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Dancers perform at the Bear Moon Pow Wow at the Indian Community School in January; photo by Lacy Landre

WISCONSIN'S NATIVE TRIBES ARE TAKING ACTION TO KEEP THEIR LANGUAGES FROM DYING OUT

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The speakers of Wisconsin's native languages have dwindled to a few elders, but the tribes are rallying to ensure this critical element of their culture is preserved.

he day care classroom looks pretty standard.

T Six children, ages 1 to 2 and full of energy, are playing with toys, bouncing around the room and interacting with three teachers. A teacher, a grandmotherly woman named Annie Wilber, sits on the floor with the youngsters and sings that ubiquitous little-kids' song – “If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!” The toddlers clap, stamp and jump on cue. Across the room, a little boy sneezes. Another teacher – tall, 23-year-old Donald Tourtillott – leans over. “Gross. Your nose is really snotty, let's wipe that nose.”

What makes this place unusual: No adult in this room is talking to these children in English. All communications are required to be in Menominee, a language familiar to hundreds of tribe members but spoken proficiently by only about 10 of them. This is a language-immersion day care on the [Menominee reservation in Keshena](http://www.menominee-nsn.gov/) (<http://www.menominee-nsn.gov/>), and part of an ambitious effort to resurrect the language that has lost so many of its native speakers that it might be headed to extinction without some kind of intervention.

The number of people who learned Menominee before they started speaking English – known as first-language speakers, or native speakers – is down to five elders, all of them older than 80, according to [Ron Corn Jr., the longtime Menominee language teacher](https://theways.org/story/living-language) (<https://theways.org/story/living-language>) who oversees teacher training for the tribe's immersion day care. The idea of this place is to speak Menominee to babies and toddlers who are in their most formative years. “The sign of a healthy language is that the language is spoken by children,” Corn says. “There's no other demographic that makes the language safe. So if it's spoken even by a thousand elders, that doesn't make your language safe.”

T here are some 150 indigenous languages spoken in North America, but many of them no longer have any first-language speakers. The last native speakers of many such languages have died in recent years, notes [Monica Macaulay, a linguistics professor at UW-Madison who specializes in Native languages](https://monicamacaulay.com/) (<https://monicamacaulay.com/>), particularly Menominee. Two examples she cites: the last native Mandan speaker, in North Dakota, and the last speaker of Wichita, in Oklahoma, both passed away in 2016.

Menominee is one of at least five indigenous languages still spoken among the 11 federally recognized Indian tribes or bands in Wisconsin. All of these tribes have concerns about their languages possibly dying out – and most have launched programs to revive them.

The **Ho-Chunk** in western Wisconsin (<http://www.ho-chunknation.com/>) are developing an immersion day care like Corn's, and Ho-Chunk is taught in five public school districts, along with informal instruction in several branch offices and online courses. [Oneida language](https://oneida-nsn.gov/our-ways/language/) (<https://oneida-nsn.gov/our-ways/language/>) is taught at schools on the reservation near Green Bay and in two nearby school districts, as well as at [St. Norbert College](https://www.snc.edu/news/pressrelease/1365/) (<https://www.snc.edu/news/pressrelease/1365/>) and [UW-Green Bay](https://www.uwgb.edu/education-center-for-first-nations-studies/wi-indigenous-language-resources/oneida/) (<https://www.uwgb.edu/education-center-for-first-nations-studies/wi-indigenous-language-resources/oneida/>); there are also an immersion Head Start program and adult classes on the reservation and at the tribe's Milwaukee branch office. There are published and/or online dictionaries in Menominee, Potawatomi, Oneida, Ho-Chunk and Ojibwe, most of them produced in recent years, and the Stockbridge-Munsee are working on one in Mahican. And at the **Forest County Potawatomi reservation** near Crandon (<https://www.fcpotawatomi.com/>), an elder named **Jim Thunder** (<https://language.fcpotawatomi.com/>) tells stories in his language, which the tribe publishes, and twice a week, he guides an eager group of adults through the long process of mastering the challenging Potawatomi tongue. “Our language is vast,” he says. “I tell them to speak to each other as much as they can.”

For some Wisconsin tribes – especially the Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk and Oneida – plentiful gaming money helps pay for these efforts. The Menominee casino in Keshena (<https://www.menomineecasinoresort.com/>) doesn't generate as much as some other tribes' larger gaming operations, but it helped the Menominee start the day-care program, which now runs on grants from the federal Administration for Native Americans (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ana>).

The Menominee immersion day care, in its second year, is staffed with teachers trained by Corn using a teaching technique called total physical response, in which he demonstrates actions while describing them in the language. The trainees in a class last October were six men and women, ages 21 to 35, tribal members who had taken classes in Menominee language in reservation schools. Corn, whose outgoing style brings a sense of theater to his classroom, acts out movements, sitting down in his chair, getting back up, turning around, writing his name on a chalkboard, drawing a circle around it, walking in an exaggerated way across a classroom, closing and reopening a window, giving it a fake punch.

It's entertaining, maybe a little goofy, and the students are enjoying the show. "He knows how to keep it lighthearted and to make sure that you're following it, and that you're sticking with it and that it's not pushing you away," says Tourtillott, the day-care teacher who finished the training last August. "He makes the whole experience of learning immersion language enjoyable and he makes it manageable, because it can be very tough. It's a very challenging field, but if you let it, it's so much more rewarding than it is challenging."



<https://www.milwaukeejournal.com/news/local/2018/08/06/ron-corn-jr-65-Dale-Kakkak/>

Ron Corn Jr. oversees the training of teachers for the Menominee immersion day care. "The sign of a healthy language is that the language is spoken by children," he says. Photo by Dale Kakkak.



(https://11pt5z46nuudt9qxx2knwgf-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/IMGL1549_Dale-Kakkak.jpg).

Teachers Annie Wilber and Donald Tourtillott with children at the Menominee language immersion day care in Keshena. Photo by Dale Kakkak.

A poem of place

Margaret Noodin, a UW-Milwaukee Native faculty member (<https://uwm.edu/eqi/people/noodin-margaret/>), wrote a poem in Ojibwe about the Milwaukee area with several references to modern place names and their natural origins. How many can you recognize?

DOODOOSHABO'ENAADE OODENA

Gii maawanjidiwag ji-odaawewaad
 endazhi waabshkaabikong
 abitoo-ay'iing naakwek miinwaa aapta dibikad
 abitoo-ay'iing minoakiing miinwaa chigaming

CREAM CITY

They gathered to trade
 where the stones were white
 between midday and midnight
 between the good earth and the great sea

Waagoshag, waawaateseg, miigwanag
 giwedining aayaawaad
 ginoozheyag, chigagoog, zhangwishan
 zhawanong aayaawaad babikaan bedowe dibaaswewewaad
 babikaan miikwendamowaad.

Anokijig, paandajig gizhigoon gimoodaanaawaan
 ningaabikizaanaawaan bawaajigewinan
 ningaabii'anong
 naningodinong maamakatch
 naningodinong endaayang

Foxes, fireflies and feathers to the north
 fins, skunks and onions to the south
 different echoes whispered
 different memories made.

Workers and wanderers stealing days
 forging dreams big as melting stars
 sometimes fantastic
 sometimes familiar.

NOTES: Foxes, Waukesha; Fireflies, Wauwatosa; Feathers, Mequon; Fins, Kenosha (“Place of the pike”); Skunks and onions, Chicago.

Perhaps the most advanced Native American language program in the state is found on the **Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) Ojibwe reservation near Hayward** (<https://dpi.wi.gov/amind/tribalnationswi/lco>), with its **Ojibwe immersion school called Waadookodaading** (<http://www.waadookodaading.org/>), which roughly translates to “a place where people help each other.” It enrolls about 80 students in kindergarten through the seventh grade in a wing of the much larger **Lac Courte Oreilles tribal school** (<https://www.lcoosk12.org/>), a sprawling building that looks like rural public schools all over Wisconsin.

Similar to the Keshena day care, the school requires that all adults speak to kids in the Ojibwe language (also called Ojibwemowin, or Anishinaabemowin). The only subject taught in English at Waadookodaading is English. Pupils are supposed to speak only Ojibwe in the classroom, too, says **Michael Sullivan**, the school’s linguist (https://www.apg-wi.com/sawyer_county_record/news/local/keeping-the-ojibwe-language-alive-michael-sullivan-receives-ph-d/article_25e2a0b4-178a-11e6-92fc-639bf7e40708.html) – though that rule isn’t enforced until fourth grade, when they’re generally proficient in the language.

On a Friday last fall, a group of charged-up fourth- and fifth-graders shouted out solutions to math problems while some sixth- and seventh-graders worked on science and social studies, all in the Ojibwe language. A kindergarten classroom was full of lively and inquisitive kids who enjoyed story time and snack time, speaking English and Ojibwe roughly evenly.

Native languages of Wisconsin

A look at the Native languages most widely spoken by tribes based in Wisconsin. First-language speakers refers to people who have been exposed to a language from birth – those who grew up speaking the language.

OJIBWE/OJIBWEMOWIN

An Algonquian language once widely spoken in northern North America. Ojibwe bands have about 31,000 members in Wisconsin.

BANDS: Bad River, Lac Courte Oreilles, Lac du Flambeau, Red Cliff, St. Croix, Sokaogon

FIRST-LANGUAGE SPEAKERS: 25-30 (est.)

SAY IT: *boozhoo* (hello), *miigwech* (thank you)

ONEIDA

Perhaps most impressive was the assembly led by Sullivan – like others that bookend each week of classes at Waadookodaading – Monday morning and Friday afternoon. About a dozen boys, and Sullivan – who for many years has been in a drum group that performs on the powwow circuit – arranged chairs in a circle in the middle of the room, hauled out a round wooden drum 2 to 3 feet across with an elk-hide head and boomed away at it, their voices rising in song and chants while about 30 other kids danced around the circle.

Waadookodaading is seen as a model by other Wisconsin tribes seeking to preserve their languages. Corn considers Sullivan, who's visited Keshena numerous times, a mentor. "They're about 20 years ahead of us," Corn says of the LCO program, which started in 1999. He and his colleagues don't plan more than a few years ahead, but they hope to grow the Menominee program as the children age, one class at a time, as Waadookodaading has done.

One reason the LCO have been able to progress as far as they have: There are far more native speakers of Ojibwe than there are of any other Native language spoken in the state. The Ojibwe are one of the most populous tribes in North America; Sullivan estimates tens of thousands of first-language Ojibwe speakers in the United States and Canada, the vast majority of them north of the border. About 400 native speakers live in the U.S., Sullivan estimates, mostly in Minnesota, with just 25 to 30 in Wisconsin. But the Ojibwe still have a much bigger pool from which to select teachers than the Menominee, the Potawatomi or the Oneida have. Sullivan adds, though, that even as the number of first-language speakers has declined over the years, more than 100 kids under 18 now speak the language as a result of the school.

Native American tribes in 17 states are conducting language immersion programs, according to a national coalition of such schools, including the Mohawk in New York and the Navajo in Arizona. Perhaps the most prominent U.S. efforts are in Hawaii, where Native Hawaiian immersion schools began in the mid-1980s and native speakers of Hawaiian have increased vastly in the years since. (Representatives of both the LCO and Menominee have visited Hawaii to check out those programs.) The effort to revive indigenous languages, in fact, is worldwide; the [international Endangered Language Fund \(ELF\)](http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/) (<http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/>) estimates that of the 7,000 languages spoken worldwide, "at least half are projected to disappear in this century."

An Iroquoian language originating in upstate New York

TRIBE: Oneida Nation

FIRST-LANGUAGE SPEAKERS: Fewer than five

SAY IT: *sekoli* (hello) *yaw^ko* (thank you)

MENOMINEE

An Algonquian language centered in northern Wisconsin

TRIBE: Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin

FIRST-LANGUAGE SPEAKERS: Five

SAY IT: *posoh* (hello) *wāēwāēnen* (thank you)

HO-CHUNK

A Siouan language spoken mostly in western Wisconsin, also spelled Hooçąk

TRIBE: Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin

FIRST-LANGUAGE SPEAKERS: 70-100

SAY IT: *hainipi* or *aho* (hello) *wa'iniginap* (thank you)

POTAWATOMI

An Algonquian language distinct from but related to Ojibwe

TRIBE: Forest County Potawatomi

FIRST-LANGUAGE SPEAKERS: Seven

And what's at stake? Language is a pillar of any culture, and central to the identity of its members. Religious ceremonies are often performed in Native tongues. Thunder, the Potawatomi elder, says his parents and elders told him that when their language is no longer spoken, the tribe will cease to exist – a comment echoed at other tribes around Wisconsin.

SAY IT: *bozho* (hello) *igwiyen* or *migwech* (thank you)

Further, studies by the ELF and others have shown that reviving languages can have wider benefits to the community – lower rates of suicide, diabetes and use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and higher graduation rates. As an undergrad at UW-Superior, Sullivan wrote a paper about language at LCO, in which he quotes [Keller Paap](http://www.ojibwe.org/home/pdf/K_Paap_Ojib_Lang_Outtake.pdf) (http://www.ojibwe.org/home/pdf/K_Paap_Ojib_Lang_Outtake.pdf), one of the immersion school's founders: "Waadookodaading was started, not only to be a school, but as a component of a complex and detailed, community-wide, intergenerational language restoration movement to create, implement, and maintain an impetus for positive change and well-being for Ojibwe people."



(<https://11pt5z46nuudt9qxx2knwgf-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/fire-1.jpg>) Bringing a language back is no easy task. At Waadookodaading, faculty had to design curriculums and lesson plans for teaching all subjects in Ojibwe. There's an element of starting from scratch, though it was done over many years, as the school added a grade at a time. Next fall, it's adding eighth grade.

And the language needs to be updated with many words describing cultural or technological concepts unfamiliar to speakers during the language's heyday. Brooke Ammann, director of Waadookodaading, notes that a word had to be invented for multiplication; *dachingagindaaso*, she says, "references counting for a number of times." Sullivan says this practice is often done in committees involving elders. He mentions two words for pizza, for example. One, commonly used around LCO, is *wiisagadesijigan*, which translates to "heartburn pie." Another, suggested by a Canadian tribal member, is *zhishagagowe-bakwezhigan*, or "puke bread." Good luck getting that out of your head next time you're at the pizzeria.

Some Native languages are related, with some 57 such families in North America consisting of anywhere from just one to many similar languages. One large family is Algonquian languages, which are spoken by most tribes in Wisconsin – Ojibwe, Menominee, Potawatomi and Mahican are all Algonquian tongues. Ho-Chunk is a Siouan language, related to Dakotan, Crow and (the late) Mandan. The Oneida speak an Iroquoian language, related to Mohawk and Cherokee, a family of tongues originally spoken in and around their original homeland in upstate New York.

Of all these tribes, the Ho-Chunk and Menominee have been in Wisconsin the longest, since long before the first contact with Europeans in the 17th century. Both tribes have origin stories that take place in Wisconsin – the Menominee at the mouth of the Menominee River near Marinette, the Ho-Chunk not far away, at Red Banks on the east shore of Green Bay. The Ojibwe and Potawatomi are Anishinaabe people who arrived later from the "salt sea" of the East, according to the tribes' oral history – possibly refugees from the bloody Iroquois Wars over the fur trade fought in the 17th century. A 1768 map in **John Gurda's *The Making of Milwaukee*** (<http://johngurda.com/publications/the-making-of-milwaukee-book/>), shows the Potawatomi as the main tribe along the Lake Michigan shore, with the Menominee to the north, the Ho-Chunk (then called Winnebago) to the west and the Ojibwe in northwestern Wisconsin. The Oneida and the Stockbridge-Munsee arrived in the 1820s and 1830s, relocating from homelands in the East.

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For most of its history, the United States has maintained mostly harmful policies toward the country's Native inhabitants. The wars and one-sided treaties the tribes signed under duress during the first half of the 19th century led to the removal of many tribal people west of the Mississippi. The last half of that century and into the next saw the establishment of federal Indian boarding schools, designed to strip Native kids of their tribal cultures. At many of these schools, children were punished for speaking their Native languages. The founder of the first of these schools talked about helping "civilize" Indians; **Capt. Richard Pratt is widely quoted as saying that his aim was to "kill the Indian in him, and save the man."** (<http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teach/kill-indian-and-save-man-capt-richard-h-pratt-education-native-americans>).

There were other causes for the decline of the languages, though. According to the online **Ojibwe People's Dictionary** (<https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/>), on which LCO's Sullivan worked as a graduate student: "Boarding schools, urban life, popular culture, and even participation in public school education all demanded that we speak English. The Ojibwe language has historically been repressed by policymakers and educators in the U.S. and Canada, though there are many, complex reasons why fewer people today speak Ojibwe."

In recent decades, though, many of those state and federal policies have reversed course. [In 1990, Congress passed the Native American Languages Act \(https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/native-american-languages-act-twenty-years-later-has-it-made-difference\)](https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/native-american-languages-act-twenty-years-later-has-it-made-difference), repudiating past practices of discouraging the speaking of those languages and supporting their instruction.

In Wisconsin, some academics in the University of Wisconsin System have supported these efforts. For example, last fall [UW-Green Bay launched a doctoral program in First Nations Education \(https://news.uwgb.edu/log-news/releases/03/22/first-doctoral-program-18-21/\)](https://news.uwgb.edu/log-news/releases/03/22/first-doctoral-program-18-21/); the first cohort of students includes [Donald Keeble, director of language and culture for the Forest County Potawatomi \(https://www.fcpotawatomi.com/news/laona-school-district-learns-about-cultural-awareness/\)](https://www.fcpotawatomi.com/news/laona-school-district-learns-about-cultural-awareness/); [Molly Miller, a clan mother from the Stockbridge-Munsee \(https://theways.org/story/clan-mother\)](https://theways.org/story/clan-mother); and many other tribal leaders, including at least two from the Menominee.

Macaulay, the UW-Madison linguist, has been collaborating for years with the Menominee (and less extensively with the Potawatomi) to help produce dictionaries of both languages and to otherwise support their language efforts. She's part of a movement in linguistics away from simply studying Native languages and toward putting academic expertise to use for the tribes' benefit. Closer to home, [UW-Milwaukee's campus has the Electa Quinney Institute for American Indian Education \(https://uwm.edu/eqi/\)](https://uwm.edu/eqi/), directed by Margaret Noodin, an associate professor of English and Native American studies. The Quinney Institute, according to Noodin, aims to support Native language revival and other education goals of tribal people. But that program wouldn't exist if it wasn't for another Milwaukee-area Native American institution.

We talk today about historically Polish, German, African-American or Hispanic neighborhoods in Milwaukee. But the Potawatomi lived here before any of them...

When you visit the [Indian Community School in Franklin \(http://ics-edu.org/\)](http://ics-edu.org/), you can't help being blown away by the beauty of the place. It's a low-slung building hugging a ridge on 200 acres of former farmland about 13 miles from Downtown Milwaukee, but the spaces inside are vast and full of light. Supporting columns are wrapped in trees from the Menominee reservation. The school was built in 2007, designed by internationally known architect [Antoine Predock \(http://www.predock.com/\)](http://www.predock.com/), in collaboration with [Milwaukee's Eppstein Uhen Architects \(https://www.eua.com/\)](https://www.eua.com/) and [Chris Cornelius, an Oneida tribal member who teaches architecture at UW-Milwaukee \(https://uwm.edu/sarup/faculty-staff/cornelius-chris/\)](https://uwm.edu/sarup/faculty-staff/cornelius-chris/).

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In the high-ceilinged central hall near the building's entrance hang banners from each of the state's tribes. The 4K-8 school, whose 372 students (all of them are Native American, and 64 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches) take a full elementary school curriculum, with math, social studies, art and music. But the kids also all take Native languages each day – committing as kindergartners to either Oneida, Menominee or Ojibwe instruction. The school is also in discussion with the Ho-Chunk to add daily instruction in that language, too. “We’re very hopeful. It’s very close,” says ICS spokeswoman Siobhan Marks.



(<https://11pt5z46nuudt9qxx2knwgf-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/LANDRE-ICS-711.jpg>)

Banners from state tribes are on display over the Bear Moon Pow Wow in January. Photo by Lacy Landre.

The heart of the school's teaching mission is making kids aware of their Native cultures, Marks says. At ICS, they learn to value their Native heritage and see how it's still alive in their hometown and state. During a morning visit to [Renee Pfaller's Oneida language classroom](http://ics-edu.org/staff/instructional-staff/renee-pfaller/) (<http://ics-edu.org/staff/instructional-staff/renee-pfaller/>) in January, third-graders – all of them at least part Oneida – worked on sentences by asking each other about their clan membership. In the next period, second-graders sat in a way to simulate an Oneida longhouse, with members of the Wolf, Turtle and Bear clans on separate benches. [Teaching assistant Lori Faber](http://ics-edu.org/staff/instructional-staff/lori-faber/) (<http://ics-edu.org/staff/instructional-staff/lori-faber/>) told the children about her first visit to a ceremony at the reservation's longhouse the weekend before, with plenty of Oneida terms and songs thrown in.

While much of the school's education focuses on places and cultures that thrived outside what's now the Milwaukee metro area, [ICS teacher Michael Zimmerman Jr.](http://ics-edu.org/staff/instructional-staff/michael-zimmerman-jr/) (<http://ics-edu.org/staff/instructional-staff/michael-zimmerman-jr/>) likes to remind visitors of the city's Native roots. As students touring the school visited his Ojibwe language classroom last summer, he called up a 1920 article on the room's big flat-screen monitor to tell the story of the multiple Potawatomi-led villages in eastern Wisconsin at the time of European settlement. He indicated five of them in what is now Downtown Milwaukee and the surrounding neighborhoods, and named the Potawatomi chiefs who led them. He called up a photo of a plaque describing a village where the Hilton City Center now stands, headed by a chief named Kenozhoym, and read from it. "The village was located near a clear spring, at the foot of a steep

bluff, atop of which were more wigwams and an Indian cemetery. A wild rice swamp lay to the east of the village; to the north, as far as Juneau Avenue, stretched a swamp of cedar and tamarack. . . . The village was vacated in 1838, when the last of the Potawatomi were moved west of the Mississippi.” He talked of other villages on today’s Jones Island, at 24th and Clybourn, and at Fifth and National. “It’s all within about 2.5 square miles,” he tells the visitors. “When I asked my third-graders through eighth-graders, ‘Where do you guys live?’ most of them lived roughly within that same area.”

We talk today about historically Polish, German, African-American or Hispanic neighborhoods in Milwaukee. But the Potawatomi lived here before any of them, notes Noodin. “It’s never too late to remember indigenous history,” said Noodin, who was there that day. “It is as much this city’s heritage as any of the other layers. How do we move to the future? Perhaps by remembering all of the past.”

The ICS started in the homes of three Oneida women in Milwaukee in 1969 who felt that Milwaukee Public Schools were not doing right by their kids. The school moved twice into more official homes before closing in 1983 because it was “struggling financially,” according to an official timeline. In 1986, with the school closed but its board still active, it purchased land at 16th and Canal streets in the Menomonee Valley. The next year the school reopened on the former campus of Concordia College on Milwaukee’s West Side, and three years later, after approaching several tribes, it inked a deal with the Forest County Potawatomi transferring the Valley land – now the site of Potawatomi Hotel & Casino – and the old Concordia campus to the tribe. The ICS operated on a lease from the Potawatomi until it moved onto its Franklin campus in 2007.



(<https://11pt5z46nuudt9qxx2knwgf-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/LANDRE-ICS-604-Edit.jpg>)

Light fills an interior space at the school. Photo by Lacy Landre.

All of this came amid the growth of Indian gaming around the country as the result of the federal [Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988](https://www.nigc.gov/general-counsel/indian-gaming-regulatory-act) (<https://www.nigc.gov/general-counsel/indian-gaming-regulatory-act>). The lease provided the school with millions of dollars of casino money each year, and allowed it to build not only the Franklin school, but also create an endowment now in the neighborhood of \$500 million. “We invested the money very well, and that is what has allowed the school to be set into perpetuity,” says Marks.

It has also allowed the ICS to create partnerships with the state’s tribes, and others. It was a million-dollar grant from the school in 1999 to endow at least two professorships at UWM that launched the Quinney Institute. Then in 2015 and 2016, ICS representatives visited all of the state’s tribes on a tour called [“Listening to Tribal Voices.”](http://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/our-ways-culture-as-the-heart-of-the-indian-community-school_2018_06/) (http://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/our-ways-culture-as-the-heart-of-the-indian-community-school_2018_06/) “Part of the talk of all tribal communities was how important language was,” says head of school [Jason Dropik, an Ojibwe from the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa](https://uwm.edu/eqi/people/dropik-jason-p/) (<https://uwm.edu/eqi/people/dropik-jason-p/>). “It was talked about at every single meeting.” The result was a new teaching plan for the school that is now in its first year. One major goal, says Marks, is to have all graduates conversational in their chosen language – with the hope that some will go on to become fluent.

Representatives from the state's tribes visit the school often. Last fall, the executive council of the Forest County Potawatomi made their first trip as a group to the school – the beautiful building that their casino helped build. “That was a historic meeting,” Marks says.

W

isconsin's tribes are not only advancing elementary education – they're also making strides toward advanced degrees to build on their work with their languages.

Sullivan, the LCO's Ojibwe linguist, received a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Minnesota in 2016, with a dissertation analyzing variation in a dialect of Ojibwe (https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/182212/Sullivan_umn_0130E_17212.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). He now adds that expertise to the school where his own kids learned their language. And Ammann, Waadookodaading's director, is in a doctoral program at the University of Hawaii, and there are at least two doctoral candidates in the Forest County Potawatomi community – Robert Lewis, who's close to finishing a University of Chicago linguistics Ph.D., and Donald Keeble, in the new First Nations Education program at UW-Green Bay. **Courtney Cottrell**, tribal historic preservation officer for the Brothertown Indians (<http://brothertownindians.org/government/tribal-council/>) – an amalgam of seven Eastern tribes that is still trying to win federal recognition – received a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in anthropology. Finally, Adrienne Thunder, the head of the Ho-Chunk language department (<https://www.hoocak.org/learning-materials/language-staff/>), is in a UW-Madison doctoral program in educational leadership and policy analysis, with the goal of using what she learns to help start a Ho-Chunk tribal college.

As for the Menominee, at least two members are in the new UW-Green Bay program, and one of Corn's day care trainees took to the language so wholeheartedly that he enrolled at UW-Madison as a linguistics major. He's a senior this year, and Corn and others in the language program are hoping he'll go on to get an advanced degree and eventually return home to help them. UW's Macaulay, who enthusiastically supports this developing movement of Native people toward advanced degrees, says the trend is sometimes referred to as “decolonizing” linguistics.

But advanced education isn't the only measure of dedication to tribal language revitalization. Gloria Gutierrez, language coordinator for the Forest County Potawatomi, left college to work with Jim Thunder and other Potawatomi elders on language preservation. And she gladly adopted part of her department's job description: that employees are expected not to drink or use drugs, even in their private lives. She said in October that she hadn't had a drink for four or five years, out of respect for the elders with whom she works. “Our language is living,” she says. “It's a powerful spirit. So how can I be doing these bad things and work with our language and have it turn out good?”

Annie Wilber, the immersion day care teacher in Keshena, says she feels like a grandmother to her young Menominee charges, and is happy to be putting her language training to work.

“It's beautiful. It really is,” she says. “To not only give that love but to get it back, and to do it in the language. ... If I'm sick or hurting, I want to be at work. It's really awesome to see our program grow. And I know that our ancestors are happy, and proud of what we're doing, because I feel there's something more than myself pushing me to do this.”

Managing Editor Tom Tolan dipped into another language

— **Milwaukee's unique dialect** (<https://www.milwaukeeemag.com/miltalkee-inside-the-milwaukee-dialect/>) —

in the June 2018 issue.

“Rekindling the fires” appears in the April 2019 issue of *Milwaukee Magazine*.

(Our headline in Ojibwe: Biskaakonenjigaadewan miinawaa ishkoden)

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Tom Tolan is managing editor at Milwaukee Magazine, where he's worked since January 2016. He spent 24 years at The Milwaukee Journal and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel as a copy editor, assistant metro editor and reporter. He lives in Shorewood.

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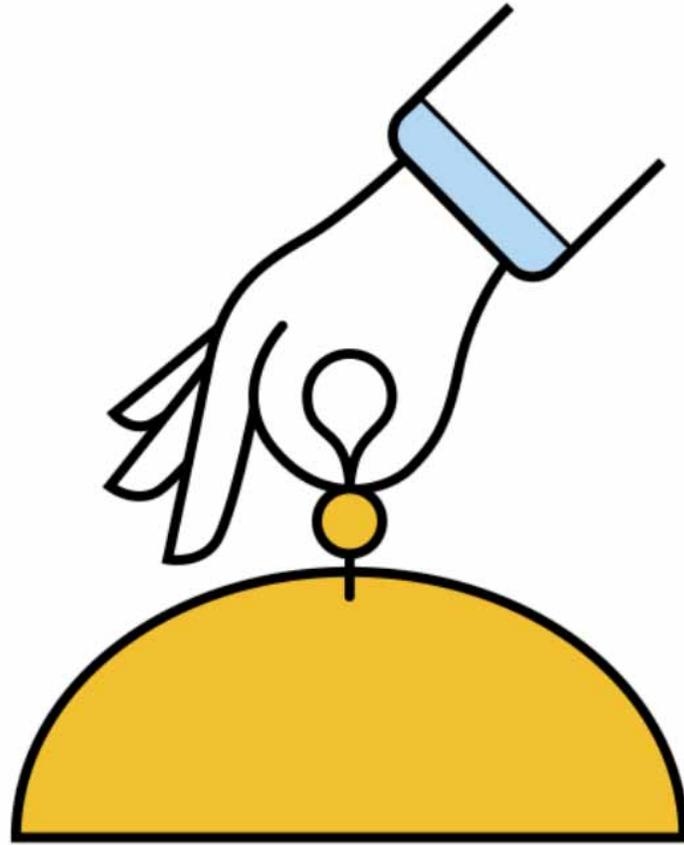
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