

A Conversation with Danny Maffia, NTID Interpreting and ASL Education Lecturer

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT Professional Development Podcast Series. I'm your host Luke Auburn. Today I'm speaking with Danny Maffia, a lecturer at RIT who teaches aspiring interpreters, various courses in the ASL English interpretation department at NTID. He began his career at RIT as an associate interpreter in the College of Liberal Arts core team. And before that he was an undergraduate student here. We'll talk about his career path and strategies for professional development. Thank you very much for having us.

Danny Maffia: Thank you for having me.

Luke Auburn: So looking back what were the most important steps you took towards advancing your career?

Danny Maffia: I think probably the top thing that was most important in advancing my career was definitely networking. That was something that I always found was important, especially as an interpreter, was networking with professional interpreters. Not just locally in the Rochester area but nationally. So I feel that that network really helped me in meeting new people, learning more about what the interpreting profession is like outside of the Rochester area and really influencing me to continue to strive to working harder in advancing my skills as an interpreter.

The other thing is professional development. It, kind of, goes hand in hand with networking. So when I was going and attending workshops and conferences I was of course networking and so both was very beneficial so attending conferences both locally and nationally. In addition to getting my certification, becoming a certified interpreter and striving towards that goal was something that was big in advancing myself and my career.

And then lastly of course but not least is getting my master's degree, which is a newer thing in our field, is getting advanced degrees in interpreting. There's only one college in the U.S. that offers a PhD in interpreting and there are just a handful that offer master's degree. At the time when I applied for my master's degree there was only two and we were the second college to offer a master's. And some come up and then they fold but we're starting to slowly start to add more programs that have master's degrees including here at NTID. We do have in the works a master's degree in interpreting, healthcare interpreting.

Luke Auburn: So when did you know you wanted to advance your career and what motivated you to take action?

Danny Maffia: Well I think there's two main things that caused me to want to advance in my career. One being I went to a conference where there was a research study done on the interpreting profession and where we were going as a trajectory. And as far as the number of individuals who are interpreters and their ages and such. And the research study had shown that a number of interpreters, quite a big large chunk of the interpreting profession, is aging and so a lot of the interpreters are in the near future going to be retiring, which was alarming to the researchers because those are our most skilled and advanced interpreters. And it-- I'm sure again the interpreting profession is not alone in that where other professions are experiencing that-- that baby boomer generation. They're slowly starting to retire. And so professions, you know, interpreting not being unique in that, are concerned about that and so in my mind that sparks something in me going I need to really advance my career so that I can help advance the interpreting profession.

In addition the interpreting profession needs advancement because we're such a new profession. We've only really been a profession for about 40 years; at least you know one that has an established organization. And so the need for individuals who are not just at the practitioner level is needed. And so I felt that I would like to see myself as being a part of that advancement.

Luke Auburn: Who or what helped you identify your direction? Where did you go for information, help, and support?

Danny Maffia: So there's an interpreter-- an interpreter researcher and educator that I really look up to. Her name is Robin Dean. She's a mentor of mine and she's very well known in our profession. She's well known for a lot of her work in her research. And so when I first met her, I first met her when I was a student, and when I met her she said to me you're going to be our next professional organization's president. And when she said that to me I, you know, at the time I thought-- I was shocked, first of all, that she was even talking to me, one, which is dorky now, especially because we're good friends. But I think that really-- her belief in me really is what inspired me to work hard. And she has always been there as a mentor for me since, you know, the very beginning. She was on my thesis committee. I turned to her for everything.

What's funny is we were both hired on as faculty at the same time. She's in a tenure-track position and I'm a lecturer but we-- It was, kind of, funny that we both were hired at the same time. I don't know, it's just-- It was kind of-- It was just an interesting trajectory for us both. She, while I was getting my master's degree she was getting her PhD in Scotland. And it just so happened that, you know, the positions opened, the lecturer and the tenure-track and we both got it at the same time. It's just an interesting way how things, kind of, come full circle.

But definitely she was the one who was in support. She was the one who had told me about the master's degree that I applied to. She has given me opportunities where I'm able to this summer I'll be traveling to Australia to work with Australian sign language interpreters and be presenting around the country there. And it was because of her networks and her belief and her educating me and cultivating me as a professional, I think was the biggest push.

Luke Auburn: She sounds like a great mentor.

Danny Maffia: Yeah.

Luke Auburn: So how did you create your plan for advancement?

Danny Maffia: It's funny. I guess I really didn't have a set plan. I knew I was going to get my master's degree and I, kind of, was not sure where things would take me. My original plan was to, you know, maybe stay within my department and to continue to advance that department into to provide in house training and workshops for our department. We had a very large department and still do. And I did that for a while. And it just, kind of, happened that this position opened up and I applied for it and pretty much took a chance at the time because the position was originally a temporary position. And so I had to leave my original-- my interpreting position and took a chance that I might not get the permanent position. I knew that they were going to be interviewing and hiring for a permanent position as a lecturer but again I wasn't-- That wasn't a guarantee thing that would be given to me. So it was a little bit of a risk taking thing.

Luke Auburn: It sounds like the risk paid off.

Danny Maffia: It definitely did.

Luke Auburn: What career advice would you give to someone who wants to have a successful career?

Danny Maffia: I would definitely say to not be afraid to try. So I think that goes along with the fact of taking a risk. So not be afraid to really try. You know I never expected at all for there to be a position open in this department for years. I thought I would be well into my career by the time the position opened and I was, you know. There was a lot of concerns I had applying for a position like this being young-- much younger than probably a lot of the other applicants. And also being newer in the field in general. I mean if you really look at it I'm a rather new person in the interpreting field.

And also I think to, kind of, tag along to your last question is even though I didn't have a plan I still went to talk with my managers to get flexibility in my schedule and they did honor that. They were very accommodating with my schedule and trying to fit it into my plan of work and to fit it into the advancement of the department as well as me as a professional. So I think that not being afraid to just ask and to just try and to take risks, I think, is important.

Luke Auburn: That's great advice. And finally how do you stay current in your field today?

Danny Maffia: So for-- As an interpreter educator my biggest thing regarding my teaching philosophy is for me to continue to be a practitioner. So I'm sure the interpreting profession is not alone but we are an ever changing field. And so I feel that it-- strongly that it's important for me to continue to be a practitioner and continue to interpret while I teach. My practice as an interpreter influences my teaching and I feel my teaching has strongly impacted and influenced myself as an interpreter.

So I think, most importantly, to actively continue to interpret, I think it's very easy to become disengaged or not in the know. And that is the biggest thing I've gotten on my evaluations from my students and the biggest piece of feedback I've gotten from my students is that I continue to be a practitioner and they look up to that and respect that. So that's one thing that helps keep me current in the field. Also, of course, conferences, attending conferences both, you know, locally, nationally and even internationally. Workshops, you know, being involved in research studies, reading research, and again continuing to network, again both on a local, national and international level.

Luke Auburn: Well thank you very much for your time. That concludes another edition of the RIT Professional Development Podcast Series. For more information on how you can develop your career visit rit.edu/cpd.