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Saving Language from Extinction

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Saving language from extinction

Ancient words have stirred a lifelong ambition for one young Linfield College woman. Jaeci Hall ’05, a Rogue River Indian raised in Veneta, is one of 12 learners reviving Tutudin, a Native American language. In the process, she is helping to rekindle a fading culture.

“I can’t put into words how important this is, how it feels to learn this and connect myself to my heritage,” Hall said. “This is my life work. I will do this for the rest of my life.”

The Tutudin language was spoken by a number of Rogue River tribes, which separated in 1856 following the Rogue River Wars when federal troops forced natives to march on a “trail of tears” from Southern Oregon to reservations in Siletz and Grand Ronde.

Gilbert Towner, 75, and his uncle, Eddie Collins, are the two remaining Tutudin speakers. Both were fluent as children, but have spoken English most of their lives. In 1993, Towner stumbled across audio tape of an aunt speaking Tutudin and, overwhelmed by the words that had gone unspoken for decades, he set out to revitalize the language.

In 2002, Hall attended the first Agness Tutudin Language Workshop, a two-week intensive course facilitated by language experts. With an incomplete grammar and only Towner to teach 12 learners, experts initially deemed the language extinct. “But by the end of the two weeks, we were speaking the language,” said Hall, who has since helped coordinate the annual workshop. “We brought it back from the brink of extinction.”

Hall and the others learned to read and write basic vocabulary and greetings that year – jala means hello – while sitting in a circle on the bank of the Rogue River. Since then, they’ve moved on to verb phrases and more complicated aspects of the language.

“It was amazing to be able to say these words that hadn’t been said for years,” said Hall, who also speaks Spanish. “When we started learning, things began to happen. Eagles would fly down over us and whirlwinds would come up.”

The workshop changed Hall’s life. She returned to Linfield, switched her major to anthropology and immersed herself in language. She has since participated in the Northwest Indian Language Institute at the University of Oregon and is learning Chinuk Wawa, a Native American trade language, as a volunteer at the Siletz and Grand Ronde Immersion Preschool. Her senior thesis, “How to Speak Grandma’s Tongue or Learning to Learn Tutudin: A Language Towards Language Revitalization,” focused on the methodology of language teaching.

“Native American thought isn’t based on the linear academic European model,” said Hall, who earned the Gebauer Prize in Anthropology at Linfield for her effort. “Language is more than just grammar and vocabulary. It’s cultural knowledge. If you don’t have the language, you can’t have that culture.”

Hall’s work to revive the language is critical to preserving a long-lost college buddy may soon be as close as the nearest computer.

The Linfield College alumni web site is getting a facelift. In response to alumni suggestions, the site is being re-worked to allow better communication for alumni. Along with a new look the site will have a variety of added features suggested by alumni in recent surveys including career networking capabilities, online class notes that will allow alumni to communicate in web forum style, and an alumni directory that will replace the e-mail directory currently on the web. All improved components will be secure and password protected. The site is expected to launch in the fall.

Alumni for whom the alumni office has an email address will receive notification prior to the launch date. To assure that your contact information is up-to-date, email your address to alumni@linfield.edu. Be sure to include your name and class year.

Alumni News

Pencil us in!
Coming soon – summer and fall events for Linfield alumni and friends. For updated information on the calendar and events, please check the website.

Aug. 11-14: Linfield weekend in Seattle
Aug. 19: Portland Beavers baseball
Sept. 24: Portland international event
Oct. 11: Career Mentor Day, Portland
On the road with Wildcat football, pregame events:
Oct. 8: Whitworth College
Oct. 15: Southern Oregon University
Oct. 29: Mesa College
Nov. 12: Willamette University

Alumni information:
503.883.2492 • alumni@linfield.edu
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