

The Progress-Index

LOCAL

For sign-language interpreters, it's all about guaranteeing equal access for the hard-of-hearing: Newsmakers

2022 NEWSMAKERS



Bill Atkinson

The Progress-Index

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PETERSBURG — Heather Kubitski's life changed because of an adoption that never happened.

"My parents wanted to adopt a deaf child, so I wanted to learn to sign, and that was just ingrained in me since I was little," Kubitski said. "Then, the adoption never happened, but later I still wanted to learn to sign. So a woman moved into our church and wanted to teach signing, so I took that opportunity and learned everything that she could teach me."

That led to enrolling in classes, and today, Kubitski is a signer and interpreter in Petersburg. She takes on a number of assignments anywhere in the private or public sector. She also has become a familiar face at Petersburg City Council meetings where she and her colleagues are assisting residents like Gary Talley who want to stay engaged in civic discussion.

And she's one of our 2022 Newsmakers, people who don't make the headlines but make a difference in their community.

"I couldn't be here [without them]," Talley, who lost his hearing later in his life, said as he sat in the council meeting room at the Petersburg Public Library. "I'm a pretty good lip reader, but I can't read [councilors] from that far away and they talk so fast. Sometimes, even the interpreters have trouble keeping up."

Kubitski and Talley were interviewed together by The Progress-Index, during which time Kubitski signed everything from questions to answers for Talley.

Just like with any language, Kubitski said, you never going to completely master signing or interpreting, no matter how long you have done it. Spoken words evolve, so signing has to evolve with it. In the end, Kubitski said, it's all about access for the hard-of-hearing, and each person she works with is different.

"You're always learning as you go," she said. "Their language modality is different from each person. Like with Mr. Talley, he can speak for himself and he can read lips, where another deaf person can't. I would have to speak for them so that's a completely different skill to learn.

"The goal is their access to communication so they can participate in anything that a hearing person can. That's the goal and that's their right."

There are two basic sign language types in the U.S. deaf community, the classic American Sign Language with its own syntax and grammar, and "exact English" which includes aspects of ASL but is more of a visual representation of the word rather than focusing on syntax and grammar. Talley said he is more of an English user, so someone like Kubitski who has so many different clients has to be fluent in both.

That's good for government meetings like Petersburg City Council, where it's easier to use exact English because you try to capture the essence of what is being said more so than trying to focus on the proper grammar ... especially since government-speak is so littered with acronyms. Kubitski said it can be intimidating, but she keeps her eyes on making sure her client is being served.

"My purpose is for them," Kubitski said. "I've had many interpreting jobs where I am on stage. I'm near presidents, near governors. I'm in huge conventions where people are looking at me, but I'm never nervous because it's for the deaf person."

Anyone attending a Petersburg City Council meeting or watching it on livestream has noticed that more than one interpreter is used, switching off after 15-20 minutes. That is done to give the signer a bit of a mental break and catch their breath because while it might not look like it, signing can be a bit taxing, especially in government meetings.

Kubitski knows that hearing people will often watch her because they are fascinated with the hand motions, and her eyes sometimes wander to others watching her. While that might overwhelm her, Kubitski said she always returns quickly to the task at hand, which is "providing the message equally as the hearing audience is getting it."

One of the biggest misconceptions about sign language is that the interpreters let their own beliefs get in the way of signing. That's based on the facial expressions the interpreter is using.

They might be signing wildly with an angered expression, for example.

Kubitski said that perception could not be farther from the truth. The facial expressions are part of the whole interpretation process.

"Facial expression is the same as vocal intonation," she explained. "A deaf person cannot hear vocal intonation, and we as hearing people, we get a lot of information from vocal intonation, but the deaf person cannot hear that. So we as an interpreter have to put [intonation] on our face to show if someone is angry and they're trying to yell at someone else, or if they're really serious, or they're trying to, like, mask their intentions. The interpreter kind of copies that and puts it on their face so that they can see and understand."

However, that does not mean the interpreter is completely shut off to getting into their feelings. Sometimes, the simplest of assignments can turn emotional, as Kubitski recalled once when she accompanied a client to a doctor's appointment.

"It was only supposed to be a half-hour appointment, so I dressed professionally and I was wearing high heels, and went into the appointment," she said. "The doctor examined the patient and found that he needed to be admitted, he needed to go to the emergency room, and he asked me to go and of course I went."

Usually an interpreter is more of a facilitator and less of a conversationalist, "but for some reason that day, I decided to sit in the room with a patient and I'm glad I did." It turned out that her client had a health episode while hooked up to the monitor, and because she was right there at his bedside, she was able to quickly alert the medical staff.

"Seven hours later, I finally got a replacement," Kubitski said. "So I learned from that experience never to wear high heels at an interpreting job ever. My feet were killing me."

More Newsmakers: Former NFL player Ken Oxendine, from humble beginnings, scores touchdowns in hometown: 2022 Newsmakers

Bill Atkinson (he/him/his) is an award-winning journalist who covers breaking news, government and politics. Reach him at batkinson@progress-index.com or on Twitter at [@BAtkinson_PI](https://twitter.com/BAtkinson_PI).

The Progress-Index

NEWS

First Black woman to be Petersburg mayor remembered as trailblazer, mentor and friend

Prior to becoming a force in Petersburg civil rights and politics, Florence Farley was also the state's first licensed Black psychologist in Virginia



Bill Atkinson

The Progress-Index

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PETERSBURG — In 2022, Treska Wilson-Smith lost two mothers — her biological mother passed away last March, and her "mentor" mother died Sunday morning.

"It becomes a lot to take in," Wilson-Smith said Sunday night.

Her mentor was Dr. Florence Saunders Farley, who died Sunday at the age of 95 following an undisclosed illness. Like Wilson-Smith, Farley represented Petersburg's Ward 1 for many years on City Council. Farley also was the city's first Black woman mayor, and she presided over council in the 1980s when the loss of Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company and the retail base signaled the start of a decades-long fiscal crisis for Petersburg.

"I have known her since I was around 11 or 12 years old," Wilson-Smith said. "I grew up looking up to her and doing my best to emulate her. When I decided to run for office it was her that I spoke to most of the time. She guided me, before the election and after being on council."

Before she blazed political trails, Farley blazed trails in other areas. A Roanoke native, she came to Petersburg in 1950 to study psychology at Virginia State College, now Virginia State University. After graduation, she joined the Women's Army Air Corps at Fort Lee and became the post's first Black woman training officer.

She returned to Virginia State in 1955 to get her master's degree and later joined the staff of Central State Hospital as Virginia's first licensed Black clinical psychologist and staff psychologist at the hospital.

She became synonymous with Virginia State in 1962 when she joined the staff of the School of Psychology and eventually rose to the rank of department chair. While teaching there, she went back to school and got her doctorate from Kent State University in 1977.

But it is perhaps Farley's role as a major political figure in Petersburg for which most will remember her. During the Civil Rights era, Farley was a familiar face in the push for desegregation in Petersburg and could often be seen at the forefront of many demonstrations.

Ballot-casting: Virginia voting rights through the years: Climbing the accessibility ladder

Her efforts soon were rewarded politically. She was first elected in 1973 as part of Petersburg's first Black majority council, the same year her colleague, Hermanze E. Fauntleroy Jr. became Petersburg (and Virginia's) first Black mayor. She was re-elected in 1978 and in 1982, and two years after the second re-election, she stepped into the mayor's role when Wilson Cheely stepped down.

When Fauntleroy died in 2010, Farley fondly remembered her colleague in a Progress-Index article. When Petersburg annexed portions of Prince George and Dinwiddie counties in 1972, Farley recalled Fauntleroy joining with her in pushing for more black representation on City Council. From those pushes, the city's first ward system was born.

Farley described him in the article as a "beautiful person" and the perfect gentleman.

"He was dedicated to this city," Farley said, per the article.

She had many proteges in Petersburg, including Wilson-Smith. Another is Cassandra Conover, a former commonwealth's attorney in Petersburg.

In an email, Conover, who now lives in North Carolina, called Farley "an icon, a legend, a giant among women.

"It is hard to speak of her in the past tense because her impact will continue to be felt," Conover added. "Dr. Farley exemplified tenacity and perseverance to her principles, to her beliefs. She was determined in her own way to provide guidance and correction to men and women alike, in all areas, using her vast wealth of history and knowledge."

As mayor, Farley was not known for pulling punches. She was straightforward, spoke her mind and was not afraid to defend her actions, no matter how others would perceive it.

For example, in 1989, when Southpark Mall opened in Colonial Heights and basically took all of Petersburg's retail business with it, Farley was asked at a City Council meeting if she

planned to attend a celebration at the mall the night before it opened for business.

Her response: "I don't socialize with my executioners."

Farley eventually lost a subsequent bid for re-election to council, but she never strayed far from the forefront of Petersburg politics. She served on the Petersburg School Board from 2002-06, rising to the position of vice chair.

She eventually retired from VSU in 2003.

Ron Flock, a former Petersburg resident who now lives out of state, remembered being active with Farley as they led various marches to Petersburg City Hall on numerous topics of concern.

"The last march we worked on together, the city accused us of inviting the [Ku Klux Klan] but they had no idea the Florence was involved," Flock recalled. "The march before that, we were waiting to be interviewed by local news after and the two of us talked forever on the bench outside of city hall before the crew showed up. I have the greatest admiration for her and I wish everyone could know her at least as much as I did."

In retirement, Farley still remained active in civic affairs. According to a 2018 article in The Progress-Index, Farley spoke out about changing the names of three Petersburg elementary schools from Robert E. Lee, A.P. Hill and J.E.B. Stuart to Lakemont, Cool Spring and Pleasants Lane, respectively.

"These were the heroes of the Civil War," Farley said during one School Board meeting, per the article. "But we're not there now, or we haven't been there for a long time. Some other people have done some remarkable things in this city."

She also was not shy about her disdain for some on the current City Council. In a Facebook post last year about council holding so many meetings online and not allowing itself to be more physically in touch with Petersburg residents, she responded in typical fashion, "It is obvious that this is a private entity without any respect for the City of Petersburg. One day it will all be over, wrong will not last forever."

Dale Pittman came to Petersburg in 1977 to open the city's Legal Aid Society. He met Farley and they became fast friends and collaborators.

"She was brilliant, thoughtful, and ready to tell you what she was thinking," Pittman wrote on social media. "We have lost a giant."

Speaking of social media, Farley was a frequent contributor to Facebook groups such as Clean Sweep Petersburg, often being sought out for counsel and opinion on the state of Petersburg's political and socio-economic scene. As always, she spoke her mind. And it was through social media that many people remembered her Sunday.

"Dr. Farley was a mentor and an inspiration to so many in Petersburg — beyond the mark she made on her students of course — including quite a few of us in this group," wrote Barb Rudolph, administrator of the Clean Sweep Petersburg Facebook group. "She had the courage to call out the powerful when many others shied away from 'making waves.' And she had the experience, knowledge, and moral capital to back it up."

"She fought a good fight, ran a hard race, and is now walking the streets of gold in her Heavenly mansion," Conover said. "Thank you, Dr. Florence Farley, for adding value to the lives of many."

Wilson-Smith, who is retiring from City Council this year, said Farley's death "truly breaks my heart."

"With her passing goes a wealth of knowledge and guidance," Wilson-Smith said. "She was like family, knew my mother and family. When my mother got sick, it was her that I called. May she rest in peace."

There was no immediate word about memorial services. Farley had no children.

Plan effect: VSU 'immensely grateful' for Biden loan forgiveness policy, says 69% of students Pell-eligible

Bettering the environment: Come next year, low-income residents will be able to switch to clean energy and save

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NEWS

'We have to keep on living': Colonial Heights man stays teaching in Belarus despite unrest

Tom Michalek has the ultimate ringside seat to unfolding history. How long will it be before that seat becomes too hot? He does not know, but he will wait it out in the name of normalcy.



Bill Atkinson

The Progress-Index

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Tom Michalek loves being close to his eastern European heritage, so much so that he up and moved to Belarus from Colonial Heights several years ago to teach English as a second language.

Now there is a new language that Michalek and others in the former Soviet bloc of countries are hearing now. It's the language of war. Not just an insurrection, a coup-d'état, or the usual saber-rattling of some mid-level world leader wanting to wield more power. It's the words and deeds of the leader of one of the planet's two superpowers trying to rein in the only country from that bloc that has fully embraced democracy.

And Michalek practically has a ringside seat for it.

Live updates: Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine puts world on edge

He lives in Minsk, Belarus' capital. It's about a two-hour drive from the country's border with Ukraine, where each day Russian troops sent by President Vladimir Putin launch military offensives against soldiers and armed citizens in an attempt to bring Ukraine to its knees.

Michalek knows his family in central Virginia wants him to leave. Even his United States senator thinks he should leave.

But he doesn't want to leave. At least not right now.

"They all want me to come home, but I am doing fine," Michalek said during a recent chat over Facebook Messenger, one of the most direct ways of communicating with him now. "I let

them know that they can contact me and I can contact them. So we're OK."

One of his sisters, however, is not so reassured about that. Ann Michalek said she is the closest in age to him of all their siblings — he will be 75 this year and she will be 74 — and she cringes with every news report coming out of the region.

"I'm scared to death," she said.

Falling economy, falling faces

Tom Michalek is not a fool. He knows things will likely deteriorate as time goes on. He understands that Belarus is a much closer ally of Russia than of its neighbor to the southeast. Matter of fact, Belarus has allowed Russian troops to enter the north and west of Ukraine through its borders and reportedly is assisting in the invasion itself.

"The economy is not good, I mean, but for me it's great because the American dollar has really taken off over here," he said. At last report, \$1 of American money is equal to three Belarusian rubles. With the Western world tightening economic sanctions by the day against Russia — and many economists expecting similar actions against Belarus — rubles are expected to continue to nosedive.

'I left all my stuff, all my dreams': Refugees fleeing Ukraine find help, housing online

Michalek does not blame the sanctions for the sagging economy, saying overall poor management by the Minsk government "is probably a better way to say it."

As an ESL teacher in Minsk, Michalek has become more than just someone trying to teach a new tongue. He's grown close over the years to his students and their families to the point where he is almost seen as a mentor, an adviser, a sounding board.

Not just about their country, either. About their Ukrainian neighbors. Needless to say, he has done less teaching and probably more counseling since the hostilities began escalating.

"Basically, they cannot believe it," Michalek said quietly. "It's like it's unbelievable. That's the most prominent reaction ... they can't believe it. Because most of the time what was happening here was that people were saying it's not gonna happen. They're not doing it. It's just bluffing, you know? That's what people thought, and I guess they really cannot believe that [Putin] did it."

Because Minsk still remains loyal to Moscow, Michalek said he suspects there is a lot of Cold War-style skepticism among the older former Soviet population about having Americans and

their "capitalistic" ways being woven into their fabric. Most of the warmth foreigners receive in the country comes from the middle-aged and younger populations who never lived one day behind an Iron Curtain.

"Belarus has its own culture, and they are trying to develop the culture," he said. "But Russia has been slammed down their throats, you know ... and it's meeting some resistance."

More: Freshman lawmaker Taylor: 'World has not seen such patriotism since our American Revolution'

So why stay around?

Despite the wishes of his family half an Earth away, Michalek said he is not sure he is ready to leave. He will go if told to, but if he does leave, that does not mean he will be automatically U.S.-bound.

He loves that part of the world. His grandmother was raised in Belarus, and his family traces roots to the Czech Republic. He is fluent in the language, he has friends there and has even discovered family members there.

'Hands off Ukraine!' Russian protesters, celebrities risk arrest to denounce Putin's war

Michalek said he might initially go as far as Poland where many others are fleeing. That has made getting out of the country much harder than just a cab ride to the airport. But he hesitates about making a jaunt much longer than that because he wants to stay as close as possible should tensions ever quickly ease.

"I was thinking just go maybe to Poland, the Czech Republic," he said. "You know, I like Hungary, but I don't know Hungarian, so that would not be a good idea."

It's much easier to get back to Minsk from Warsaw, Prague or Budapest than from New York or Richmond, he added.

Back here, home fires burn anxiously

A few days pass since the interview with Tom Michalek. Much has changed in just those few days. Russia begins an assault on Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city. There are reports of a 40-mile convoy of Russian troops on the road to Kyiv, Ukraine's capital. Talks between Russian and Ukrainian leaders break down in Minsk, and the uncertainty continues.

Ann Michalek, one of his many worried siblings, has exchanged calls and texts with her brother. She said he continues to tell her he is fine. A recent doctor's appointment went well, she said, and he claims he can get out to the store and get supplies if he needs them.

Ann has visited that region in the past and liked what she saw. But she said she also knows how stoic her brother can be and she fears he is not telling the entire picture to protect her.

"I was texting him to come home, trying to get clues about what was going on over there," she said in a phone interview. She hesitates to explain just what he tells her out of fear for his own personal safety "because you just don't know who will be listening, and they will beat you to a pulp over there" if they think you are talking too much.

"I'm a worrier, but his other sisters just say he is happy, so I try to believe that," Ann said.

"But I still want him to come home."

Others are reading: Their father was buried without them knowing. Now they're trying to pick up the pieces.

So does Virginia Sen. Mark Warner. In a recent briefing with Virginia-based journalists, The Progress-Index asked Warner what advice he would give Americans such as Tom Michalek who find themselves so close to the epicenter of escalations.

"If you are an American citizen living in Belarus, you want to get out of the country as quickly as possible," Warner answered. "Belarus is becoming more and more simply a client state of Russia. The Belarusian troops have started to invade Ukraine as well, and I think the sanctions that were put against Russia, you will start to see put against Belarus."

His short-term response: "Get out and try to contact their American consulate services and others if you're in Belarus on the easiest, quickest fastest way to leave the country."

More: Did a former governor really live in this house on South Sycamore Street?

Michalek may heed that advice soon. But right now, he's not in a real big rush.

"As the director at my school said, you just have to living the way we have to keep on living," he said. "We just can't give up, you know? We can't throw our life away. We were scheduling some workshops that I will be teaching in April, and I told her, 'You know, well, maybe we shouldn't because it might be that we will be at war.' She says, 'You know what? We'll schedule it, you know, just keep on living.' And that's basically what I think. You just, you just live your life the way you normally live it."

"Yeah, I think that, that would be the message."

Bill Atkinson (he/him/his) is daily news coach for USA TODAY's Southeast Region-Unified Central, which includes Virginia, West Virginia and central North Carolina. He is based in Petersburg, Virginia. Reach him at batkinson@progress-index.com.