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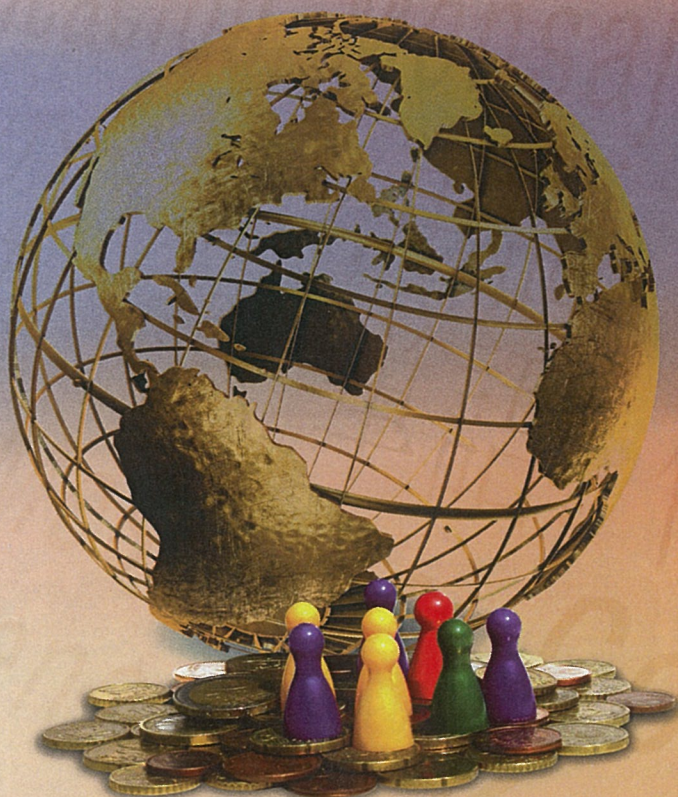
pursuing a balance of business and life

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Beyond the Word... Delivering the Message

Avantgarde Translates
True Meaning

Memuna Williams
President, U.S. Operations
Avantgarde Translations, Inc.



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Memuna Williams hasn't actually seen her sister for a couple of years, but it sure doesn't feel that way, as the siblings talk and work together on a daily basis.

The two are principals of Avantgarde Translations, Inc., with an American office in Charlotte and a Canadian office in Mississauga, Ontario. "It's a type of project management that has a lot of moving parts," says Williams, co-owner. Her sister, Isata Jones-Stanley heads up the Canadian office. Both pair up on projects routinely.

Avantgarde Translations, Inc. is a language services company. A B2B enterprise, its mission is to enrich a company's multilingual communications by bridging the linguistic and cultural gaps that exist between different languages. This is accomplished through translation, interpretation and cultural consulting.

The company works in the world's major languages—defined by their use in business—including French, English, Spanish, German, Japanese, Russian, Turkish, Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese in spoken form; simplified and traditional in written), Portuguese, Korean, Italian, Finnish, Polish and others less widely used such as Tagalog.

"The types of documents we handle are those people use to transact business—a letter, legal document, application, brochure, financial report, product manual, food label, web-site material," says Williams, "anything people need to communicate with inside or outside constituencies."

The Business of Translation

Avantgarde also does interpretation services, focusing on business conferences. Examples include a three-day strategy conference for Daimler Trucks North America in Cleveland, N.C., during which Avantgarde provided interpretations in Portuguese, Japanese and German, and a YMCA conference for participants from all over the world. All interpretation is done on-site in real time.

Avantgarde contracts with over 60 language professionals as translators or interpreters. Williams explains that translation is written while interpretation is verbal. "With interpretation, you have your headset on and microphones. You're listening and repeating in the language needed," she says. Contractors tend to do one or the other. "It's a different skill set," she says, adding "interpretation is more difficult."

Williams says that there are a couple of contractors in Charlotte and a couple in Mississauga but the rest are scattered across the globe. The company looks at a combination of education and experience for its translators. Experience in law, business or some other area of the type of document to be translated, as well as technical expertise, is required.

Among Avantgarde's long list of clients are lawyers, manufacturers, non-profit organizations and other language services agencies. The law firm of Moore & Van Allen is a client; so is the fine furniture source for interior designers, Baker, Knapp & Tubbs, as well as U.S. GreenFiber, Zang, Alan Gordon Immigration, Hampton Hotel Performance Support, and Helix Financial.

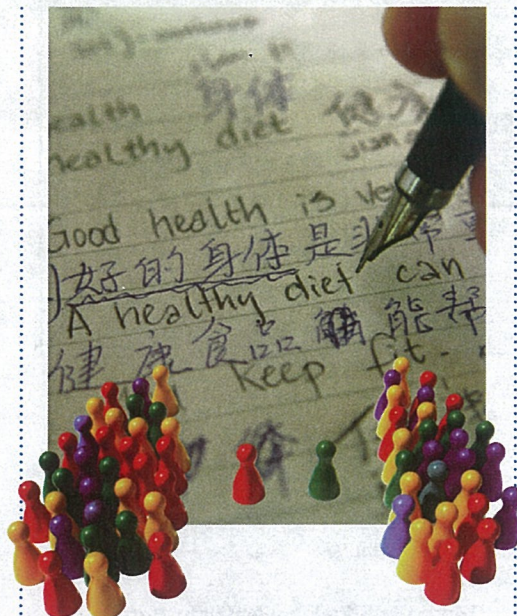
The Canadian office has a large contract with the government of Ontario, supporting several of their departments. "We work a lot with the Attorney General's Office there on case material, correspondence and questions placed on their website translating French to English," says Williams. The Charlotte office has recently obtained its federal 8a certification to work with government as a small business. Williams plans to focus on leveraging the certificate for business development.

"You never know what will land on your desk—a business document, something from a funeral parlor or something as challenging and difficult as a child molestation case," exclaims Williams.

The company has been approached recently for literary translation. "Although that's not the business we've built thus far, we wouldn't turn it down," states Williams, who explains that they were academically trained by doing a lot of literary translation.

"We love that stuff! Literary translation allows you to see things from a cultural context and learn and absorb much more than if you were doing it from a business application," she says. Under consideration now are three book projects—one for children from English to French and Spanish, one authored by a Chinese woman in English who now wants it available in Chinese, and a self-help book from English to French and Spanish.

Occasionally Williams and her sister find humor in the words and phrases people use or misuse. Says Williams, "Sometimes I'll let something go by until it hits my sister's desk



"From my point of view, translation and interpretation is still a human endeavor. There is a large constituency out there that would like translation to be something you can punch into a machine and have it be reliable and cost effective—we're not there yet,"

~Memuna Williams
President, U.S. Operations

just so I can hear her say, "Did you see that?"

A Natural Transition

Started in 2004, the Charlotte office moved into its first corporate space on Fairview Road in the spring of 2010. Although Williams envisioned an office with staff from the start, she operated for the first six years out of her home.

"We knew we wanted to be in the South Park area; we just had to wait for the right situation." What the company did have from the very start was a computer server; a shared virtual workplace. "We made that investment early on," says Williams. "Everything is organized. We know where to go to look for things, plus we have a system that eliminates opportunity for errors. Avantgarde just

hired its first two employees: an administrative assistant and the first staff translator. It expects to do between one-fourth and one-half million dollars in business this year.

Williams was born in Canada. Her parents, citizens of Sierra Leone, Africa, were in Alberta while her father completed graduate work through his Ph.D. Once done, the growing family returned to Sierra Leone briefly before her father was sent off to diplomatic service, taking the family along with him.

He was first assigned to be the High Commissioner in London, then went on to become Ambassador to Germany for five years, then Ambassador to the Benelux countries for the next three. These experiences provided Williams and Jones-Stanley, who was born in Sierra Leone, and their siblings a tremendous education in culture and language. The family returned to Sierra Leone when Williams was around 12 years of age.

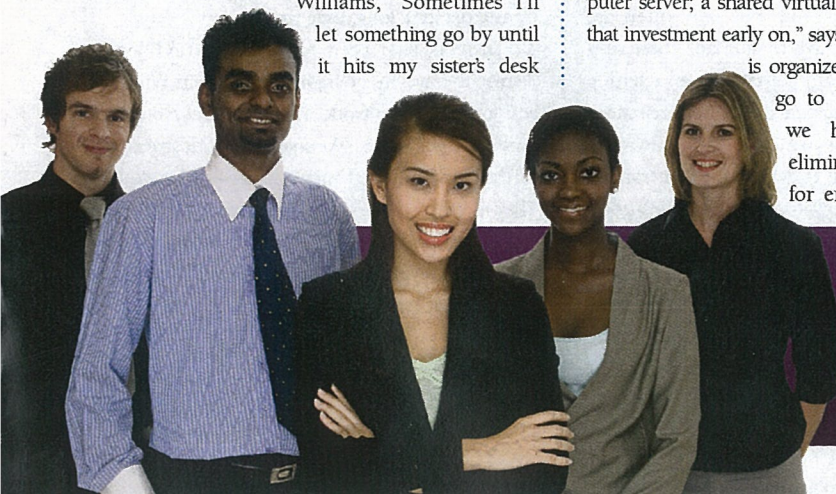
"I always had it in my head that I would go back to Canada one day," says Williams "so when it was time to go to college, I did." Williams studied translation at Concordia University and went on to earn her master's degree in translation from the Universite de Montreal. She met her future husband while attending a conference of Sierra Leone students in Boston.

"He was a moderator and I was a frequent questioner," she remembers cheerfully. "Turns out he was from the same neighborhood in Sierra Leone." Williams ultimately joined him in New York where he was in banking which, in turn, brought the two of them to Charlotte in 2003. He works with Wells Fargo. She completed her M.B.A. degree at Queens University.

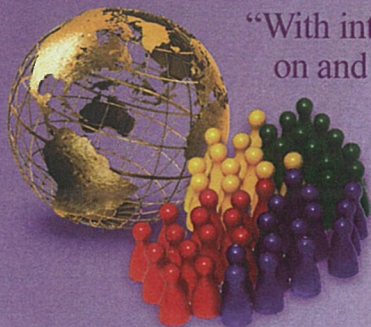
Williams' family, which includes three children now—Victor (12), Alex (9) and Arthur (5), speaks English, the official language of Sierra Leone, at home. Williams also knows a bit of Temne, one of the 13 tribal languages of Sierra Leone and the one her parents spoke, and Krio, the language that bridges the gap between the tribal languages.

"Every so often I'll say something in Temne to my children, as my grandmother did to us, and they will say, 'What did she say?'" The two sisters first learned French during their years in Belgium and kept it up through high school and college. Jones-Stanley studied English and French literature at the University of Sierra Leone and then moved to Canada to complete her master's degree in translation from the Universite de Montreal.

The sisters' father was an inspiring figure, not ➤



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~Memuna Williams
President, U.S. Operations

only because of his sterling career interacting with heads of state from around the world, but because he did not begin his education until the age of 12.

“His is the story of the power of education,” says Williams. She is equally passionate. Education is what allows people to do things with their lives, according to Williams.

While a stay-at-home mom and ambassador’s wife, their mother earned two masters degrees during the time they lived in Europe. In Sierra Leone, she served as a correspondent to the American Library of Congress. It was not typical for Temne women to be educated but Williams’ grandfather was a businessman and he wanted his daughter to be educated as well as his sons. “I would not be here if he had not recognized the value of education for women,” claims Williams.

“When you grow up as I did, you kind of take everything for granted but now I see how powerful education is to change lives,” shares Williams. “All

of our six siblings are professionals. Our children have decent lives. With a few degrees of separation—if you go back and look at our cousins—it’s not the same story. My dad didn’t know he was building quality of life for his grandchildren, but that’s the result.”

Generally Speaking, A Bright Future

Of course Avantgarde Translations has competition from individual translators, other agencies, locally and nationally, but debate is underway as to whether the machine will prove to be the greatest competitor.

“From my point of view, translation and interpretation is still a human endeavor. There is a large constituency out there that would like translation to be something you can punch into a machine and have it be reliable and cost effective—we’re not there yet,” states Williams.

Jones-Stanley points out, “Google is working on algorithms that will greatly improve systems that are available now. But there are still issues with syntax, context, voice and homonyms. French [language] loves the passive voice; English prefers active voice. A machine can’t make that distinction. It’s technically correct but in English we wouldn’t say it that way. Even Google does not use its program for its own translations.”

Williams also refers to cases where it is critical to be literal such as in the legal system. “Lives are in the balance,” she says. “You can’t feed all that information into a machine; you have to have a human being.”

Williams likens the status of machine translation to that of spell-check or grammar check functions. “They’re helpful, but how often are they wrong and you have to override their suggestions?” Williams admits that it is an exciting time for computer-assisted human translation. “Productivity and fast turnaround are always a concern, so the extent to which human translators can use technology to help them is a good thing.”

Nevertheless, Williams recognizes that technology will inevitably promote change. “In any case, now, 15 years from now, we have to embrace the technology, find how it can help, do it better, differently or we’ll disappear,” she says. “I don’t think we’ll disappear; I think there will still be a need for



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~Isata Jones-Stanley
President, Canadian Operations

translators for a long, long time.”

There is little need for Williams and Jones-Stanley to travel in the traditional sense in Williams’ and Jones-Stanley’s work. They do travel more than most in virtual space. “We share the work space, talk on the phone and exchange e-mails—and it works!” They meet face-to-face when they can around family gatherings; birthdays, celebrations. When they do get together, perhaps they’ll discuss a little business—in any language they choose. **biz**

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Principals: Memuna Williams, Co-owner and President, U.S. Operations; Isata Jones-Stanley, Co-owner and President, Canadian Operations

Established: 2004

Revenue: Approximately \$25 million-plus

Employees: 2; 60-plus translators and interpreters

Recognition: NAWBO-Charlotte Rising Star of the Year (2006), NAWBO-Charlotte Pioneer (2007), BMA Carolinas ProAd Award Corporate Identity Package (2007), Pica Award Best of Category in the category of Presentation Folders (2009)

Business: Business-to-business language services company providing translation, interpretation and cultural consulting with a focus on accounting, advertising, banking, communication, immigration, law and marketing.

www.avantgardetranslations.com

