

YBA Presentation

My name is Helen Palmer. I was born Helen Goldberger, in 1966 in St. Paul Minnesota (which makes me 48 for those of you who can't do the math that quickly!). My dad was from the Bronx in New York and my mom was from Brooklyn in New York, and they moved to Minnesota to start a family business with my dad's family, a meat packing and processing plant. We were sort of outsiders compared to the mostly Scandinavian community that lives there, to say the least. I only have one older brother, who is two years older than me. Growing up, I loved gymnastics and ice skating. I lived in Minnesota until the end of 3rd grade, at which point my dad's business sold and we moved to California (leaving behind all of his family and the cold weather, both of which we were all happy to escape!) My dad started a new company in California in the meat business as well, and my mom was always a stay at home mom.

I started 4th grade in California in Tarzana in the San Fernando Valley, a public elementary school. The transition was not very difficult, since I was pretty young and kids are easier in elementary school. I think had we moved in middle school it would have been brutal (you remember middle school?), but we both got along pretty easily. I made new friends and found a new gymnastics school, so I was happy.

My brother and I both went to public school and graduated from Taft High School. In high school, I always worked after school and on weekends in retail jobs and babysitting to make my own money. The school part was never hard for me - by senior year, I was number 4 out of a class of about 800, having only received one B in high school. It was always expected that my brother and I would go to college. We came from an immigrant family on my dad's side, and education was really important as it was seen as the way to get ahead. So, when it came time to apply to college, I took the SAT twice, and got a pretty good score but it was not in the same league as my grades. This was my first indication that things were going to be more difficult than I anticipated and were going to require more effort than I had been putting in.

During this process, my brother and I took aptitude tests, like multiple choice exams that would indicate what you would be good at and where your interests lie. My tests suggested that I should be a lawyer, which my dad wholeheartedly encouraged. He liked the idea that I would have a profession, since his sister wound up a divorced single mother and he thought it would be a good idea if I had a profession and I could support myself economically. It seemed interesting and like a good idea, so I had in my mind from the end of high school that I would ultimately be going to law school and would become a lawyer.

I visited three schools on my college trip and applied to all three: Stanford, Princeton and Berkeley. I had my heart set on Princeton and could not believe it when the skinny envelope came (meaning, just one page – a rejection letter). Where was my welcome packet with the new student and housing information? Out of the three schools, I got into Berkeley and that's where I went – not a particularly complicated choice. They even gave me a partial scholarship the first year based on academics.

When I got to Berkeley, I had already passed out of certain first year requirements so I had the liberty to do upper class work early. I had always liked Spanish in high school and done really well in the class so I decided to major in Spanish literature, even though I thought that I was going to become a lawyer. My dad encouraged me to learn in college and to get the broadest possible experience, since college does

not teach you your profession – rather, it teaches you how to think. My classes were really interesting, all taught exclusively in Spanish and really small, since they were upper level in the major. I did well in all of those classes, but surprisingly not so well in the other classes that I took. They were really big, like 800 kids per class, and you didn't even have to go – you could buy class notes instead. So, I kind of escaped undetected and got average grades for the first two years. For my junior year, I decided to study abroad for the whole year. If I went to Spain, I could get credit for all of the classes that I took since they would count for my major. So, I went through the University of California's study abroad program to Madrid, to study at the university there. It was incredible – we were all part of a group from all of the U.C. campuses, maybe 60 of us total. We started in San Sebastian, a beautiful seaside city in the north of Spain close to the border of France. We stayed there for a month in the summer before school began in August, so we could have a crash course in Spanish, especially dirty words. The faculty didn't want us to be the clueless idiots and fall victim to the dirty jokes made at our expense, for which I am eternally grateful. I have an older brother so I am really good at English dirty jokes, but in a foreign language it's different.

We then moved to Madrid, where we had a full immersive experience. It was really interesting to experience a foreign university – as an example, in Spain, the teachers and students smoked in the class. Needless to say, a much more casual environment than we had here. I worked teaching English and made money to be able to travel around on weekends and holidays. It was really fantastic – I would encourage all of you to do it. You learn so much by living abroad, not the least of which is how to be independent and fend for yourself. I had to rent my own apartment and open a bank account, do the marketing etc., all in a foreign language. I couldn't even communicate with my parents except for by landline once a week – there was no internet or cell phones or anything in 1987.

When I returned back to Berkeley, for my senior year, I already had a lot of credits completed because of my Spanish work that counted towards my major so my last year was not particularly difficult. I finished all of my credits and decided to start focusing on my future as a lawyer. Through the campus employment office, I got a job in law firm in San Francisco, which seemed terribly exciting. I would take the BART across the bay to work in this beautiful building. The work, however, was boring and tedious. They had me doing really trivial things. And, to my surprise, it looked boring being a lawyer – they were always in their offices working on the computer. But, I assumed that this office was different than others and that it would be much more interesting and exciting when I became a lawyer. I had seen this television show called LA Law, which was really popular in the 80s. Everyone was really good looking and well dressed and they had a lot of interesting meetings and exciting trials, but never seemed to do office work. I assumed that was how it would be.

So, I set to work on preparing for the LSAT, the entrance exam for law school, and applied to a few schools in California. I got into USC, so I moved back to Los Angeles and started law school in 1989. The classes were interesting and the social life was great, if you can imagine that. I didn't expect it to be so fun. It was a pretty small class, about 100 kids total, and we would all hang out together. I did fairly well and was invited to participate in the moot court program, which I really liked. They give you a topic and you prepare your argument and do a mock trial. From this experience, I determined that I wanted to be in litigation (file and defend lawsuits and go to court), as opposed to contract work (drafting documents and doing business transactions).

After my first year, I received a Public Interest Law Foundation Grant to work at Bet Tzedek in the San Fernando Valley, a legal clinic for low income clients. They gave me the grant since I spoke Spanish and I exclusively worked with the Spanish speaking clients, on a variety of topics, from family law, discrimination actions, employment issues, whatever they needed. It was really hands-on since they were understaffed. It was a great experience and I liked it a lot, but I had concerns about the nonprofit field. I had a wonderful director in the clinic that I admired a lot – we had many in-depth conversations and I learned how little money they made and how overworked they are most of the time. So, for the following summer, I participated in the on-campus interviews so I could get a summer job with one of the big law firms. I got hired by a Century City firm and it was really glamorous – a beautiful office with a lot of perks, like Dodger tickets and meals paid for by the firm. But, they were going through a merger at the time and decided not to hire any associates for the following year. I was disappointed, but I figured that I would easily get another offer.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. I graduated in 1992, just when a huge downturn in the legal market took place. I could not find anything! I was offered one job in a junky car accident firm in midtown, which I really did not want to take. The only other offer I had seemed a little better, a position at a firm in Brentwood as an associate in a small litigation firm. There were two partners and they wanted someone to help them with litigation who also spoke Spanish, which seemed perfect, right? So, I accepted the job. But, after I started, it turned out to be a different story. They wanted me exclusively for their Spanish speaking clients. Apparently, the lawyers were selling prepaid legal plans, which was a big thing back in the early 1990s. Essentially, they would do a pitch in a big auditorium in Spanish and explain to the prey, I mean the potential clients, that prepaid legal services would protect people who could not otherwise afford to hire an attorney. For a certain sum per month, they would get unlimited phone calls for minor issues and could hire an attorney at a discounted rate if the need arose. The thing was that they did not specify that the discounted rate would still be far out of their reach. Anyhow, guess who was the phone girl? That's right, me. All day long, 40 hours per week, I was answering the phone for Spanish speaking clients who had "issues." It was not practicing law at all – it was mostly being a therapist. Most of their problems were not legal at all in nature, and even if they were, I didn't know how to fix them nor did the attorneys help me. I learned nothing and felt horrible about how these people were being taken advantage of.

So, I kept sending off applications and after a few months received an offer at a medical malpractice firm in Woodland Hills. They represented doctors and hospitals that had been sued for negligence. The cases were really interesting and combined medical and legal knowledge. I also had a great boss, made decent money and did not have to work crazy hours. But, their practice was compartmentalized, meaning you didn't handle the case yourself from start to finish. They had one department that exclusively did one part of the case (like draft pleadings in the case), another department did another section (like draft and respond to discovery) and then the head partners would come in and take the fun parts, like deposition and trials. I knew that I had to learn how to understand the whole process if I was going to become a good lawyer. Also, I was in the department that specialized in medical malpractice during labor and delivery, which meant that I mainly worked on cases with a bad outcome during birth. They jokingly called it the "bad baby" department – it was dark humor because the cases were so depressing. Most of the plaintiffs had mental and physical defects for life that they claim were caused by the doctors and the hospitals. Also, since I was planning on having a family myself, I found it really depressing and sad and wanted to change my field.

In my personal life, around this time in 1995, I became engaged to my boyfriend, who I had been dating for a year. He was younger than me (scandalous!) and had just graduated college. He had no job, no career in mind, and really no experience either. So, I decided to swing for the fences and apply again to the high level firms in Los Angeles so I could support us while he figured it out. We knew someone at a firm downtown and I pleaded for an opportunity as a young associate (3rd year at the time). The job market was better by this point, firms were hiring again, and I had three years of experience under my belt. Luckily, I got the job, which was fantastic since the pay was double what I was making with the opportunity for a bonus after you worked (or, rather, billed) 2000 hours for the firm. They did business litigation primarily and my clients were all big companies who could pay their high fees. They had a dining room in the firm, original art on the walls, dodger tickets - the whole deal. I was there for a few years, working long hours and weekends to complete my hours and get my bonuses. I did not really enjoy the work and wasn't very good at it either since I came unprepared and unexperienced from my other two jobs where I didn't really do much legal work per se. And, I was again surprised to see that even at this level, most lawyers spent the majority of their time alone in their offices, except for the rainmaker attorneys who brought in the clients. It was a really odd combination of intense boredom and intense stress. But, we needed the money so I just did it and figured that's what being a grown up meant, being kind of bored and tired. In the back of my mind, though, I knew I didn't want to continue on the path to becoming a partner in the firm. There were a handful of women older than me in the firm who had succeeded in becoming partners, but I saw their lifestyle and I didn't want it – their working hours were long and unpredictable and it seemed to me that they had difficulty balancing family and work.

Around this time, my firm sent me to Mexico City on a case where our client was involved in a lawsuit on a letter of credit. I was sent along with the partner as an associate and interpreter for him so we could interview our clients there and also depose the bank officials. I was also in charge of having the documents we needed translated, so I got in touch with a language agency in Los Angeles and for the first time learned about the field of translation. It seemed really interesting to me and, based upon the fact that I was hiring the translators and paying their bills, it also seemed to me that they made pretty good money. The funniest thing is that nobody thinks I speak Spanish since I don't have a Spanish last name or accent. So, I sat in the deposition and when the bank officer defendant told their attorney (in Spanish) that they had shredded certain documents, I asked for a break, told my attorney what they said and we won the case based upon their admissions. It was really exciting and fun, not just for the a-ha moment but I also felt that I had found something that really interested me and that I would be good at. So, when I got back to Los Angeles, I convinced the firm to pay to send me to a Spanish legal translation class. I loved it and entertained the idea of transitioning to interpreting work at some point.

But then, three years after joining the firm, in 1998, we had boy-girl twins. At that time, I felt I couldn't continue with my unpredictable schedule and I really didn't want to leave my kids with a babysitter all of the time. We had saved some money so I stayed home with them until they went to preschool at two and a half. By this time, my husband had gotten his career started and I turned over the responsibility to him to be the breadwinner. When they went to preschool, I had a lot of legal experience and could work unsupervised which is a big attraction for small legal firms – any hour you work they can bill at three or more times what they pay you and they don't have to teach you anything. So, I found a job in a small firm and got paid by the hour. It was a circus – I would wake up the babies, feed and dress them, drive them to preschool, drive to the office and work for two hours, turn around and pick them up, and

then work for two more hours while they napped after lunch in the afternoons. I did that for a few years until they went to kindergarten, and then the firm asked me to go full time, which I rejected since I felt it would be too difficult for my family.

At that time, my husband and I jointly decided it was time to go for the dream of becoming an interpreter. So, I investigated my options and enrolled at night at UCLA in their certificate program. You had to write the application in Spanish to be accepted and I needed a lot of help from my Chilean sister in law, since I had forgotten so much by that point about 15 years later in 2003. I loved the teachers in the program and also the classes– it was fascinating. They taught us how to translate documents and how to interpret simultaneously and consecutively, plus they taught us about 50,000 words in Spanish. You had to learn everything, from car parts to architecture to colors to clothing – a witness could say anything and you couldn't make a mistake, particularly if it was a criminal case and someone's freedom or even their life was in the balance. So, my kids would test me from flash cards after school.

After a year, our class graduated and prepared to take the certification exams. There are both state and federal options so I decided to do both, not knowing the passing rates or anything about the tests. For each of the options, you have to pass a written test first to show that you have a mastery of written Spanish and English at an SAT level. I passed both of those, and was then qualified to take the oral component of each. At that point, I finally learned the dirty little secret that they try to keep from potential applicants - the state exam has about a 10% pass rate and the federal exam has about a 4% pass rate. Apparently, the oral exams are really difficult. The state offers the oral about three times per year and the federal offers the oral only every two years. I failed both oral exams and I was devastated. So, I took the state oral again three months later and failed again. By this point, I was extremely frustrated, had no confidence and saw no end in sight to the testing cycle – many people started to drop out of the process from our class and I only knew one person who passed any of the state or federal exams out of all of us. So, I decided to go back to work while I tried a new angle, studying on line through the Southern California School of Interpretation. I had heard they teach to the test, meaning they instruct you how to pass. I found a job through Craigs List, a sole practitioner lawyer in Los Angeles who needed an associate. So, I took the job with the understanding that if he had no work for me that day, I could study in his office on-line and practice for another upcoming oral exam. I took two more state orals while I worked for him and failed both. I was despondent and decided that the federal oral (three years after I started the process!) would be my last attempt. And, I finally passed in 2009 at the time when I was set to give up, about five years after starting the whole odyssey.

I was so excited, but I didn't know where to begin. I had no idea what to do - where to find work, how to get established, what to charge, etc. I never knew anyone who was an interpreter nor did I know anything about the job options. I found out that the county court system of Los Angeles hires interpreters as employees, but I wanted to be an independent contractor and work for myself.

So, apropos to the idea of your mentor program, I did a little research on the internet to see who was the most successful and renowned interpreter in Los Angeles and then I called her. She was extremely flattered and willing to help me – she showed me how to sign up with agencies, what to charge, how to get private clients, etc. I could never have got started without her. I learned that I could make about twice per hour that I used to make as a part-time attorney, and also have a 24 hour cancellation policy, meaning if the client cancels within 24 hours I get paid anyhow for the time that they reserved. That happens more than you would think and I get paid a lot of the time to do nothing. I called my company

Watermark Interpreting (after that little symbol of authenticity on documents), made a website, signed up with a bunch of agencies, andwaited. It was a little slow going at the beginning so I kept my job with the lawyer and then things started to really pick up so I quit after a few months to dedicate myself completely to building a practice. In order to drum up some free public relations, I wrote an article about my experience and the Daily Journal, the preeminent legal newspaper in California, published it. I can't tell you how many phone calls and emails I got after that! Everyone was really intrigued by my transition and I got a lot of business out of it.

I have been running this business now for 5 years and I absolutely love it – every day is different. Primarily, I get hired by law firms to interpret for client meetings, depositions and trial, typically at their offices or in court in the case of trial. Usually, these cases are civil actions (not criminal) and involve employment cases, like sexual harassment, discrimination or unfair termination or maybe civil cases like car accidents. As an example, if a Spanish speaking employee at a restaurant files a lawsuit for sexual harassment and the attorney defending the restaurant wants to take her deposition, I am also at the deposition and simultaneously translate what the attorney says in English and what the plaintiff says in Spanish so they can understand each other. That's where the dirty words I learned in college come in handy. I also sometimes get hired by the federal government to interpret at prison lockup meetings at the federal prison downtown. Usually, that involves attorney meetings with their clients, who are Spanish speaking and many times gang members from Central and South America. I have also interpreted at a federal kidnapping jury trial, which was the most intense experience I have had to date. A guy had kidnapped his ex-girlfriend, took her across the border to Mexico, where she screamed and was rescued by the border patrol. So, we had to interpret for the victim and her family who didn't speak English, the border patrol who rescued her, and the doctor who examined her in Mexico. The defendant was found guilty and was sentenced to 25 years to life. Apart from the fact that it was a criminal trial and the defendant would be imprisoned, jury trials in general are stressful because typically at least one juror speaks Spanish and wants to correct your translation. So, I got around that by getting a wireless system – now, I wear a microphone when I am next to the witness testifying at the stand and they wear an earpiece so the jurors can't really hear us communicating with each other and offer helpful suggestions to the judge.

On the other end of the spectrum, I get hired by agencies to interpret in Worker's Compensation cases. When a worker is injured on the job, they file a claim in the Worker's Compensation system. Then, the attorney that represents the insurance company gets to depose them and ask them questions about their injuries and their claim. I interpret at these question and answer sessions, which are usually pretty routine, like someone slipped and fell at work, or hurt themselves lifting something or using some equipment. One time, though, a guy was a security agent at an apartment complex and got shot by the police when they mistook him for a robber. A lot of interpreters interpret at the medical appointments related to the worker's compensation case, but I don't care for those type of jobs. The claimants really take off their clothes and get examined while you are there and you have to wait in the examination room with them alone until the doctor comes. It's really awkward, the doctors are overbooked all of the time and they typically expect me to fill out forms for the patients, which I think is very strange. I shouldn't be taking the client's medical history and asking them questions – I think that's the doctor or nurse's job!

So, I only work on legal matters, which is a good fit for me since I practiced law for almost 18 years. The beauty of the job is that every day I meet new people, work on new cases, have new challenges, and

best of all, when I go home at night, I am done (unless I am working on a translation, which is a very small part of my job). I also get to set my own schedule, which I love. In order to get clients, I use all of my old relationships from when I was a lawyer and I attend interpreter conferences and other events like continuing education in order to make a strong interpreter network – I am part of an informal federal group (there are very few of us locally) and we all refer business to each other and keep each other informed daily of our availability if we have overflow work. If I get two or more offers in one day, I want to keep them for myself and make sure they don't go to another interpreter or agency. I don't make any money off the work that my other colleagues do, but I make sure I keep my clients by staffing their job. And even though the job is pretty independent, there is a Facebook Certified Spanish Interpreter page that I belong to where we ask each other questions about interpreting, share experiences and changes in the law, and present job offers and vacancies.