

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IS A

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SUPERPOWER

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY WITH LANGUAGES

- **GINA RIDULFO ON NAVIGATING BEING 'LANGUAGELESS'**
- **CERTIFIED WITH NO FORMAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION**
- **CAREER ADVANTAGES OF BEING TRILINGUAL**
- ***AND SO MUCH MORE!***

Imagine you are eight years old and one day you are unable to read anymore yet remember you could before. This happened to Gina Ridulfo after an epilepsy diagnosis at seven years of age. A year later, she experienced something called status epilepticus which damaged the left temporal lobe of her brain, causing her to forget how to read and write the English language. This is a disorder called aphasia and because of it, she had to learn English all over again. "School became an impossible environment for me to function in, and when I was 13 years old, I learned American Sign Language after another seizure left my hearing damaged," Gina shares. She learned American Sign Language (ASL) as a way to navigate and survive the school environment.



Taking the same classes as other deaf and hard of hearing students afforded Gina the opportunity to always have an interpreter for her classes and learn ASL quickly, becoming less dependent on English. Her reading and writing skills were delayed; however, she was eventually able to catch up academically. "I was around 19 years old when I felt that my abilities to read and write in English were on par with my peers," she recalls. After deciding to become a sign language interpreter, Gina was required to study the linguistics of both English and ASL extensively. With the support of her tutors, she experienced a remarkable improvement in her ability to read and write.

Gina then decided to tackle another language barrier between herself and her family members, most of whom do not speak English. She embarked on studying Italian extensively as an adult, allowing her to nurture relationships with her relatives in Italy. "I would not have those deep relationships if we could not communicate. I cannot imagine my life without these people," Gina states. "My languages have enriched my life in so many ways. In my personal life, the relationships I have developed are probably the most profound way my languages have impacted my life. If I didn't know ASL

or Italian, there are so many people who are precious to me that I would not have," she added.

From a career standpoint, Gina is a relay interpreter at a call center where she interprets phone calls for people who speak English or American Sign Language. She has taught ASL at the university level and presently also teaches English mostly to Italian speakers.

Although Gina faced many struggles with language that made her life very difficult growing up, she thinks her experiences made her a better teacher and she's thankful for them. "I know what it is to be languageless. It's frightening and frustrating and hard," she empathizes. Her job as an interpreter has always required her to be bilingual but adding to her repertoire of languages has given Gina the ability to work anywhere in the world. Being trilingual has facilitated communicating effectively with her Italian students and to understand how best to instruct them. It has also given Gina the chance to work abroad and market herself internationally. "I think being bilingual or trilingual always gives you a competitive advantage especially here in the U.S. where most people only speak English," she highlights.



Gina describes herself as a shy speaker with no formal language instruction in Italian; however, she received Intermediate High on her ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer (OPIc). She had two major reasons for wanting to get certified. First, to increase her confidence while speaking the Italian language and prove to herself that she could do. Gina also wanted to set an example for her students, especially her young learners. She explains, "I always tell my students it is very important to speak the language even if they are nervous or afraid. Real learning happens outside of your comfort zone, and I feel it is important as a teacher to live that example out loud. If I ask my students to be brave and courageous then I need to be brave and courageous."