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Stemming the Tide

by Rita Pyrellis

Darrell Kipp has sat at the deathbed of more than a few Native languages. As a Blackfoot educator and language activist, he knows well "that feeling of tremendous grief" when a language slips away. And he has devoted his life to making sure that his endures.

Kipp is one of dozens of Native peoples from around the country fighting to revitalize their language--a movement that has gained momentum, and urgency, in the last decade. From the California coast to the Southwestern desert to the Florida Everglades, many Native communities are looking for ways to ensure the survival of their languages. These efforts have taken many forms, including private immersion schools, CD-ROM language instruction, and kitchen-table learning among adults. Some programs have tribal council and community support, and some do not.

"This is the toughest business you could get into," Kipp says from his office at the Piegan Institute, a private, nonprofit organization in Browning, Montana, that is dedicated to promoting and preserving Native languages. Kipp, a co-founder of the institute, helped develop the Nizi Puh Wah Sin School "Real Speak" Immersion Schools on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. "You are going against the grain of American society, and you are fighting longstanding generational dogma that says, 'Don't speak your language in school,'" he says, referring to the boarding school experiences of many elders in his community. "It is an extremely difficult task, changing a collective mind view. We've done a lot of community seminars and attitudes are changing, but time is running out."

This sense of growing urgency is justified, according to the Indigenous Language Institute (ILI, formerly known as IPOLA) in Santa Fe, NM. Of an estimated 300 languages spoken in the territorial United States when Columbus landed here in 1492, only 175 are still spoken. But of these, only 20 are being passed down to infants and children--a critical link in perpetuating language. Several communities have only a handful of speakers. Some tribes, like the Cahuilla in Southern California, are down to the last fluent speaker of their native language. When these people die, much more than just their language is lost.

"We still have some of our dances, but we've lost the Flower Dance, the Kick Dance, some of our ceremonies," says James Jackson Jr., who at 91 is one of four remaining Native speakers of the Hupa language among nearly 2,000 tribal members. "Those things are gone because certain people are gone." Jackson teaches the language once a week at the Hoopa Community Center in Hoopa, California--in a state that once had the densest concentration of indigenous languages in North America. His grandson, who teaches Hupa at the local high school, says that language is more than a way to communicate, it is "a reflection of the people." In Hupa "there is no gender, the aspect of time is different, there is no East or West, just upstream and downstream," he explains. "Learning your language gives you a different and a larger worldview."

To understand why Native languages are dying requires a quick look at government policies. For nearly a century, Native American languages, as well as Native Hawaiian, were the target of government policies to eradicate them. In 1869 a federal commission on Indian Affairs concluded: "In the difference of language lies two-thirds of our trouble. Their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted." The commission concluded that "through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment, and thought." Not until 1990 did the federal government reverse its hostile attitude toward Native languages when Congress passed the Native American Languages Act, which set forth a policy of preserving indigenous languages.

Ground zero for eliminating Native tongues were government- and mission-run boarding schools,

where students were forbidden to speak their language and often were physically punished for doing so, even up until the 1950s. A favored technique—one that Jackson recalls in his mission boarding-school experience—was washing a student's mouth out with soap. These practices and attitudes left deep psychological scars among many Native people, making them reluctant to pass their language on. Boarding-school experiences had "a devastating generational effect," according to Kipp.

At the Nizi Puh Wah Sin School, language immersion begins at preschool, and parents are urged to speak Blackfoot at home. English at school is strictly forbidden. Five days a week, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., students from preschool and kindergarten through eighth grade learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, among other subjects, entirely in Blackfoot. Tribal beliefs and traditions are reflected everywhere, even in the construction of the buildings.

There are only a handful of true immersion schools in the nation. The Blackfeet program was inspired by one of the first and most successful—the Punano Leo schools in Hawaii. In 15 years, the Hawaiian schools have grown from a few volunteers running a preschool with 12 students to a \$5-million-a-year enterprise with 130 employees and 11 private Hawaiian-language schools, the world's most sophisticated native language computer network, and millions of dollars in university scholarships. The Punano Leo schools were inspired by the Maori in New Zealand and the Mohawks of Canada.

Experts believe that these types of immersion schools succeed where many other efforts fail: in the home. Many schools, like Punano Leo, require parents also to become fluent in their native language and to promise that they will speak it at home.

Kipp believes that total immersion, in which the language being learned is the only one spoken, is the most effective way to preserve language. But he also acknowledges that such programs are the most difficult to get off the ground. Most immersion schools are privately funded and require a high degree of community involvement and support.

Inee Yang Slaughter, executive director of ILI, agrees. "Yes, these types of schools would be the ideal. But about 80 percent of Native communities are not able to pursue the dream of an immersion school," she says. "This is due, for one, to a lack of speakers in the community, and, as a result, teachers. You need a cadre of people to teach and run an immersion school."

Slaughter said each community has unique needs and resources and that all efforts to revitalize language need to be honored. For communities with only a handful of older Native speakers, a master-apprentice program can be very effective. This one-on-one approach is one way to adhere to the concept of immersion, but on a smaller, more workable scale, Slaughter explains. "We honor everybody's effort for the sheer love of what this means to us," she says. "A total immersion school is just as important as two folks sitting around a kitchen table learning their language." A good example of one-on-one learning can be found in the Tlingit community in Carcross, Alaska. Their program is one of three language revitalization efforts profiled in a documentary film called *Finding My Talk: A Journey Through Aboriginal Languages*, by Canadian filmmaker Paul M. Rickard.

Whatever the approach, the most important ingredient in developing a successful language revitalization program, according to Slaughter, is "sheer determination and the will to begin."

For Jessie Little Doe, love and determination are the forces driving her to accomplish what some have called impossible: reviving a language that has not been spoken in more than 100 years. For the past seven years, Little Doe, a member of the Mashpee Tribe on Cape Cod, has been on a mission to "reclaim" the Wampanoag language. Little Doe, who prefers the term "reclamation" to describe her efforts, points out that the issues her community faces are different from those who have even one or two Native speakers. "Folks revitalizing their language are looking at a current piece of the culture," she explains. "Reclamation is about discovering that piece."

It has been a daunting effort. Known descendents of the original Wampanoag speakers number only 2,500, and Little Doe is trying to create a spoken language out of a language that existed only in documents, many from the 17th century. In spite of these obstacles, Little Doe, who received a Ph.D. in linguistics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in June 2000, says her efforts have widespread support both in the community and among fellow linguists. Little Doe hopes that other Native communities without speakers will be inspired by her community's example. "A lot of times I read that if you don't have your language, you don't have your culture," she says. "But that can't be true because we're still here. We still have Wampanoag culture, songs, and dances. But using the language helps us pray better. It is a special gift. It's made me understand why I view things the way I do. There is something powerful in that. It has brought our people together."

Community support and determination are two components necessary in developing a language program. Another is taking a realistic look at the status of the language, according to Slaughter. How many Native speakers are there? How many children are learning the language? These are just a few of the questions communities must ask themselves. "There is a reality gap out there," Kipp says. "A lot of people assume their language is relatively strong, but most tribes don't have any children that speak their language. You need to take a realistic view of what you're facing and deal with it."

In 1997, the Hopi did just that, with a survey that revealed that only 10 to 15 percent of Hopi under 20 years old were fluent. Although the language is not in danger of dying, according to a Hopi professor and linguist who preferred not to be identified, the results were alarming. As a result, the tribal council passed a mandate to teach Hopi at the tribally run, federally funded schools. In addition, the tribe compiled a comprehensive Hopi dictionary, far more advanced than the lexicons done in the early 1990s, and it was published in 1998 by the University of Arizona Press. Also, the tribe asked the professor to develop courses using interactive television so that all schools could have access to lessons and to provide teacher training.

Today, Hopi schoolchildren from kindergarten through high school study the language as a discipline, like math or science. Although the ultimate goal is to create speakers, students must also learn to read and write Hopi and to study grammar and syntax. Hopi officials say it's too soon to determine how successful their approach has been. Success can be difficult to quantify for many programs, especially smaller ones, according to Slaughter, because success means different things to different communities. But the ultimate goal for most language revitalization programs is simple: creating Native speakers.

Success also depends on changing attitudes toward language revitalization on an individual, community, and national level. Community activists like Kipp, Little Doe, and others are creating awareness one community at a time, but more support is needed on a national level, according to John Cheek, executive director of the National Indian Education Association in Washington, D.C. "It's about changing the attitude of Congress, which very much has an English-only attitude," he says. "Until that happens, it's up to individuals and Native communities to help stem the tide of languages being lost."

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