

Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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As small children, many of us remember hearing our parents and our grandparents speaking the language or of learning a few phrases, but few of us grew up with Oneida as a first language as our grandparents did. As a child I remember with warmth, the sound of my mother at the back door, calling “swatekhuni” and we’d all come running because we knew it was time to eat. And after the meal, we’d never think of leaving the table without a “yaw^?ko, mama, yaw^?ko.” It is imperative that our little ones are offered that same opportunity to be able to hear the Oneida language spoken in our homes.

In 1996, there was a ten year plan developed to bring our language back. The plan was done our elder community members who were fluent in the language with a group of young trainees who were willing and able to learn the language through an intense semi-immersion process. In turn, those trainees would go out into the community and teach what they had learned. The ultimate goal of the project is to once again hear the Oneida Language spoken in our community.

The Oneida Language Revitalization Program was started in 1996 as a result of a survey conducted indicating that there were less than 30 community members who learned to speak Oneida as their first language and were still fluent. The situation created a state of emergency with regard to losing our identity as a nation and a people.

Since the inception of the program, it has indeed been an intensive learning process but now the trainees are developing language lesson plans, creating innovative teaching materials, and conducting language classes for the community in a variety of ways from formal

classroom settings at Tekalu.tate, to informal family “nests” in the home.

When the Oneida Language Revitalization was formed in 1996, there were twelve part time speakers; Mary Danforth, Lydia Denny, Hudson Doxtator, Melinda Doxtator, Luella Elm, Mary Jourdan, Leona Smith, Helen Skenandore, Margaret Summers, Lavinia Webster, Loretta Webster, and Vera Wilson. The following is a profile of those elders who took part in the project to save the Oneida Language.

Mary (Antone) Danforth

Aka: “Wali”

Daughter of Wilson and Eunice (Skenandore) Danforth

B: March 28, 1828

D: August 12, 1997

M: Louis F. Danforth, son of Julius and Eunice (Williams) Danforth

Wali attended the language classes because she just loved listening to the Oneida language and being in a wheelchair never held her back.

Wali taught the language at the Oneida Head Start Program for umpteen years. Once in a while, whenever she got the chance, she would steal away and come to the language class. She is truly missed at Tekalu.tatu. Her encouraging words and constant ambition were so admirable.

Lydia (Summers) Denny

Daughter of: Taylor and Elizabeth (Wheelock) Summers

B: August 4, 1907

M: Joshua Denny

Lydia brings with her the dialect from the south end of the reservation, which has proven to be of great value to the language

program. Listening and distinguishing the different dialects that exist within our spoken language is an important part of who we are and who we have become.

Lydia has a sense of humor that never stops, and she has helped to make learning the language so much fun!

Hudson Doxtator

Son of Hyson and Martha (House) Doxtator

B: January 26, 1918

Every day of the week, nine a.m. until noon you will find Hudson in his rocker at Tekalu.tatu, keeping our language alive. Hudson, the only elder male speaker in the group (and he gets a lot of credit for that) is one of our teachers that has such a strong clear voice that you stop in your tracks when you hear him speaking in the language.

Hudson has been helping to teach the language for quite some time in the community and he doesn't mind it a bit when he has to repeat the word sixty seven times in a row. He has been such a big with many aspects of the language program, often going over and above what's required of him. And he loves those pot lucks that the crew plans every now and again.

Melinda Doxtator

Daughter of: Chauncey and Emma Jane (King) Doxtator

B: December 12, 1907

D: June 1, 2003

M: Clifford Doxtator, son Isaac and Dolly (Denny) Doxtator

Melinda is one of the few who taught the Oneida language almost all of her life in some shape or form. Over the years, Melinda had been involved in so many projects within and around the Oneida reservation. She had language on the brain. When in class, if you received one of Melinda's YES head nods, it was a feeling like no other. Cartwheels even came to mind. And when she spoke, it sounded like music because she put the words together so perfectly. The Oneida Language Revitalization Program was very fortunate to have had her.

Luella (John) Elm

Daughter of: Minor and Cecelia (Hill) John

B: 3/3/1912

D: 1/4/2005

M: Howard Elm

The next elder is Luella. Her heart is with teaching our little one's how to speak their own language. She is a true akshota (grandmother) in every sense of the word.

Luella taught at the Oneida Head Start Program and came and helped with the language program in the morning and evening classes. Dedication is Luella's middle name.

She can usually be seen sitting on the side helping out individuals when they would be stuck with a word, here or there.

When she became a part of the Oneida Language Revitalization Program, Lydia had been helping to teach the Oneida language in the community for more than six years.

Mary (Powless) Jourdan

Daughter of Whitney E. and Lavinia (Doxtator) Powless

B: October 8, 1911

D: February 15, 1998

M: Henry E. Jourdan, son of Ephriam and Elsie (Christjohn) Jourdan

Mary never quit! Even after surgery, she still wanted to come in and help whenever she could. She was often referred to as the energizer bunny in disguise. Mary was another aksohta who was involved in teaching her first language to various others in the community. Before she came to the language program she worked for years with the Head Start children.

Mary was one who love to test her students after she had taught them. She had a way of gently challenging each one to push themselves. She would come to the language house in the afternoon when she was feeling up to it. Those days were filled with lots of learning and lots of laughter.

The language program gained so much by having Mary as a part of their team.

Helen Skenandore

Daughter of Mason and Sophie (Antone) Skenandore

B: June 17, 1913

M: Edmund Skenandore, son of Jesse H. and Electa Celicia (Hill) Skenandoah

The Language Revitalization Program is so lucky to have had Helen involved because her

wealth of knowledge has been most helpful in the classes. Along with the morning classes, she also helps out with the evening classes that are open to the community. She's always on the go and so generous with her time. Once in a while, Helen decides to make a mean batch of brownies for the pot luck lunches. She is a sweetheart and a half.

Leona (Doxtator) Smith
Daughter of Hyson and Martha (House)
Doxtator

B: January 20, 1920

M: Peter Smith, son of Joseph M. and Rose (Cornelius) Smith.

Leona is one of the few speakers left who was raised speaking the Oneida language. She is now diligently keeping the learner's tongues tied with practice, practice, practice.

Leona has been teaching those who are really motivated to work hard at learning this complex language. Her soft smile is so comforting to the student who is unsure.

Along with teaching adults in the language program come the many stories that everyone loves to hear, stories about how it used to be. Along with her brother, Hudson, we get a brother/sister tag team. It's a beautiful thing to watch them converse at length in the language.

Leona's dedication comes shining through whenever she would show up even during the worst snow storms.

Margaret (Smith) Summers
Daughter of Johnson and Electa (Ninham) Smith.
B: March 1, 1901

M: Frank Anderson Summers, son of Richard and Electa (House) Summers

Energy is the word you think of when you spend time with Margaret. Many times she would rather walk than ride to the post office. Margaret brings so much energy to the group. She is truly missed when she's not there.

She's another elder who shares her time and knowledge with the youngsters at Head Start. Speaking the language comes easy for her. It is all her family spoke for many years.

Just hearing her laugh will make you smile and she's got the funniest stories to tell.

We've all been very fortunate to have Margaret involved in the language program

these past few years. It is also a good thing, too, because someone needs to keep an eye on her great nephew, Curt, who is one of the language trainees.

Loretta F. Webster
Daughter of Elijah E. and Margaret (Baird)
Skenandore

B: July 25, 1910

M: Willard R. Skenandore, son of Seth Willard and Melissa (Green) Skenandore

Loretta is one of our language teachers who has been giving ALL she can. The evening community classes have been a great success with Loretta's help. The winters have been very hard on Loretta, but she still keeps hanging in when she can. Loretta's fluency with the language is so beneficial to everyone who has been lucky enough to be in a class with her.. When asked for help with the pronunciation of words, she is so patient and supportive that you just want to keep on asking. It brighten's up the day, just to see her smiling face come through the door!

There are many others in the community who are involved with teaching the language, but it is these twelve that were the backbone of the Oneida Language Revitalization Program and today, only two of the twelve are active with the program and a couple more work when they can and as their health permits. We are in a state of national crisis.

In the fall of 2003, an Oneida Language Charter Team was established by the Oneida Business Committee. The charter team is a tool to expand bilingual learning. The mission of the Charter Team is to "identify immediate needs and develop mid-range and long-range plans to keep our language alive and implement the Business Committee's four resolutions as they relate to the Oneida language."

Under the charter's plan, the Oneida Nation will form a teacher certification program and the Oneida Business Committee will send communications to 3,000 government employees informing them that the Oneida language is the tribe's official language.

On April 3, 2004, a community meeting was held at the Norbert Hill Center in Oneida, Wisconsin to honor our Oneida speaking elders who worked so diligently through the years to

help keep the Oneida language alive. Oneida Business Committee representatives, Brian Doxtator, Trish King, and Paul Ninham were on hand to present a plaque designating Oneida elders as our “National Treasures”. They also presented individual awards to elder speakers, past and current, who have been instrumental in keeping the language alive and well. Those present were Hudson Doxtator, Loretta Webster, Maria Hinton, and Vera Wilson. Those not present are to receive their awards at a later date.

On April 14, 2004, the Oneida Language Charter Team, which includes 13 representatives from across our nation officially signed the recently completed Oneida Language Charter.

We are hoping, if there are speakers that we have not yet reached through our surveys, that they would come forward to help in preserving our identity as a people. We would like to encourage positive involvement in revitalizing our very complex, very descriptive, yet vibrant Oneida language, keeping it alive for those who will follow us. It’s been a long time coming and hopefully this is just the tip the iceberg of what’s in store for us as a people, speaking our own language.