

Meet Jamey Cook

...the unstoppable blind medical interpreter. Judy Jenner reveals the story of a colleague and friend who has refused to allow her lack of sight to get in the way of a fulfilling and successful career



Judy A. Jenner MBA is a Spanish and German business and legal translator and court interpreter in Las Vegas. She runs Twin Translations with her sister, who works from Vienna. She's the co-author of *The Entrepreneurial Linguist: The Business-School Approach to Freelance Translation*, writes a popular blog, *Translation Times*, and has given presentations on marketing and entrepreneurship at conferences around the world.

Last spring, I flew to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to speak at the annual conference of the Carolina Association of Translators and Interpreters (CATI). I met many fantastic colleagues there, but one stood out (actually, two): Jamey Cook, a certified medical interpreter with a master's degree in Spanish, who happens to be blind. Her lovely companion was Abner, a gorgeous and well-trained guide dog, with whom she was matched at an organisation called The Seeing Eye in New Jersey. They make a great team, and they live near Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

While giving my presentation, I was terrified by my own lack of sensibility. It had not occurred to me that there would be many blind interpreters and/or translators in our industry, and in retrospect that seems incredibly naïve, as there is an entire listserv [mailing list] just for blind interpreters. A few times, I had put up funny images, and Jamey gently reminded me to describe what I was showing, as she couldn't see it. It's amazing how we take eyesight for granted. But it turns out you don't need eyesight to become a top-notch interpreter. Meet my new friend Jamey Cook, the first blind certified medical interpreter in the United States, as far as we know.

When I first met Jamey, I felt generally insecure about how to tackle her lack of eyesight, and I am embarrassed to admit that I didn't even know the proper term to use. Perhaps as a society we've taken this political correctness a bit too far, so I asked her about it. She responded: 'Just call it what it is. I am blind.'

Just like any interpreter, Jamey is

hard-working, dedicated, looks out for her rights and demands to get paid what she is worth, but she has a whole other set of issues to deal with. This includes getting software in a format that she can feed into her reader, and making calls to companies large and small asking them to accommodate blind users. I've admired her courage and her dedication since the day I met her, and with Abner at her side, she feels almost invincible. However, her day has struggles big and small. She does not drive (I wonder if Google's driverless car would ever be an option for her), but she takes buses and trains with Abner and she flies quite a bit. She recently returned from Chicago, where she went to help a friend.

Jamey's graduate school alma mater, the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, made a huge commitment to accommodating her needs. UNC Brailled her tests and scanned her textbooks, but stopped short of providing a sighted reader to help her get through her research faster. Even though her thesis research was slow – which is the case for most sighted people as well – she was able to complete her Master's degree.

It's hard to resist Abner, Jamey's loyal companion, who is very focused

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when he's working, but turns into a playful puppy when his harness is removed. I was not surprised when Jamey told me that her four-legged friend has helped her network and makes others feel more comfortable around her. She also uses a talking GPS and, between technology and canine support, she's quite comfortable navigating on her own.

Jamey currently takes advantage of an old-school piece of technology that is ideal for blind interpreters as she works the night shift as a medical telephone interpreter. I recently emailed her some questions about how she works and what companies could do to better accommodate blind interpreters. She doesn't use a mouse or a monitor, and she performs all functions with keystrokes. A program then reads the screen aloud to her, but in order for that to work, she needs specific formats (for instance, Word documents are great, but PDFs not so good). During her undergraduate studies, Jamey met a private adaptive technology teacher who helped her navigate the world of Windows and internet concepts. She also reads Braille.

Judy & Jamey in conversation

Judy: First of all, congratulations on becoming certified by the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters. I understand that the sight translation portion of the exam is obviously a huge challenge for blind interpreters. How did you resolve the issue?

Jamey: The proctor read aloud the sight translation portion sentence by sentence, after reading it through once. (I sensed correctly that I was running out of time.) I took notes with my direct slate and stylus, and muddled through to the best of my ability. I did lose the most points on that section.

Judy: What can developers of software and publishers or dictionaries do better to allow you to use their products in a more efficient way? What do you need from them? Do you think



unable to access the same information everyone else can, I am unable to apply for work, or fulfil many other life tasks, such as paying bills online. Webmasters will receive a tactful email from me explaining what I am unable to do, but I rarely hear anything back from them. I am overjoyed when someone not only replies, but also fixes the problem, but that is the exception, not the rule.

Judy: How are you enjoying telephone interpreting?


Jamey: It is a nice fit, but requires great patience. I can be logged in for hours while only receiving a few phone calls, and many companies only pay me for the time I am actually on the phone. It is providing me with a wonderful terminology base, and I can travel all over the country, or even the world, from my desk chair! This also means I hear many different accents in both English and Spanish on a daily basis, which is both interesting and builds my vocabulary. I miss the interactions that happen while working on site, but I do take self-care very seriously (staying

connected to friends, neighbours and church, for example). I would like to do more on-site interpreting, as long as employers enter into dialogue with me about Abner. I even wonder if video remote interpreting would be possible, because again, it wouldn't make any difference in my interpreting to have someone working with me remotely via video, and the technology is certainly evolving.

Judy: Your guide dog, Abner, is a very talented animal. Could you tell us the most amazing thing he can do?

Jamey: If something is in my path before I cross the street, he practises what is known as 'intelligent disobedience', and refuses to obey my command to go forward. Of course, it is up to me to judge the traffic properly, and I mustn't make too many errors because I could untrain this concept, but this really comes in handy with very quiet cars and bicycles.

Judy: Finally, does Abner have a special way to tell you he's hungry?

Jamey: He has several techniques, actually. He might gently poke me with his nose, snort at me, stand beside my computer chair and stare at me, or even bark. In short, he knows how to get my attention. 

they have been responsive enough?

Jamey: I am no computer programmer, but developers can save me a lot of headaches by reading about universal accessibility, and implementing solutions as they build their website or software. Labelling graphics, using basic HTML or text-only versions, avoiding placing all content of a site or program on a platform which utilises Flash – these are all very simple if implemented from the beginning. However, if training modules are built in Flash or depend on image content, I will need someone to read them aloud to me, and this isn't always possible or convenient.

As for books and dictionaries, I appreciate publishers who trust in the copyright law clause which states that an individual with a print disability may put their publications in an accessible format, so long as they pay the same purchase price as any other customer. I need a way to see the spelling of words, so just providing audio isn't an optimal solution. If I am given an image PDF, I will have to run it through a program to get at the text. If I want to print out something in Braille, I run the text through yet another piece of software. In short, there isn't a one-size-fits-all

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accommodation, so trust is very important. Dictionaries are tricky, and I have high hopes that the iOS devices might make them easier to use. It is next to impossible to put dictionaries through a scan-and-read software and get accurate results, so I find accessible electronic publications helpful. While there are organisations that work to put texts into an accessible format, specialised books and dictionaries are often ignored. As to whether the response has been adequate, it really depends on the willingness of the publisher to work with an individual customer. In many cases, I have gone to great lengths after receiving a product to make it remotely readable, but in others, so long as the publishers understand all I want is equal access, it tends to be smoother.

Judy: What's your biggest technology-related challenge?

Jamey: Inaccessible websites! If I am

Above: Jamey Cook, at home in North Carolina, ready to begin a telephone interpreting assignment