

Fake interpreter draws ire [Commentary]

By BY KELBY BRICK

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Among the distinguished heads of state and dignitaries at Nelson Mandela's memorial service, one man stood out for the wrong reasons. The event featured a fraudster on stage pretending to be a sign language interpreter. Wilma Newhoudt-Druchen, the first deaf woman to be elected to the South African parliament (and one of the few deaf elected politicians in the world) immediately demanded that the man be removed.

The impostor deprived deaf South Africans the opportunity to participate with their country in mourning, honoring and celebrating Mr. Mandela and his commitment to civil and human rights — a brazenly oppressive act that drew wide outrage.

Organizations ranging from the Deaf Federation of South Africa to the World Federation of the Deaf and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters condemned the impostor and decried the loss of communication with deaf people.

Unfortunately, what happened merely highlighted what has become the norm for deaf people all over the world — including in America. Fake and incompetent interpreters act everyday to isolate and segregate deaf people from their community at large. And our own government and our own school systems tacitly approve such despicable actions.

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Deaf children who are mainstreamed in public schools frequently suffer at the hands of interpreters who barely know sign language. Those so-called interpreters have perhaps taken a single class learning sign language and then

tell school administrators and unknowing parents that they are fluent. As a result, those deaf students are isolated and cut off from basic education. Underqualified interpreters in the court system literally strip defendants of their right to defend themselves in court by failing to convey information. And in hospitals and other medical settings, poor interpreters fail to give doctors sufficient or clear information from deaf patients, leading to improper or incomplete diagnoses. Treatments are not effectively communicated, either — a dangerous situation.

Deaf people today depend on Video Relay Services (VRS) to make and receive phone calls. The most important element in VRS are the American Sign Language interpreters who translate between the deaf and the hearing callers. VRS is heavily regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, which has consistently rejected consumer organization proposals to establish minimum standards — such as basic certification requirements — for interpreters.

Such requirements could solve most of the problems deaf people experience with interpretation.

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Federal and state agencies should require that interpreters be qualified and licensed or certified. If we require hairdressers to be licensed, there is no reason why we should not demand the same from sign language interpreters. The harm caused by fake or incompetent interpreters is far more permanent the harm that could be caused by a hairdressers.

In many situations, the use of Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI) should be required. CDIs are nationally certified interpreters who are deaf and have specialized training, experience, knowledge and understanding of deaf people — their culture and their community — along with native or near-native fluency in American Sign Language. CDIs should be used far more often in settings ranging from memorial services (such Nelson Mandela's) to schools

and courtrooms. They provide translation services that are unparalleled by regular and qualified interpreters.

Our public officials need to take a stand today by recognizing that sign language is essential for deaf people and ensuring that interpreters are qualified and that they be required to meet minimum standards through certification or licensing for every setting.

South Africa is fortunate to have Ms. Newhoudt-Druchen as its leader to carry on the legacy of Mandela in the area of civil and human rights. Who will be her equivalent in the United States?

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