

Chinuk Wawa grows in new language education building

By Sherron Lumley

Smoke Signals staff writer

The chinuk wawa skul glows brightly on a wintry December morning in Grand Ronde, with natural light streaming through the new building filled with the sounds of children drumming, singing, laughing and playing.

The Tribe's immersive language program has a home at last, a dream come true for the Elders who envisioned it many years ago.

Chinuk Wawa Education Program Manager Justine Flynn, a Grand Ronde Tribal member, was hired to lead the program in December.

"Teaching language is a key aspect to our lifeways," Flynn said. "This building brings positive momentum. I want to see the school expand and grow in the number of students we are serving."

Flynn is the granddaughter of Tribal Elder Jackie Whisler, a Chinuk Wawa teacher to whom the Tribe's 500-page Chinuk Wawa dictionary was dedicated in 2012.

In addition to learning from family, Flynn studied the language at Lane Community College in Eugene. She has now worked for the Tribe for more than a decade, most recently as the Youth Education Program manager. Previously, she was the lead teacher for second- and third-graders.

"I learned (Chinuk) from my grandma and at Lane," she said. "We have great staff furthering education and infusing culture and language. Part of the goal is offering parents classes, then expanding to community classes at all different levels of proficiency."

Education Department Manager Angela Fasana, a Grand Ronde Tribal member, is excited about having all of the language learners in one building. Her granddaughter, Palmer Heidt, is in the preschool class. Fasana was the interim manager of the program following Tribal member Ali Holsclaw, who is now teaching fourth-through sixth-graders, and before Flynn being hired in December.

"Just in the few months since we've had the building I've had a front row seat and we're super ex-



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Chinuk Wawa Immersion K-5 teacher Kate Thomas, right, gives out snacks during snack time in the k'wichati class in the chinuk wawa skul building on Tuesday, Dec. 19.

cited about the amount of language being spoken that has increased exponentially," Fasana said. "They are talking in Chinuk. The building is so nice and for kids to see and hear the language being spoken all around them, language develops much more rapidly because of them being together. Before, it was so spread out."

Flynn also noted the significance of bringing the Chinuk Wawa learners under one roof.

"Having a whole building expands the ability of giving students the 100 percent experience. The youngest speakers are doing the most immersive, a 90-10 model typical of dual language programs. By the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, it is a 50-50 model of Chinuk Wawa and English."

Staff and students moved into the new building in September with some of the construction still under way. For example, overhead lights were yet to be installed, which was done in late November.

"We are wanting to plan a formal grand opening of the building in the spring, inviting the many funders to see the building and see the kids in it," Fasana said.

The Tribe worked with MCA Architects of Portland to create a building that advances the vision

of preserving Tribal culture and traditions for future generations. It creates a home separate from the English language programs, strengthening the Chinuk Wawa immersion.

Preserving the language

One of the primary goals of the Tribe's language program, which began decades ago, is saving Chinuk Wawa from extinction. At one time Chinuk was spoken throughout Northern California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and Alaska. However, by 2013 Max Planck Institute scholars estimated just 1,000 people knew how to speak it.

Chinuk Wawa is classified as critically endangered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger," an online publication.

Chinuk Wawa began as a trade language between Tribes. Words and expressions come from multiple source languages and Tribes with the biggest component are from the Chinook of the lower Columbia River. It also includes Coast Salish, Nuuchaa-nulth, Kalapuyan, French and English words.

As a multicultural, functional language, it was used widely into the early 20th century and was the

most recent Indigenous language spoken in Grand Ronde.

Formal efforts to preserve it began with the establishment of a Grand Ronde Chinuk Wawa class in 1997, taught by former Language Specialist Tony Johnson.

Tribal Education Committee Chair Tammy Cook sees the Tribe's long-term vision for preserving the language now becoming a reality.

"We are so excited about where we are," Cook said. "We have watched these kids grow up. Our hope is that as we see our community grow that they would stay here and practice our language. The more people speak Chinuk, we begin to remember, 'Hey, my grandma used to tell me that.'"

Cook's grandson will attend the Chinuk Wawa Skul once he is old enough. Students currently range from ages three to 11.

"Adults learn from kids as much as kids learn from us," she said.

Creating a unique space

The new language building has six classrooms and sits close to nature, with large windows and doors from each classroom to the outside with native plants filling the landscaping. The interior design includes shared teacher preparation areas, a secure entry and reception, light-filled administrative offices and modern technology in every classroom.

Interior windows and high ceilings let the light shine through uninterrupted, making the trees and sky as much a part of the interior as the safety features.

"It is very safe but what I like the most about the building is that we are all here," Flynn said. "We get to make it our own. Program-wise, we have the autonomy to decide how we teach things, being very culturally responsive to the needs of the kids. We can bring in Elders as speakers and teachers of culture, parents can come for lunch and it is familial. Teachers are referred to as aunties and uncles, t^hat- Uncle and k^hwa!- Aunt. It creates a space where kids want to be."

As more children and adults speak Chinuk Wawa, it is renewed as a living language, one used and spoken by people, changing over time to add new ideas and words.

"I see the language growing," Flynn said. "How will we come up with words we need? Do we create a board? What makes sense and works in the classroom?"

On a cool and foggy morning, the littlest Chinuk speakers arrived to classrooms warm and cozy with blankets, baskets and soft rugs. Little tables and chairs awaited them after morning circle. Near the front entrance, they passed a young tree planted with an eye to a beautiful future of many generations to come. ■

The chinuk wawa skul building was completed in September.

