Tribal voices rise again

Students learn Chitimacha language

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Chitimacha

The hands shoot up as Sandra "Sam" Boutte points to her leg. "Leg," blurs out one of the fifth graders. "Sitimaxanki," the teacher says. "Say it in Chitimacha." "Wix," another student answers. The teacher nods and moves on to arms, fingers, head.

After class at the Chitimacha Tribal School, fifth-grader Taylor Darden sees a vision of the future when asked about her lesson. "It would be nice for me and my kids...it would be nice for us to have a conversation in Chitimacha," she said.

It's a vision shared by a small group hoping to revive the language of one of the Florida-based Native American groups that came into contact with other Native American groups that had retained more of their culture.

"The language was one generation from becoming extinct," said Carolyn Savage, who teaches Chitimacha at the tribal daycare center, and special class meetings.


Gladly, said Chitimacha Tribe Cultural Director Kim Walden. The Chitimacha language, believed to have been spoken for 7,000 years, was the victim of the countless indignities suffered by Native Americans across the country during forced assimilation.

"We had never heard the language spoken, only a few words," Walden said. "My grandparents were ordered not to speak it, like what was done with the (Cajun) French." From the old recordings — done on wax cylinders — field notes from the ethnographers and bits of the language remembered by elders, the Chitimacha tribe has developed a curriculum to teach the language that starts with students as young as six weeks old.

The tribe contracted in 1997 with linguist Julian Granberry, who had learned the basics of Chitimacha while studying Native American languages.

"Sitimaxanki," the teacher says. "There was a movement to document endangered languages, and we just got lucky," said Chitimacha language student Grant Darden uses body language to speak to other students during class Thursday at the Chitimacha Tribal School.

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"He asked if anyone had memories of the language, and it was silent. No one said they did, and I knew better," Walden said.

Then Granberry spoke a few words in Chitimacha. "There were ladies who hadn't heard the language since they were children and had tears in their eyes," Walden said.

The tribe developed a teaching packet and first sent it out to all tribal members in 1997. The school program began in 1999, and two teachers now work full time on language instruction. The tribe is planning on publishing an in-depth grammar guide and dictionary this year.

"The Chitimacha have gone the farthest from the zero base than any other tribe in the country," said Granberry a part-Mississippi Choctaw who runs the Florida-based Native American Language Services and works with several Native American groups in language revitalization efforts. "I would say in another decade, at the most, there will be a new first generation of Chitimacha speakers.

Out of roughly 1,500 tribal members, 121 are enrolled in language classes. Most are in the four-day-a-week courses required in kindergarten through eighth grade. Instruction is also given at the tribal daycare center, and special classes are held for adults and elders interested in the language.

"The scarlet part to me is that the language was one generation from becoming extinct," said Carolyn Savage, who teaches Chitimacha at the tribal daycare center.

Savage, who is 58, said she remembered hearing Chitimacha only once when she was young. She said she felt like something was missing in her life when she grew older and came into contact with other Native American groups that had retained more of their culture.

"The only reason we knew we were Indian was because we lived on a reservation and went to school on a reservation," she said. "We were told we were Chitimacha, but we didn't know what that meant."

Savage said, "We do a game called 'Who Wants to Learn Chitimacha?'" She'd like to say, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" said Boutte, the teacher.

Boutte admits she sometimes gives her students a hard time when they slack off, reminding them of the importance of their culture.

"Sometimes we don't feel like learning, but she kind of convinces us to learn it, talks about our history," Darden said.

The challenge now is to encourage the use of the language outside the classroom. The Chitimacha has been integrated into ceremonies and tribal staff meetings. There's talk of Chitimacha street signs and classes that bring in entire families.

All the while, the teachers stay just a few steps ahead of the students in developing fluency.

"Before I die, I want to be fluent in the language," Savage said. "To me, that is a dream. Sitting when I'm older and speaking with younger children in Chitimacha."

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