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The Last Word

by Ron Selden, Photos by Chad Harder

How a group of Montana teachers saved the Blackfeet language from extinction.



Stepping into the newly opened Lost Child immersion school in Browning is like taking a capsule back in time.

Here, young Indian boys and girls are taught to think and speak in their native tongue, as their ancestors were. And unlike most places on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, English is meant to be the students' second language.

Asked what he likes best about the program, which serves youngsters from kindergarten through the eighth grade, student Sam DeRoche says the answer is simple. "I can talk with my grandparents now," he explains. "Before I couldn't understand them."

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

"They're proud of it," says instructor Deanna Burd, who teaches the program's upper grades with her mother, Diana Burd. "They know they're Indian, and they're proud of it."

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

The Lost Child, Cuts Wood and Moccasin Flat schools are part of an ambitious project undertaken by the Piegan Institute, a nonprofit organization founded in 1987 by Blackfeet tribal members Darrell Robes Kipp and Dorothy Still Smoking. Kipp's son Darren joined the group's three-member board of directors in 1994. "You can't get off the board unless you die," Darrell says with his trademark mischievous grin.

Still Smoking, recently appointed president of Blackfeet Community College, has degrees from Concordia College and the University of South Dakota, as well as a doctorate in education from Montana State University. Kipp holds an undergraduate degree from the former Eastern Montana College, a Master of Fine Arts degree in writing from Vermont's former Goddard College, and a master's degree in social policy change from Harvard University. The pair established the institute as a last-ditch way to protect and perpetuate their tribe's heritage, especially the spoken word.

Kipp, a former editor for Time-Life, knows firsthand how difficult it is to master the Blackfeet language. Long before he learned his native tongue, he recalls addressing a group and trying to say he rode his horse to town. Instead, Kipp mistakenly related that his horse had the runs.

"This is not a project for the faint-hearted," he says of the three schools, collectively dubbed "Real Speak" in Blackfeet. "I've been at the death bed of a lot of languages. You're talking legacy, messing with the time clock."

Linguists say there were at least 300 Native languages used in North America when Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492. Of those, about 190 are still spoken or at least fractionally used. But according to prominent researchers Jon Reyhner and Edward Tennant, only about 20 of these languages are practiced throughout all levels of individual tribes and bands.

Without complete stratification—where the old and the young and everyone in between are speaking—even the surviving language speaking – even the surviving language groups are threatened, they say. Kipp says many Indian children today “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.

Decades of church-and-state-sponsored prohibitions against Native languages, bolstered in public schools and boarding institutions alike, were almost entirely successful in eradicating the culture, he says. Turning the tide, he admits, will take an immense effort from tribal educators and political leaders.

Kipp, who has become an internationally known authority in the field, says preserving languages is a “crucial thread” in perpetuating Native cultures around the world. Without it, he contends, centuries of traditions will be lost forever. “I think language was the first gift the Creator gave us,” he explains. “The Creator gave us a gift and he wonders why we gave it away.”



Shirley Crow Shoe, teacher at Nizipuhwahsin Center, a nationally recognized effective model for Native language immersion with a multi-generational approach.

Death of a Mother Tongue

With the Blackfeet, Kipp and Still Smoking were disheartened when a series of cultural-identity seminars they helped organize in the early 1980s showed that many tribal members, especially the young, didn't hold their native language in high esteem, even though it was nearing extinction.

“We were really astounded that no one was interested in our language. Then we got a second hit,” Kipp says, referring to a 1985 survey of Blackfeet members. “We weren't either. It was an awakening for us.”

The survey showed that essentially no one on the reservation under the age of 50 actively spoke Blackfeet. And even in the 50-60 year-age bracket, the number of fluent speakers was “slim,” he says.

A main part of the problem, he and Still Smoking surmised, was that the dominant non-Indian culture had controlled tribal education systems since reservations were first established in the late 1800s.

“They don't say they want to educate you,” Kipp contends. “They say, ‘We want to change you.’ Formal Western education puts Indians on a journey away from themselves. Western education removes you away from who you are.” Combating decades of de-culturing Native Americans means reworking the entire educational system from the bottom up, Kipp says, and at the same time providing an alternative.

“These things don't work in public schools,” he says of immersion programs. “It takes a lot of philosophizing, a lot of fasting. You don't just do this.”

Indeed, establishing the Piegan Institute was an uphill battle, Kipp says: “We could not get anyone to support us.” Undeterred, he and Still Smoking plowed ahead, realizing they were on the cusp of

something crucially important. “We discovered there was an order of some sort,” Kipp says of the loss of languages around the world. “It was a common lament, and we heard it from a lot of people other than Indians.”

As they progressed, Kipp and Still Smoking came upon an obvious quandary—most Blackfeet tribal members didn’t speak the language, and some, in fact, expressed disdain toward it, just as their oppressors wanted. But ironically, Kipp says, the institute’s surveys also showed about 99 percent of respondents wanted their children to learn it. Complicating the matter further, Kipp explains, was the fact that many respondents said they didn’t believe it was possible to learn a second language, and if given the choice, English, for obvious reasons, was the language most would choose.

Perplexed by their findings, 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. The project, among others undertaken by the institute, provoked many reservation residents to look closer at the issue, Kipp says, and also helped solidify support for the creation of the new private schools.

New Beginnings

In 1994, the institute founders traveled to Hawaii to visit the famous Aha Punana Leo Schools, where Native students were successfully learning their home languages through immersion. Kipp and Still Smoking came back to Montana convinced that the only way to succeed was to dive in and start a similar program on the Blackfeet Reservation.

“We finally started seeing a shift in the community’s thinking,” Kipp says of the climate in Browning upon their return. “We learned there’s a true, bona fide desire among some people to learn the language. I don’t know if it’s in their genes or in their brains or what. But we radically underestimate the people on our reservations who wish to speak their language. It’s really the pursuit of self-knowledge by Indian people who have been denied access to the knowledge for so long. And the strongest empowerment we have is self-knowledge.”

The group quickly went to work raising money and attracted the attention of actress Jane Fonda and fellow philanthropist Howard Terpning, who together provided \$155,000 in seed money for the project. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation chipped in \$170,000 for teacher training, and The Lannan Foundation contributed a whopping \$1.2 million for construction and general operating costs, as well as a \$250,000 challenge grant, which must be matched by next summer. Once the match is made, Kipp says, an anonymous donor has promised to double that total.

Another supporter will match again if the sum reaches \$1.5 million. The ensuing \$3 million would serve as the institute’s endowment fund, although they’re always looking for additional funds. “We consider the building phase completed,” Kipp says. “Our efforts now will be committed to curriculum building. But we’re such a lone-horse operation that it’s hard to get anyone to pay attention to us.”

Moccasin Flat School, which serves the youngest students, opened in 1995, followed by the Cuts Wood facility two years later. The Lost Child school opened in August. More than 40 students are currently enrolled in the program, and dozens more are on waiting lists. Outside of a small, public school program on the Fort Peck Reservation, the institute runs the only native immersion schools in Montana.

“We’ve never recruited for students,” Kipp says. “We’ve never had to.”

In all, he says, about \$2.4 million has been spent building and staffing the “Real Speak” schools over the past five years. The school buildings are tight and brightly lit, and few shortcuts were taken in their construction. Classroom equipment is also top-notch.

“We want to connect learning with quality,” Kipp explains. “We’re adding status to our language.”

Kipp proudly points out that the schools are fully accredited, and that no federal or state money has been solicited.

“The move away from government subsidy meant a move away from government control,” he says. “I believe true immersion schools should set out to exceed [state and local] standards. We say we’re a very high-caliber school, and we operate like one. One of our rules is that we don’t ask for permission. We have our own standards and our standards exceed the state’s. The only thing we’re affiliated with is the language.”

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

The tuition, which Kipp calls “symbolic,” creates a financial hardship for many families, and some opt to work it off at the schools at a rate of \$10 an hour. Other members of the community put in time for parents who can’t attend to help reduce their costs.

“There’s lots of unheralded heroes,” Kipp says. “We would never, ever turn a kid down for lack of tuition. It’s not an exclusionary program.” Along with immersing Indian children back into their language and other aspects of Blackfeet heritage, a major advantage to the schools is that they have a 1:7 ratio of teachers to students, Kipp says. The individual attention has helped the students excel in achievement tests, according to one MSU researcher who based her master’s thesis on the schools’ successes.

“There’s a strong correlation between strong learners and a strong sense of self-identity,” Kipp explains. “We have no qualms in stating whatsoever that our children could return to the public schools and do quite well. People who are aware of their ethnic selves are healthy learners.”

Kipp says and the other founders hope “Real Speak” graduates will come back later to manage their alma maters, which now employ six teachers, a cook and a registrar. The institute’s annual payroll is about \$300,000, a substantial influx to the poverty-plagued reservation, which ranks among the poorest sectors of the entire United States. “There’s an economic base in studying ourselves,” Kipp says half-jokingly. “This movement is growing. These are direct responses to what Indian people want.”

Going Public

Administrators in the Blackfeet Reservation’s public school system, where about 98 percent of the students are Native American, say they’re doing what they can to offer Native language and other cultural programs, 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 bi-lingual program director Laura Gervais, but the district continually has trouble finding enough instructors to teach Blackfeet. She notes that it takes a commitment from each school’s staff to make cultural programming a success. “The whole school has to buy in for it to work,” Gervais says. “We’re making progress. The enthusiasm and interest is here with the students. They want it, and that’s making all the difference. More and more parents want the culture and the language taught to their children.”

Gervais says new language immersion labs are being established in the district’s high school and middle school, and new language programming will soon be offered in the elementary schools.

The reservation’s Head Start program offers language training, she says, as well as Blackfeet Community College. But, Gervais acknowledges, there’s still much to be done to ensure that youngsters between pre-school and college get as much exposure as possible. In an effort to further define the need, a district-wide assessment is being conducted this year.

“What I’d like to see is a Blackfeet language teacher in each building,” Gervais says.

Meanwhile, public school leaders are incorporating a new bi-lingual curriculum that includes sections on tribal history, as well as a detailed plan that integrates the Native language into math, science, reading and general history courses. Project coordinator Leon Rattler says all of the components are crucial in helping students learn more about their identities. Annual field trips to cultural sites also are offered so students can obtain firsthand knowledge about their tribe’s ancestral homeland and traditions.

“Where do you go to learn to be an Indian?” Rattler asks. “Generally, the schools just don’t teach that.”

Robert DesRosier, chairman of the Browning Board of Public Education, says he believes the Piegan Institute’s immersion schools are an important addition to the education opportunities offered on the reservation.

“I think they’re really an asset to the community,” he says. “They help keep us together. I haven’t talked to anyone who doesn’t think the same. It’s a binder for us. I really think Darrell has put us on the map as far as education goes.” As in the public system, however, Kipp says it’s been tougher than expected at times to find teachers who can both excel in the private-school setting, as well as be fluent in Blackfeet.

“It’s almost like you need to have people find you,” he says of the institute’s recruitment efforts. “I don’t think this is a field you advertise outright for.”

The Future of the Language

Life in the Blackfeet immersion schools is in many ways less restrictive than it is in the public system. Students largely make up their own classroom rules, and they help guide what will be taught each day and in what order. Instructors say this creative approach allows each youngster to advance at his or her own pace. As a result, they say, many students are studying at levels far above their age groups. Discipline problems are rare. “These guys have something to do every day,” says Diana Burd. “They don’t have time for running around town.”

A large focus is also put on teaching the children respect, Deanna Burd adds. “They’re very motivated and outgoing and well-mannered,” she says of her students.

One of the biggest challenges, however, is making an age-old language fit into modern times. Traditional Blackfeet, for example, has no words for computers, spaceships, microwave ovens, and countless other staples of our day. Along with learning the language their ancestors spoke, “Real Speak” students must create many new words for the 21st century.

In most cases, Deanna says, tribal elders and others are consulted before the new words and phrases are put into common usage. She adds that it’s fortunate the Blackfeet language is “very flexible.”

“You can make a word for most everything,” she says, even though Blackfeet is grammatically different than English. It has no gender, is full of “timeless” verbs, and presents some subjects in the fourth and fifth person, Kipp explains. While teaching Blackfeet is a primary goal in the immersion schools, Deanna and Diana Burd try to ensure their students can quickly transition from their native language to English in everything they study.

“We’re finding that if they understand it in English, they can do it in Blackfeet,” Deanna says. “What’s good about these kids is that they can go back and forth now,” adds Diana. “It’s a very challenging job, though, to keep the language going. Sometimes I get a headache, and the children say they do, too. We always believe they function in two worlds anyway, so we’re preparing them for both.”

“It is our intention to follow these children for the rest of their lives,” Kipp says. “We’d like to be of assistance to them even when they get into college. It’s a family based school, and these children really

become part of the family.”

Along with their work in Browning, 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.

“We want other tribes to do this,” he says bluntly. “If they don’t do this, they’re going to lose their languages.”

Kipp adds that fear of a lack of finances should not prevent tribes from creating immersion programs. If the will is there, he says, the resources will follow.

“We use the old adage all the time—just start,” he says. “And then, show, don’t tell. I think that’s the most effective way to enlighten people.”