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## **KEEPING A LANGUAGE ALIVE: Co-founder of Blackfoot immersion school in Browning visits UM**

By Kim Briggeman



**Blackfoot linguist, poet and teacher Darrell Kipp** told students at the University of Montana on Tuesday that youngsters in his Cuts Wood School in Browning learn their native language more efficiently by using a combination sign and oral language.  
MICHAEL GALLACHER/Missoulian

Blackfeet learning Blackfoot - what a novel concept.

Not long ago it was, Darrell Kipp said Tuesday.

"Twenty years ago, the notion of revitalizing our language was met with hostility. That shocks people today," said Kipp, a Blackfeet and graduate of Harvard University.

Kipp is on campus at the University of Montana this week, speaking at classes and Wednesday night at the Gallagher Business Building about the Piegan Institute and the pioneer language immersion school he helped found in Browning.

More than a century of assimilating America's Native people into an English-speaking society by "religious and public institutions" was highly effective, he said.

"The conditioning of people to reject or replace something as close to them as their language was highly effective," he said.

So when Kipp, Dr. Dorothy Still Smoking and Edward Little Plume launched Cuts Wood School in downtown Browning in the mid-1990s, they were met with antagonism and resentment on the reservation.

Kipp told of facing the wrath of Blackfeet who told him point-blank that speaking the native language was the devil's work. He was called a mercenary, bent on exploiting the language in order to sell it.

It wasn't, "Hey, you shouldn't do that," Kipp said.

"It was, 'What the hell are you doing? Who in the hell do you think you are? What are you trying to be - a big Indian and steal everything?' "

Perhaps most troubling was the notion that the Cuts Wood School, a K-8 institution at which only the Blackfoot language is spoken, was out to harm the children.

"I think this really reflects the educational standards of Montana, and it's certainly an American philosophy, that the only route to success is an English-speaking trek," he said. "Anything less, or anything different, is a serious mistake."

Some saw Cuts Wood School as promoting something bordering on child neglect.

"The fact that you would risk your child's mental stability by proposing to have your child talk in an archaic language is close to pure negligence," he said, repeating one charge he heard.

But time and research have proved the language immersion school's value.

Three of the school's graduates are now in college. Others have scored well in testing, including four at off-reservation high schools in Cut Bank, Valier and Billings.

A master's study by a University of Montana psychology student in 2003 presented what Kipp called a "very powerful case" that Cuts Wood students actually outperform those with public school backgrounds.

"These children have been schooled in a program that never gave them a formal English language, yet they go into public schools and excel as English-based students," he said.

How to explain that?

"Here at the University of Montana, how many students come from other countries with limited English and max out your Ph.D. programs in science and math?" Kipp said.

Cuts Wood also teaches sign language, and the multilingual approach is known to succeed in schools, be they American Indian or not.

That success extends to other disciplines, Kipp maintained.

In the Blackfoot language, children can count to a million much quicker than in English, for example.

"It's just a shift in a suffix," he said.

"The thinking is that tribal languages, because they're archaic, are stunted in their ability to deal with sophisticated mathematics. The fact of the matter is they're able to incorporate all the attributes of modern-day mathematics, but because the language works so differently, they often can make quantum leaps, like going from 10 to a million (quickly)."

The Blackfoot language also doesn't distinguish between gender.

"Oftentimes you think, how does that reflect, just in world view?" Kipp said.

Blackfoot and other tribal languages have a fourth and fifth person in their grammatical structure.

"English-speaking people just can't go there," and are often repulsed by the idea of learning sentence structure and diagramming, Kipp said.

He said the Blackfoot language is primarily made up of "timeless verbs," most often in the present tense that describe things in an animate state. The term for moose translates to "dark moving into the brush."

"I think that's a moose," he said.

The world isn't divided into animate and inanimate objects. In an office in the Native American Studies building on campus, he pointed to a bowl of apples, a table, a reporter's shirt.

"Using English, they're all dead," he said. "But you make the next step up to science, and you get into physics and chemistry, then you realize the table's not dead, and there are things going on in your shirt."

The Browning school, an offshoot of the Piegan Institute, and another launched by the Mohawk tribe were the nation's first American Indian language immersion schools. They've been models in recent years for the successful Nkwsum (Salish) school in Arlee and the White Clay (Gros Ventres) at Fort Belknap.

In 1990, Congress passed and President George H.W. Bush signed a Native American Language bill that "at least acknowledged the legality of speaking our language," Kipp said. "Native American languages were outlawed until 1990."

Last December, Bush's son signed into law an act providing a competitive grant system for native language immersion programs.

"That's a big jump," said Kipp. "Twenty years ago you were accosted by your own people, told to mind your own business and that Native languages were like a vase thrown on the ground - broken forever."

### **Living language**

Darrell Kipp will speak Wednesday night about the work of the Piegan Institute in Browning and the emerging national language revitalization movement in American Indian communities. The free lecture, at 7 p.m. in the University of Montana's Gallagher Business Building, Room 106, is presented by Native American Studies department and the Calvin B. Stott Scholar fund.