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11-21-2011

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Recommended Citation

University Relations, "Dakota Wicohan addresses a loss by re-envisioning a future sustained by Dakota culture" (2011). *Campus News Archive*. 542.

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Dakota Wicohan addresses a loss by re-envisioning a future sustained by Dakota culture

Summary: The nonprofit organization, co-founded by Teresa Luckow Peterson '91, seeks to renew and sustain the Dakota language.

(November 21, 2011)-When Europeans arrived on what we now call North America, the tribes and clans of the native peoples, in total, spoke more than 300 languages. In 2011, more than half of those languages are lost, unrecorded, no longer alive. Of those remaining, few people speak those languages and even fewer people claim them as first languages. The Dakota language is no exception. It is estimated only seven people who grew up speaking Dakota in Minnesota remain. A nonprofit organization, Dakota Wicohan, co-founded by Teresa Luckow Peterson '91, seeks to renew and sustain the Dakota language. The nonprofit's efforts connect people and families and communities through life ways deep-rooted in relationships.

Peterson and fellow grassroots advocates established Dakota Wicohan nine years ago, but Peterson's path to this place in her life began as a child raised on a farm near Foley, where her Dakota heritage was uncommon among her peers. Peterson's mother grew up on the Upper Sioux Indian Reservation near Granite Falls and, as a "product of the Indian Relocation Act," was moved to the Twin Cities as a young adult for vocational training sponsored by the United States government and designed to advance assimilation. As the act intended, her mother lived most of her life away from the Upper Sioux Community, a happening that impacted Peterson's past and continues to shape her present and future.

Had not her uncle asked her if she planned to attend college, Peterson would not have considered the option. The seemingly small question led her to Morris, where a very shy young woman learned to be independent, enjoyed the social fun, became who she was meant to be...and almost dropped out. "But Morris is a place where you don't fall through the net," says Peterson. "There's a good system in place, and Mike Miller, now retired Multi-Ethnic Program counselor, worked with me. He was great, as was a wonderful network of lifelong Chi Phi friends."

A sociology and liberal arts for the human services major, Peterson first served as an Upper Sioux mental health and social services worker, her introduction to tribal administration. She received a master of education from Southwest State University, served as coordinator for a post secondary prep program for native high school students, and then as grants planning and development administrator for Eci Nompa Woonspe Charter School.

Then, Peterson says, she just stopped. She interrupted her professional journey by responding to a personal calling. Supported by the Grotto Foundation, Peterson invested a full year in renewing her relationship with her grandmother, Genevieve LaBatte, and learning Dakota with LaBatte and her father-in-law, Douglas Peterson, then two of the last remaining first language Dakota speakers.

"Those were precious times," remembers Peterson. "I was not only learning the language but also the Dakota way of life.

It was a huge growth period."

Without then knowing the pedagogical term, Peterson embraced a master-apprentice model of language learning. In a one-on-one relationship, the elder and the learner extensively worked together, immersed for substantial amounts of time conducting everyday life activities while speaking the language.

Sharing life with her grandmother increased Peterson's understanding of Dakota culture and history, from a community perspective and also from a very personal perspective. She began to recognize the origin of a longtime estrangement between her grandmother and her mother. The elder, educated in a Pipestone boarding school, signed the form that allowed the government to relocate her daughter for vocational training. The daughter, not understanding her mother's history or the government's authority, believed that her family "sent her away." Peterson's discernment of both perceptions led to new and renewed bonds among the three generations of women.

The next step on her life journey taught Peterson even more about Dakota culture but from a very different viewpoint. For four years she served in a very public, elected role as Upper Sioux Community vice chair working on issues of housing, roads, education, and economic development.

"It was an eye-opening experience," says Peterson. "I enjoyed it. I learned a lot. But I didn't run again."

And then the stage for Peterson's next venture was set. All of her life experiences—rural life, Morris grad, educator, social worker, grant writer, elected leader, Blandin Foundation Leadership graduate, Americans for Indian Opportunity Ambassador program, restored relationships—informed her leadership role with Dakota Wicohan for which she now serves as executive director.

Peterson says that the organization resulted from a group of mostly women who gathered to address the "feeling of loss" they were experiencing—loss of language, loss of traditions, loss of relationships embedded in Dakota values. Describing the co-founders as courageous, compassionate, passionate, spirited, ambitious, and "so naive," Peterson says the learning curve and challenges were great, but trusting and relying on traditional Dakota kinship values resulted in Dakota Wicohan's success.

"We first sought elder advisers," shares Peterson. "Board members bring wisdom and perspective to the program and guide the mission, as do staff members. The environment is ripe. People are thirsty for Dakota language and culture."

As its core mission, Dakota Wicohan's focus is on developing a cohort of Dakota language teachers. Currently, three master/apprentice partnerships are underway, with goals of increasing as the organization's capacity grows. The nonprofit has expanded to include youth afterschool and summer programs, including leadership development and traditional Dakota horse riding in partnership with Sunktanka, a local 4-H group.

Peterson notes that an Oral History Project, funded with an Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund grant from the Minnesota Historical Society and the Administration for Native Americans, has been an especially rewarding and heartwarming undertaking. Peterson's grandmother, before she died in 2010, shared the Dakota language, stories, reflections on the past, and thoughts for the future for a documentary that is currently in production.

Dakota Wicohan is also collaborating on the Dakota Language Digitization Project that will provide historical documents and resources for language learners.

In addition to the support of the Minnesota Historical Society, Dakota Wicohan has received support in the form of volunteers and monetary donations from the Dakota community and grant support from the Blandin Foundation. Dakota Wicohan also partners with the Minnesota Alliance With Youth as an AmeriCorps site.

A future project on the "radar," says Peterson, is the development of a Dakota Learning Institute, which she hopes will forge partnerships with the Minnesota Valley History Learning Center, the University of Minnesota, Morris, and others.

Drawing on the strengths and skills and networks each brought to its mission, the Dakota Wicohan co-founders have addressed a loss they experienced, personally and as a community, by re-envisioning a future sustained by Dakota

culture—language, values, traditions, arts, and kinship.

Peterson and her family, including three sons, make their home near Belview. She is pursuing a doctorate in education at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. At Morris, she serves on the American Indian Advisory Board.

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