

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER



Northwest Indigenous Language Institute

NILI
Northwest Indigenous
Language Institute



Table of Contents

(3) Letter from NILI Director

(4) Mother's Day Pow Wow

(6) Summer Institute

(8) Janne Underinner Retires

(9) Joana Jansen Retires

(11) A Spring of Illustrations

(13) NILI Faculty and Staff

(15) Announcements

Letter from NILI Director

Robert Elliott

As I write my first Director's letter for our new NILI newsletter, we are in the midst of a beautiful spring here in Eugene, Oregon. Flowers are blooming in waves, geese are passing north, and the trees are nearly fully leafed out, with just a few still budding. Change and growth are in the air — and all around us.

As an institution, NILI is also in a time of change and growth. Two incredibly important members of our community will soon move on to the next phase of their lives after years of dedication to this work they love. You can read more about Janne Underriner and Joana Jansen later in this newsletter. We are deeply grateful for their contributions and lasting impact.

We are also thankful for our board, who continue to guide us thoughtfully as we consider the best path forward. In particular, I want to recognize Jaeci Hall for stepping into a leadership role with the board. Jordan Douglas-Tavani continues to sustain and strengthen the NALRC through diligent and committed work. In addition, six student workers and one intern are contributing to a wide range of projects—helping us move forward on important efforts that we have not been able to fully pursue in recent years.

We continue to build new connections and collaborations. Recent travels to the University of Alberta in Canada, Washington, DC, and Alaska have allowed us to deepen relationships with partners across the field, including our sister institutes, AILDI (American Indian Languages Development Institute) and CILLDI, (Canadian Indigenous Language and Literacy Development Institute). Through this work, we are



sharing NILI's efforts, learning from others, and connecting with new communities engaged in language revitalization in both local and global contexts. It is truly exciting to contribute to this growing and vital field.

Closer to home, we are excited to begin developing a campaign for a new Language Revitalization Center to replace the current NILI house. While still in the early stages, we envision a purpose-built space dedicated in honor of átway Dr. Virginia Beavert (Tuxámshish). This new center will support NILI's work well into the future, allowing us to grow and adapt to a promising future for Indigenous languages.

Please enjoy this issue of our newsletter. If you are visiting for the Summer Institute or are in the area, we warmly invite you to stop by the NILI house — still our cozy home for the immediate future.

Robert

Language and Dancing at the Mother's Day Powwow

By Sam Dody



On May 8-10, the Native American Student Union celebrated its 58th annual Mother's Day Powwow at McArthur Court and the Many Nations Longhouse. As per usual, the event was anchored by three grand entries, and a wide range of dance competitions.

The Powwow is a relatively modern form of expression, beginning in the late 18th and early 19th century as a way to celebrate Native American song, dance, and art, despite intense cultural repression and forced assimilation by the US federal and state governments. Like language revitalization, powwows act as a form of active resistance against colonization. As such, some students

who are involved in both practices find that they go hand in hand.

Perhaps nobody understands this connection better than 2024-25's Mr. Indigenous UO, Te'e Brown (Pauma Band of Luiseño Mission Indians). A double major in linguistics and Native American and Indigenous studies, he has been grass dancing since he was old enough to walk, and speaks both Ichishkiin and his own heritage language of Luiseño. For Te'e, both language and dance are two sides of the same coin: "Language itself is a very beautiful thing that has to be held tightly to us and it's something that we consider sacred. It's our original way of communicating to each other

and I think dance is another form of communication. So when I think of dance and language I think of the ways that we show and express ourselves to other people." Te'e strives to be a community leader in both fields; this year he helped judge several competition categories and his future goal is to go back home to his community to help revitalize his own language.

Also dancing this year was 3rd year Ichishkiin student, Wishxam / Zecharia Webb (Yakama Nation, Wasco-Wishram). Wishxam could be seen dancing, judging and running a merchandise table. He's been dancing traditional style since he was about 10, and speaking Ichishkiin



almost as long as he has English. Both are important parts of his own spirituality: “When I go out there I always think in a Washat mindset, our sacred religion. I go out there and sing almost like a Washat song in my head before I go out, which is all in Ichishkíin, and I say those words.” Even though we’re far from Yakama, Wíshxam appreciates how much culture and community can be found at the UO: “I love the fact that Ichishkíin is spoken here, even so far away from home, it gives me a good sense of feeling. Whenever I’m at the NILI house, it’s that weird creaky little

house, but I’m like dang, it always feels like home a little bit, and I get the same sense from the powwow too, I always know there’s a sense of community there.”

Te’e and Wíshxam are just two out of over a dozen current and former Ichishkíin students who attended the powwow, including NILI student worker and official Indigenous UO Ambassador Ericka Grunlose (Yakama Nation, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation), and outgoing Miss Indigenous UO, K’wáłáni i Xáyxyaw / Alexis Maddern



(Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation). Their involvement shows the close relationship between language revitalization and other forms of Indigenous cultural expression at the University of Oregon. Through dance, ceremony, and everyday language use, students continue to maintain connections to their communities while sharing those traditions with others all across campus.

Summer Institute

By Anthony Michael Ryder

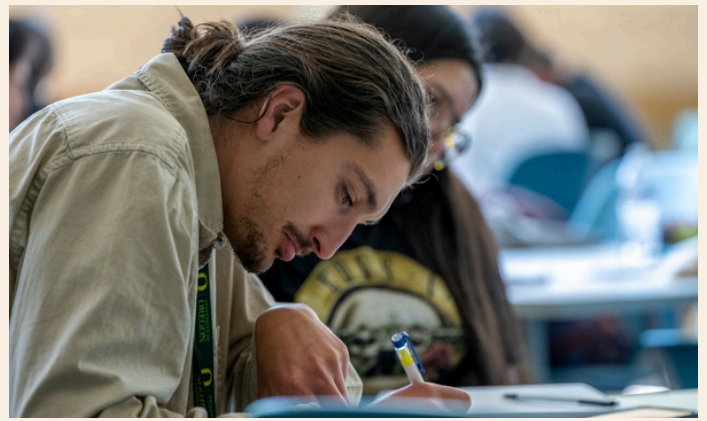


NILI held its first Summer Institute in 1998 and has been bringing people together for language work for over 25 years. At our annual, week-long teacher training institute, Native language teachers and learners come together to learn and support one another. Participants study teaching methods, activism, linguistics, language vitality, and community use of the language. NILI Summer Institute is a collaborative effort between the University of Oregon and Native Communities. At the end of June, more than 45 Native American language practitioners, teachers and learners gather at NILI and UO's Eugene campus for Native language revitalization.

There is something powerful about the way people arrive at NILI's Summer Institute. Attendees come with a deep commitment to their culture, to their language that fosters the creation of strong connections with others—working to restore their languages with additional teaching tools. They come from different tight-knit Tribal Nations, communities, classrooms, families, and stages of their language revitalization journeys. Attendees arrive as fluent speakers, teachers, learners, as relatives, carrying only a few words with a deep responsibility to keep languages alive. What brings everyone together, is the shared understanding that language is

community work. It is memory work. It is future work.

Summer Institute becomes a kind of oasis in that way. A place where words become a deliberate place to enter, so that with our voices we can enter a place with care. In the middle of long days, workshops, meals, conversations, and moments of uncertainty, people are reminded we are doing this work together. Language revitalization can often feel like carrying water across dry ground. At NILI, the water is gathered together and cupped around our futures. The work becomes collective.



The impact of Summer Institute is perhaps best understood through the words of past participants. One attendee shared their joy, “Being together with my group! Hearing from all the different communities. Inspired to move forward and bring language breath at home.” Another reflected, “I enjoyed the community of it and the positive communication. No one was negative or shamed. It was a very peaceful NILI.”

I often think of this gathering through the image of salmon. Salmon travel outward into vast waters, gathering strength, experience, and journeys before returning home to the river.

In a similar way, those who come to Summer Institute enter a larger current. They come to learn, to exchange, to be challenged, and to be nourished. Language belongs in kitchens, classrooms, ceremonies, jokes, stories, songs, and everyday moments between people who are still learning how to return to one another. They return home carrying new tools, new relationships, and new lived knowledge back to their communities as a technology to build towards their own return.

This spirit of collective care is echoed by one previous participant, who shared, “The teachers in the classes

I took were super engaging and receptive to the needs of the class, balancing teaching with interacting and allowing students to bring what they need to the table.”

For me, NILI’s Summer Institute is a reminder that language revitalization is a process. It is about the people gathering within their relationality, sharing what they have, and returning home with enough strength to continue. And in doing so, they help make the river possible for those who will come next.

We look forward to another year of togetherness.

Janne Underriner Retires

By Sam Dody

After 29 years of service to NILI, founding director and Research Professor Janne Underriner will retire this summer. Her work has been pivotal in the field of language revitalization, and she has consistently served as a vital liaison between higher education and the Native Tribes of the Pacific Northwest.

“I thought I was going to do ESL in graduate school,” Janne recalled, noting that she fell into the work almost by chance. “At the end of my second year, I hadn’t taken a seminar, and there was only one offered. It was by Scott [DeLancey], on morphemic analysis of Klamath texts ... and I just fell in love with it.”

In 1997, Janne was one of a handful of graduate students who responded to requests from Elders and educators from local Tribes seeking teacher training and curriculum development, helping to found NILI (then the Northwest Indian Language Institute). The following year, she and DeLancey co-directed the first Summer Institute, an annual program that continues today.

Because she was there from the beginning, Janne’s story is, in many ways, the story of NILI itself. At the time, language revitalization had not yet emerged as a formal discipline within linguistics. “People were doing it because we were responding to communities’ needs,” she said. Alongside her colleagues and Tribal partners, Janne helped shape the field of community-driven linguistics. “It was a small group of people and a really big deal. We weren’t doing it the old way. There’s a new way, and that’s that the [Tribal] community leads the way.”



Among the many initiatives Janne led or supported were: creation of language proficiency benchmarks for Oregon’s Native languages; development of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde’s Chinuk Wawa Immersion Preschool and Lane Community College’s Chinuk Wawa program; assistance in codifying Oregon’s American Indian Languages Teaching License law; and the co-founding of the Northwest Native American Language Resource Center (NW-NALRC).

Janne was also a close friend and academic collaborator of Atwáy Tuxámshish (Dr. Virginia Beavert) for many years, supporting her doctoral work and publications. Janne encouraged Dr. Beavert to come to the University of Oregon in 2008, where she shared her expertise as a community leader until her passing in 2024. Janne also helped Dr. Beavert found and lead the Ichishkíin

program, and supported projects such as the 2019 book *The Gift of Knowledge / Ttnúwit Átawish Nch'inch'imamí*, for which she served as an editor.

In retirement, Janne looks forward to spending more time with her grandchildren and family in Sweden, as well as pursuing her love of music. She also plans to remain involved with Tribes across the Pacific Northwest. “I can’t imagine ever really walking away from those communities,” she said. Reflecting on her career, Janne added, “I am so grateful for this work and opportunity. It’s a work of everybody’s love.”

The impact of Janne’s leadership and guidance on NILI cannot be overstated. We extend our gratitude for her decades of work and wish her well in her retirement.

Joana Jansen Retires

By Bella Snyder



Joana Jansen, Associate Director of NILI, will retire this summer after 15 years of faculty service and 10 prior years of volunteer and GE service supporting language reclamation work.

“Language situations are so different than in 2000. We see that there are more speakers of Indigenous languages than there have been in years. It’s not comfortable to be prideful in something that has been my privilege to do. I am the one blessed to get to do the work, to have had others believe I am worthy of it.”

Joana was introduced to NILI in 2000 when she began the graduate linguistics program at University of Oregon. Her long-term career plan had been to teach English as a second language (ESL). Through Professor Scott DeLancey and

graduate teaching fellows Tim Thornes and Janne Underriner, she volunteered at the NILI Summer Institute the following year in 2001. There, she met Judith Fernandes, who shared her expertise on classroom language teaching. An Elder at Summer Institute helped Joana realize that she could use linguistics in the PNW to help with Indigenous language reclamation rather than teach ESL, so she decided to stay at UO to pursue a Ph.D.

At Summer Institute in 2004, Scott Delancey introduced Joana to Átway Tuxámshish, Dr. Virginia Beavert, who asked her to work together on a comprehensive grammar for the Yakama Ichishkíin language. “Working with Virginia was – beyond anything I could have expected I would do and the honor of my life,” Joana said. “She was ínt’aks (my friend), sapsikw’atá (teacher), and papakutkut’á (colleague).”

Two years later, Joana accepted the graduate teaching fellow position at NILI, where she assisted on projects with Tribal programs and supported the Summer Institute. After graduating with her Ph.D. in 2010, Joana stayed at UO to pursue post-doctoral work and grant projects in her role at NILI.

In 2013, she became the Associate Director of NILI where she learned about crafting projects and proposals, language work, work with people, Tribal Sovereignty and Indigenous education. She and the team wrote the proposal that led to NILI becoming a Native American Language Resource Center in 2023, which has allowed NILI to continue expanding their work.

Joana credits NILI’s accomplishments to her influential team of long-term friends and colleagues that she had the joy of working with. “A critical



part of anyone's journey with NILI is the team and relationship-building process. The process can be messier and longer, but the outcome is invariably better. We shouldn't only work with people who think or see the world the same way as we do, or who agree with what we think. At NILI, we are a team."

As NILI continues to grow, Joana looks forward to seeing more Indigenous leaders and faculty at

NILI. She hopes to hear more Indigenous languages in everyday places and see more focus on community and family language use. "I can't wait to walk through the doors of the Dr. Virginia Beavert, Tuxámshish, Language Revitalization Center. I'll be one of the ones crying tears of joy."

In retirement, Joana plans to continue to work on the Ichishkíin grammar and curriculum and

contribute to materials for the Yakama Nation Language Program. Outside of work, she is excited to spend more time with her husband Steve. As longtime travelers, their most upcoming plan is to ride their sailboat *Seaweed* around the Pacific Northwest and travel to Spain to see the solar eclipse.

A Spring of Illustrations

By Jordan Douglas-Tavani



A major obstacle for Indigenous Language Teaching is a lack of good materials for teaching. Unlike teachers of major world languages like Spanish or Japanese, Indigenous languages teachers in the Pacific Northwest must make all of their own materials. They must be teachers, artists, translators, and more.

Over the last 10 weeks, student artists from the University of Oregon Comic Studies Program have been working to make the lives of these teachers just a bit easier. Under the mentorship of Jordan Douglas-Tavani, Project

Manger for the Northwest Native American Language Resource Center (NW-NALRC) at NILI, these student artists have been working as interns to illustrate a new storybook series.

Authored by Douglas-Tavani, reviewed and edited by language teachers, and illustrated by these student artists, the NW-NALRC Illustrated Storybook Series: Book Templates for Indigenous Language Teaching, aims to provide teachers with easy-to-implement curriculum for their classrooms. The books provide short stories of animals

Indigenous to the Pacific Northwest going on journeys. The stories are meant to be engaging, fun, and scientifically accurate in their depictions of Indigenous plants and animals.

Each storybook comes with a simple story, written in English, and a blank version of the book, for teachers to write a version of the story in their languages. Alongside this, each book comes with a translation guide which explains all of the different language functions and structures present in the English version of the story.



The books will also have decks of flashcards to assist with vocabulary learning.

There are three books in this first run. The first tells a story about a Sea Otter and their friend diving for food. It is illustrated by August Reitan.

The second book is about a Mother Black Bear teaching her cubs how to gather food. It is illustrated by Theodore Dillon.

The third book is about a Crow flying through a valley to meet up with their friend, Stellar's Jay. It is illustrated by Query Dyhr Juuri.

This project has been supported by the UO College of Arts and Sciences Rippey Career Preparation Grant.

If you are interested in using these books, make sure to subscribe to the NILI email list so you can know when the books are ready to go!

Meet NILI Faculty and Staff



Jordan Douglas-Tavani

Jordan Douglas-Tavani, Ph.D., serves as the Project Manager for the Northwest Native American Language Resource Center (NW-NALRC) at NILI. A speaker of miluk t̓iis (Miluk, Miluk Coos), he has worked in partnership with the Confederated Tribe of Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians to develop curriculum, and compile and edit dictionaries in the Tribe's three languages: miluk t̓iis, hanis t̓'i'iiis (Hanis, Hanis Coos), and wa'as (Siuslaw). Jordan is a proud citizen of the Tlingit & Haida Nation. Outside of work, Jordan enjoys tabletop role-playing games, conlanging, and spending time with his wife, Nikola, and their two corgis—Toast and Waffles.

Norman Kerr

Norman Kerr, MA, Analyst Programmer, is a software developer focused on language-oriented applications following a career as a teacher. He has developed several types of online systems for language teachers and learners. He has extensive knowledge of CMS systems, various programming languages, and backend SaaS platforms such as AWS and Azure. More recently he has researched how machine learning can be used in a language learning context. He serves as lead programmer and developer for the NALRC Resource Hub and will assist with its creation and unfolding, including sustainability, maintenance, and security.



Torsten Kjellstrand

Torsten Kjellstrand helps NILI with communications, working alongside our student workers to create newsletters, social media content, and language teaching materials. As a photojournalist and filmmaker, he works to tell stories with under-represented and misrepresented communities. He studied literature at Carleton College, then as a Fulbright Scholar, and spent a year as a Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford. He is now a Professor of Practice in journalism at the University of Oregon. He likes being outdoors more than he likes being indoors, especially if he is also with his wife and dogs.



Meet NILI Faculty and Staff



Michelle Hefner

Michelle Hefner has supported language faculty, staff, and students at the University of Oregon for over 20 years working at the Yamada Language Center, and she now brings her dedication and expertise to the NILI team as an Administrative Program Assistant. With her years of experience and relationships that she maintains across campus and in the community, she successfully prepares and plans annual events like Foreign Language & International Studies (FLIS) Day and other large conferences throughout the year. Outside of work, Michelle enjoys cheering on the Ducks, painting, gardening, and spending time with family.

Brittany Parham

Brittany completed her PhD in Linguistics at the UO in September 2026. Her research has focused on language revitalization, applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and pragmatics. She has also been learning the Ichishkiin language for 12 years, teaching for two, and was a pupil of the late Dr. Virginia Beavert. She is currently the instructor of the first and second year Ichishkiin sequences at the UO. Outside of work, she loves being outside and spending time in her garden, going on long walks with her dog, and treasure hunting at thrift stores and antique malls.



Regan Anderson

Regan Anderson has worked with NILI since 2009. She is a UO instructor of the Ichishkiin language and Summer Institute faculty. Additionally, she is the Community Outreach Coordinator for Babies and Families at the Ichishkiin Sínwit Language Program, Yakama Nation. She earned her PhD in the Critical and Sociocultural Studies in Education program at the University of Oregon and holds a Masters in Language Teaching and a Bachelors in Linguistics, both from the UO. Regan collaborates on Ichishkiin materials and curriculum development, program development, teacher training, and language documentation.



Announcements



Summer Institute

June 21–28

TRaiLS

June 22–26

SNAIL

June 26–27 at the University of Oregon

Learn more about NILI's Programming at
<https://nili.uoregon.edu/program-offerings>



NWILI

Northwest Indigenous
Language Institute



Scan to subscribe to our email list

Click Below for More Info



Contact Us

nwili@uoregon.edu

1629 Moss St, Eugene, OR 97403