working freelance for the translation company in Italy, I mainly worked on written translations for automotive engineering clients. I was able to apply what I learned to my interpreting assignments, which included business-to-business meetings, scientific events, press conferences, book presentations and sports events, such as the 2010 men's volleyball world championship. It was a few years later that I volunteered at the London 2012 Olympic Games as a language service team member. While the assignment only lasted two weeks, I used this opportunity to move permanently to the UK in October 2012. Having studied foreign languages, I'd always wanted to live abroad and the London Olympics offered me the opportunity to make this move.

To begin with, when I first moved here, I had two jobs unrelated to my chosen career and worked freelance as a translator and interpreter when I could. After very little time, though, I switched to working only as a freelance translator and interpreter for

private companies and language agencies. I realised languages were my true vocation. Shortly after this, in 2013, I became a member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) and started to attend continuing professional development courses organised by various institutions in London.

### **Why did you decide to start working for the public services?**

For many years, I didn't think I would work in this sector. When working on my MA thesis, I observed interpreters working in health and mental health settings and found these to be very emotionally charged situations. I thought I would become too emotionally involved if I were to work for the public services. Over time, though, I have learnt to become more emotionally detached.

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What I have discovered over the years is that, regardless of whether you are working for public or private sector clients, you use many of the same skills. You need to be a good note taker, precise in your use of terminology, focused, quick thinking and so on. However, there is one skill that you often need to exercise when undertaking public service assignments that you rarely need to employ when working for private sector clients and that is emotional detachment. Owing to the nature of public service interpreting engagements, the types of subject matter you are interpreting and the

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situations you are interpreting in, the individuals involved often see you as their friend. As a result, they can try to get to know you better or approach you while you are waiting to start an assignment. Occasionally, they even ask the person booking your services to ensure you are booked again next time. I do, of course, understand people's reasons for doing this. Using the same interpreter can help with continuity and means that they don't need to tell a new "stranger" about their circumstances.

While our profession calls for us to be impartial when we are communicating between two parties and only to interpret exactly what is said, that doesn't mean you aren't or can't be influenced emotionally by what you are interpreting or the scenario you find yourself in. But, with experience, I have found it easier to manage and distance myself from these feelings.

#### **What would you say is the most challenging part of working as a public service interpreter?**

Apart from learning not to become emotionally or psychologically involved in assignments, and ensuring you remain and appear neutral, I also find the high level of concentration that interpreting requires a challenge. But I have embraced all of these challenges whole-heartedly. This is my vocation, my profession.

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**"It's the desire to bridge the gap between cultures and languages that motivates me to work as an interpreter."**

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#### **Why did you decide to study for the Diploma in Police Interpreting (DPI) in particular?**

I wanted a new challenge. When I first started working as a translator, much of my work related to engineering and technology. I wanted to learn about a new sector and so decided to discover more about the English legal system. I was already familiar with the Italian legal system and the German system after spending six months in Germany as part of the Erasmus exchange programme, which I took part in during my BA studies. But I knew little about the English system. I was driven by curiosity.

Whereas the language used in science, technology and engineering fields tends to be universal, that is, it is "relatively" easy to find an equivalent term when translating from one language into another, legal language is culturally bound and the law used in one country derives from completely different roots to the law used in another. For example, Italian law stems from the Roman system and is heavily influenced by the Napoleonic Code, whereas the English legal system was transformed following the Norman Conquest. After this, you had the basis for your case law here in the UK. These differences mean that, as an interpreter, you often have to find the closest, most suitable term rather than an absolute equivalent one.

#### **What drives you to work as an interpreter?**

It's the desire to bridge the gap between cultures and languages that motivates me to work as an interpreter. I relish the fact that, as the intermediary, I must not take for granted what either party I am interpreting for is saying and that everything that is said has to be

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**"Three of the most important things for me are education, qualifications and continuing professional development."**

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interpreted precisely using the right tone of voice and inflection, and accompanying gesticulation, so that the proper meaning is conveyed. I love interpreting elements of one culture into another, knowing that there are just some concepts that it is impossible to find an equivalent for in another language for which I will need to find an explanation.

#### **How important was it for you to obtain the DPI qualification?**

Three of the most important things for me are education, qualifications and continuing professional development. So, it was very important for me to obtain this qualification and to pass with a good grade, at least a merit. I also wanted to work with the Metropolitan Police and needed to obtain this qualification to do this.

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**"It is very important to me to be qualified to a high level, to keep my skills up to date and for there to be no question that I am a professional with a unique skillset."**

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Prior to undertaking the DPI, I did consider studying for a UK Master's degree, but I quickly realised that I couldn't do this and continue to work full-time as a freelance interpreter and translator. So, I then started to look for a qualification that I could undertake while working and I could do this with the DPI.

It is very important to me to be qualified to a high level, to keep my skills up to date and for there to be no question that I am a professional with a unique skillset. Interpreting is a very precise profession and you are sometimes required to work under extreme pressure, particularly when working for the public services. Just like the other public service professionals you work with, like doctors and nurses, you can't afford to make mistakes. Just like our fellow public service professionals, those of us who have chosen to go into public service interpreting have studied and trained for years to do what we do. But it seems to me that few people with whom I work understand this or exactly what interpreters do. It is because of the professional qualifications and specialist knowledge that

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interpreters acquire that we can enable other public service professionals to do their jobs. It is for this very reason that we deserve the same professional recognition and respect as our fellow public service professionals.

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**Do you have any translation qualification/s and if so which qualifications do you hold?**

Both of my Italian qualifications include translation and interpreting. I have also accumulated a lot of practical experience in both disciplines. My qualifications and professional experience together were enough for me to be accepted into CIOL membership. By doing the DPI, I have qualified to register with NRPSI as well. As the recipient of this year's NRPSI Award, my prize included one year's free registration with NRPSI and two hundred pounds. I have already invested this money in studying for the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting in Law and have become registered with NRPSI. With my DPI qualification and 100 hours' public service interpreting experience, I am registered at

Interim A status. However, I will, hopefully, obtain the 400 hours' interpreting experience necessary to register at Full status soon. ■