Maria Seymour

Native Language Instructors Program

AN INTERVIEW BY ALICE WILLIAMS

When I was a little girl we were always moving from one place to another. I used to see my mother getting ready to leave a spot. As soon as I sensed we were going to pack up the canoe, I would scurry around, picking up odds and ends of material and bundle up my stuff together. If my parents didn't want to take my bundle, I would cry and scream until they put it in the canoe. It got to be that when it was time to pack up, they would start yelling "ᐅᔑᑕᐣ" [Get ready! Get ready!]. So they called me " ᐅᔑᑕ^{ah} " [the little one who gets ready]. As I got older my name became ᐅᔑᑕᐣ, *ozhiitaan* [Get ready].

My English name was Maria Wesley. When I was in gradĕ 2 the teacher asked me, "What is your name?"

"Maria," I said.

"That sounds like a Catholic name. We'll call you Moriah." But they still spelled it Maria, but with an 'h' — Mariah.

Maria is one of many Anishinaabeg who has been instrumental in the actualization of the Aboriginal languages being officially taught in the provincial schools in Ontario. For many years the First Nations people have been concerned with the loss of our Languages, that our children are not speaking the Language and are, therefore, not aware of the Native cultural nuances in behaviour, world view, religion, values, interpretation and in their attitudes towards themselves and their own peoples. Because of her respect, regard and caring for our Peoples and our culture, Maria has worked with many individuals to have the language recognized by the Canadian public. Because Maria is Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), her work has specifically been with the Anishinaabe language; however, with the work that she and her friends have done with the Anishinaabe language, it has been able to be used to advance the validation and respect of the other Languages of the First Nations People.

One of the aspects of the Native Language that concerned Maria is the fact that "you can't apply English into Ojibwe. For example, going to court — how does it apply to my language?"

"The court will ask you, 'Did you have a relationship with this man?' The court didn't mean 'did you have a relationship with this man?' The court meant, 'did you have sexual intercourse with this man?' But they don't say that. Therefore, the answer the Indian gives does not apply to what the court really means. What they ask the defendant does not translate to 'relationship,' and the defendant does not give the answer the court wants. Then all kinds of problems arise, one being that the translator is blamed for the mix-up and gets into trouble. [Maria has been a translator many times. She knows.]

Another example of how you can't apply English into Ojibwe: one realizes that when one goes to court, he has broken the law, and has done something wrong. It is a black-and-white thing. The person thinks 'It's up to them to decide what to do with me. I broke *their* law. Therefore I must be punished in court.' They know it's up to the courts to determine what's going to happen to them; they're at the mercy of the courts. When they are asked, 'Did you not tell the police...?,' they will reply, 'Well, I must have said it if that's what you have written down.'"

[Maria recounts how we've worked together to have the Native Language Instructors' Programme (NLIP) come together]:

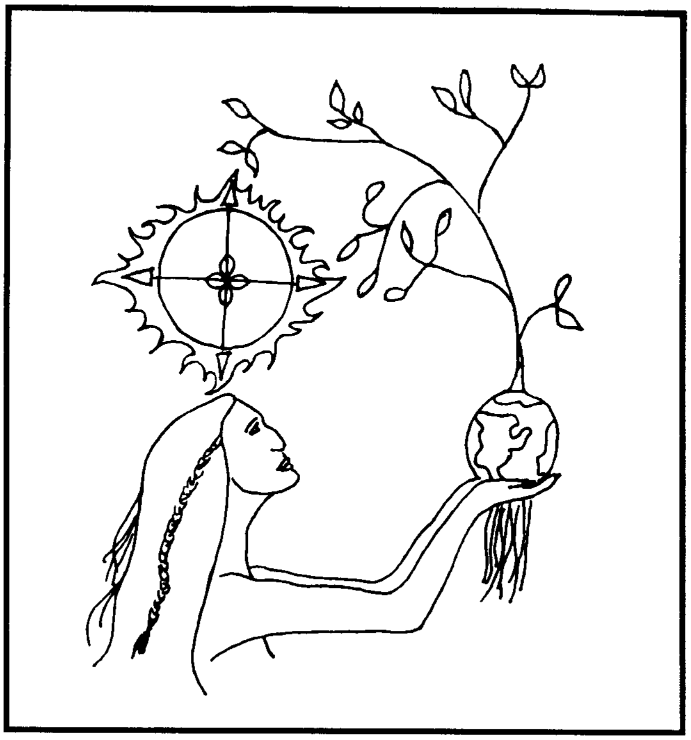
In the summer of 1973 a one-day workshop was held in Fort Frances to discuss our concerns about the loss of our language and what we could do about it and keeping it alive. Thirty of us were able to get together. We found that with the younger generation, there was almost a 100% loss. The ones who have lost the language are the first ones that work the hardest at retaining it or trying to get it back. At this meeting we established the need *for training language teachers*. Because the writ-

Maria Seymour *photograph* **ALICE WILLIAMS**

ing system was inconsistent, because there were no support materials for teaching, and there were many language variances within the Ojibwe Language, we realized the task ahead was great.

We knew there were language teachers, but it was piecemeal and they were hired on the basis of speaking a language. They were not necessarily trained and they were getting bogged down in their lessons because they didn't know their language, and that their language had a structure to it. They just spoke it. And they were hired on that basis.

So we needed to train Native Language Teachers, to educate language teachers that there was a structure to the Language and to try to get them interested in studying their Language if there were training provided. *We* needed to train them. The only ones who could speak had limited schooling (limited education—in society's terms) that is, the older ones. They knew the Language was being lost.



There was the age factor. They felt they were too old, so they backed off. Their formal education was limited, so they felt they were unable to do a good job. Most of us who had gone to school had lost the language and we were already busy doing other things.

We couldn't attract anyone who had papers (who was qualified — in society's terms) to teach Language when the teaching of it was only piecemeal.

Also, the funding for teaching their Native Language was piecemeal. Only when there was money left over, in other words, when the money was available, "Oh, well, we'll give it to the Indians," would they throw a course together to appease. Anyone within the education system (for example, Confederation College, Indian Affairs, local school boards and social services) would throw a course together. In the summer of 1974, we held a week-long workshop again in a hotel in Fort Frances. This was the first Native Language Teachers' Workshop.

In the summer of 1975, we held the second Native Language Teachers' Workshop, this time right in the residential school on the Couchiching Reserve.

All along we talked about how the teaching of units would help teach the Language the best way. We discussed Language curriculum in terms of having units on Story Telling, the Family, Music, the Seasons, etc., etc. John Nichols (not Native), who has been studying the Ojibwe Language for many years, was a big help to us as he taught aspects of the grammar and structure of the Ojibwe Language. There are many cases where you cannot transpose English structure to Ojibwe structure (there are also many cases where you can't directly interchange Ojibwe structure into English Structure). The syllabic writing system was also taught.

When we talk about the Native teachers, they had the knowledge, they had the information. They gave this to the instructors at the workshops. However, these teachers never completed a unit on their own. White people (the instructors) told them how long to make them.

My message [Maria's] is: you have the knowledge, learn how to do it. You sit at that desk and they pick your brains. We have the skills; we have the knowledge. Use them.

In planning units, White people had the writing skills. They collected the money to develop and finish the Units. Meanwhile they used us to collect the information that would go with the education components they developed. They knew the goals and objectives, the rationales and the time frames. What we hope to accomplish is to find the language components and complete the units ourselves.

They hire a Native Language teacher. They hand her her lesson. Plunk. She had no idea how to teach it, but by handing her the lesson, they expect her to know all about teaching it. She had no idea of the time frame. They need it at the office. They never showed her how to do it and they never gave her what she needed. Native teachers didn't know the rationale, the goals, or how to set it up, or how to set up tests, evaluate and the variances. The system is set up so that the classroom teacher or the principal takes credit for what the student learns.

During 1975-76, two workshops were held at Walpole Island. The people who attended the Fort Frances workshops went there. Everybody went—Crees, Ojibwes and Iroquois speakers who were interested in having the Native Language taught in the schools. And we re-hashed all our continuing problems.

In the summer of 1976 we took the NLIP programme to Sudbury, where the education space was available at Laurentian. At this time, the Iroquian speakers broke off and set up their own programme at the University of Western Ontario. They fought to become teachers and when they realized the Language was a viable subject, they retrained and took regular teachers' courses. Native Studies was included. When these student-teachers graduated in 1978, all the language teachers took part.

A Native Language Advisory Committee was established in 1976. Mary Mitchell, from the Indian Affairs office in Toronto, worked for us as the NL coordinator.

The need was established for funding for training NL teachers because they were getting money only that was left over. The money was now there. Now the need is to set up a training package to train Native teachers.

One of the things we found out about holding our NLIP course in Sudbury was that it was too far away from the homes that many people came from. People had families and leaving them for six weeks was just too much. They'd go home for a weekend and many never came back. They just couldn't go home for a visit, and so they had to quit. Ones from Kenora, for example, couldn't finish; however, the ones who lived close by finished their course.

Meanwhile, for these past several years, Language instruction had been given in Thunder Bay, as Mary Mitchell's office had moved there. A Native Language course as a credit to a B.A. programme in Thunder Bay had been held at the University in 1978. So in 1978, the NLIP programme returned to Thunder Bay. Up to this point, the NLIP programme was still using the same format as had been all along.

At this point in time we found out that after four years of taking the NLIP courses, the people had nothing to show for it. They weren't recognized by the Ministry of Education. Local school boards didn't recognize them. They had no certification, because it was not under the umbrella of a recognized educational system, such as a university, a Board of Education, a Ministry of Education, a college, etc. So nobody would hire them. They couldn't get a salary.

It was, therefore, up to the Native Language Advisory Committee to find the way to get certification and to validate the work that was being done by us "nobodies."

The NLIP went to the Dean of Lakehead University to establish a course under the umbrella of Lakehead University, so those taking the courses could get accreditation. Many many meetings were held that year. Finally, Dean Simpleton agreed that there should be official recognition of the NLIP courses that were taken. He was very open to suggestion.

It got off the ground and in July 1978 and '79 the courses began. Now those who started in 1973 had to repeat all those years. The courses would take eight years to get that piece of paper. No credit was given for all those years put in. It was a sickening situation. I felt sorry for them. There was fear of giving up just to get that paper.

But they stayed with it — because the system says you have to do it. I had to appreciate those people for persevering (about twenty-four from north western Ontario).

This was the turning point for everyone because they would get certification — to the extent that their salary base would change. They could have recognition as Native Language speakers.

Now we've established these courses. The onus is now on the NL teachers to take it even further, to organize themselves so they can command the funding or even deal with the issues that concern them as an organization — for example, changing courses so they'll have impact and relevance.

Teachers keep redefining goals and objectives, so that these don't remain at the level they were when they first started.

Teachers need to organize themselves for discussion purposes. The distances are very great. They work in isolation within the school system, and they are not within working distance of each other. They should demand and command P.D. days, separate from the school system. They should get help for developing resources. They should support each other. Someone has to pull it together. They have to be organized in order to do that. Right now they are under the immediate boards for whom they work and they have no understanding of the unique problems and relations to teaching NSL (Native as a Second Language).

Funding for the development of curricula, funding for travel. They have to lobby to the Department of Indian Affairs, the Secretary of State. There is money available for Native Language. They have to pull it in.

We who worked with the NLIP at its infancy, we knew the need, we knew what the Native Language teachers lacked: their prestige. They have to feel like they're accomplishing something. We carried them. We helped them. When they struggled with their units, we got "experts" to help them. We counselled them when they were at the end of their rope. They found out what their language is, what their language is about. How does this word fit into your language? What does it mean?

We're not here to correct you, but to help you. Problems in developing units, they ran into a brick wall. Change it around to your teaching method, for example, a trip to the store. What can you build from that? 1. make a colouring book. 2. different jobs in the store. 3. kinds of people who go in.

They stayed.

This spring in the Treaty 3 area, the Native Language teachers are going to meet as a group in Kenora to form an organization to accomplish all of this. They want to set the stage for their future activity.

Today you live in Kenora. You had eight children; you lost a boy three years ago in a car accident (not alcohol-related) and you have four of your own grandchildren. But there's an extended family in your life: since your sister has died, her daughters have become your daughters and you have become the ᑯᑯᒣ, kookoom [grandmother] of their children.

The reason I made it, I never had alcohol problems.

Illustration DENNIS SMOKEYDAY courtesy ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S COUNCIL OF SASKATCHEWAN

I had my first drink when I was thirty-five. I always thought I'd never be any different from my mother in her drinking habits and in her behaviour when she was drunk. The way we were living in fear, always running — I didn't want that for my children. It was that fear that prevented me from drinking. I was too busy anyway, looking after my sisters. Mom died in 1944, from childbirth, a boy. He was adopted out until he grew up, but he always knew who he was. There was also a two year-old girl. Because there was trouble with the Indian agent, I couldn't do it and manage it. Another family fostered her until she was five. It was at this time my Dad took me out of school to teach me the traditional customs. For three years I lived on the trapline and learned how to make snowshoes, how to trap, skin beaver, muskrat, mink and all the animals that were killed, how to set nets and look after them, how to preserve wild meat and fish, how to hunt moose, and have respect for all things.

When I was eighteen, I went back to school to go to nursing. I finished it and got married and never worked at it. Mind you, I did use it in my life, in bringing up my children.

Today, Maria is the Director of the Lake-of-the-Woods Ojibwe Cultural Centre. They make representations on Native Culture to reserve schools, local schools and anywhere they are asked to do so. They have developed teaching kits on various aspects of Native Life (for example, traditional crafts, foods, clothing, canoe building, weaving, snowshoes, and more. The Centre also provides placement for people taking courses in town (for example, social courses, NOW, FUTURES). They apply for funding to hire unskilled labour, people who are unemployable and can't find jobs (older men, women who never went to school, students who are drifting). People come back and tell her "I'm working now."

The soul of her work is building self-esteem to be proud. The Centre helps groups of women on the Reserves to meet their goals. It is a resource centre for all aspects of Ojibwe Culture. There's a constant display at the Centre to show the work they do. The Centre acts as a liaison between those who know the culture and those who don't and want to find out and want to know about their background.

All the things I am doing now I learned from my father when he took me out of school to live on the trapline and on the reserve to help him raise my sisters. It was a good thing to do. Who would have thought that those things I learned in the bush would bring me to where I am now — helping to bring pride and confidence and contentment to people of Native heritage because they have found out about themselves?

One time I asked my father to come and help me make a presentation on one of the Centre's teaching kits. I was so overwhelmed by the good feelings which came out of that work that I was moved to thank him for the life he exposed to me: "It's because of the things you taught me that I now work here. I had respect, a good job and a good salary and I thanked him."

A few minutes later Alec Skead, a respected and well-known Elder from Rat Portage Reserve near Kenora, came in. My father told him,ᓂᒪᒪᑲᑌᓂᒪ ᐊᐧᐁ ᐃᑕᓇᐦ ᐃᑭᒋᐃᓀᓐᑕᒼ ᓂᒪᐃᐠ ᐊᐱᒋ ᐃᓇᑭᑫ ᑭᐃᔑᐟ ni *maamakaatenimaa a aw iintaanis in kichi inentam. Ni mooik, aapichi inake kii ishit.* ["I am very full of wonderment about that daughter of mine. I am feeling great. She hurts me, the way she thanks me and thinks so highly of me."]

Then he mentioned what I had said, he repeated it, that he had regretted the way we lived, the struggles, that I had raised the kids. Because of the responsibility of raising my sisters, he had thought he had taken away something I had wanted. Little did we ever think that now I could use him to help me teach.

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Aapichi kii' kakwaatakitoo awe e kakwe nitaawikiaach oshiimesha' kii abinoochiiwidash kewiin [That person suffered very much as she tried to bring up her younger sisters. She was only a child herself].