



Notes from the Chief

What I'm working on for You

Osiyo -

The Cherokee language is one of the most vital elements of our tribal culture. We have invested in preservation efforts and youth education endeavors, including the Cherokee Immersion School, which is a renowned global example for developing youth speakers. Today, there are an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 fluent Cherokee speakers, and many others who are conversational second-language learners of Cherokee. While we have elders who are fluent and the emerging youth who will be, there was a void in the development of young adults.

That is why, two years ago, we launched the Cherokee Language Master-Apprentice Program. The goal of this program is to create new adult Cherokee language teachers. We selected four young adults to be the first class, and I am proud to say two of the students recently graduated and one of them will soon be teaching at the Immersion School.

When the selected students came into the program, they had little to no knowledge of the Cherokee language. However, upon graduating two years later, they have achieved high conversational levels. That is truly amazing.

The Master-Apprentice Program is an everyday effort. The students perform general, everyday activities but speak nothing but Cherokee. No English is spoken all day. They cook, look for wild onions and mushrooms, and have general daily conversations in Cherokee. The approach is to do the everyday things, simple activities that are second nature to speak about in English, but do so only in Cherokee. The Cherokee language immersion environment is eight hours each day, five days per week.

The students are paid an hourly wage to attend the program and are selected through an essay and interview process. The students are referred to as apprentices, and these activities and classes are led by fluent, first-language speakers called masters. The program tries to identify young adults and older learners.

This method has been adopted by many tribes in California and has proven to be effective in producing fluent second-language learners. The evidence-based strategy integrates the Cherokee language and our staff has secured multiple grants to help fund the Master-Apprentice Program. Our success in the past year reinforces this effective learning method. Language immersion may be difficult and disorienting initially, but through perseverance and patience, students begin to grasp and learn Cherokee communication structures. Our mission is to develop Cherokee speakers who will have the knowledge to continue learning and teaching throughout the student's life and ensure language preservation.

A third class of eight participants was selected in late 2016, bringing our total to 16 students. Increasing our number of speakers means preserving our unique culture. Our goal is to provide a seamless path for Cherokee language achievements that result in cultural preservation and eventually finding employment utilizing the Cherokee language.

With this effort, coupled with our Cherokee Immersion School and the work of our Cherokee translation department, which has helped develop the Cherokee language for new technology that our citizens can use to text and email in Cherokee, we have set the bar for what it means to invest in language development. Cherokee Nation is a leader in Indian Country, and we are committed to preserving and growing our language. The tribe is proving we can cultivate more Cherokee speakers and enhance our language programs.

For more information on the Master-Apprentice Program, contact the program's manager, Howard Paden, at Howard-Aden@Cherokee.org.

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