Unmasking Performative Inclusion Allyship:

The Deaf Community's Challenge for Sign Language Access

Recently, I came across Dr. Geer's experience shared on LinkedIn, which reminded me of my own struggles in similar inaccessible language situations. In Sacramento, California, a significant opportunity for celebration was missed when Dr. Leah Geer, a Deaf professor in Deaf Studies, was honored at Sacramento State University's Outstanding Faculty Awards. Upon arrival to accept the award, no American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were present, creating language barriers that prevented full participation in this once-in-a-lifetime celebration.

I can imagine the dilemma Dr. Geer must have faced: Walk away to make a statement? Call a hearing colleague who knows ASL to volunteer in a pinch? Or awkwardly accept the award without understanding what's being said, unable to fully engage or express her feelings about the honor? What would you have done if you were in Dr. Geer's shoes?

As a Deaf professional, I've found myself in similar situations countless times. The outcomes have varied depending on the circumstances, my support systems, my mood for self-advocacy, and my level of grit that day.

The Personal Impact of Inaccessible Events

Several years ago, I attended an Office on Violence Against Women (OVW)-funded meeting in Washington, D.C. During a working lunch, the interpreters took a break, leaving me without any interpreters present. I kindly approached them and asked them to return for the meeting, but they rolled their eyes. One of them walked toward me, napkin still draped like a bib, showing a clear and unprofessional attitude. It was as if their frustration, if not anger, was being projected onto me.

Throughout the session, both interpreters—including the one with the napkin bib—refused to make eye contact while interpreting, sending a clear message that they were upset. The tension was palpable, and everyone noticed.

These interpreters' behavior reflects a larger systemic issue within the hearing power structure, a topic worthy of further discussion. Ultimately, it shows that language accessibility isn't merely about providing interpreters—it's about fostering a respectful, collaborative environment for everyone involved. I will save this topic for another conversation. Please bear with me as I get to the point.

After the working lunch, the interpreters went outside for a smoke break. When the afternoon session resumed, they were still absent, continuing their "break." The event organizer, Nancy Smith, already shocked by their behavior, wasn't sure how to proceed. Eventually, Nancy pulled me aside, with one of the participants—who was a Child of Deaf Adults (CODA) and fluent in ASL—interpreting for us on a volunteer basis to address the issue. Nancy asked for my suggestion on how to handle the absence of interpreters. I responded that if the meeting continued without interpreters, I would miss out, and they would miss out on my expertise in working with Deaf survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Nancy thanked me and canceled the meeting.

The interpreters arrived 20 minutes later, but Nancy, as the event organizer, sent them home and arranged for new interpreters to resume the meeting. Through this experience, everyone learned that interpreters aren't just "for" Deaf people—they're essential for hearing people to access the wealth of knowledge Deaf people can offer. This example illustrates how collaborative partnerships can enhance event planning and language accessibility.

Nancy became one of my early models for what it means to be a true collaborative partner in creating language accessibility. I'm proud to share that Nancy has since become a fluent ASL signer—a personal decision to authentically engage directly with the Deaf community as a language access partner.

Performative Inclusion Allyship Marginalizes the Deaf Community

A common misconception is that interpreters are solely for Deaf people. In reality, they facilitate language and communication access, enabling meaningful exchanges between Deaf and hearing individuals. Deaf people bring unique perspectives and expertise to events, enriching discussions across business, education, technology, social justice, and the arts.

The absence of interpreters didn't just affect Dr. Geer—it deprived the entire Sacramento State community of an opportunity for growth and connection. This lack of language access isn't just about excluding one person; it's a missed collaborative opportunity for all.

Without interpreters, both Deaf and hearing individuals miss out on meaningful exchanges. This is often the result of "performative inclusion allyship"—inclusive efforts that fail to promote true language accessibility. When language accessibility is neglected, it erodes trust within the Deaf community and marginalizes their participation.

Inclusion isn't about checking boxes. It's about creating systems that prioritize meaningful language access. Neglecting language accessibility exposes a gap in organizations' claims of inclusivity.

By prioritizing collaborative language accessibility, organizations can not only ensure that all perspectives are exchanged, but they can also create an environment where everyone feels valued, recognized, and supported—whether Deaf or hearing.

The absence of language access at events like Dr. Geer's highlights the urgent need for a shift toward proactive, collaborative language accessibility practices. One powerful example of this shift comes from Cynthia Erivo at the 2025 Grammy Awards.

The Erivo Factor: Interpreters for All

Recently, Cynthia Erivo, known for her role in Wicked, exemplified the power of language accessibility at the 2025 Grammy Awards by bringing her own ASL interpreter to the red carpet. Erivo's decision demonstrates language accessibility in action.

Erivo's thoughtful act of language access wasn't just about supporting the Deaf community; it created space for meaningful engagement between both Deaf and hearing individuals at a major cultural event. Few others shared the same commitment

to language accessibility, including Paris Hilton, Victoria Monet, and CeeLo Green. This spirit of accessibility is what I call the *Erivo Factor*.

The *Erivo Factor* exemplifies this shift: a proactive, collaborative approach to language access that benefits both Deaf and hearing communities alike. Organizations must move beyond performative inclusion allyship by embracing genuine collaboration in language accessibility. Such a transformation ensures that all individuals—regardless of language and communication needs—can fully participate and contribute.

Erivo's thoughtful act of language access wasn't just about supporting the Deaf community—it was a powerful reminder that language accessibility should be part of every major event, just as it should have been at Dr. Geer's award ceremony.

Lessons from *Sign the Show*: Collaborative Language Accessibility

Sign the Show, directed by Cat Brewer, explores the powerful impact of collaborative language accessibility in entertainment. The documentary highlights how ASL interpreters at live events enhance the experience for everyone involved—from performers to audiences. Featuring Deaf advocates like Matt Maxey and Nyle DiMarco, it emphasizes the importance of language accessibility at events where both Deaf and hearing individuals can engage together. I'm also proud to be one of the interviewees, where I discuss the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

What sets *Sign the Show* apart is its focus on performers who actively embrace language accessibility, such as Chance the Rapper, Kelly Clarkson, Waka Flocka, D.L. Hughley, André 3000, and others. The film shows how interpreters benefit everyone, including the performers themselves. When Cat Brewer began making the documentary, she was just learning about the challenges Deaf people face with language access at live events. By the end, she had gained valuable insights and became one of our staunchest partners for promoting language accessibility.

The documentary, which has earned multiple awards, is now available for streaming on platforms like Apple TV+, Tubi, Google Play, and YouTube. Event planners and entertainment professionals can benefit from watching it to learn how to become true language accessibility collaborators. For more information, visit www.SIGNTHESHOW.COM.

Shifting from Performative Inclusion Allyship to Language Accessibility

It’s crucial to shift from performative inclusion to authentically engaging with collaborative language accessibility. Collaborative language access creates meaningful opportunities for everyone to participate, recognizing Deaf people as equal contributors. This shift makes events richer and more interactive, benefiting all participants. While not difficult to achieve, it requires systemic commitment. With this commitment, Dr. Geer’s experience with language exclusion could have been prevented.

Additionally, I want to address Universal Design Principles and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)—terms commonly associated with inclusion—which aim to ensure that everyone, regardless of disability, benefits from inclusive design. However, these “inclusive” principles often overlook language access, which excludes Deaf individuals. Universal Design and UDL won’t be fully realized until everyone learns fluent signed languages. For this reason, I caution against labeling efforts to promote collaborative language access as Universal Design or UDL if signed languages are not universally learned.

True Universal Design can only be fully realized when people everywhere know signed languages, ensuring authentic, direct language access to content without the need for a 'third' party—just as Nancy Smith’s commitment to becoming fluent in ASL demonstrates. This is a vision I have for future generations. While this remains a long-term goal, we can still make meaningful progress toward collaborative language accessibility in the meantime—by following the examples set by Cynthia Erivo and Cat Brewer.

Supporting Deaf-Centered Organizations

To make your future events more accessible, here is a list of Deaf-centered and Deaf-run organizations in California that offer ASL interpreting services. Supporting these organizations is a vital step in ensuring language access at your events and creating a more accessible society for everyone.

CALIFORNIA THEATERS

Velvet Hands TheVelvetHandsCo@gmail.com JAC Cook, owner of Velvet Hands, LLC

CALIFORNIA COMMUNITIES

(Contact agency for locations of nearest branch offices)

REGION I: Deaf Community Services of San Diego, Inc. (DCS)

(Imperial and San Diego)

2240 Cleveland Ave

National City, Ca 91950

(619) 398-2441 (Voice)

(619) 550-3436 (Videophone)

Email: info@dcsofsd.org

Website: www.deafcommunityservices.org

REGION II: Center on Deafness-Inland Empire (CODIE)

(Inyo, Mono, Riverside and San Bernardino)

1737 Atlanta Avenue, Suite H3A

Riverside, CA 92507

(951) 275-5000 (Voice)

(951) 801-5674 (Videophone)

Email: info@codie.org
Website: codie.org

REGION III: Orange County Deaf Equal Access Foundation (OC-DEAF)

(Orange)

6022 Cerritos Avenue

Cypress, CA 90630

(714) 826-9793 (Voice/TTY)

(714) 503-0669 (Videophone)

Email: info@ocdeaf.org

Website: www.ocdeaf.org

REGION V: Tri-County GLAD

(Counties served: San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura)

702 County Square Drive, Suite 101

Ventura, CA 93003

(805) 644-6322 (Voice)

(805)256-1053 (Videophone)

(805) 644-6323 (TTY)

Email: info@tcglad.org

Website: www.tcglad.org

REGION VI

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Service Center, Inc. (DHHSC)

Fresno, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Monterey, San Benito and Tulare

5340 North Fresno Street

Fresno, CA 93710

(559) 225-3323 (Voice)

(559) 578-4117 (Videophone)

Email: resources@dhhsc.org

Website: www.dhhsc.org

REGION VII: NorCal Services for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NorCal)

(Alpine, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, El Dorado, Glenn, Lassen, Modoc, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Tuolumne, Yolo and Yuba)

4044 N. Freeway Blvd.

Sacramento, CA 95834

(916) 349-7500 (Voice)

(916) 993-3048 (Videophone)

(916) 550-9355 (Videophone P3)

Email: info@norcalcenter.org

Website: www.norcalcenter.org

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In 2021, Dr. Julie Rems-Smario graduated from the Ed.D. program at California State University, East Bay. She currently serves as an Education Programs Consultant for the Deaf Education Unit at the California Department of Education, where she is also the co-coordinator of the California Early Hearing Intervention and Detection program known as LEAD-K Family Services. In 2007, she was recognized by CNN Heroes and E-Women Network for her work with DeafHope, a nonprofit that supports Deaf survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Dr. Rems-Smario is also a co-founder of CoFusion

Group, which engages in abolition work to address inequities in the educational system. www.cofusiongroup.org