

Northwest Indian Language Institute Comes To Grand Ronde

■ The program offers seven teachers to the 16 students attending.

Story and photos by Ron Karten

In Grand Ronde, pre-schoolers learn Chinuk wawa in an immersion class. Culture Language Specialist Tony Johnson hopes to see the program expand so that students will have continued opportunities to learn the language as they grow.

Tribal member Nicholas Bishop graduated from high school using Chinuk as his foreign language. He had worked his senior year in the Chinuk wawa immersion program, said his mother, Tribal member Vikki Bishop, and made it pay for his education while also making history. (Vikki Bishop is the Director of the Early Childhood Education program for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.)

"This is the first time that's been done in Oregon," said Janne Underriner, Program Director of the Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI), the source of much success in bringing Native languages back to life here in the Northwest.

The program is meeting this summer at the Grand Ronde campus. From its start in 1997 until this year, the two-week program set to end July 2 in Grand Ronde's Education Center had been held at the University of Oregon. This year, the program accomplished one of its long-standing goals, said Underriner — to offer the program on an Indian Reservation.

Seven teachers from Tribes across the region, including Grand Ronde's Chinuk wawa language expert, Tony Johnson, are working with 16 students — mostly Tribal language teachers, said Underriner.

Daily classes have been offered in speaking, reading and writing Chinuk wawa and the Yakama Indian Nation dialect of the Sahaptin language. The Chinuk wawa classes were freely available to all Grand Ronde Tribal members.

Takers included Tribal Elder Don Day, who also is Vice Chair of the Tribes' Cultural Resource Committee. His interest in the language complements his archeological studies at the University of Oregon. "It will give me a better understanding of the artifacts and the ancient culture," he said.

Sessions also covered linguistics, teaching

methods and materials development.

Underriner helped develop this program at the request of Tribes. At the time, she was a graduate student at the University of Oregon, studying linguistics.

"My work went from language analysis to working within the communities," she said.

"We asked them to teach us the skills we need to teach our language," said Johnson. The program also has helped the Grand Ronde program "with independent evaluations of student and teacher progress."

Underriner called the Grand Ronde Chinuk wawa language immersion program "a huge success story. Have you been in and heard those kids speaking Chinuk wawa?" she asked.

But the success here in Grand Ronde is not the only example of a Native language program that NILI has fostered among Northwest Tribes.

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs have developed a Native language program teaching all three of the languages spoken in their community, including Northern Paiute, Kiksht (Upper Chinookan) and the Warm Springs dialect of Sahaptin. Classes include children from kindergarten through fourth grade. In addition, the Warm Springs Tribes have a Native language radio program for the community.

"I wish all the Tribes could have a radio program," said Underriner.

The Klamath Tribes are working with an Elder to keep the language alive, and the Tribes have been able to put the language classes in the public school system.

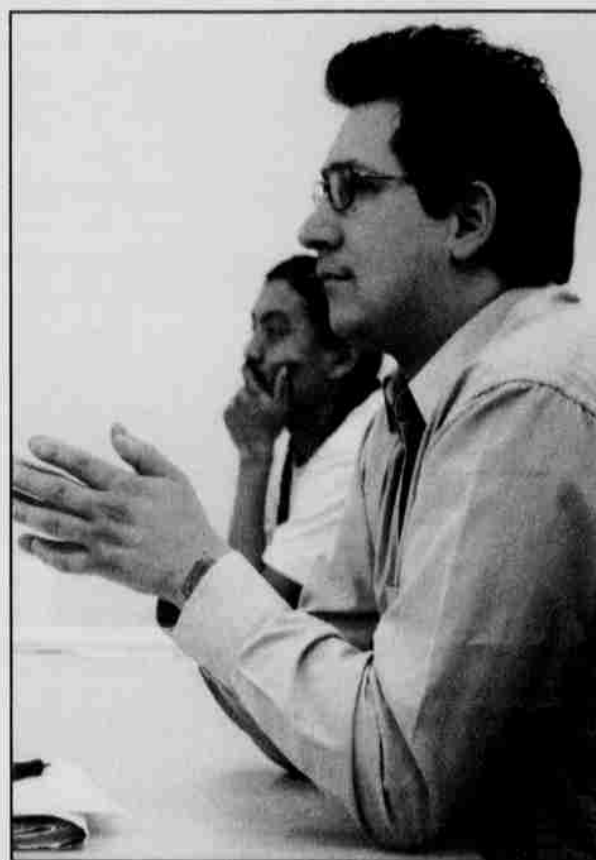
Underriner cited other success stories.

"You can get a degree in the Sahaptin language at Heritage College in Toppenish, Washington," she said.

"Lane Community College has put together a Native studies program that focuses on language, and if you're interested in studying one language, their goal is to find teachers for that language," she said.

In addition, the state of Oregon has developed "a specialized teacher license" for teachers of Native languages.

The program has focused since inception on



Focused — Tribal member Leslie Riggs (foreground) and Yakama and Chehalis Tribal member Greg Sutterlic concentrate on a lesson during this year's Northwest Indian Language Institute.

these summer sessions but Underriner is seeking funds to support "on-site workshops in the fall and spring because teachers need to follow-up." Presently, NILI is able to offer Tribes one-for-one scholarships, meaning that for every two Tribal members that attend, NILI pays for one.

This year, NILI provided \$7,500 toward student tuitions. Tuition for the intensive two-week program, which provide six credits at undergraduate and graduate university levels, was \$950.

"We have used NILI for numerous on-site trainings in the past and will in the future," said Johnson. The success of the program, he said, comes from "the involvement of really great people. There's a lot of laughing and a lot of learning going on."



Preserving The Language — Judith Fernandes, a teacher in the Northwest Indian Language Institute (NILI), leads a class at the NILI workshops held in Grand Ronde from June 15 — July 2. The institute brought in Indian language teachers from across the Northwest. This was the first year the program found a home on a reservation.