

Lakota Language Study in South Dakota - Lowell Amiotte - OSEU 3

My parents spoke Lakota. They always used it around each other when they didn't want us kids to know what they were talking about. My mother went to the Holy Rosary Mission which is now Red Cloud. She got the idea that you can't make anything of yourself in this country unless you know English. So, they thought, our kids are going to know English...and we are not going to be so worried about them learning Lakota. However, down at Rocky Ford, a lot of people would come and visit our grandparents...and we had spent our summers there. And they would speak in Lakota to each other. And all of us kids would sit there and be like "What's going on?" We saw it was important to them, very important. So, I'm kind of proud of this fact...when I was working at Black Hills State...in the Center of Indian Studies there...we wrote the first grant to bring bilingual into South Dakota...the bilingual programs. At that time, it was strictly a Spanish program out of Washington D.C.. I guess I'm telling a lot of stories, but...we went there to the Office of Bilingual Education in Washington. And we said, "We want bilingual programs for Indian students. The languages, from what we hear, are dying. The people down at Pine Ridge don't think so, but that's what we hear. We want these bilingual programs in South Dakota."

The woman, who was Spanish, looked at me and said, "Where is South Dakota?" She said, "Could you point to it on a map?" She was from Mexico City...she told us later...and she wasn't that familiar with the United States. And so, it was kind of a proud thing to do...to bring those in. And for twenty years, I was the coordinator of the Lakota Language Teacher's Group...and I was a non-speaker. And every time I would turn over to them, they'd get me to come back in and do it. And I would, I would keep coming back because I thought it was very important. And when we first started that group, we invited every reservation to send a representative. We had people like Jim Emery, Calvin Jumping Bull, Albert Whitehat...and you know people of that caliber coming to those meetings. And we thought, "We are going to get them all to agree to come up with one language, Lakota language." And you know there are different dialects that people talk about. The old Indians said, "We didn't worry about Dakota, Nakota, and all that stuff." What we wanted to do was communicate. And we did.

We could understand each other. Now, you say, "Are you Lakota?" "Oh no, I'm Dakota. I'm Nakota." If you start breaking it up like that, you start bringing division. So, keep it. Don't worry about that. So, after the first meeting, we were chewed out so much for trying to get everyone to speak Lakota in the same fashion, that we gave that up." And we tried to promote the idea that each reservation should take their language and teach it to the children. So, I've been very supportive of that idea that you have there that we have to keep working at it and keep the language alive. Part of the thing that came out of that meeting of the Lakota language teachers was Albert Whitehat's dictionary and his work. And Voreen Cedar Face also started one. She works at Oglala Lakota College. But, I don't know if she has ever published hers...but she did a lot of work on that. And at Black Hills, we had Bertha Chasing Hawk. And...oh boy...the name just slips me...come in and develop a language book. And I think Black Hills still sells them.