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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO SAVE A LANGUAGE? ‘KEEP TALKING’ DOCUMENTARY EXAMINES LANGUAGE, CULTURE REVITALIZATION IN AMERICA TODAY

KODIAK, AK – NOVEMBER 1, 2016 The small town of Kodiak is home to the Kodiak Alutiiq Alaska Native community. In 2013, a documentary crew began following several Alutiiq language revitalization activists. This is where the film’s story of language revitalization in action began.

By 2013, only 41 fluent Alaska Native speakers of the Kodiak Alutiiq language remained. The future for the Kodiak Alutiiq language’s survival looked pretty grim. However spending several years following the progress of a few inspiring language learners and teachers, we see another side to the culture and language work happening there; hope.

Keep Talking (or Niugaa, Yugaa) is an Alutiiq song that is by some accounts at least 200 years old, and this idea was a mission for the Native Village of Afognak when director/producer Karen Weinberg came on the scene. Starting at their first attempt at a remote summer language immersion camp with no cell phones, electricity or running water, the film plunges the viewer into a great social experiment: what happens when you take a bunch of modern day children and give them time on a remote island to explore the sounds and customs of their ancestors?

The *Keep Talking* documentary focuses on three Alutiiq language teachers- Candace Branson and Marya Halvorsen. Candace and Marya are friends who confess they were wild as teenagers, which included drinking too much and generally not taking good care of themselves. Both women came to language revitalization work as part of living a new, healthy lifestyle. The other language activist the film centers on is Lynda Lorensen, a single mother who dreams of one day opening an Alutiiq preschool. Lynda battles domestic violence and finds the language work has given her an opportunity to, as she explains, “reinvent herself.” The film also follows a young girl, Sadie Coyle, whom we meet at age 13. Sadie is a shy girl who is inspired by the Alutiiq language and dance, and this outlet for culture and connection helps her come out of her shell as she becomes a teenager and a bit of a leader herself. Through these inspiring women we come to know the Elders, community leaders and partners who inspire and support them as they move forward with the daunting task of revitalizing their language and culture.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) “It is impossible to estimate the total number of languages that have disappeared over human history.” UNESCO also estimates “There are about 6,000 languages spoken in the world today, most of them in several dialects.” By some estimates the rate of language loss, due to a variety of factors, is staggering; some say one language dies every two weeks. At this rate, by the end of this century over half of the world’s 6,000 languages will be gone. As many will attest, a people’s language holds the keys to their culture. As one film subject states, “language is the key to understanding who we are and who other people are.”

The loss of diversity we are facing with this global phenomenon of language loss is staggering and brought on by a variety of factors; the internet, global commerce, the continued impact of colonialism... however the Keep Talking film focuses on the personal impact language loss has on one small community. We then allow the viewer to extrapolate what this means on a global scale.

In the film, as we get to know the people at the Dig Afognak language camp we come to understand how few Elders remain who can still speak and understand the Alutiiq language. It becomes clear fairly quickly that the children only know a few key words: much work still lies ahead. Also, only a few men seem to be involved in the language movement (including the young men who are music and dance teachers at the camp, Peter Squartsoff and Dehrich Chya). The absence of a strong adult male presence is painfully obvious at camp as Florence, a fluent Elder, prays for the young boys at the camp to make the language their mission.

The teachers dive in, teaching even as they are still learning themselves. We witness language games unfolding with the children, we follow community meetings and house calls with Elders (these visits are called “language fishing sessions...”); all of which are part of an intricate and complex web of community and interpersonal dynamics which make up the language movement.

As the bigger picture of the movement unfolds, the cultural values and history of the Alutiiq people are revealed and the basic lessons of human decency, trust, sharing, and humor emerge. Along with the beauty and richness of their cultural history, the film does not shy away from the impact of hardships from the past which one can still sense today. In the 1700’s the Russians enslaved Alaska Native people and forced them into the fur trade; intermarriage was common and sometimes forced as well. Over time the Russian influence came to be integrated with the Alutiiq culture, and many Alutiiq people still attend the Russian Orthodox Church today.

Another destructive chapter in their history is the forced assimilation of U.S. Government run Indian Boarding Schools. In the 20th century these schools broke up countless Native families across the United States and forcibly punished the children for the simple act of speaking their language. The punishment received by Elders for speaking their language at these U.S. run boarding schools is retold by firsthand account by the Elders themselves. This abuse caused the next generation to lose their history, traditional knowledge, stories, songs, culture and identity. The aftermath of this loss resulted in PTSD, high suicide rates, shame, and patterns of abuse and alcoholism in many impacted communities. However as pointed out by one of the film subjects Alisha Drabek, Ph. D. “our culture is NOT all of these side effects.” She goes on to explain why they learn: “In some ways what we’re doing is all about identity and healing. In other ways it’s about wanting to live in a holistic way, based in this place, connected to our ancestors, and in other ways, it’s a political statement.” Some of these Indian boarding schools did not close or change these policies until the 1980’s and 90’s.

Another nearly buried component of Alutiiq culture lies deep in the memories of the Elders and old audio recordings. Traditional Alutiiq stories (which some call folklore) were a powerful part of Alutiiq culture in the past, and the film explores two traditional stories with animated Alutiiq art. One Elder recounts a personal encounter with the Oolak, or “Bigfoot,” who comes to represent hardship, obstacles and transformation in the film. As camp comes to a close, it becomes clear that young Sadie (13) is going through some personal obstacles of her own; she does not want to leave camp and return to her real life. The community comforts her, but of course everyone must go back to their home.

After camp, Candace and Marya teach Alutiiq part time in the local middle and high school, but their task isn’t easy. Lynda tests her preschool curriculum out on kindergartners and hopes for a grant to come through to fund a preschool. Old personal demons continue to haunt the young women as the threat of domestic violence and presence of alcoholism looms nearby. Meanwhile, as young Sadie’s desire to keep doing Alutiiq dancing grows, the Alutiiq dance group is falling apart. Despite these challenges, both Candace and Lynda find new love.

When Candace and Marya go fishing (now for silver salmon instead of language), as they discuss changes in the language movement. Candace has taken over the Alutiiq dancers and revived them. Sadie is growing up, gaining confidence, and dancing at the head of this new, stronger Alutiiq dance group. Together, the Kodiak Alutiiq Dancers attend the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) conference in Anchorage and Sadie and Candace dance beautifully, but their moment is marred by a tragic [public suicide](#) which occurs during the conference. One of the film’s subjects, April Laktonen Councillor, PhD was at the time giving a speech on how language learning can help decrease the cases of suicide; the timing of this speech was eerily apt. Again the theme of the lingering impact of historical trauma rears its head..

Lynda has a new baby with her new love, but still seems to be on her own, and is dismayed to learn the preschool funding did not come through. At the same time, the Alutiiq Museum is getting ready to do an exhibit on weaving and the community holds a New Words Council to get fluent Elders together to help recall or reclaim a word that means “to weave.” In a tense interplay it becomes clear consensus is impossible as no one seems able to come up with a word that seems right to everyone present, and the complexities of their task become more opaque. Two of the fluent Elders, Sophie Shepherd and Katherine Chichenoff, have a candid talk with a learner and teacher whom they trust- Michael Bach. They confess with their dialect they can’t always understand the other Alutiiq dialect, and admit to sometimes being hurt in the meetings when they feel they aren’t being listened to.

Another year of Dig Afognak camp is held, and we enjoy Marya and Michael teaching and speaking with greater fluency, but an Elder’s passing reminds everyone of the urgency of their task. Candace joins Peter and Dehrich now to teach dance. There is a new focus on reaching young men, with Candace’s boyfriend having joined the dancers. A small hunting party brings three otters to camp from the ocean, and Dehrich the dance teacher learns to skin the animal. As an urban Native coming from Anchorage he explains this is a new and exciting opportunity for him. The skinning of the otter leads to another traditional story- Candace explains the creation story she heard where a baby falls from the sky and the animals gather around to protect it, and the otter offers its skin so it can be warm. The scene ends with a sense of connectedness to the land, animals and history.

In the coda we finally see Lynda with her whole family, including her new husband Jason, her son learning to ride a bike, and her baby girl, who is now almost able to walk. We then see a preschool in action and learn the funding for the Alutiiq preschool finally came through. The preschool opens in January of 2017 so that footage will be shot at that time. Candace, Marya and Michael will all be involved in teaching at and running the preschool, allowing us to see the hard won fruits of years of not only their labor, but also the entire community that has put in so much to help pass this on to the next generation.

Keep Talking is directed and produced by Karen Lynn Weinberg. It is a co-production of Kartemquin Films (*Hoop Dreams*, *The Interrupters*) and Ten Trees Productions. By the end of production filming will have taken place over 4 years from 2013- 2017 in Kodiak, Alaska, Dig Afognak camp on Afognak island, and Anchorage. The film is scheduled for completion in Spring 2017. Principal crew members are executive producers Gordon Quinn, Betsy Steinberg and Justine Nagan, co-producers Kari Sherod and Trish Dalton, cinematographer Nara Garber, editor Lesley Kubistal, and associate producer Rachel Rozycki. *Keep Talking* has been supported by Vision Maker Media, the Native Village of Afognak, and Afognak Native Corporation.