

# Rising Voices/Hóthāŋiŋpi

## A One-Hour Documentary

A Presentation of Vision Maker Media, with major funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities

Florentine Films/Hott Productions, in association with The Language Conservancy and in partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities, present a new one-hour documentary film: *Rising Voices/Hóthāŋiŋpi*, coming to American Public Television (APT) this fall.

*Rising Voices* tells the story of a passionate, dedicated and diverse group of people, including members of the Lakota community and Linguists from outside of the community who are working together to save the language and restore it to its rightful place in Lakota — and American — culture. Told through the voices of a wide range of Lakota people who share their feelings about their language and the myriad challenges facing their community, the film also incorporates four short films created for *Rising Voices* by Lakota filmmakers and artists, each one giving a perspective on how finding one's authentic language connects a person to a deeper sense of culture.

*Rising Voices* offers a snapshot into a day-to-day struggle of one of the biggest Native American nations, and illuminates the devastating problem of ancestral language loss to Native American people. Before Columbus, Lakota was one of 300 Native languages spoken north of Mexico. Today only half those languages remain. By the year 2050, experts say, just 20 indigenous American languages will exist. By some estimates, a language dies somewhere in the world every two weeks; over half the planet's 7,000 languages are in danger of disappearing.

This case is a particularly powerful one, for Lakota isn't a minute language practiced by a minor Native culture. The Lakota are probably the most prominent Native American culture – the archetypal buffalo-hunting nation of the Great Plains, represented countless times in popular culture from Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show to the *Dances with Wolves*. "When people think of American Indians," says magician and language teacher Rueben Fast Horse, "They tend to think of Lakota people, because of the stereotypes that are around us even today, such as the teepee, the buffalo, the feathered war bonnets." The Lakota image is strong in the American imagination; but as the language slips away, so does Lakota identity.

The Lakota nation has over 170,000 tribal members. Yet, the language is clearly at risk - only 6000 people speak Lakota today, and the average age of these speakers is now almost 70. *Rising Voices* depicts an exhilarating effort by Lakota tribal members to hold back the floodwaters of history: the day-by-day struggle to save a dying language.

For years, Lakota schoolchildren took classes in the language, but were unable to become fluent. Today, Lakota tribal members, in partnership with non-Indians are fighting to save the language by introducing a new way of teaching, brought to Lakota reservations

from faraway places like the Czech Republic and France. These methods are producing results; for the first time, schools are creating fluent second-language Lakota speakers. "If these people can come in from other parts of the world and learn my language, then I can, too," says tribeswoman Tipiziwin Young. "Our language is learnable. I didn't really think that before. And they are truly our allies."

Wil Meya, the film's executive producer and the executive director of the The Language Conservancy, has worked with the Lakota for 20 years. "Every language expresses the history and the heart of its culture," Meya says. "Every language describes an ancient world view. Every language is a collective achievement as monumental as a Machu Picchu or an Angkor Wat. A language can be broken, and it can disappear. But a revival of a language can restore a sense of community to a people."

The film is serious but unconventional, at times describing life on the reservation from the Lakota point of view. Woven through the documentary are four short films by Lakota filmmakers made especially for inclusion in *Rising Voices/Hóthayiŋpi*. One such film is Milt Lee's You Got It!, a rapid-fire sendup of game shows, sociology, and cultural identity:

-- How about if you speak the language but you also shop at Walmart and you drive a big American truck? Are you more or less of an Indian?

-- Depends on the kind of a truck.

The film result is a portrait of a culture today, focusing on the myriad conflicts around the disappearing language on the Lakota reservations of North and South Dakota. However, there seems to be a solution: immersion schools, which surround children with the language from a young age, may turn out to be the salvation of the Lakota language.

But as Co-Producer/Director Lawrence Hott notes, it's not a slam dunk, "The immersion schools are few and in danger of losing their funding. They're spread out all over the vast reservations, so a parent might have to drive an hour or more each way to bring a kid to school. Filming on the reservations, I was impressed by the tremendous dedication that's needed on everyone's part. There are no easy fixes. Our film is honest; it doesn't sugarcoat problems. Yes, there is progress. But no guarantees going forward."

The film shows the challenges Lakota people face today as they struggle to learn their ancestral language and teach it to their children. But it also tells the history that forced the language near extinction.

It was a painful history. For many decades the American government tried to defuse what its leaders saw as "the Indian problem" by deliberately eliminating Indian culture. From 1879 on, thousands of Native American children were sent away to English-only boarding schools that cut off Indian hair, enforced Christianity, and routinely beat children for the offense of speaking their native languages. Native Americans, it was thought, could only be assimilated into mainstream America if they spoke English and

only English.

After years of attempting to destroy Indian culture and annihilate Native languages – too often with great success – the government eventually did an about-face. Today the United States officially recognizes the value in diversity in both culture and language.

*But is it too late?* The Rez today is a mix of educated, iPad-toting young Native Americans, passionate about basketball and hip-hop, in close conjunction with Lakota-speaking elders deeply rooted in traditional life. Can the older people transmit the power of history and tradition in time? At times there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between generations; but more often, a vital transmission. While many Lakota people are saving the language, they feel the language is somehow saving them.

A list of characters in the film, and a glimpse of the conflicts they face, is attached below.

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*Rising Voices* is presented and distributed nationally by American Public Television (APT) and will premiere on public television stations nationwide beginning November 1, 2015 in honor of Native American Heritage Month (check local listings).

*Rising Voices/Hoθhaŋiŋpi*, a film by Lawrence Hott and Diane Garey, is a production of Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc. in association with The Language Conservancy. The project is funded by Vision Maker Media with major funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Administration for Native Americans, the Dakota Indian Foundation, the South Dakota Humanities Council, and the North Dakota Humanities Council. Executive Producer for The Language Conservancy, Wilhelm Meya; Executive Producer for Vision Maker Media, Shirley K. Snee. © 2015

**Desiree Condon** is a mother of four young children and Language Coordinator for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. Although she currently has no time to study Lakota, she hopes to, one day, converse with her husband Travis, who is dedicated to learning the language.

**Naomi Last Horse** powerfully resisted the idea that a Czech outsider could know more about the Lakota language than a native, but slowly she came around. Now she's just as powerful a voice, supporting the language collaboration between Lakotas and non-tribal members.

**JoAllyn Archambault** tells us that young people who speak Lakota might be more Lakota than those who don't, even if that is a controversial thing to say. She confesses that at 72 years of age, she's just not going to be able to learn Lakota and it's up to the next generation to carry on the language.

**Kevin Locke** is a Lakota dancer, indigenous flute player and Lakota language teacher. At the beginning of the film Kevin talks about how he used to hear Lakota all the time, but now he doesn't. He's now had the revelation that this isn't just a coincidence – the elders

are passing. His generation will have to step up, or the language will disappear.

**Philomine Lakota** talks about her boarding school experience -- how it made her ashamed of her Lakota language – and how she passed that shame onto her children. This is a common theme on the Rez; many elders have these experiences. So there is a widespread resistance to learning Lakota, based on the bad experiences that parents and grandparents had in boarding school.

**Brian Dodge** is a fourth-grade teacher of Lakota language at Little Wound School in Kyle, SD. He only gets students for a half-hour a week. He wants to do a good job, but notes that it's nearly impossible to teach anything substantial in that amount of time. He hopes that one day there will be more time allotted for language teaching.

**Matt Rama** is a basketball coach and a teacher in an immersion nursery school. He talks about how passionate the kids are about playing basketball, and how diffident most of them are about learning their own language. Lakota takes a back seat to b-ball.

**Tipiziwin Young**, an immersion-school teacher, describes how difficult it is for a family to make immersion school work. Most parents drive two hours a day, and so do the teachers.

**Didier DuPont**, director of the Lakota immersion school in Kyle, points out that they draw from a large region, but have only 30 kids or so. He hopes that more parents will understand the importance of putting their kids in immersion.

**Jan Ullrich**, the Czech outsider, talks about the commitment necessary to make language revitalization work. He is in the recording studio with seven fluent Lakota speakers recording 22,000 words in one week, a massive effort. He also talks about recording the Berenstain Bears cartoons in Lakota. Again, an enormous effort that needs to be reinforced with other materials, if it is to compete with the thousands of hours of English content that surround young people (and everyone else) today.

**Travis Condon**, a dedicated Lakota learner explains: "I was told stories about the old ones, when they would learn English that they were very proud of when they learned English. Even if they messed up they would speak it all the time. If only we could somehow reverse that, and make our young people feel very proud when they learn Lakota, then they would speak Lakota."