

# Meet the ebullient Bryna Monson

BY KELLY EGAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN FEBRUARY 8, 2012





The irrepressible Bryna Monson, 80, of Languages of Life. She was one of the 60 recipients this week of the Diamond Jubilee Medal for community service.

**Photograph by:** Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen, Ottawa Citizen

Bryna Monson is just a wee thing, a little old lady who lives big and loud.

She is close to 80, but do not press her for precise dates. The self-described "Jewish broad" will stop you cold, refer to God's only son by his full name, and remind you that age is a number, not a gateway to the margins.

Nor does she take kindly to a suggestion that Monday's winner of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal does not always speak the Queen's English.

"None of your God-damn business if I swear like a trooper."

And she laughs. She is disarming like that.

Monson is well-known across town in police and health-care circles for founding and running Languages of Life Inc., which offers round-the-clock translation for those struggling with English or French while dealing with doctors, police officers, child-welfare authorities or even insurance agents.

It has a roster of some 400 interpreters who can translate about 140 languages. It gets by without a nickel in government funding, a staff of two and a bit and loads of enthusiastic fundraising.

Many things have been written about Monson over the years, but Tuesday in her office at Fifth Avenue Court was the first time we heard the depth of her attachment to the cause.

She came from a wealthy Victoriaville family named Grosser. They lived in a big house and had a chauffeur, she said, until her father Charles fell ill with a poorly understood disease called multiple sclerosis. Harder times would follow.

"I think you have to learn to fight for yourself. When you go from steak and potatoes, to pea soup, you fight. You have no choice but to fight your life."

When she started Languages of Life (in 1979, under a different name), it was a shoestring operation and, after marriage at age 18, she was now divorced. She had, however, a sizable amount of expensive jewelry from her mother. She sold most of it, save the diamond wedding ring she wears to this day.

"I sold it to keep this agency going and, you know what? I would do it again."

She is not one for fancy baubles, though she did look smashing in a cream-coloured suit the day the Governor General pinned the medal on, one of 60 awarded this week.

"My mother gave me some jewelry, but arthritis too. I couldn't sell that. I tried."

Indeed, while raising two children on her own, she said, of necessity, she sold an A.Y. Jackson painting to keep the home fires burning.

Monson said her epiphany - "my light had gone out a long time, then it went on again" - occurred as she was doing social work in the Ottawa Civic in the late 1970s.

A man had collapsed at the airport and arrived with a life-threatening condition. But he spoke no English and it was unclear if he had any family nearby.

He was Lebanese. Monson said she tried to help, but was rebuffed. "How can you know what to do when you don't know what the hell they're saying?"

She put out a call to friends Ernie and Mary Assaly, then a prominent construction family.

They arrived with food and, more importantly, comfort and communication. The man was in town for a wedding. Calls were immediately made to his wife back home. It made, she remembers, all the difference in the world.

Then fate intervened, but Monson describes it more colourfully. "God was good to me. I fell and broke my leg, and I was home for year. And I am not a sit-at-home person."

She started to put together the framework for the organization. It began translating about 10 languages. For the first 15 years, everyone was a volunteer.

Monson, meanwhile, networked: with the Citizen's Dave Brown, with CJOH's Max Keeping, Mayor Jim Durrell, MPs, PMs (Trudeau, Chrétien), GGs, police chiefs - you name it, she was on the horn with her irrepressible pitch. Many doubted her.

"I remember the first time she ever called," said Larry Hill, a former deputy police chief in Ottawa, stopped at a posh party Monday. "I answered the phone 'Deputy Chief Hill' and Bryna said 'Yeah, this is Brigadier Monson'."

And it was love at first line, so to speak. Hill has been a great supporter ever since. Indeed, it is Monson's way to win people over with warmth, wit or wisecracks.

Asso Faraj has been translating for Languages for 23 years (Kurdish, Arabic, Farsi). He met Monson only days after he arrived in Canada in 1989. "I'm here to meet Mrs. Monson," he recalled saying when he entered the office.

"She died a long time ago," came the reply from, of course, Monson herself. They've been friends and associates ever since.

Monson does not entertain thoughts of retirement: "I will not sit at home and do nothing.

"I love what I do. I'm happy to be here at eight in the morning, or to get up for a call at two in the morning, because I love what I'm doing."

To contact Kelly Egan, please call 613-726-5896, or email [kegan@ottawacitizen.com](mailto:kegan@ottawacitizen.com)

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