

Laurie Salvador



Learn to Teach to Learn



When I hear Italian being spoken, it takes me back to my childhood. It's like a warming mental massage to hear familiar words in my grandparents' language.

Readers with a mother tongue other than English or whose family had origins outside Canada or England will recall with fondness the language spoken by their parents and grandparents.

To research this article, I had the pleasure of meeting Tracey Herbert, Executive Director of First Peoples Cultural Foundation. Tracey emphasized that language revitalization for aboriginal people is not just about communication; it is a *ménage* of history, culture, geographic, and botanical data for food sources and ancient medicines. Language is the very basis of any culture. The loss of languages would mean the loss of important elements of their cultures.

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Imagine if the language you grew up with suddenly disappeared—forever. Thirty-two First Peoples' languages throughout our province are nearly extinct. Program Coordinator Deanna Daniels explains that First Voices is a program designed to salvage and protect these precious cultural heirlooms.

A computer-based linguistic program, First Voices archives each language in both the written and spoken form. The program is the first of its kind to create keyboard solutions to a variety of alphabets and orthography.

Each band is responsible for gathering and inputting the alphabet, words, and phrases of their language. From there, books, tapes of stories and songs, flashcards, dictionaries, and curriculum materials are designed for use by school children and

adult learners alike. Learners on the Website (www.firstvoices.ca) can use the program to learn, but they cannot change the data without going through the administrator. The Website gets 300,000 hits per month; it is being used by Aboriginal schools from kindergarten on up.



The project, while painstakingly slow, is urgent because in some cases, there are only one or two fluent speakers available to record the sounds. Thirteen of the 32 languages are now partially archived. Deanna feels it is her responsibility to support new learners.

Studies indicate that 20 percent of our First Peoples' children today must learn their native language or, in 10 years, the language will be extinct. She encourages every learner to find a fluent speaker, make use of the First Voices program, and practise, practise, practise. She asks readers to reach deep into their hearts to see what they can do as volunteers or as contributors.

While at the foundation office, I met Cathi Charles, Arts Program Coordinator. Cathi says she has the best job in the province! Responsible for the part of the program that supports emerging artists, she helps them with funding proposals, mentoring programs, and training in non-institutional settings. Operational for 12 years, the program provides project, portfolio, and proposal development for new artists. It also assists artists to develop professional practices so they can become successful—not only in their art forms, but in the marketing and sales of their product.

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literature, carving, painting, weaving, and music. New and committed artists can apply for grants of up to \$5000 per year, to assist them in finding a mentor partner to share knowledge and techniques, to introduce them to the process of developing a business plan and to create a viable income.

Cathi tells me that in the first year of

the program, there were 19 applications. Today she receives about 90 annually. There is a continued need to support this program, which is delivered in a fair and responsible way. It is based on artistic excellence; the decisions are made by a panel of other artists. Cathi says, “the work these artists are creating is an important expression of our cultures. Language, scientific knowledge, and cultural expression are passed on, revived, and supported.”

As luck would have it, I was able to visit one of the recipients of the emerging artist-funding program while on a recent trip to Terrace. I met with Oleepeeka Roche and her fiancé Joseph Mantur. The couple proudly showed me their studio and workshop, filled with totem works-in-progress and a good year's supply of cedar barks all bundled into little nests for basket weaving. Oleepeeka described her visit with her mentor Mrs. Bolton, where she spent two months learning how to pull the cedar bark from the tree, shred it, store it, and weave it into traditional baskets and hats.

Along with that learning process, Oleepeeka was able to glean valuable information about the area—where to pick berries, the tricks in cedar collecting, and the local people's stories, dances, and traditions. Oleepeeka, a diminutive and quiet young woman just emerging as an artist, was proud to show me her home, her work area, and her latest creations. I was so impressed by her ability to share concepts and ideas.



Joseph spoke passionately of art as a beautiful language—a language that speaks to the soul of the viewer. Mrs. Bolton gave Oleepeeka hat molds to get her started on her new career. The grant supported Oleepeeka during this training period and allowed her to give Mrs. Bolton an honorarium in recognition of her priceless contribution to the process.

Both Joe and Oleepeeka are now sharing what they learned from Mrs. Bolton and others by teaching carving and weaving at the local schools. Joe says that sharing what he knows is like money in the soul account. The more you learn, the more you have to teach. By sharing knowledge, thoughts, and experience, you learn from the learners. It is a circle . . . learn to teach to learn.

The First Peoples Foundation supports artists like Oleepeeka, who will become a great weaver, I have no doubt. She will in turn teach others her new trade and eventually become an elder in her community. Oleepeeka and Joe will be married this Fall. They plan to devote time to learning their respective languages so they can pass on their heritage and their art.

What I learned from writing this article is that like love, art and music are universal languages. As a society it is our responsibility to preserve and foster the growth of language, art, and music in the hopes we will some day be able to communicate our history and our life experiences to future generations.

As British Columbians, we use native designs to draw attention to a significant part of our heritage. Images such as totem poles and masks adorn posters, print materials, and advertising. We can go a step further—by embracing and supporting the Aboriginal artists in our communities.

I encourage readers to look at the program at www.firstvoices.ca and make a donation to the First Peoples Cultural Foundation online at www.fpcf.ca. Your support is an investment in the future. ▲

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