

FourThought

NAI National Conference Review

I have found myself navigating unfamiliar territory the past couple years. I often wonder if there are others my age who feel the same or am I an anomaly? I suppose after 25 years in interpretation it's normal to feel like I'm the old kid on the block. Like a broken record, I repeatedly catch myself saying 'years ago.....'. Then it dawned on me, when did I become THAT person?! How is it that I'm now swiftly approaching middle age and no longer the fresh-faced 21-year-old just starting out in parks? As Bob Dylan wrote, "the times they are a-changin'" and wow, do I feel this to my core. I'm definitely at a crossroads, the intersection of the way it used to be, the way it's headed and where I am going?

The face of interpretation has changed. Visitor interests and desires have changed. Our role as disseminators of natural and cultural history knowledge has evolved from the spewing of facts to the newly minted definition of Interpretation as stated by NAI: *Interpretation is a purposeful approach to communication that facilitates meaningful, relevant, and inclusive experiences that deepen understanding, broaden perspectives, and inspire engagement with the world around us.*

It became evident that I was in a danger zone. I felt as though I was on the verge of being left behind. I didn't want to find myself stuck in "the way things used to be" mindset. It was time to seek out opportunities to understand all of these changes and adapt. What better way to remain relevant in our careers than to attend the NAI National Conference?

I had not been to a national in nearly a decade. Financially, the regional workshops are more budget friendly for my organization. I knew that the sure-fire way to exit the crossroads and close-in on the generational divide I was feeling was to attend Shifting Sands of Interpretation in Palm Springs. I wanted to write in large, bold letters on the scholarship application **HELP**. Because at the time, it's exactly how I was feeling. I needed help. However, I did go in to quite a bit more detail as to why I really needed and wanted to attend this conference.

I was absolutely elated when I found out I had been awarded the scholarship. As I suspected, the conference experience exceeded my expectations. Along with presenters who are the best in the field, fantastic concurrent sessions and mind-blowing offsite trips, I met so many people from all over the United States. Networking with so many individuals, who represented such a variety of locales, enabled me to gain perspective on my own personal journey.

What I took away from my experience at the National Conference was that it's ok to be at this season of my career. There is value in reminiscing about the past while embracing the future. Am I willing to give up my paper calendar for the digital version? No way, but had I not attended the NAI National Conference, I never would have met the staff from Agents of Discovery. I'm thrilled to say that because of my encounter with them, my park district is the proud new partner of the Agents of Discovery app! The app allows visitors to engage in site-based virtual reality type missions that allow users to gain more knowledge, experience and appreciation for their parks. Who knew? The girl who was feeling old and past her prime is the same girl who was the primary catalyst for bringing new technology to her park district!

Thank you NAI for propelling me out of the intersection as I venture into the future of my waning career.

Mandy Martin

