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## **An Interview with Dina Toulan**

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**Q. I am excited and grateful that you are willing to be here again to get your perspective on the barriers and difficulties in education. Can you give the overview of your work and your research, and what you do in the classroom and out of the classroom, and how you came to be here?**

I did not want to become a teacher at first, I wanted to become an attorney when I was growing up. However, people discouraged me from doing that. The bar exam, unfortunately, is not easily accessible. So, it would be difficult to pass. English is not our first language for the Deaf community. I did consider becoming a chef, but my concern was accessing culinary school was: would they provide an interpreter? Especially because the culinary schools tend to be private. So, I thought they would be resistant about making it accessible and that there would be a barrier to accessing that. I was not sure exactly what I wanted to do. My primary concern was access. Would I be able to proceed through the program by having the access that I needed? A lot of people say, "oh, your ASL is beautiful, "you should become a teacher." So, I taught high school at first. At that time, I had already graduated with my bachelor's degree, which is why I decided to teach at the high school level. I loved that. I taught a master's level. I took master's level classes. I feel in love with teaching that, so I wanted to become a professor at the university level. That is where and what I have been doing ever since.

**Q. I am glad that you are with Iowa State. It is great to have you here as a part of the community.**

It has been a great experience.

**Q. Some of the barriers that you have come across between law school, or people not understanding, how did you move past that? Was that a matter of educating them, and then understanding that it was not the right path for you? How did you move beyond and still maintain yourself in the education field?**

For me, at my age, I am getting close to 40, and I felt like I have just been tired of fighting. Even though we should always continue the fight, I got tired of picking my battles. So, depending on the younger generation to fight for making some of those changes, that is where I feel like I am in, at in my life, I just do not have the energy anymore, even though I should.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit more about your background, and any master's classes that you might've taken, what those classes were like for you, and any of the challenges that you might've faced with those?**

I grew up in Washington D.C. Gallaudet University's campus has three schools. They have an elementary, a middle school, and a high school on their campus. Plus, Gallaudet University is also there, so all on one campus. It is funded differently because they have different sources of funding. The funding is separate, but they are still on one campus. The university funding is different than the elementary, middle school, and high school, the K-12 funding. When I grew up, I went to school at the School for the Deaf. Maybe people say I live a sheltered life, but it was great because everything was accessible. Communication was there, all the teachers knew how to sign, and everybody was using ASL on campus. For me, I thought it was great. I did not have to worry about communication issues. I thought it was a normal childhood, of course. It was a normal childhood, you play sports, you get together with your friends, all the social issues that normal kids have.

Once I transitioned into a mainstream high school after elementary and middle school, that was a different experience for me. Because the high school was a mainstream setting, I had limited access to the communication, I had interpreters for the high school setting in all of my classes. That was a very difficult experience for me. I was completely independent up until that point and now I had to depend on somebody else for the access. I struggled for the four years in general. High school experience, for most people; kids can be mean. But as a Deaf person entering a mainstream environment, it was difficult, the kids were mean to me. After four years, I did not know if I would become stronger. It was a tough time for me. Once I finished high school, those four years, I went back to Gallaudet for my bachelor's degree. I thought it would be, you know, a life-changing experience for me when I got back, but it was not the same. They viewed me as a traitor because I had left the university, or campus, in the first place and came back. I had to reestablish my identity. They treated me differently. It was a difficult journey for me, and a very difficult experience. The campus was different. The dynamics were different than when I had left before. So, I am teaching in American Sign Language (ASL), but it is different than my bachelor's degree.

My bachelor's degree was a tough experience, but my master's was a completely different experience. My master's degree was a hybrid year. So, I had online classes throughout the year, and then during the summer, we met up face-to-face on campus. Throughout the year, we were assigning videos, doing discussion boards, quizzes, in an online environment. When we came on campus, we were entering more of a discussion, a way to communicate in discussion with each other. It was a different experience face-to-face than throughout the year virtually. People think, well, ASL is pretty easy. I thought it was easy because others share that believe because you gloss the words in English what the sign is. When I came into the master's program, I realized

and learned that that approach is not right. The point is, do we, as a Deaf child growing up, or Deaf children, they [parents] do not use the English words and they use drawings, pictures, parents use picture books to show the image of a cat, rather than the English word, cat. I realized that we did not learn to read and write in English first. We used ASL from a pictorial approach. I learned that and I use that in my instruction at Iowa State. I reduce the English words. I still use the English words, but I try to use pictures and gestures in a visual language to communicate how you learn and teach ASL. From my master's program, it made me stronger. It helped me realize my identity as a Deaf person. The program really impacted how I was journeying through life. Because everybody approached the program, we had international students, we had people from all over the United States, we had people from Iraq, from Israel. It was nice to have such a diverse group of students that we were all learning from each other. For me, it was a significant growth opportunity to see all of the ideas shared and everyone together for the purpose of ASL. Whether they were teaching Deafhood and giving workshops, everybody had a variety a level of teaching experience; some who had never learned to teach before and this was their first experience. We were all journeying together. So that was really a life-changing experience for me along the way, a growth opportunity.

**Q. I am glad to hear your master's program was a positive experience. Can you tell us more about how you took what you learned from that program and from the students who were learning how to teach along with the other pedagogy, and how you apply that to the different levels that you are teaching at Iowa State?**

Who I am now as a Deaf person and as an instructor's completely different than who I was growing up. When I was growing up, I must admit, I did not really want to deal with hearing people growing up. I viewed them as a poison – because of how they were trying to, how I viewed them trying to change the Deaf community. Hearing people, in general, viewed us as a problem. So, I did not want to deal with hearing people. I wanted to stay in my own circle, my bubble, where I was safe.

Gallaudet University has historically gone through a lot of changes. If you have read or Googled [Deaf President Now movement in 1988](#), I think we, as a community, drastically changed from that point on. You know, of course, we are always evolving. The Deaf community has evolved, the university has evolved. Deaf President Now, that movement in 1988, had a huge impact in Deaf history because of our ability to fight for a Deaf president at the university. Prior to that, they had never had a Deaf president at the university. At that point, the community was fed up and they wanted to have a Deaf president. We still talk about that even though it happened in 1988. We hold festivals every year to honor that event because this had such a huge historical impact. I cannot speak for everyone, but the Deaf community has had the experience where we view the hearing people as trying to take over our community and our culture. They do not see ASL as a language. We fight and say no, it is a language. There is sometimes an ongoing battle. Typically, the hearing community may view us as cognitively delayed because we cannot hear. They focus more on the audiological function of not being able to hear rather than our intelligence. So, I struggle with that oppression.

My family is from Egypt. When my older sister was born, they found out she was Deaf. They moved to France and then they moved here to America, to the United States, to give the right educational environment for my sister. So, when I look at that and I look at here generally, in America, when they see a kid who is Deaf, they do not see enough effort being put into, say they do not have the resources, or the support. I'll use my mom as an example, who moved here from Egypt. She literally moved to another country, changed her entire life so that my sister could have the best education possible. I struggled with that trying to understand the viewpoint that some people have when they say they cannot do things. I cannot put my kid in a school, or, that is using sign language, I cannot bother to learn it, or, I struggle with that because I turned out fine, my sister turned out fine. My sister is one of the most intelligent people that you will ever meet. I could tell you so much about her, but I do struggle with that perspective. Sometimes I am conflicted. So, I try to dissuade that thinking in my classes so that students understand that Deaf people can do anything.

Of course, not all Deaf people are the same. Some Deaf people struggle with English, some people are very proficient in English. I think hearing people have the misconception that if you meet one Deaf person who cannot read or write, then all Deaf people are the same. But there's diversity within the Deaf community. I try to use that thinking when I work with my students. My students often admit at first they do not know what it is like, but then by the end of the semester, they realize that there are variety and differences within the community. I think for me, the biggest thing is attitude that has changed. From what I was growing up to who I am now, my attitude has changed. When I became a teacher, I think it is important for hearing people to be more aware of who we are as the Deaf community, so I have been more inclusive. My family is not from America, so I explain to people that we need to be more mindful of each other, more inclusive, and more sensitive to one another. There are many job opportunities out there that hearing people work in. That is where we need to educate hearing people. That is why I try to educate my students to have that experience.

**Q. It is interesting to hear more about your family, your background, and the impact that that has really had on you as a teacher and what you bring to the classroom. So, would you be able to speak a little bit more about your family's background, or your background, and the road that got you here?**

Yeah, as I said, my family is from Egypt. My family never had experience with a Deaf person before. My mom said it was a huge surprise to her when they found out that my older sister was Deaf. She did say that a lot of people, well, a lot of family members from my mom's side in Egypt were very against moving to America. They said that it was a huge mistake, that she was going to suffer considerably by moving to America. But mom said she does not regret giving up everything in Egypt to come to America for my older sister who was Deaf, and then I was born here later.

I wanted to prove that my sister and I, we can do anything. There are no limits to who we are and what we can do. My mom always said when we were growing up, that you just have to continually fight and do the best you can be, be a good person, it does not matter whether you are Deaf or hearing, as long as you are a good person. Also, leave an impact on the life, on your life,

that your life has an impact on people and to leave a good impression on people. I use that and I apply that in my work. If I do not make an impact on students and their livelihoods on a daily basis, then I am not doing a good job. So, that really stuck to me and I use that mentality. I take it day-by-day. I want to make sure that my actions have an impact on students, and they see that I can do it, and that they also can do it. My energy, I draw from other people. So, my students, if they are doing well, then I feel good and I know that I am doing a good job.

**Q. So if you could design, for your students and for yourself, this perfect and ideal educational setting, if it is a classroom, or a conference, or all the way up to an institutional, or university, or academy level, what would that look like for you?**

I think every ASL instructor has their own perspective on the world. I cannot speak for everyone, but I can speak from my perspective.

I think it is important that the classroom itself is designed that the chairs can be moved in a classroom, that the chairs are mobile. We can design the room in a U shape, so we can plan activities that everybody can see each other, so there's mobility in the room. Less use of windows. Windows create distraction in a visual classroom. So, curtains or blinds that can hide the outside world. Classrooms would need to have technology. I think now having TVs, use of technology in the classroom is huge. Also, consider hallways. I always pick a classroom that has less distracting noise from the hallways.

I did have bad luck one time where I had a classroom where the table was stationary, and the student desks could not move, so it was really hard to see one another when we were trying to communicate. When teachers pick a classroom, they have to think of mobility so the students can see each other, can see the instructor, the instructor can see the students, that everybody can see one another, for sight lines. We also have to remember that the classroom, a perfect classroom, the students should be divided in about 15 to 20 students typically. ASL itself should, I feel, at maximum, have a capacity of, like, 15 to 20 students. I mean, I know they try to fill the classes to the larger, but I feel it should be capped at 15 students. That is the maximum size to maximize the use of ASL and dialogue. If we have 30 students, by the time we have dialogue with all of the students, it reduces the amount of class time. 15 students in a class allows for maximizing the energy and the use of the time and learning.

**Q. Outside of class size and, because that was clear that it is a little different now, how would the setting that you are in look different with, or would it look different based on what your ideal would, so your ideal compared to what your currently working with.**

Are you talking about current situation [coronavirus and all classes were moved on time at the time that this interview took place] with our online classes or something else?

**Q. Either. So, the transition online with COVID, or in person when you were on campus.**

I think from my department, World Languages and Cultures, I think they do a great job accommodating my needs. But again, their efforts may be limited. I know they try their very, very best. They did tell me that they can reduce it to 15 to 20 students if I desired. I told them no, because obviously I want more students. You know, I want to show that this program is

accessible to us. I want to have more students. If we have students on a waiting list for one to two years to get into ASL, at least that is at Iowa State University, I want to be understanding, and accommodate, and work with them as they work with me. That is my way of thinking. In general, in an ideal classroom, 15 to 20 students.

Iowa State is a large university compared to like, Gallaudet University, it does not have the same size. It was easier, say at Gallaudet University, to cap the class sizes at 15 to 20. So, we have to keep some of those factors in mind. However, if I have 30 students, I do have to adjust my curriculum so that I can accommodate that number of students. I do my best, I work all the time, I do not have a lot of free time. If a student emails me, I respond to them really quickly. I try my absolute best. My department does a great job. They have been meeting my needs, accommodating what I need, and they have been great to work with. For example, during the summer, or with these online classes, I have been teaching online classes, occasionally with Iowa State, I have been teaching ASL. I told my department that it is extremely important to have sign language mentors. Which means, I pull in Deaf people from around the United States, from all over, to meet weekly with students. The students have said that it has been a great experience for them because the online class during the summer, they learn more by interacting with a Deaf person, with these mentors. My department has been wholly supportive of that endeavor. But again, there are limitations. My department really tries their best, they really do. So, I applaud them. I am very proud of my department for their efforts. My department, I can say many great things about it but my hope is that Iowa State will recognize that we are doing our best to give students the absolute best we can for the ASL program. I feel like many students are very frustrated because we only offer ASL one through four. And we do not offer any other additional classes. We do offer a Deaf Culture 275, but again, students are hungry, and they want more. I feel like we are limited in what we can offer. We do not have enough resources, et cetera. That is something that I hope Iowa State will recognize; that the department is doing a great job with the ASL program, and that we'd want to grow it and expand it.

Talking about barriers on campus. I do go to Clyde's [a spot for dining at Iowa State University] and get lunch sometimes. The first day I went into Clyde's, it was really neat because they have a TV that would display the number when your order was ready. I went to the counter and I used that. On occasion I realized that they were no longer using the TV to announce the numbers. Rather, they were calling them out. As a Deaf person, that wasn't advantageous for me, and I asked, I confronted the cashier and they were not sure how to react. They said, "well it is too much of a hassle to type in the number rather than to just yell it." I said, "well, I do not know when you are yelling it." So, they said, well they felt yelling it was easier than just typing the number in on the board. I responded with, well, so during that time, around noon to one, it is packed and I am guessing it is very, very loud, so how would everybody be able to hear if it is already a noisy environment? I would think that typing it would be easier in that situation.

**Q. You mentioned briefly time spent at Gallaudet and working there. Can you talk a little bit about more if you had any similar barriers, or your experience with teaching with your prior institutions?**

Yes, I have worked at two different universities prior to this. I had very similar issues. Gallaudet University's a very Deaf friendly university. Teachers already know sign language. It is very accessible that way. They, of course, still have their own disadvantages. They are not disability friendly – physical disability friendly. Often the wheelchair ramp is broke, or the electronic door opener does not work, or, it is cool that they have access to communication, but there is still room for improvement to make it open to everybody. They have some limitations when they work with our Deaf/blind community. There are things that they are working at. I do have to say that social justice is a very strong component at Gallaudet University and people work together for that effort. There is a group that really tries to, if there is a marginalized community, they really try to hear the needs of those communities and address it. Of course, they have their own issues. For the most part, they try their best to accommodate everyone, but they have some room for improvement, some things they can work on.

**Q. Thank you. I just have one last question, and it is broad. I am curious what your advice would be for students or professionals who are experiencing barriers inside or outside the classroom, are frustrated at an institutional level, or, what you would say to these individuals, what your advice would be to them as they are going through this?**

My advice is for individuals to keep knowing their rights. And asking more questions. Asking questions generally opens more doors along the way. A lot of individuals are not used to saying anything when they encounter a barrier. I encourage people to ask questions, provide the education. And then people are willing to accommodate. But if you do not make those needs known, then those things will not change. I think, by staying quiet, then things do not change. We have to know our rights and we have to know our values. If I see that a barrier is there, I cannot give my best. Once the barrier is removed, then I can give my best. You have to meet each other in the middle. I think that is the way to do it.

**Q. I appreciate your time and your candor. Any final thoughts?**

Oh, I think ISU does a great job with this, has done a great job with the coronavirus and the COVID-19 situation. They have done a wonderful job meeting everyone's needs as much as possible, at least, I hope. They have done a great job.