

A Language Revived

LCC EXAMINES COMMITMENT TO **CHINUK WAWA** LANGUAGE COURSES by Kelsey Anne Rankin

Unless you solely rely on your dusty elementary school education to shape your worldview, or you live beneath a social-media rock, you ought to have a broadened understanding of colonization (just in time for Thanksgiving, y'all). European colonizers came, they saw and then stole the land we now recognize as the United States from its indigenous people.

Early settlers used many forms of sneaky fuckery — I mean, *cough*, assimilation — to overpower indigenous folks and force them to adopt a white code of conduct. One of those methods was the forced erasure of native languages.

Two generations and one nearly extinct language later, native and non-native community members are revitalizing the Northwest language Chinuk Wawa by securing it in a place where it was once ruthlessly banned: our school system.

In the 1800s, indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, together with the European settlers, created the pidgin language Chinuk Wawa to communicate during trade or for everyday conversation; this became the present-day version of the language (tribes used a form of the language during pre-colonial contact) the teachers of the language at Lane Community College tell *EW*. The jargon was a mixture of more than 20 native languages with French and English influences — in a way, it was a budding cultural exchange.

But then came the boarding schools. Then came the brutal methods that colonizers used to literally beat native languages out of indigenous people.

Janne Underriner, director of the Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI) and former Chinuk Wawa professor, says the language has been taught at LCC for a decade. She taught the course for several years before turning her focus towards planning and protecting the class' curriculum.



(LEFT TO RIGHT)
HEIDI HELM,
JEROME VILES
AND JANNE
UNDERRINER

Underriner explains how language courses across the nation are increasingly difficult to protect from budget cuts, and students are shifting their interest away from the arts, including language studies. "There's quite an emphasis on science, math and engineering," Underriner says. "We see across our state, at all levels of education, that language is not well-financed."

This past spring, LCC's recent budget cuts threatened the Chinuk Wawa curriculum (three 100- and 200-level classes), which Underriner says caused multiple layoffs in the language department and put a handful of other courses at risk.

Jerome Viles, a member of the Siletz tribe, attended LCC's Board of Education meeting in May 2016 and saw community members of different tribal affiliations and backgrounds flood the room, then passionately argue against the erasure of yet another native language.

The board decided in a 5-to-1 vote that Chinuk Wawa would remain available for the 2017 school year, but according to the board's meeting notes of June 2016, the discussion about funding the course remains unresolved.

Viles is taking over Underriner's instructor position at LCC and he now teaches three 100 level Chinuk Wawa classes. Together, Viles and Underriner are building a curriculum that focuses on the technical and cultural aspects of the language.

He says that being able to teach and learn Chinuk Wawa is a way of honoring the generations whose language was taken from them, and its revival pays tribute to his and other tribal cultures. "It's trying to heal some of the wound that boarding schools, removal [of native people] and colonization have caused. We have a lot to say about it, obviously," Viles says.

Chinuk Wawa is becoming cross-generational again, which Viles says is the biggest step in revitalization. NILI, Grand Ronde members and other tribal organizations have been teaching the language to younger generations through preschool and high school courses, like the College Now class at Willamina High School.

Our nation's school system has an ethical and moral responsibility to support and protect native cultures, Viles explains, and it is up to our community to protect that obligation to indigenous people.

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