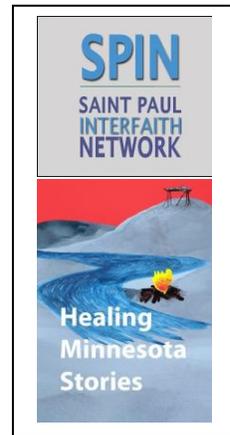


# Native Language Revitalization: A Path Toward Healing

## Part I of Healing Minnesota Stories *Native Voices* Series

Local Native American leaders are working to heal their communities by reconnecting their people with their original languages and cultures. The work ahead is significant. Dakota and Ojibwe are critically endangered languages. There is a rapid loss of elders who are first language speakers. In Minnesota, there are now four first language Dakota speakers and fewer than 100 first language Ojibwe speakers. There is little opportunity for language to be passed from generation to generation in traditional ways. The Dakota Ojibwe Language Revitalization Alliance (DOLRA) is working to support language immersion programs to revive their languages. The following summarizes a presentation by DOLRA representatives given February 9, 2015, to the Saint Paul Interfaith Network. Panelists were Betty Jane Schaaf (Ojibwe) and Jennifer Bendickson (Dakota), founding mothers of DOLRA, and Jewell Arcoren (Dakota/Lakota) program consultant for the Wicoie Nandagikendan, an early childhood Dakota/Ojibwe language immersion program. *The St. Paul Interfaith Network's Native Voices Series, highlighting the healing work being done by local Native American leaders. This is the first of four sessions.*



### **Language revitalization reconnects people with their cultural identity and offers a path towards**

**healing:** At a very young age, Arcoren said, kids in the language immersion program are learning how all things are interrelated. "We think of the water and the river as our relative. The trees are our relatives. Through our language, our kids learn to think like that," she said. Last fall, for example, the Wicoie Nandagikendan students visited an apple orchard. The owner told the teachers this was his favorite group of kids because they were the only children that remembered to thank the apple trees. Arcoren called it is an example of how native languages teach respect and connect our people back to our environment. "Language revitalization is another way for us to see how we can start healing as a community," she said.

**Language Revitalization is important to all ages:** Bendickson said when she started this work, she couldn't speak or understand her own language. She recalled telling her supervisor that she didn't think she could learn Dakota. "I was 55 years old," she said. "That is kind of old to learn to speak another language." She attended classes at the University of Minnesota, and began to pick it up. "I will never forget when I went to my home reservation and I heard a drum song and I heard them singing in my language and I knew what they were singing about. That really changed me. I felt so good just to know I could understand the words they were saying." Revitalizing language really isn't just about the language, Bendickson said: "but it is about people knowing who they are so they can grow from there."

**Language revitalization efforts rebuild community:** This ongoing process of language revitalization has involved children, teachers, elders and others. "It wasn't just the children who were learning," Schaaf said. "It was the whole community. As native people, this is how we were supposed to learn a long time ago. We were supposed to learn as a community. ... This is our future."

## The presenters gave the following timeline for language revitalization efforts in the state.

- **1998: A Leadership Circle:** The Alliance of Early Childhood Educators started a leadership group in 1998, a time when Schaaf was working as an early childhood educator for a program serving Native American children in south Minneapolis. There was a core group of about seven people who participated. She was a part of the circle; Bendickson was a facilitator. “We didn’t know what we were supposed to do,” Schaaf said. “Who said we were leaders? We were just early childhood teachers. Some thought we were baby sitters.”
- **2000: Creating Community to Address Problems:** Schaaf said the group decided it didn’t have the power to speak for our community. We did not know the issues. They held a conference in Mille Lacs in 2000 and issued a broad invitation to educators, legislators, tribal leaders, elders and others. “The two things that kept coming up was loss of language, and lack of curriculum,” she said. The problem was, they needed resources—including locating elders who still spoke the language. So they created DOLRA.
- **Early 2000s: Building Support for Teacher Training, Immersion Programs:** They went to each reservation and asked for support. They asked reservation leaders to sign resolutions supporting language revitalization. They got a resolution from the state to support language revitalization work. Recalled Bendickson: “One of the most important things we did ... was we worked with our elders for guidance. When we listened to them, everything went the way that it was supposed to.” DOLRA went to the legislature and got money for teacher training programs at the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities and UM-Duluth—one program for Dakota language one for Ojibwe language. After securing money for teacher training, they went back and got \$2.5 million for language revitalization work. Now every two years they have to go back and fight for that money.
- **2006: Starting an early childhood language immersion program:** In 2006, the group started Wicoie Nandagikendan, an early childhood program with three hours a day of language immersion in either Dakota or Ojibwe. (There are other language immersion programs, including the newly opened [Bdote Learning Center](#), a K-4 immersion program in Dakota and Ojibwe.)

## Challenges in moving forward

**Teacher shortage:** While new teachers are being trained, they also are in demand. Teachers get better job offers, so there is turnover. If programs have to bring in teachers from out of state, it gets expensive. Language revitalization supporters are going to high school career days to encourage young people to learn to become language teachers. They also have created an apprentice program, but Arcoren said funding it continues to be a challenge.

**Parent Support:** Wicoie Nandagikendan has had powerful impacts not just on children but on their families, too. They used to send home books for parents to read with children. They had sticky labels with the Dakota or Ojibwe words for “table” or “chair” and the whole family would learn. They cannot currently afford the parent support program.

**Creating words that don't exist in Native languages.** Schaaf works with Native speakers on curriculum, but it has its unique challenges. For instance, some modern words and concepts do not have an equivalent in the Dakota or Ojibwe. Schaaf recalled a class project making marshmallow bears. There was not a word for marshmallow in Ojibwe. Working with an elder, they decided it was called “pillow candy.” She recalled another incident working with a Native speaker to translate the book: “The Little Red Hen Makes Pizza.” The hen put five different kinds of cheese on her pizza. The Native speaker working on the translation refused to do it. The reason: Ojibwe has one word for cheese, not five—and the speaker wanted the translation to be the true to the language.

### **Observations and Outcomes**

**Minnesota's Native children face many challenges:** Minnesota schools are failing Native American children, Arcoren said. In addition, Native children are growing up in a culture of historic trauma—and all its social, educational, and health impacts. She cited one Native elder who noted that Minnesota has tried seemingly everything for the past 30 years to try to close the achievement gap for Native children—but they have never tried language revitalization.

**Many program impacts are hard to measure:** The early childhood program has had initial positive test results for children for preschoolers entering kindergarten. But beyond that, the stories teachers are hearing point to less measurable but still positive impact on community recovery and well being. Arcoren recalled a story of a father who was bringing his son to the Ojibwe language program. It began to affect how he parented his child. He wanted to be a part of his son's education and even wanted to become a part of the class. He started to sober up. Last the teacher heard he was still sober and involved in cultural ceremonies.

**Seeking allies:** Arcoren said there is little research on American Indians out there today, “but the little that is there says when you plug American Indians back into their traditional lifeways such as language revitalization, we begin to recover.” DOLRA is looking for allies and friends to support this work. It has a Facebook Page at: <https://www.facebook.com/dakotaojibwelra>

*A video of this presentation is available on our [website, http://spinterfaith.org/healing-minnesota-stories.html](http://spinterfaith.org/healing-minnesota-stories.html) which also includes information on future Native Voices presentations. Healing Minnesota Stories is an initiative of the St. Paul Interfaith Network. For questions, contact us at: [info@spinterfaith.org](mailto:info@spinterfaith.org)*