

Learning First Nation Languages Is an Ideal Way to Preserve Culture

Written by Leona Morin-Nielson

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If there is one thing I could pass on to the youth of today it's the importance of learning about the culture that you come from, including its roots and its language. That is why I teach the Cree language to everyone from three and four year olds to adults at university.

Too many youth today spend time in front of TVs and computers when they should be spending time getting to know their elders and enjoying and appreciating nature. There were all kinds of beautiful colours this fall, but many youth didn't even notice them and that's a shame. It was a simpler time and a simpler way of life when I grew up. We would go out into the bush to get our exercise and fresh air. Today's youth don't get that in the city, especially on bad-air days.

Another area where today's youth are missing out is the Cree language. They need to understand it to truly understand and appreciate their culture. For example, many youth don't get some Cree jokes because they don't really make sense when you translate them into English. You have to understand Cree to really get the play on words. Unfortunately, First Nations languages are dying today because the youth are not using them in their communities. The language is part of our culture, part of what we need for it to survive. In order to understand the culture you need to understand the language.

Don't be intimidated at the thought of learning the Cree language. I didn't even know how to count to five when I started in 1994, but now I teach it to everyone. I grew up speaking Cree, but didn't really learn to read and write it until 1994 when my mom, who was a teacher, retired and gave me all of her tapes and books. It's important that we all do our part to pass on the language to the next generation. I am teaching my 10-year-old grandson new words every day. For example, today I was teaching him how to say "Good morning" in Cree, which is Miyo Kisipa. Miyo, which is good or nice, and Kisipa, which is morning. I was also teaching him how to say all of the wonderful colours in Cree this fall. Just basic things like that can go a long way.

Youth should also go to the Elders and ask them for advice and offer to help them. That's how we were brought up. We used to get wild mint for the Elders' tea and just to visit. There are a lot of Elders who are lonely and they will tell you stories about how things were when they were young. When you talk to them you can ask them to help you learn the language. I believe many are willing to help. I started to teach the Métis elders in the community and they expanded it to their grandchildren because they understand the importance of the language being passed down.

If we continue to do things like this and share the language, it and our culture, will survive.

Leona Morin-Nielson has lived in Prince George for more than 34 years. She currently works as a Cree language instructor and interpreter. She has been involved with two books: the first is a genealogy called People of the Bay. It is about her home community of Sandy Bay, Sask. The second book is Niwechihaw - I Help, written by Caitlin Dale Nicholson with Leona Morin-Nielson. It is written in both Cree and English and is about her and her grandson as they spend a day at the lake.

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