

Victoria Wanihadie: Teacher preserves Indigenous language for future generations

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THERE ARE 7,000 LANGUAGES spoken in the world today. Half of the population speaks 50 languages, and the other half speaks the other 6,950—one of which is the Beaver language (an Athabaskan or Tsa'a Dene language). And teacher Victoria Wanihadie is determined that the Beaver language, with only about 300 speakers left, will not go extinct.

Termed a “knowledge holder” by the Beaver people, Wanihadie is working to create accurate and accessible resources that honour the Beaver language, culture and history.

After growing up in Grovedale, a hamlet just south of Grande Prairie, Wanihadie served in the Canadian Armed Forces and the US Marines, spent time at home to raise her family, then obtained a BEd and became a substitute teacher in the Grande Prairie area—all the while thinking she was Cree.

When conversations with her relatives made it clear that she had some Tsa'a Dene ancestry, Wanihadie was shocked to learn that she had grown up on Tsa'a Dene ancestral land. She knew nothing about these ancestors.

“I went in search of my identity,” she explains. “My grandparents were taken to the residential school, and, as a result, they stopped speaking their Tsa'a Dene language. This was a huge loss for myself and my family. My grandparents passed away many years ago, and when they passed, thousands of years of knowledge went with them.”

Wanihadie says this loss can be redressed by revitalizing the Beaver language, and, with it, knowledge of the land and the

history, culture, stories and ceremonies of the first people in the Peace Country. She believes that hearing and sharing the stories and language will help the Beaver people to reconnect to the land, their ancestors and thousands of years of history.

Creating a space where the Beaver language and knowledge are readily accessible is an immensely ambitious undertaking, but Wanihadie is not working alone.

Travelling around the Peace Country, Wanihadie is meeting with native speakers of Beaver to record their words and stories, and with non-speakers of Beaver who still remember the stories. While this is perhaps the most labour-intensive—and urgent—aspect of her work, another vital aspect is visiting schools to share these words and stories with Alberta’s teachers and students.

“The Beaver language, culture and ceremonies are a way of bringing us back together and empowering us,” Wanihadie says. “I want to make my ancestors proud. And I will continue to share my Beaver language and culture with anyone who wants to respectfully learn.” ^{ATA}

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Language barrier

Prior to European contact there were approximately 300 Indigenous languages spoken. Of these, 70 are still spoken in Canada today. Statistics Canada 2016 census data showed that only 15.6 per cent of the Indigenous population reported being able to conduct a conversation in an Indigenous language.

ILLUSTRATION BY AJA LOUDEN
TSA'A DENE TRANSLATION BY BRUCE STARLIGHT AND VICTORIA WANIHADIE