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Raising Minipokaiax

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Photography by Lynn Donaldson

Born in Browning 58 years ago, Darrell Kipp is a self-described child of plenty—in his own language, Blackfoot, a “minipoka.“

”I was raised in a rural, ranching community, where the language was still strong, where the extended families still functioned as extended families, where we were always presented with the positive aspects of being Indian people.”

The concept of the child of plenty, or of praise, he is quick to explain, has nothing to do with being spoiled. “It is more the child who has everything, therefore wants nothing. This child knows he can do anything. He doesn’t whine, or pout. Not spoiled, but taken care of. They get things they use, rather than just what they want, and will always be the first to give presents to others. When a minipoka sees a truck he might want, he doesn’t say, ‘Gimme that truck,’ he thinks, ‘There’s a way for me to get that truck,’ and if he needs it, he goes about figuring out what he has to do to earn it.”

As he struggles to explain, in English, the meaning of a single Blackfoot word, the complexity and subtlety of his language, even of a way of thinking, becomes clear.
“Really, minipokaiax are the perfect children to raise.”

And that’s something Darrell, along with the others working with him at the Piegan Institute and its collection of three Blackfoot language schools, have been striving toward for the last decade or so.

But, before that, Darrell journeyed away from home, starting with a four-year stint at Eastern Montana College in Billings, where he earned a degree in English. “I had never seen many non-Indians until then. But, despite being part of a tiny minority, I never felt singled-out. The logger kid from Libby, the

rancher kid from Roundup—we all had more in common with each other than what separated us. Wow, we were in the big city, you know? We could finally go to a dance and not have to dance with our cousins. This was big stuff."

After being drafted, a two-year army stint in the mid-60s, Darrell traveled a lot, bouncing around, trying to find something he wanted to do. Eventually in 1975, he wound up at Harvard. "I was very interested in how societies worked. Finally realized I was from one…and I wanted to learn about it."

After earning a master's of education in social policy and institutional change, Darrell worked for many tribes along the East coast and all over the country, trying to design schools to match the communities. "A lot of tribes didn't have high schools back then. And they didn't want them. 'All our young people will leave,'" Darrell shakes his head. "So if the community was in a fishing area, we tried to make the high school match that, ranching, logging, whatever."

Finally, in 1982, Darrell returned to Browning to be with his aging parents. There he met Dorothy Still Smoking, who was also home after a long absence, to care for her grandmother. "During a conversation, we became curious how we had both left and finished college, when so many young Indian people don't manage to. And, eventually, we decided that it was our backgrounds—our parents—that had made it possible. They were able to praise us, teach us how great we were. We were given credit for who we were, what we could do, and because of that, we were not afraid of challenges."

Blackfeet youth in attendance at Nizipuhwahsin Center in Browning, Montana.

Darrell explains some history: "The philosophy of the day was 'kill the Indian, save the man.' The mission schools forbade the speaking of our language. For decades the Indian people were taught that their language, art, music, everything, was so worthless it had to be abandoned. They did not try to educate the Indian child, they tried to change him."

This, of course, had a reverse impact. "It made the Indian ashamed of who [he was]. He became intimidated in the world. When someone asked him about his tribe, he couldn't tell a thing. He didn't know his own history. You take any child and tell them every day that they're worthless, they'll believe it, to some extent, forever."
As he does often, Darrell laughs. "I had to go to college before I was able to study Indians."

Dorothy and Darrell also realized that they didn't know their own language well—and either did most anyone else. A study in the mid-80s showed that no one under 55 years old was still fluent in Blackfoot, and only about 40 percent of those over 55 were. They decided to study their language as a means of self-discovery. In 1987, along with Ed Little Plume, they co-founded the Piegan Institute, a private, nonprofit group which Darrell says has never taken any government money. Their mission statement: to research, promote, and preserve the Native American language.

Opening file drawer after file drawer, Darrell says, "For seven years we gathered materials, dictionaries, archives, taught ourselves the language. We were a couple of academics. We thought we might write a paper about it someday."

Blackfeet youth in attendance at Nizipuhwahsin Center in Browning, Montana.

Instead they wrote a book, Study of the Blackfoot Language, 1934 to 1958, which is still the consummate guide to studying the language. And in 1992, they made a film, Transitions: Death of a Mother Tongue, chronicling the Blackfeet people in mission schools, where they were first forbidden to use their language. It went on to become one of the first Native American films shown at Sundance.

Giving seminars, studying why they lost their language to such a drastic extent, they began studying language teaching techniques as well, where they came across the total physical response methodology. Things began to shift more dramatically from their original idea of writing a paper someday.

In 1994 the Institute built their first total immersion Blackfoot language school, the preschool through kindergarten Moccasin Flat School. Two years later, they built a first- through sixth-grade school, Cuts Wood, and four years after that, the Lost Children School for seventh and eighth graders.

In the classrooms little kids crawl around chairs, under tables, they stand in a circle, jump around, the whole time speaking Blackfoot. “Associating a movement with specific words internalizes the language. They don’t have to translate back into English.” The Total Physical Response method. No English is allowed during the school day.

But, Darrell explains, “the school is not nationalistic, or retro, we’re not trying to exclude anyone or to stay in the past. Rather we’re trying to move into the future successfully on the strength of the past. The language is the basis of our formal belief system, a cosmology of history and genesis, everything that is important to us as Indian people.”

He smiles. “Same reason you don’t burn down your libraries is why we keep our language. Our language is our library.”

He goes on. “And Blackfeet is totally unlike English, so it gives the child another thinking blueprint. For example, in Blackfeet, there is no gender, so the world can be suddenly seen in a different fashion. Or, there is nothing dead in Blackfeet, only the animate and the inanimate, so everything is alive. The child sees the world as alive around them.”

Still, the school is small, but, depending on donations, it’s as large as they’re able to make it. “No high school yet,” Darrell says. “Too expensive.”

Charging a ‘symbolic tuition’ of $100 a month, which many of the parents cannot afford, takes the school away from being a give-away program. “Even if they can only pay one dollar, they always pay something. It gives dignity and a sense of stewardship in the school.” And the school asks for a larger commitment. “We ask that the child comes here for all eight years.”

Graduating six to 10 students a year, the waiting list is enormous. “That’s our problem now. Parents

bring applications to us when their kids are three, two, hoping that by kindergarten they'll get in."

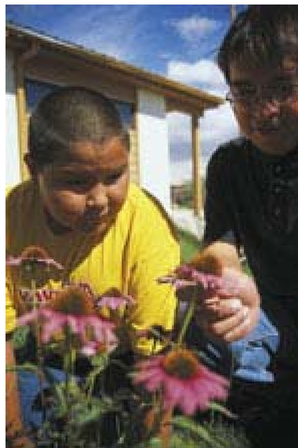
Nizipuhwahsin Center teacher, Shirley Crow Shoe, with Blackfeet students in Browning, Montana.

Walking the school grounds, past the vegetable garden, the native herb garden, Darrell says, "For a long time, I always felt like I was on a journey away from home, but when I started studying my language I began to feel as if I might be starting the journey back. I think I'm still on that journey."

Passing the young trees he hopes will became a native forest, Darrell asks, "Can we, even with the small number of kids coming through this school, give them the same sense of inner strength to succeed in college the way we did? We teach the language and everything else here to create a healthy child, to give them choices, to give them parity in society."

So far, it seems to be working. Of their first eight graduates, every one is now an honor student in their high schools. They hold leadership positions.

They have become minipokaiax.



Nizipuhwahsin Center staff member with Blackfeet student in Browning, Montana