

Kanien'kéha: Recognizing code talkers a part of resuscitating the language

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Chelsea Sunday of the Ohero:kon rites of passage took a two-year intensive course to learn the Mohawk language. She said the language holds the key to understanding their way of thinking, and could help heal the trauma experienced by indigenous people. Taken on Friday, Sept. 6., 2019 in Akwesasne, N.Y. Nick Dunne/Cornwall Standard-Freeholder/Postmedia Network

This is the second of a two-part feature on the Mohawk language's use during the Second World War and how recognizing those who spoke it has become part of efforts to sustain its use. Part one published on Friday, Sept. 6, 2019.

By Nick Dunne

AKWESASNE — The story of the code talkers — or the pieces of it that have been preserved — has become a symbol of strength, resilience, and pride in a community that has made massive strides in preserving and revitalizing Kanien'keha, the Mohawk language.

Over the past five or so years, the momentum in revitalizing the Mohawk language has picked up as interest within the community grows. There is also urgency to the revitalization efforts: elders and first-language speakers are getting older.

While it is too late to gather knowledge about the code talkers, there is time to preserve and record the words, dialects and meanings of the Mohawk language.

Suppressed until it was useful

In Akwesasne, if you ask anyone aged 40 to 60 if they can speak fluently, the answer is likely no. Though many can tell you their parents or grandparents spoke it, there is a massive dropoff in its use among the baby boomer generation.

It is a result of the concerted effort of Canadian and U.S. governments to stamp out culture and language, and the lasting shame that was imparted onto those who experienced abuse for simply being who they were.

St. Regis Mohawk Tribal Council Chief Mike Conners said his grandmother's biggest regret had been not passing the language on to her children.

"She didn't want them to speak one word of it. That's what the whole generation went through," Conners said. "My grandparents had 12 kids. I don't think any of them are speakers. On my mother's side there are nine of them, and there are no speakers.

"That's a common story in our community."

Whether it was in pursuit of economic opportunity, worries of being ostracized for speaking the language, or a sense of shame over the traditional ways, the language wasn't passed on to many in the community. The pressures, abuse and trauma people had experienced carried through the generations.

"The push was initially termination, and when that wasn't working, it was assimilation," explained St. Regis Mohawk Tribal Council Chief Beverly Cook,

who often speaks about the effects of residential schools and trauma.

"But it wasn't just assimilating; it was obliterating everything that you were," she explained.

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What makes the story of the code talkers all the more incredible is that, before becoming war heroes for using their language, a number of the code talkers were residential school survivors, punished for speaking their language before being rewarded for it far later on in their lives.

Louis Conners, grandfather of Mike Conners, was a code talker and residential school survivor. Though Louis Conners retained the language through the experience, he never passed the language on to his children.

It is unclear how many code talkers attended residential schools in Canada or Indian boarding schools in the U.S., but even the day schools run by nuns and priests would shame and hit students for speaking Indigenous languages, rapping them on the knuckles or worse.

"When you start treating children like that... that does something to their development, their psyche their spirit that carries on," said Cook.

Though the language now is taught in public schools and other programs are available, there is a new sense of shame that exists among some in Akwesasne: embarrassment for not knowing the language.

Though Conners can pick up a few words here and there, he is not fluent. Not being able to speak makes him feel "like less of a Mohawk, at times."

Cook felt similarly.

"You feel disappointed that you don't have that. Even though you can understand how it ended up that way, you still feel some kind of resentment that they should've taught you," she said.

Language and culture are interwoven

Language plays a key role in identity. It connects people to their heritage and history, sons and daughters to their parents, grandchildren to grandparents, and individuals to their family line.

“Who are we without if we don’t have our language and our culture?” said Conners. “Even if you have a little tiny bit of it, you still have something. We just have to keep it going, keep it growing.”

If it fails to pass on, Conners said he feels his community will face assimilation.

“Everything the government worked to do for 100 years will have worked if we don’t have anything left,” Conners said.

The Mohawk language is not only a gateway into the culture, but it holds a fundamentally different view of the world and shapes the way that people think.



Chelsea Sunday of the Ohero:kon rites of passage took a two-year intensive course to learn the Mohawk language. She said the language holds the key to understanding their way of thinking, and could help heal the trauma experienced by indigenous people. Taken on Monday June 10, 2019 in Akwesasne, N.Y. Nick Dunne/Cornwall Standard-Freeholder/Postmedia Network
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"Not only is this a language of love, but it gives you a way to express those things that you may not be able to express in English at that level," said Chelsea Sunday, who took an intense two-year language course in Kahnawake, a Mohawk community south of Montreal.

From September to June, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., students were taught the language, culture and traditions of the Mohawks. Sunday graduated this past June, but her time learning the language of her people has changed her life.

With a wholly different syntax and root word system from English and other European languages, the structure of the language and the meaning of its words come from a totally different basis. With that comes a different way of thinking about the world.

Sunday explained the language is mainly comprised of verbs that have pronouns attached to them. Each word is in effect a phrase where the pronouns relate yourself or others with objects and things around you, and can inform how an action is being done, where it's being done, among other things.

"Inside of our language, you can't really say anything without relating to something else," she said. "You have to relate yourself to things around you."

Sunday said since she's become fluent, she has what she calls an English brain and a Mohawk brain.

To illustrate what she means, she breaks down the word for "I love you," *konnorónhkwa*.

"The pronoun at the beginning shows transmission of something from me to you. The part in middle means valuable. Something is happening from me to you, and it's very precious and important," explained Sunday.

The word, and the language as a whole, helped bring Sunday a new understanding of what exactly love means to her. Having dealt with the lasting effects of colonization within her family, she grew up struggling with being able to express those kinds of feelings. Learning Mohawk has given her a new perspective on relationship with others.

"Love cannot exist unless there are two people. I can't just love things," she said. "Someone has to exist and cause that love to come about."

Packed within one word are all these different concepts: of transmitting this feeling to another and the true weight of what that love is.

"That's how every word is," said Sunday. "It makes me wonder: who the hell came up with these words?"



Handout/Cornwall Standard-Freeholder/Postmedia Network An illustration done by Bobbi King found in one of the new picture books the AMBE had made for the Mohawk language

Learning an entirely different language was a challenge, however. She had to spend two years away from her children while in Kahnawake, and she had to confront her own shame and family history.

Learning the language came with an understanding of what happened to their families. It comes with confronting why it was never taught to them, and confronting the abuse that had instilled that sense of shame.

In becoming fluent, Sunday believes language revitalization can play a critical step in recovering from the traumas of the past and present.

"When they took our language, they took our identity with it," said Sunday. Learning the language once again could "singlehandedly could reconnect us with who we are.

"I can heal what was said and done to my grandmother to make her hate being a Mohawk woman. And it goes forward. My children feel pride in who they are."

Optimism moving forward

Though there's much work to do in promoting, improving and furthering the language courses, particularly full immersion lessons, Sunday feels optimistic about keeping her language alive.

Sunday reflected on the code talkers, how it had been all but too late to hear what they had to say. She hopes that it could serve as a lesson as the old first-language speakers grow older. She also reflects on what it means to keep speaking her language as her community is surrounded by the all-encompassing influence of the English language.

"I feel like a code talker when I'm out there speaking the language with my daughter," she said, "when we're having breakfast at a restaurant, and just her and I know."

At the Twin Leaf Diner off New York's Route 37, Todd Conners looks out the window.

"It was so different around here when I was growing up," he said. "It was less populated, none of these businesses existed. I'm not sure when they paved the roads around here.



Handout/Cornwall Standard-Freeholder/Postmedia Network Instructor Carole Ross teaches a class on how to speak the Mohawk language of Kanien'kéha. *SUPPLIED*

Those aren't the only changes. Both American and Canadian tribes offers free language courses to members. The Ahkwasasne Mohawk Board of Education offers courses in public schools, and both the Mohawk Freedom School and Kana:takon School offer immersion courses where the subject material is taught in the Mohawk language.

Todd, like his cousin Mike, isn't fluent. But he's taking the free courses offered by the tribe. His son, who lives in California, has only visited Akwasasne a few times, but he also wants to learn the language.

"I'm embarrassed that I don't speak Mohawk," Todd admitted.

The classes are tough, but it's important to him

"I've heard the language dies, the people die," he said.

But he doesn't think his people will die off anytime soon.

"That's who we are, man. We're Mohawk. We're strong man. We ain't going anywhere."

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