

WINTER 2026 NEWSLETTER



Northwest Indigenous Language Institute

NILI
Northwest Indigenous
Language Institute



Storytelling Night

By Sam Dody



Among many Native American communities in the Pacific Northwest, wintertime traditionally marks a shift from outdoor work and activity to a more domestic way of living. Along with this shift comes an engagement in the age-old tradition of storytelling. So it is at the University of Oregon, where, on February 25, 2026 the Many Nations Longhouse once again held its annual community storytelling event. As has been the case for 8 years, the University of Oregon's 1st and 2nd year Ichishkiin classes performed traditional Yakama legends, pulling from stories documented by Átway Tuxámshish, Virginia Beavert (Yakama Nation).

The 1st year class performed the story Łkw'í ku Sts'át (Day and Night). They utilized sock puppets, costumes and masks to tell the creation story of how the animals at Union Gap decided how long day and night should be for the humans.

Next was the 2nd year class, who presented Síkni (Yellow Bell). The story tells of how the flowers all arose for springtime, except Yellow Bell, who refused to get out of bed.

The 3rd year Ichishkiin class did not perform a story, but attended the event to help set up, take pictures, and as moral support to their fellow skuulítáma.

Also in attendance were Sapsikw'atá Brittany Parham, who teaches this year's 1st and 2nd year classes, and Sapsikw'atá Regan Anderson, who drove down from the Yakama Nation Language Program with her family to attend the event.

Both stories were presented in both Ichishkiin and English language. They can be found in Átway Tuxámshish, Virginia Beavert's book "Anakú Iwachá", along with many other Yakama legends. They were shortened and adapted for performance by the students, including Jonathan Van Belle, who wrote and directed this year's performance of Síkni.

For many in the community, storytelling is a way of honoring our ancestors and elders. Brittany Parham reflects, "Each winter, we learn and perform these legends to honor the memory and legacy of Átway Tuxámshish and all that she shared with us."



Architecture Course

By Bella Snyder



“Indigenous perspectives give you an interesting and different approach of being reciprocal to nature and relationships,” explains architect and professor Malu Borja Lopez.

Professor Borja Lopez teaches a two-term terminal studio course in which architecture students are invited to design a new NILI house, situated within the “Native Quad,” which is envisioned as a campus within the broader University of Oregon campus. She states, “It’s the story of the people who are going to use the space, that is most valuable for us.”

The course centers on reciprocity. Students work closely with the

NILI community to understand what people want and need and then bring those insights to the design process.

Professor Borja Lopez is a practicing architect whose work emphasizes community-based perspectives. She brings an approach shaped by her education in Ecuador, where architects often learn directly from communities and build with available resources. Her focus on community engagement has led her to lecture internationally and now guide this collaborative studio course. For professor Borja Lopez, this course is an opportunity to teach students how to prioritize community needs.

This is an ongoing project that NILI will continue to follow and share with our community through the academic year.

For NILI, the ideas that emerge from this course help us envision the future, where NILI has the necessary resources to strengthen our community. NILI is working on a plan to create a dedicated, purpose-built building that would allow for activities not currently possible in our existing space. This collaboration is more than a class project; it’s a home, a place for gathering, rebuilding, and thriving together.

Grove Garden

By Anthony Michael Rider



NILI has a new neighbor. When the Grove Garden on the University of Oregon campus learned that their garden between East 17th Avenue and East 19th Avenue on Moss Street was being moved to a plot next to NILI, they came to NILI in hopes of fostering collaboration. As the garden takes shape next to Elder House, new opportunities arise for NILI. Most importantly, a space in the new garden will be dedicated in honor of Átway Tuxámshish, Virginia Beavert (Yakama Nation), co-founder of NILI, who passed away in February 2024.

The space will be a living expression of gratitude, remembrance, and reflection. Through the continued presence of the Ichishkiin language, the garden also carries forward Átway Tuxámshish,

Virginia Beavert's lifelong work in Native communities and language revitalization. The times she lived in, the people she touched and learned from, made Átway Tuxámshish, Virginia Beavert real for so many. This memorial garden honors that legacy.

The UO Grove Garden, operated through the Student Sustainability Center, has been located on Moss Street between East 17th Avenue and East 19th Avenue since 2012. The space has long provided students with an opportunity to learn about growing food outside of a formal class setting. Both the previous and new sites measure 8,736 square feet, allowing the garden's scale and purpose to continue while opening possibilities for new collaborations.

Our partnership creates opportunities for educational engagement that connect students, volunteers, and community members to the region's cultural and ecological knowledge. This includes Ichishkiin language staff member Sapsikw'atá Brittany Parham facilitating a project for Ichishkiin 203 student integration. Students will learn the associated plants, the sound system of the language, and tangible materials that reflect traditional ecological knowledge, contributing to the resources available to learners of Ichishkiin through the creation of plant name plaques throughout the garden.

I had the opportunity to volunteer at a UO Grove Garden work party during the transition. The day fostered



conversations among volunteers, staff, and students about moving the garden while maintaining community roots. The workday reflected the project's commitment to accessibility and shared stewardship. Gardens like this need years of collective care to thrive.

Volunteers worked on a range of activities, including planting cover crops, spreading wood chips and

mulch for pathways, and preparing new soil layers. Some participants carefully dug up plants from the old garden to transplant into the new beds, while soil from the previous site was also incorporated into the raised beds.

These actions created both a literal and symbolic connection between the garden's past and its future.



As the project continues to develop, the UO Grove Garden stands as both a place of cultivation and a space for community learning. I look forward to seeing the garden's completion and the continued relationships it helps grow.

Film Screening

By Daniele Sparks



In honor of International Mother Language Day, NILI hosted a film screening and Q&A panel on Friday, February 20, 2026, at the Eugene Art House. Following a land acknowledgement expressing respect for all federally recognized tribal nations of Oregon, GeorGene Nelson, Klamath Tribe's Family Language Program director and elder, opened up the evening with a prayer. Two films were shown, each introduced by the filmmaker: "Kla-Mo-Ya Language" by Princess (Princi) Bass-Mason, who is Klamath and Western Shoshone, and "And Knowledge to Keep Us" by Torsten Kjellstrand. A Q&A panel followed with GeorGene, Princi, Torsten, and NILI student worker Daniele Sparks.

GeorGene highlighted the experience of a previous Klamath student she had instructed. The student later returned to her and said, "I can finally say who I am."

Learning late in adulthood, she finally believed in who she was. She no longer carried shame or guilt about an inability to introduce herself in her language.

Language learning is powerful in such a way that it is never too late to meet yourself at a deeper level, and most importantly you are never alone in the journey.

Princi spoke on being drawn to projects that highlight Native American perspectives. She highlighted that if your work is respectful and resonates with others, the innovation derived from the constraints and affordances of your context will shine through.

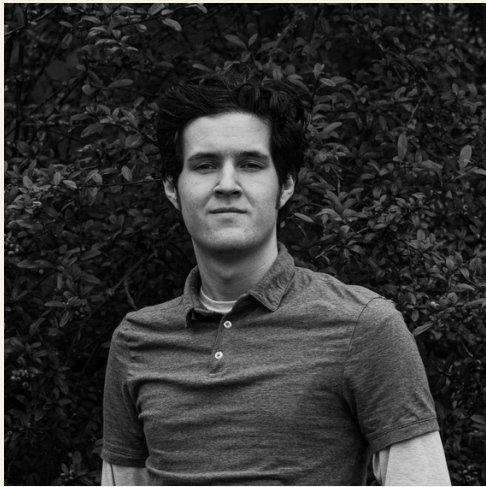
Indigenous language programs need support systems and structures that endure and thrive with or without institutional funding. Autonomy, agency, and intergenerational language transmission is what motivates her work.

Torsten shared his experience documenting an annual culture and language camp hosted by the Native Village of Akhiok, a Sugpiaq community on remote Kodiak Island in Alaska.

Daniele brought up the point that brain plasticity isn't the only reason children learn language easier. They learn somatically, by living through their bodies in a way adults can forget to. This is why learning the culture and the language is so important and useful. Culture and language go hand in hand and we have to surrender our insecurities as language learners. The audience was given the opportunity to ask questions at the end.

Thank you to all donors who contributed to our fundraiser. We raised about \$3,000 for future projects by our student workers! We look forward to hosting a film screening and Q&A panel again.

Meet the Student Workers



Sam Dody

Sam is an undergraduate student from Portland, Oregon, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies at the University of Oregon, along with minors in Native American and Indigenous Studies and Music. He became involved with NILI through UO's Ichishkiin language program, where he is currently a third-year student. His primary duties at NILI include video production, helping prepare the annual TRaILS talks, and communications work. Outside his work in NILI and school, Sam is a hobbyist filmmaker and jazz enthusiast.



Ericka Grunlose

Wanishaash Ericka Grunlose Washnash Yakama ku Colvilleknik. My name is Ericka, and I come from the Yakama and Colville people. I'm a second-year student majoring in Early Childhood Education with a minor in Indigenous studies. I value language revitalization and have been studying Ichishkiin, my Native language, since high school. My language journey has been influential, and I hope to continue expanding my knowledge by also learning Salish and eventually becoming fluent in both languages. At NILI, my work focuses primarily on language, especially supporting and engaging with Ichishkiin materials and learning. I also help coordinate student and staff events that bring together community members.



Mayel Interian-Ku

Mayel is a third-year student from Portland, Oregon, who is majoring in political science and minoring in Spanish, Latinx studies, and legal studies. Mayel is Mexican American with Mayan descent. She is this year's Curriculum/Materials and Events Support Intern. She is currently working on a long-term project that involves creating a comparative timeline of NILI and what was going on legislatively. Her interest in NILI rose from seeing the decrease in her parents' Native language, which sparked a need to give back to her community, especially when it comes to language. Her hobbies include trying new things and making sure she creates good memories as she is graduating this year!



Alex Moreno

Alex is a Language Teaching Studies M.A student from Eugene focusing on Chinuk Wawa who is helping support the development of the Resource Hub by organizing and adapting teacher training materials previously created by NILI for use in this new context. He is particularly interested in curriculum and materials development, as well as translating children's literature, and also works in the UO Language Revitalization Lab organizing and digitizing CDs, DVDs, and VHS tapes. He enjoys playing clarinet, birdwatching, board games, and long-distance running.

Meet the Student Workers



Daniele Sparks

Daniele is a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes. She is a senior at the University of Oregon studying data science. She aims to combine her expertise in data science with the expansion of language revitalization projects and services throughout the Pacific Northwest. Joining the Native American and Indigenous Studies Academic Residential Community (NAIS ARC), she was exposed to more broad conversations within academia, and ongoing efforts throughout the country regarding Native Sovereignty, cultural, and language preservation.



Bella Snyder

Bella is a third-year Journalism and Psychology student from Roseburg, Oregon. As a member of the NILI Communications Team, she creates video, photo, and written content for the NILI website, newsletter, and social media, helping translate NILI's work into accessible, engaging content. She is especially passionate about photojournalism and its ability to preserve moments of cultural significance. Through storytelling, she hopes to highlight NILI's language revitalization efforts at the University of Oregon and within the broader community. Bella sees this work as a way to strengthen connection and awareness among both internal and external audiences. Outside of school and work, she spends most of her time outdoors, running, biking, hiking, and documenting her experiences through photography.



Anthony Michael Ryder

Anthony (Ojibwe, Saulte Tribe of Chippewa Indians descendent) is an interdisciplinary artist based in Oregon whose work navigates the entanglement and often transformations of personal trauma into collective calls for accountability, care, and reparation. Ryder's practice explores how vulnerability can be a tool for reauthoring power, by building communal spaces of reciprocal witnessing. Ryder is a grant recipient from Southern Vermont Arts Center through NEA funding and the Emergency Fulcrum Fund from 516 Arts through the Regional Regranting Program of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. In 2021-2022 Ryder participated in Andy Warhol's curatorial fellow Ric Kasini Kadour's Art Meets History. His work has been exhibited and featured in film festivals, music festivals, non-profits, NBC, People Magazine, KSL, and internationally including at the Czong Institute for Contemporary Art (CICA) in South Korea, The New York City Electroacoustic Music Festival, The Santa Fe Film Festival, The Amsterdam Independent Film Festival, WET Productions in the United Kingdom, and many others.

Announcements



After 12 years of valuable service to the NILI Advisory Board, **Sheila Bong** (Blackfeet) is stepping down. Sheila joined the board in 2014 at the request of then director Janne Underriner. She advised NILI during a number of crucial periods and supported the transition to a new director Robert Elliott in 2021. The expertise and insight she has shared with NILI through the years is vast, ranging from her own work as a youth helping transcribe oral language of her Tribe, to her work as an entrepreneurial co-founder of Avant Assessment for languages. We thank Sheila for her long-standing commitment, which has helped make NILI what it is today, and wish her all the best as she transitions to new adventures and life experiences.

Summer Institute 2026

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nwili@uoregon.edu

1629 Moss St, Eugene, OR 97403