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The Sounds of Salish

Reviving a native language one story at a time

STEPHEN SMALL SALMON, sixty-three, stands in a playroom inside the Nkwusm preschool in the small town of Arlee on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. With his gray hair in braids, shirt untucked, and a traditional Salish toy made of willow twigs and string in one hand, he has a gentle, grandfatherly look to him.

"Pick up the toys and blocks, you guys. We're going to have the *yamncutwi*," the language hour. The eight students, ages three to five, gather around Small Salmon and another Salish elder. All instruction at the school includes some Salish words, but in the yamncutwi, only Salish is spoken.

Sometimes the elders focus on vocabulary: *wa waa* for fox, *ahk' et* for toy, *ket'li* for hill. Other times they tell stories they recall from their childhood. Today Small Salmon recounts how Coyote walked through Jocko Canyon, singing to himself—"way HEY, way HEY"—while shouldering a tamarack, a local conifer. "Slue-TSEN-cheleh Tcheh-CUL-weh-tchen-sheath WHE-wi": Coyote steps on Meadowlark's leg. Small Salmon goes on to tell how Coyote splints the broken leg and Meadowlark warns him of a monster ahead.

The children sit rapt, some cross-legged with elbows on knees and chins on hands. Behind them, sitting on a chair at a low table, is Melanie Sandoval, twenty-seven, a state-certified teacher and one of the school's founders. On her lap is the youngest student, a two year old. Sandoval whispers to her in Salish, clapping her feet and hands together.

Nkwusm's seventeen enrolled students are among the first in half a century to learn their native language as children. Salish is endangered, with only about seventy-five fluent speakers still living in a total population of about 6,000. All but about a dozen Salish speakers are over age sixty-five. Every year since about 1930, the number of Salish speakers has declined.

Nkwusm, pronounced "en-KOO-sum," a native-language immersion preschool, is designed to reverse that trend, preserving not only vocabulary and conjugations but a rich vein of identity, cultural knowledge, science, and stories—including the creation myth Small Salmon is telling.

Despite Meadowlark's warning, Coyote has unwittingly walked into the bowels of a monster. But he stands his tamarack on end, clambers up, and cuts out the monster's heart, allowing a Noah's Ark of animals to escape. To this day, Coyote's tamarack can be found on a small butte beside the highway, and the monster lies fallen as Jocko Valley itself: Its head and hind ends are marked by local canyons—visible from the school and familiar to the children.

"My dad and them told me the story," Small Salmon later recalled. "They said the story reminds us that we inherited this country from the animals, and it teaches us to watch the animals and learn from them."

Such stories are disappearing rapidly. Ninety percent of the 155 native languages in the United States are near extinction. But Nkwusm is part of a small but burgeoning movement. Nationwide, tribes have founded about ten immersion language schools since 1980, and have begun planning about fifty more since the late 1990s, according to Inee Yang Slaughter of the Indigenous Languages Institute in New Mexico. The revival could have positive consequences for understanding and living in harmony with the land.

"Each [language] has a whole history of understanding and knowledge of environment," said Jaune Evans of the Lannan Foundation, a Santa Fe–based nonprofit that fosters native languages and culture.

In 2001, for example, a tribal project to record Salish place names revealed that one thickly forested valley near the Flathead reservation was called *n'paa*, "the burnt-over place." Intrigued, the tribe conducted federally funded research, which suggested that their ancestors regularly started small blazes in the area. Such burning enriched huckleberry and camas, two food staples, and increased forage for large game. This winter, the tribe revised its fire management plan to resume the cycle.

But the language also proclaims a person's identity—and that's what motivated the young founders of Nkwusm.

"It hurts not to know your own lan-

Salish elder and teacher Pat Pierre helps a student pronounce the Salish word for "bison" at Nkwusm, the tribe's native-language immersion preschool.

guage," said Tachini Pete, thirty-two, a self-described language obsessive whose scholarship inspired the other founders of the school. "You have to know the language to see what our ancestors saw and how they viewed the world." Starting in 1994, Pete began interviewing elders, filling notebooks with definitions, and compiling an expanded dictionary of the language. In 1997, he met Sandoval, Josh Brown, twenty-nine, and Chaney Bell, twenty-six, when they all taught at a summer high school program in Missoula.

By 1999, the four friends began meeting once a week to hone their language skills in the kitchen of Dorothy Felsman, a tribal elder and former school teacher. "Sometimes I had to shoo them out of the house," Felsman recalls.

In those sessions, the young tribemembers discussed their options for building a Salish school. The local tribal college offers classes in Salish, and bilingual programs operate in public schools and summer language camps. But it's difficult to produce fluent speakers "from a few lists of words twice a week," said Slaughter.

The immersion school option presented its own obstacles. Native language curricula must be written from scratch and can get bogged down in such issues as proper pronunciation. Tribal politics are often fractious and chaotic. Steady funding is hard to come by. Few skilled speakers can teach, or manage a nonprofit.

The four turned their careers toward the challenge: Sandoval and Pete earned teaching certificates, effectively adapting a Spanish curriculum based on storytelling and hands-on instruction. Brown learned proposal-writing and earned a master's degree in public administration. Pete's dictionary, published by the tribe in 1998, won the respect of politically influential elders. And Bell, a popular ex–football star and student of Salish culture at the tribal college, won over remaining tribemembers with his disarming enthusiasm.

The idea took off. "We all separately knew the roles we needed to fill," said Sandoval. "But the whole community was working toward this school. It was almost like they formed us and put us together." The four were also inspired by success stories of the Blackfeet tribe's Piegan Institute in Browning, Montana, and the language schools run by Native Hawaiians and the Maori in New Zealand.

In 2001, they settled on the name Nkwusm, or "one fire," loosely "one family," and formed a nonprofit. Boosted by $1,000 in foundation seed money, they visited model immersion schools, refined curricula, held a fundraiser, moved into a tribally owned bowling alley, and presented a plan to the tribal council, which provided nearly $100,000 for the first year.

The community donated everything from paper and chairs to a refrigerator. Pete became teacher and executive director, Sandoval teacher, and Bell and Brown board members, focusing on planning and proposal writing. In November 2003, Brown received a two-year, $60,000 foundation fellowship, covering his salary.

Word of mouth and a "NOW ENROLLING" sign visible from the highway attracted students to the free preschool. In September 2002, about a dozen students enrolled for the full day, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. In the fall of 2003, the tribe slightly increased the funding. As of January, 2004, seventeen preschool students were counting, learning the calendar, and talking about the weather—all in Salish. The school's goal is to grow with the students, adding a grade each year and establishing branches in all five communities on the one-million-acre reservation.

Through it all, Nkwusm has addressed one of the greatest obstacles to a full revival of any Native American language: Many elders refuse to speak the language in public, a legacy of years of persecution and the forced relocations to English-only boarding schools from 1890 to 1970. Nkwusm breaks down those barriers by linking the generations. Before this fall, when he began teaching at Nkwusm, Small Salmon rarely spoke his native tongue. As he talked to the students, he began recalling stories from a past he had almost forgotten.

"It's a wonderful feeling," he said. "I'll be driving along, and a song will come back into my head, and I'll sing it again. I'll see a place my dad talked about, and I'll remember a story. Teaching the kids really feels good—from my heart to their heart. I'm hoping that they learn from it, and they carry it on."

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