Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Maria Izaguirre

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York courts. I'm John Caher.

In this Diversity Dialogue segment, we are honored to have a unique guest with a unique background and a unique job: Maria Izaguirre. Maria is a sign language interpreter. For people who are deaf, like the parents who raised Maria and her six siblings, Maria is the bridge between them and the court system. It's kind of a family affair. Five of the Izaguirre children are sign language interpreters. Maria has been a sign language interpreter for 40 years, 25 of them in the courts. We are pleased to have Maria with us today, as we celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month as well as Hispanic Heritage Month.

Maria, thank you for joining us. Now, I believe you told me offline that your parents came here from Mexico and Puerto Rico.

Maria Izaguirre: Yes.

John Caher: And met in New York City.

Maria Izaguirre: That is correct.

John Caher: When, how, and why did they come to New York?

Maria Izaguirre: In my father's case, he came from Mexico. And in Mexico, there weren't many opportunities for the deaf. So he came to America for better opportunities and to find a better life. My mom came with her family from Puerto Rico during Operation Bootstrap. They both arrived in New York fairly at the same time, in the early '50s.

John Caher: Now, what was it like growing up in a home with two deaf parents? How did you communicate with them before you became fluent in sign language?

Maria Izaguirre: Because of them, I became fluent in sign language. Sign language was my first language, John. This was all that I was exposed to while I was growing up. I did have older siblings but they weren't really exposed to language, other than my parents communicating to us in sign language. So sign language was our first language. Then, we learned how to speak.

John Caher: Well, that's interesting. So it's probably the same as anyone else. I mean, I learned to communicate with my parents verbally. And you learned to communicate with them in a different way.

Maria Izaguirre: Correct. It was my native language. It is my native language because it was the first language that I learned, that I acquired.

John Caher: Now, it sounds like both your parents came here, came to the mainland, seeking greater opportunity. Did they find that here?

Maria Izaguirre: For the most part, yes. It was quite the struggle for them, being deaf and not really having too many resources. But they both connected with the local Catholic Charities and found support with the Catholic Church. There was an organization, the Puerto Rican Catholic Deaf Society, which my parents were a part of. And that's where they met. And that's where they received resources in terms of housing, getting married, settling into New York.

John Caher: Now, where did you go to school?

Maria Izaguirre: I went to the local public school in Brooklyn where I grew up. And went to the local high school. And then, when I decided to pursue interpreting, I studied in San Diego. I went to their interpreter program and studied there before I got into the profession.

John Caher: How long did you know that's what you wanted to do?

Maria Izaguirre: It wasn't until my late teens that I decided that, when I discovered that I could actually get paid for doing what I had been doing all my life. That's when I decided to pursue it. And I found that San Diego had a pretty good program.

And I had a brother, my oldest brother, who's deaf, lived in San Diego at that time. He was already married and starting his family. So I moved to San Diego and I attended the training program that was available when I decided that that's the profession that I was going to pursue.

John Caher: And then, did you remain in California for a while?

Maria Izaguirre: I did. I got my first assignment in California.

John Caher: And what was that? What was that first assignment?

Maria Izaguirre: I was an interpreter at the community college, interpreting for deaf students. So they would attend classes. They were mainstreamed with the hearing population, with their hearing classmates. And I was assigned to be their interpreter, to interpret lectures or whatever the course may be. So that was my first experience as a professional.

John Caher: And then, how did you come to work for the courts?

Maria Izaguirre: Well, that's interesting. Because I did a lot of community work when I came back to New York and I became certified, and I worked in the community. I took on different assignments. I had assignments involving medical interpreting, working in the hospitals, working in the school system. And then, after I became certified, I was eligible to work in the court system. And once I had a taste of it, I really liked it. And I preferred it to the other areas of interpreting specialties. And it stuck with me. I really enjoyed legal interpreting.

John Caher: Now, how is legal interpreting differ from medical interpreting?

Maria Izaguirre: Oh, gosh, medical interpreting is very intense. I mean, you're dealing with sick people, crowds. You're overworked. It's a lot of chaos. It was a lot of assignments. I had patients, emergencies, detox. It was just constant. It never stopped. It never ended. And it was sort of a burnout for me. And the hospitals weren't hiring more interpreters. So I decided that the medical interpreting was not something that I was interested in pursuing.

I did some educational interpreting. And although I did like that very much, it is also intense because you're interpreting lectures for long periods of time.

And then I found that legal interpreting was not as difficult. Most people think that it would be:. "How could you do legal interpreting? People's lives are in your" — "in your hands." But I enjoyed it. I enjoyed law. I was fascinated with law. And each case was different. So it wasn't like a boring biology lecture that I had to interpret. It was interesting cases, in Supreme Court, in criminal court, family court, housing court. So there was always a variety of assignments. I enjoyed that.

John Caher: I would imagine that the courts can be chaotic, but in general are a little more orderly.

Maria Izaguirre: Yes, it is. Definitely. A lot more orderly than a hospital.

John Caher: What is the greatest challenge in legal interpreting?

Maria Izaguirre: When you meet someone who comes from a different country and you're trying to establish communication. I find that challenging. I actually like it. Actually, it's my specialty. Because I always believe that there's always language somewhere, be it gesturing or facial expressions or whatever it takes to establish that. So I enjoy that challenge.

John Caher: Now in the courtroom, of course, emotion or tone or context of a statement could be very, very important. And that's why reading a transcript of a court proceeding can be very, very misleading. Is there a way in signing to convey those things, the tone? Whether it's anger or sarcasm or whatever?

Maria Izaguirre: Oh, absolutely.

John Caher: How do you do that?

Maria Izaguirre: In facial expressions, rapid movement, expressions on the face. You can interpret sarcasm, you can interpret fear, you can interpret anger, you can interpret love or calmness, serenity. All that is interpreted through, of course, sign language. But mostly facial expression. Facial expressions is grammar. It's the vital part of communicating in sign language.

John Caher: That's fascinating. And is that something you learned through experience or something you learned in the training, that it's not only the signing, but the expressions, the facial signing, that is relevant?

Maria Izaguirre: Well, it’s something that I grew up with. It was something that was very familiar to me, in my parents' social groups and community. We would go to these deaf events and watch and learned. And we saw when someone was angry or someone was excited or the noises that were made. And it was fascinating. When you're young, you absorb it all in. It was just something that you grow up with and something that's instilled in you. And it's so natural for me.

John Caher: Now, I'd imagine, particularly in legal interpreting, where you're also interpreting with your facial expressions, you have to be extremely careful to avoid doing anything that would evince an opinion on your part.

Maria Izaguirre: Oh, I definitely keep my opinion and my personal feelings or opinions. That is not expressed in my sign language. Sign language, there's such a fine line between interpreting and acting, because you're conveying the true spirit of the speaker.

Maria Izaguirre: I do my best to portray that as close as possible to the speaker or signer. So, when a judge is angry and telling a defendant, "If you get in trouble again, I'm putting you in," I express that. "You get in trouble again?" Usually, the defendant gets it from my expression, they can look at the judge, look at the interpreter, and they'll get it.

If the judge is angry, I'm not going to sign timidly. My signs are going to be stronger, more intense. My facial expression is going to convey the anger of the judge, or maybe the opposite. Maybe the judge is commending the defendant and saying, "You did really great. And I'm happy to say that you complied with all my orders and everything that I've asked of you." And so, they could see that. And you could see that they're happy about that. They nod their head. They sign, "Thank you. Thank you, your honor." And the judge can see that as well. Facial expression is universal, I would think.

John Caher: Sure. So it sounds like you've really got to be hyper alert and totally tuned into whatever's going on in that courtroom.

Maria Izaguirre: And you've got to get in the zone, as I would always say: "I'm in the zone!" It's transference almost. Because you're evoking that emotion.

John Caher: Now what languages do you sign?

Maria Izaguirre: Mexican sign language, Puerto Rican sign language, American sign language, signed English.

John Caher: Now, there must be differences, cultural differences, to be aware of, even in the Spanish language. You mentioned Mexico and Puerto Rico.

Maria Izaguirre: Yes.

John Caher: There may be different phrases, different tones, different contexts.

Maria Izaguirre: It's completely different,Mexican sign language from Puerto Rican sign language. Totally different. From American sign language, Cuban sign language. They're all different. It's not universal. As many languages there are on this earth, there is as many sign languages. So each country has their own sign language. It's not American sign language.

Even in this country, there are regional signs. There are some signs that are native to New York. And if I use that sign in California, they don't understand. I learned that when I lived there, when I signed, for example, the sign for hospital is different. New Yorkers sign hospital different than

what Californians sign hospital. So I had to learn sign languages can be regional.

And also, with the Mexican sign language, their foods—tamales, tacos. They have their signs for that. And then, there are Puerto Rican signs for their foods and their customs.

John Caher: Now, this seems to be a family business, as I said in the introduction.

Maria Izaguirre: Yes.

John Caher: Tell me about your siblings. What do they do?

Maria Izaguirre: My oldest brother that I mentioned, he lives in San Diego. He's retired. Grandfather of seven. He was an engineer. He worked in a company that made airplane parts. He retired from his company years ago. And he's a leader in his deaf community. He's a president of the Mayan Soccer Club with deaf members. My brother John is a sign language interpreter. He works for the Department of Education. And then, my brother Alan, he lives in Georgia. He works for the school system, the Georgia School for the Deaf. My brother Joseph is also an interpreter, working for the Department of Education. My sister, Gloria, my only sister, works for the court system. She joined the courts a couple of years ago. So she's working in the courts like I am.

John Caher: Now, as someone who grew up with two people who could not hear and spends probably every day assisting other people who are deaf, what would you like people to know, people who do not have your experience, to know about people who are unable to hear?

Maria Izaguirre: Treat them as you would anyone else. The only thing deaf people can't do is hear.

And deaf people don't see themselves, for the most part, as being disabled or handicapped. They see themselves as being a linguistic minority as opposed to being disabled. And they like to be treated equally and fairly. And so long as there's access to language, then there's nothing that they can't do.