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Immersion programs ensure cultural survival

by Ron Selden

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BROWNING, Mont. - Stepping into the Blackfeet Indian Reservation's language immersion schools is like stepping back into time. Here, as with their ancestors, Blackfeet boys and girls from beginners not more than 2 through sixth grade are encouraged to think and speak in their native tongue. Here English is meant to be a student's secondary language.

Asked what he likes best about the program, Sam DeRoche says it is simple. "I can talk with my grandparents now. Before I couldn't understand them."

"People look up to us because we can speak Indian," adds fellow student Kristy Calf Robe.

"They're proud of it," says instructor Deanna Burd, who teaches upper grades with her mother, Diana Burd.

"We produce speakers and leaders in here," Diana adds. "Their whole personality changes once they know who they are."

One of the biggest challenges for the institute programs is making an age-old language fit into modern times. Traditional Blackfeet has no words for computers, spaceships, microwave ovens, and countless other staples of the time. In most cases, Deanna says tribal elders and others are consulted before the new words and phrases are put into common usage, adding it's fortunate Blackfeet is "very flexible."



The Cuts Wood and Moccasin Flat schools are part of an ambitious project spearheaded by the nonprofit Piegan Institute, founded in late 1987 by tribal members Darrell Robes Kipp and Dorothy Still Smoking. The third school, Lost Child, will open this fall. The first eighth-graders will graduate in 2003.

The pair established the institute as a grass-roots way to help perpetuate Blackfeet heritage, especially the language, and modeled it on a successful school in Hawaii.

Many Indian children "live in a de-linguaged zone" because most of their parents and many of their grandparents were taught it was wrong to retain their lingual heritage, Kipp says. Turning the tide will take an immense effort from tribal educators and political leaders.

A 1985 survey of Blackfeet members showed that essentially no one on the reservation under the age of 50 actively spoke Blackfeet, a "crucial thread" to maintaining the tribe's

uniqueness, he says. Even in the 50- to 60-year-age bracket, the number of fluent speakers was "slim."

"I think language was the first gift the Creator gave us," Kipp says. "... and he wonders why we gave it away."

Establishing the Piegan Institute was uphill because "we could not get anyone to support us." Undeterred, they forged ahead into an obvious quandary - most tribal members didn't practice the language yet surveys showed about 99 percent of respondents wanted their children to learn Blackfeet. Many didn't believe it was possible to learn a second language, and, given the choice, English was the language most would choose.

Perplexed, Kipp and Still Smoking filtered deeper into the community and in 1993 produced the award-winning video, "Transitions: Death of a Mother Tongue," which documents the state of the Blackfeet language and its importance through the eyes of elders, everyday tribal members and emerging leaders. It helped solidify support for the creation of the new schools.

Kipp and Still Smoking attracted the attention of actress Jane Fonda and fellow philanthropist Howard Terpning, who together provided \$155,000 in seed money. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation chipped in \$170,000 for teacher training and The Lannan Foundation contributed \$1.2 million for construction and general operating costs, and a challenge grant of \$250,000 to be matched by August 2001.

Another donor promised to match the total and yet another will match the fund once it reaches \$1.5 million. The goal is to have a \$3 million endowment within the next few years. In time, Kipp hopes graduates will return and manage the facilities which have an annual payroll of about \$300,000.

In all, Kipp says about \$2.4 million has been spent building and staffing the schools. "We want to connect learning with quality. We're adding status to our language." He points out that the schools are fully accredited and no federal or state money has been solicited " ... we don't ask for permission. We have our own standards and our standards exceed the state's."



To help cover costs and create a sense of ownership, parents pay up to \$100 tuition a month for each child. Parents must come to the schools a minimum of three hours a week so they can improve their language skills.

The schools have a 1:7 ratio of teachers to students, Kipp says. The individual attention from a specially trained staff helps push the students ahead of their peers in achievement tests.

"We have no qualms in stating whatsoever that our children could return to the public schools and do quite well," Kipp said.

Administrators in the reservation's public school system say they're doing what they can to educate students about their language and culture, but a lack of money and staff has thus far prevented them from fully achieving their goals.

Language offerings are being expanded each year, says bilingual program director Laura Gervais. This fall, language immersion labs should be in place in the district's high school and middle school, and some new language programming will be offered in the elementary schools. About 98 percent of the district's students are Native American.

Gervais said the reservation's Head Start program offers language training, as well as Blackfeet Community College, but there's much to be done.

District leaders will be asked to approve new bilingual curriculum with history of Blackfeet culture, as well a detailed plan that integrates the native language into math, science and reading and general history courses.

Robert DesRosier, chairman of the Browning Board of Public Education, says he believes the Piegan Institute's immersion schools add nicely to the mix of education opportunities on the reservation. "They help keep us together. I really think Darrell has put us on the map as far as education goes."

Kipp and Still Smoking have helped more than 20 other tribes across the nation develop language programs of their own. Kipp has also traveled to Bosnia and other parts of the world in his quest to learn more about language preservation.

"I've been at the death bed of a lot of languages," he says. "You're talking legacy here, messing with the timeclock. We want other tribes to do this. If they don't do this, they're going to lose their languages. ... just start," he says. "And then, show, don't tell. ... But always remember that once you start, you may never be able to get out of it."