

## LEGACY OF HOPE FOUNDATION

### PODCAST EPISODE FEATURING MICHELE K. JOHNSON

Gordon: Hello and welcome to the Voices from the Land: Indigenous Peoples Talk Language Revitalization Podcast produced by the Legacy of Hope Foundation. Tansi, I'm your host, Gordon Spence, from the Tataskweyak Cree Nation in northern Manitoba. I also am the community facilitator for the Legacy of Hope Foundation. Today I am joined by my colleague and co-host, Andrew Bomberry, a Mohawk from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. Andrew is a curriculum developer, writer, researcher, and teacher. Welcome.

As part of the Legacy of Hope Foundation's mandate and mission we are working to promote Indigenous language revitalization as a critical step in the healing of generations of survivors and their communities from colonial policies and practices which robbed Indigenous people of their first language. The goal of this project is to help support Indigenous language reclamation through interviews with Indigenous language teaching experts. The target audience for this work are Indigenous language teachers.

We hope that by sharing accessible podcasts of interviews with people doing interesting and relevant work on language promotion we can help facilitate the sharing of knowledge ideas and practices that are relevant to the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages.

While there are many contexts that are particular to specific nations and dialects within their regions, we are hoping to provide additional tools and platforms that can help with Indigenous language revitalization, despite the many differences.

Today our guest is Michele Johnson. Michele is a member of the Okanagan Indian band. She speaks Syilx language, which is a Salish language. She is the executive director, lead activist and a teacher at the Syilx Language House in British Columbia. Syilx Language House is a non-profit charitable society with the express purpose of creating the Syilx Salish Okanagan speakers in the Syilx Nation through activities such as recording their fluent elders, forming an empowered speaking community, and running a language nest for toddlers and children with Ti K<sup>w</sup>u Ti X<sup>i</sup>lx association.

Michele has a PhD in Indigenous language revitalization from the University of British Columbia, where she spearheaded the Language House, modelled for language revitalization. When not manifesting language fundraising or tobogganing in [unintelligible 00:02:29] with toddlers, she can be found hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing and playing guitar.

Welcome, Michele. How are you today?

Michele: I'm very well. Thank you so much for having me on your program and thank you for sharing the dream of language fluency across Canada.

Gordon: Before we start we'd like to do a prayer, and I'm going to ask Andrew to do the prayer through audio.

Andrew: So, this is a prayer for the language from elder Andrew McGinnis.

[Prayer narrated by Ki?lawná? Andrew McGinnis: k<sup>w</sup>ulnčútn a? l?iw k<sup>l</sup> stkmasqt ki? k<sup>w</sup> mut. limlmt k<sup>w</sup>u ullús alá? řapná? sxlřřalt. řk<sup>w</sup>ulntm a? řqilx<sup>w</sup>čń. k<sup>w</sup>u? knxitnt i?, məl řast i? ksk<sup>w</sup>ultət. məl mýpnúntm a? řqilx<sup>w</sup>čń. ixí? a? řkstx<sup>w</sup>uýstm. limlmt.]

[Translation of the prayer provided by Michele K. Johnson:

Short prayer for řqilx<sup>w</sup>čń told for Sřimla?x<sup>w</sup> and her students.

Creator who resides in the sky. Thank you for our gathering today. We are studying our language. Help us that our work may be good, that we will learn our language, and that we will continue. Thank you.]

Andrew: So, welcome, Michele Johnson.

Michele: Thank you.

Andrew: We're looking forward to speaking with you on these topics. From reading about your work, it seems you have a model, a very interesting model called the Language House, and I was hoping you could talk to us a bit about the Language House model that you explored for your PhD.

Michele: Yes. I hope that what I'm able to share will be of some help to some people who are struggling to revitalize all of our languages. I just want to express my gratitude for the – for playing that that elder recording that are – my dear elder Andrew McGinnis, who recently – he passed, and I worked with him for years and that prayer is very special to my heart because at the beginning of each of my language classes we all stand up and we say that prayer [Nřyilxčń]. Have pity on us. We are working so hard on our languages.

And so we feel like we're learning from our elders and yet we're also learning directly from recordings.

The Language House model is a space we created, recognizing that our languages, they can no longer be – we can't revitalize them on evenings and weekends and in our spare time; we need full-time programs. We need to spend our entire working day on language. So the Language House – it's a home for language, and at first it actually was a home; our first one was a home that we rented way out on the reserve where nobody could bother us, and nobody knew where we were. So there was five of us – myself and four women – and we studied from a curriculum. And our elder would come once a day and we'd study with her for an hour-

and-a-half a day, and for four hours a day we studied our curriculum. And we're continuing the model.

And the model basically means we know that in our Indigenous languages, that are highly complex, it takes upwards of two thousand hours to gain intermediate fluency. So we know we need to create a dedicated space where we study.

A lot of what we do in the Language House is classroom-based study. And in my particular Language House we are just absolutely lucky, because we have this curriculum that was created by the Salish school of Spokane. They created an entire comprehensive – beginner to advanced – curriculum that takes about 2,000 hours to teach. It's got textbooks, audio files, computer games, graphics, teaching methods, and it's designed to be taught by learners. And as a learner this is how I became as proficient as I am was by teaching this material for 2000 hours and creating space now for my apprentice teachers to be teaching this material to other apprentices, and then bringing in elders as much as we can.

I think that's the Language House model. It's a space.

We do adult learning. I also do elder recording, and then lately we partnered with the Ti K<sup>w</sup>u Ti Xilx language nest, and that created another container for language with children.

Andrew: It sounds like the house aspect is kind of an ecosystem of the language.

Michele: Yeah. I guess so. I guess so, because we also go outdoors. We did an outdoor program with the children. We went out and did tobogganing and nature walks. So that the container just means it's a space we're making; a physical and temporal space. It's immersion is what it is. We're creating a safe space for immersion where we're allowing ourselves to be in immersion. We use all the best pedagogical aspects of safety and teaching.

You know how languages can be very stressful to learn? There's language tension inherent in learning a language. So we imbue our language methods with kindness and safety so that we have a space safe space to make mistakes.

Andrew: OK. And so this was a curriculum that you started off with from Spokane, you said?

Michele: Yeah. That's right. Our good friends Chris Parkin and LaRae Wiley and our elder SƧamtíca?, Sarah Peterson. They co-wrote the curriculum. It was a labour of love over about a 10-year period. And they're still writing it; they're still writing the more advanced books.

There's currently 12 books in the curriculum and each one takes 100 or so hours to teach.

Andrew: OK. So, it's very staggered, I guess you could say. Like, it's very clear, the roots you're going through.

Michele: Yeah. They call it sequenced. It's a sequenced, ladder curriculum; each part builds on the part before.

Andrew: OK. Our next question would be about the planning. Would you mind talking about just how the Language House does its planning for your different initiatives and executing the curriculum?

Michele: Our planning is an organic process. If it takes a person about 2,000 hours to become fluent, I try to create opportunities for as many people as possible to get two thousand hours. In my last Language House I created a four-year program – two days a week for four years – six hours a day. Which was exhausting; don't get me wrong. It's exhausting to teach for six hours straight. And it was exhausting for the students as well, but we got through our 1200 hours and two in four years and they emerged with low to mid intermediate fluency. And as teachers, my co-teacher and I, we emerged at high intermediate to low advanced proficiency. So, huge success.

And I went to each of the chief and councils of all of our member bands and I said, OK, now that we've done this pilot project, I've gotten 12 people through the program. It's humanly possible for us to get 100 people through starting next year, because we could do three Language Houses and have 30 people each – 30, 60, 90 – and the chiefs and councils more or less agreed until push came to shove and we were starting the actual on-the-ground planning, and then they all backed out.

So of course that was devastating. As a language planner I went from having 100 students to – the only way I can get 100 people through is if I physically fundraise for 100 people to be paid full time. So I backed up and I said I think I could probably fundraise enough to get 10 people paid full time, which means I have to raise about a million dollars a year. And we work independently from the bands and the tribal councils, although they do provide us with support letters, which we're very grateful for.

So the planning is – it's difficult, you know? It reminds me of the words of Darrell Kipp, and any other language teachers that are in the activist phases. This will resonate with them. Darrell Kipp said, do not ask for permission to revitalize your languages; work with the ones who want it. Because there will be people that will – they will oppose you or they will not be ready to put in this amount of work, but there will be those two or three or five or ten people that really want this. So that's – my language planning is finding those 10 people and fundraising the million dollars to get us 10 people through, before I run out of steam, because I only have another couple decades left on the planet.

Andrew: It sounds like a significant hurdle that your Language House was faced with early on.

Michele: I think all of the activists encounter a similar hurdle. I've talked to other language activists and they've found the same thing, and I think that's the message from Darrell Kipp, is he must have encountered the exact same thing, and that's why he wrote those words, and it's like a trail of breadcrumbs for us to follow – that – I'm not the only one that is not able to get a hundred people through because of barriers within community. It's happening to all of us, and it's not our fault. We're working super hard.

And the language, it's so beautiful, and it's such good medicine for all of us that I would love to get as many people through as possible. It's not a political thing. I just – I know our languages are healthy for our communities.

Andrew: Mm-hmm. And you had said your planning was organic. And so in what ways do you look for those organic opportunities for the planning or the taking advantage of organic moments?

Michele: Now I look for the skills that the people bring to the program – the people, like as Darrell Kipp says, that want to be here. For example, one young woman in her family moved to the Okanagan territory from Edmonton last year to be part of my program. She moved her entire family just so she could become fluent in the language, because this is one of the few – well, this is the only fluency opportunity in our language.

So, we have meetings with our team members. Well, what skills can we bring together? And another team member has really excellent resources and lateral violence training. So now we're bringing in lateral kindness training into our organization.

Andrew: Mm-hmm.

Michele: So, at first, the curriculum, that was our skeleton – that, like, our framework. Our structure. And now we're taking the structure of the curriculum and we're adding on the things that we realize we need. Like, we know we recognize we need lateral kindness training, because lateral violence is endemic and it's epidemic in First Nations community. And it comes even into the smallest organizations because we're all connected.

Andrew: Hmm.

Michele: So we – yeah. The planning is – it's organic because it's me and the people that are drawn to the language planning together. How do we get this curriculum delivered to as many people as possible without having the barriers shut us down?

Andrew: You had mentioned that – or I gather from what you've said that when you started teaching the language you were not a fluent speaker. Is that right?

Michele: A Oh yeah. Total beginner. I'm 53 now. I started learning the language when I was 40. And we can say that I'm – by my own estimation I'm high intermediate and another colleague says I'm low advanced and we argue about that. He says are you arguing with me? Yeah, I am. I also did a PhD in language assessment and I say I'm high intermediate because I cannot have a specialized debate in my language. Of course there is no opportunity to have a specialized debate in my language but I know that if there were an opportunity that I would lose. [Laughter] I would lose really bad.

Gordon: Through a band meeting, eh?

Michele: If they were in the language, absolutely.

Gordon: Your band meeting, if they don't speak their Aboriginal language, or their Indigenous language?

Michele: No. Gordon, in my territory there are somewhere around two dozen fluent elders remaining, and they're all around the age of 80. And then there's a couple of handfuls of us younger people. I'm like the middle ground between the elders and the younger people; I try to train much younger people. There's only a couple dozen of us.

Gordon: Mm-hmm. Like, a lot of communities have – are in a similar situation as your community, where they've gone away from their language and now they're, you know, realizing that they got to do something about it. What was the main cause of the slide of your language – of, you know, people kind of forgetting to speak it?

Michele: Oh it's been the same all over. Through factors that were really nobody's fault. All of our grandmothers and grandfathers chose not to speak the language to their children to protect them from the trauma that they've been going through for being Indigenous people – for living through the debilitating effects of colonization. So it's not like people chose to let the language go; they were protecting their children. And now this generation that's coming up, where – we really want to get it back. And it's not like we're passing blame on the elders for not teaching us, but we're recognizing that the elders are not necessarily the best people to teach us, currently, because there are so few of them.

Gordon: Right. Part of what we do is, at the Legacy Hope Foundation, is trying to educate the public, I guess in general, about the impacts of residential schools. And what we've heard through some interviews is that the residential schools had some impacts on people losing their languages. And I don't know. Did people from your community go to residential schools?

Michele: Yeah. Most of our elders have attended residential schools. There's a lucky few that didn't attend residential schools. And absolutely that was a huge tool that the government used to erase our cultures and erase our languages. And our existence here is – it's proof that they didn't succeed,

but we – our languages are so close to extinction, and that’s a measure of how effective those really ugly residential school programs were.

Gordon: Right.

Andrew: So, you had mentioned that you have studied assessment as part of your PhD program. And I was just wondering if you would speak about the role of assessment in the language revitalization efforts you’re involved in.

Michele: Yeah. I think I was lucky to take a deep dive into assessment during my PhD because now, as a teacher and just always sort of fighting forwards on the grassroots, cutting edge of language, teaching, I don’t have to worry so much about assessment because I’ve studied it very deeply and we have assessment practices built into our curriculum.

I think a lot of Indigenous programs, from what I read, from what I studied, people have been afraid of doing assessments. They might say assessments are non-Indigenous, or we’ve never assessed, but that’s just not true. We’ve always assessed the quality of what we do. You know? Our buildings would have fallen down; our children wouldn’t have been raised well.

So, assessments are not an unnatural thing. It’s just that if you’re not running a program that shows results, your assessments won’t show very good results. But we’re following this sequence-laddered curriculum that shows results; it’s a results-based, proven method, based on direct acquisition.

So, I do a quiz every day. And it’s part of our routine; when the students arrive the first thing they do is they’re going to write a quiz on the material they learned yesterday. And then I have a midterm at regular opportunities, and I have a final exam and we do final oral exams, which makes people really nervous, and I film them. They have to tell either a story or a lesson or an entire introduction in the language, depending on which book we’re learning. So my students who are currently learning book four, they have to study one of our traditional captikwł stories, and it’ll take them maybe five or ten minutes to tell this story. And they’ll tell it with images so they’ll have visual cues of what’s happening in the story. And they’ll tell it in their own words or, if they want to, they can just memorize the words.

And the assessment process. There’s the Canadian language best benchmarks, there’s American benchmarks, and there’s European benchmarks. They’re all more or less the same; they’re beginner, intermediate, advanced, and each has low, medium, high. So, low, medium, high, beginner, low, medium, high, intermediate, low, medium, high, advanced. It takes about 100% hours to get to low beginner, about 500 hours to get to mid beginner, about 1000 hours to get to low intermediate, and about 2,000 hours to get to mid intermediate. So you notice, between low intermediate and mid intermediate, it’s 1000 hours.

The intermediate phase is large. And we know that going in, so I know going in I'm not expecting my students, say if they come into my program and they're already high beginner and I train them for another 300 hours, I'm not expecting to see very much because 300 hours at high beginner, you'll probably still be high beginner. You might just be touching at low intermediate.

So we know going in about how much time it's going to take, and we're pretty strict about if you maintain 80%, then you can progress along to the next book. And that's how we just maintain that the students who are learning at a certain level, they're learning with other people of the same level so that they can move forward at the same pace.

So if you haven't had the time to maintain 80, like if you haven't had the time, things come up in your life, you just have to repeat that book and then move along with the next group.

Gordon: What's the failure rate? Like, if you fail your exam, like, do you got to repeat the thousand hours?

Michele: You would just repeat the previous book.

Gordon: OK.

Michele: So, if each book takes about 100 hours. My four-year program, though; that was difficult because it was the first time I ever taught it. So it was a one-time deal. I didn't know if I'd ever do it again, so I told everyone, just, please, keep up, and there were plenty of people that were failing and I just let them keep attending as long as they wanted. Because, I mean, I can't say take it next time because I didn't know if there would be a next time. And as truth comes out, I'm not training 100 people right now; I'm only going to train about 10 people that I've fundraised for to pay them full time.

Gordon: Right.

Andrew: You had mentioned frequent quizzing. I'm guessing that has something to do with strengthening recall and fluency, maybe.

Michele: Yes.

Andrew: If you could talk about that a little bit.

Michele: Yeah. There's – review is also a very important part of learning a language. They say 75 of your time should be spent learning and a good 25 should be spent on a review. And quizzing people, believe it or not, is a form of review because it forces people to look over their notes and, you know, five minutes before class they're flipping through their notes. So it's a review time that they wouldn't have otherwise gotten. It's not that I think quizzes themselves are very valuable; it's the review time the student put into studying for the quiz that's super valuable. So you – it buys you a little extra review time.

And yeah, like you said, review time is super important. We build in 25% of our study – our in-person study time is review time. And then of course they have homework at night.

Andrew: I imagine it also helps them kind of self-check how well do I actually know that thing I thought I knew.

Michele: Oh yeah. Absolutely. One of my sort of favourite tricks is to just say, OK, we're just going to cover up – take our vocab page that we might have learned yesterday Cover up the N̄syilxč̄n part and just look at the English part and now we're just going to say from memory what the words are. And the first time I did this one of my students was like, oh, and she's so embarrassed, but then the next time she was doing it no problem, because we sort of – we should be able to think the word in English and then say it in N̄syilxč̄n. And a lot of people, we do the testing the easy way. We'll have them test – we'll write out the word and in N̄syilxč̄n and have them write out the word in English. But that's of no value when you're forming a speaker; if you're forming a speaker you need to be able to think what you want to think and then say it in the language. So we need to test ourselves, you know, in reverse – forward and backwards.

Andrew: Hmm. And I'm guessing it's more of a either a low stakes or no stakes quizzing. Like, the goal is actually the practice of it rather than obsessing over marks.

Michele: We record the marks and we tell everybody they have to maintain 80%.

Andrew: Oh OK.

Michele: And it's an expectation of their of their job – of their employment. And if they don't maintain 80% we find them tutoring and we get them time.

Andrew: Hmm. So good diagnostic, also, to get the interventions in.

Michele: Yeah.

Gordon: Is that a TPR method?

Michele: Yeah. We do use TPR. TPR is total physical response. We use that when we're doing action-based words where we'll stand up and sit down and act out the words. And also when we're practicing songs we do lots of TPR. That's very effective at beginner levels.

Gordon: Hmm. Right.

Andrew: So my last question the assessments would be: do you find that students having a sense of their upcoming assessment influences their studies? Like, knowing that they've got that oral exam or whatnot.

Michele: Yeah. Some people are highly motivated by marks, and we consider that very helpful. Because one – every now and then a student will come along that is not motivated by marks, and it's really hard to make that

student thrive. When they say, oh, I don't care if I do badly on this, then they often will do badly on this. But if there's – most students will say, oh, I don't want to do badly and they get a sense of competition between themselves and their peers, and pretty much everybody gets 19 out of 20 on my quizzes. I make them easy; the point is just to do them. So if you study a little bit and if you do it you're going to get 18 or 19 out of 20. But if you don't study and if you don't do it, then you're not going to pass the course and you're – it's a requirement of your employment.

Andrew: OK. Thank you. So, best practices. Gordon, I think you had a question you wanted to ask for practices.

Gordon: Yeah. What are the sort of the best methods when you teach – like, can you be more specific in terms of what you do when you teach, what methods you use and what methods are most successful?

Michele: Yeah. The most effective method is to follow a sequenced curriculum. And I can't state that enough. I think we're one of the only languages in Canada that has a sequenced curriculum from beginner to advanced. And it's really hard to imagine being able to do this without a sequence curriculum. If you don't have one, then the teacher just has to be a brilliant genius and come up with, on the fly, what they're going to do and be assessing the students every minute of the day, of what they need to learn now and then remembering in their head what they learned last time. But because we have a sequenced curriculum and it's been tried and tested several times, so it works.

Now that I've taught it through two, two-and-a-half times now, I'm able to modify it somewhat. I'll say, well, there's some things that I really need to stress a little more some grammar drills right around here, because I've found that a little later on my students are confused about some material that's coming up. So now I can see things coming in. I've found grammar drills are super effective.

Gordon: Grammar drills.

Michele: Yeah. Unbelievable, right?

And learning the stories has been super effective. So at the beginner level we just – we get through book one. It's vocab and sentences. Simple vocab; simple sentences. And then book two: it's all our traditional stories. Because we love hearing our traditional stories and we sort of want to know what's going on. So they've been written out in a beginner format and we really repeat, repeat, repeat the sentences, and we have pictures, and we make it fun.

So the most effective way of teaching language is to make it a game. We have tons of games. So we'll have fly swatters. You put the words up on the wall and then you have two students come up and you'll say a word. Well, you'll – they'll have the pictures on the wall and you'll have them hit the picture with the fly swatter. And it's a little competition: who can

hit the picture the fastest? And everybody laughs because it's really silly having, you know, your 70-year-old dad playing fly swatters against his, you know, 21-year-old niece. And we have a lot of fun, or we – there's class mixers where I'll pass out the imagery and have them have a guided conversation with the imagery.

And then the conversations at beginner level, they have to be light and fun. So, we make really fun, silly conversations at the beginner level.

Do you like salmon? Oh no. I don't like salmon. Oh you don't? Oh that's terrible. It – just to be silly and fun. And then when we get to intermediate we can get really silly, and we're inspired by our elder, Sƚamtíc'a, who would come and visit us.

And you know the elders? They just have this beautiful sense of humour where everything's funny. And when you get to intermediate in your own language, you were inspired by that. So we try to make everything funny. We try to put, like, a connotation on everything that we can. [Laughter]

Gordon: Yeah. I think as you get older you get funnier. You get – you're more relaxed about who you are.

And I wanted to ask you a question about – see, a lot of the people that are a target audience are Indigenous language teachers. You said something about sequence curriculum. Can you explain what sequence curriculum is?

Michele: Yeah. I can. And I really encourage other language groups to contact me or go to my website or go to the Interior Salish website. And this curriculum is free and you can copy it.

I actually worked with the Tlingit nation; they're way up north in the Yukon and Alaska. I worked in the Yukon. And I helped them basically translate the first two of our textbooks into Tlingit, and then show them how to teach it. So for a little period of time I could teach beginner Tlingit, even though I can't speak beginner Tlingit at all; I can still remember a few sentences because the method is so effective. And I'm speaking with a few other language groups currently, and they're translating this material into their language because the teaching method is – it's so safe and fun and repetitive and easy.

So, what – all you want to do is go to [interiorsalish.com](http://interiorsalish.com) – that's where the language curriculum is stored – interior Salish, all one word, dot com – and you can contact me. I'm sure we'll put my contact at the end of this podcast. And I work at the Syilx Language House, and we have a website, which is [thelanguagehouse.ca](http://thelanguagehouse.ca) – the Language House, all one word – and I have an email that you can click on there.

I would be happy. That's my joy in life is to help other groups adopt effective, proven teaching methods so that we can get ahead of our

languages and not get bogged down by methods that that might be slow or might not be as effective.

Gordon: Right. That's kind of exactly what we're looking for. Effective best practices, what works and best methods of teaching Indigenous languages.

So, Andrew, do you have any more questions? I really don't have any more questions for her. You probably have a couple more.

Andrew: Earlier you had mentioned in teaching using direct acquisition. I was just wondering if you could explain that term a little more.

Michele: Yeah. It's a term that was coined by some language acquisition researchers, and it's a pretty broad, all-encompassing term. You've heard of TPR. TPR is a type of direct acquisition. Direct acquisition – it takes into account that there's phases of learning. When you're learning a language there's the silent phase and the limited production phase and then the full production phase. The silent phase, also known as the comprehension phase.

So when I'm teaching a beginner lesson, the first several exercises, the students aren't expected to say anything. They might say yes or no or they might repeat a number, or they may point at something. So that's them in their silent phase, so I'm allowing them to be in their silent phase. While I'm talking, I'm talking non-stop; I'm saying this is a banana or this – I just repeat these phrases over and over. And then they get to their limited production phase where they might have to say fry bread. And then we get to the full production phase where they're paired up with each other and they're saying, I like fry bread. Do you like fry bread?

So that's – direct acquisition is going through the phases of learning and having as much game-based material as possible.

At the intermediate and advanced levels, it's not as game-based but we have as much games as we can. And what we're finding, even at the – say the intermediate-advanced levels, our games are more sort of funny things that involve grammar, but we're starting to find that really fun because that's – we're at that level where we're really hungry for the grammar; we want to say everything correctly.

So we have a thing called drill and kill, which sounds terrible, but if I don't do it I have a student who will say, oh, we didn't do drill and kill yet. I'm like, oh, I love you for wanting to do this thing that I've had previous students go, oh god, not drill and kill, because it's really hard. But we're finding it fun because I've made it – I let them see that I'm not an expert at it. I make mistakes. Sometimes I struggle or I might pretend to struggle more than I actually am because it makes them feel more comfortable.

Gordon: Hmm.

Michele: But we're coming up with this together, how to do these drills and how to speak correctly. And we all want so badly to speak correctly that sometimes we come up with new games on the fly to help each other – to practice the really hard stuff.

Our grammar is incredibly hard. I'm sure all of your grammars are incredibly hard.

Gordon: I was just going to ask you that. And just trying to read your names here is like – that's really challenging.

So that must be, like you said, it's got to be the most one of the most difficult parts of learning your language is the pronunciation, right? The grammar and how to say the words. And you don't have a specialized writing system that people can use.

Michele: We do have a specialized writing system. We use the international phonetic alphabet that was handed down to us, I guess, by the first linguist that came to our territory. So, you know how it is – when the first linguist comes to the territories in the '70s and he basically assigns you a writing system. I feel lucky because I like the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Gordon: Mm-hmm.

Michele: Each symbol sounds exactly like the sound. So, when I'm recording an elder and they're speaking, I can write it out exactly as they say it and then I can repeat it back to them exactly as they say it, because we have this particular writing system, and that helps us with our pronunciation. It helps us pronounce things perfectly, because it's important to us to not change the language.

And, yes, the grammar is also very complex. It just gets more complex almost every day. Every time I learn something I learn something else that I don't know.

Gordon: Is that the same as the, like, the English alphabet?

Michele: Some of it is.

Gordon: Yeah.

Michele: Like, our alphabet, the first couple of letters, that's the first part of our alphabet [Ñsyilxčň]. That's the first part of our alphabet.

Gordon: OK.

Michele: Our alphabet has 46 letters and one of our letters is [Ñsyilxčň]. If we say the word for elder, [Ñsyilxčň], which I wouldn't expect a beginner to be able to hear. But after 2- or 300 hours you'd be amazed. They're able to

produce that; they're able to recognize it. First they recognize it, then they produce it. And then after about 400 hours we'll fine-tune their pronunciation. Because we let them talk like babies for the first 3-, 400 hours. And then after 4- or 500 hours, well, it's actually [Ńsyilxčń] and we'll work on it. People will confuse a few sounds. There's [Ńsyilxčń], which sounds really similar, if you're not an Ńsyilxčń speaker, the [Ńsyilxčń] is pronounced in the front of the mouth and the [Ńsyilxčń] is pronounced back, in the throat.

Gordon: Wow. That's amazing.

Andrew: How do you teach the sounds that aren't in English? Like, when you wouldn't find them in English.

Michele: At the beginner levels we have the audio files; we let the people listen and we just say it and say it and say it because we know they can't produce it until they can hear it. So we'll say it and say it and say it. And then we require them to say it, but we don't mind if they say it badly. So if you say it completely wrong, we just go, oh, right on, high five, good job. A lot of high fives in my class. When we were allowed to have high fives. On Zoom I do high fives too.

And then I'll do – I have little tricks, like when I'm trying to pronounce a word like [Ńsyilxčń], which is a – if you tilt your head back while you're pronouncing it, and I'll get it – and I'll tilt my head back and I'll point to my throat and I'll say [unintelligible], and people will do that, and I'll look at them and I'll give them a look if you don't tell your head back. I'm a bossy teacher. I'll just give you a look.

If there are still difficulties we'll have pronunciation workshops. That hasn't happened yet. I have had some students that have had difficulties and eventually they iron themselves out, but it does take that thousand hours. That's actually a criticism I've received – that we all talk like babies. I think, well, yeah, your baby probably talked like a baby too when it was only 300 hours in.

Gordon: [Laughter] OK. I'm really interested in your language. Can you explain about, like, your language? And is it part of an another language group? And also how many languages – how many different languages are there in British Columbia?

Michele: British Columbia has 35 languages. Four of the languages are Interior Salish, and my language, the Ńsyilxčń, or Syilx language, is one of the four Interior Salish languages. There's actually seven interior languages, but three of them are in The States – in Washington – and there's another handful of Coast Salish languages. So the exact number is 10 or 12 Salish languages in total. We're all related but we're all distinct, separate languages. They're just as distinct and different as, say, German and English. They're completely separate languages. But they're related.

Like, when I hear a Shuswap language, which is our neighbouring language, I'm like, man, that sounds familiar, but I can't really make out what they're saying – because it's that different. So that's our neighbouring language; it's also an Interior Salish.

And the other languages in BC, the other 35 that aren't Salish, completely different. Completely distinct; not even the same sound system or the same grammar.

Gordon: Wow.

Michele: But one way we can help each other, which I hope we will begin to do, is, once we start making resources in one language, if another Interior Salish language, they can use those. They could hire a linguist or hire a language trainee and they could translate it more easily because our languages are quite related. The Salish languages.

There are dialectical differences within ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ, but at this point because we only have two dozen or so – maybe as many as 50 – fluent elders remaining, we don't focus on our differences; we focus on our similarities. So we're focusing on the 95% that is exactly the same in all of our languages, and we try not to argue anymore because that's become what they call a politics of distraction – when you argue about, oh, well, my dialect is completely different from yours so I don't want to learn from you as a teacher because you'll give me the northern dialect.

I think now we're all starting to come together as a nation and realize it's a language, and most of our recordings are done from one elder who happened to speak the dialect of her family and her community. But we're happy to learn from her, and we'll incorporate as much as we can from our own particular dialects. Because people get attached to say, like, in the north, they say the colour red is cha, and in the south the colour red is [ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ]. So if I say [ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ] in a class and there's a northerner there, they're like, [ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ], and then we all laugh and then we all say [ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ] and we're happy. We're just happy to have that difference come in.

I've seen this happen before where people have argued, and that was really debilitating. We would spend way too much time. We'd waste time arguing about the differences instead of saying let's learn [ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ] and [ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ]. They're both good. Really good.

The time for arguments are over. If I have a few minutes left I feel like I should introduce myself properly in ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ and talk about the deep spiritual importance of the language for me.

Andrew: Please do.

Michele: Thank you. [In ᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ: My name is Sᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲᑲ. I live in West Kelowna BC. I am a teacher. I moved here 10 years ago to learn my language. One thing I know is that I do not know everything. I am always learning. Our

language is very important. Our continued work in the language is difficult and important. We are continually learning. We humbly offer ourselves up and ask for help so that our work may be good.]

My name is Sʔimlaʔx<sup>w</sup> and 10 years ago I moved here and I didn't speak a word of N̄syilxč̄n̄. And I moved here to learn my language and to learn my ways from my people, and the one thing I have learned is that the more I know the more I have left to learn, and that our language is absolutely sacred and important to me and important to all of my people.

We are asking for help from our elders and from everybody out there listening. Help us learn our language. Help us do the right thing. Help us do this in a good way. If we're making mistakes, come and help us. The time for argument is long past, and these are my words. I hope what I have to say is of some help to some people who are also working to work to learn our languages and become fluent speakers. And if I inspire one person to put aside what they're doing and become a fluent speaker, I just want to let you know, from the bottom of my heart, that you can do this. You take what you need to do. Take your grizzly bears and take your knowledge keepers and gather your strength around you, and you go hiking, and you go to the water and you can do this.

I have done this and I'm helping other people do this. And if I can do this, and I'm just a little powerless person, you can do this. [N̄syilxč̄n̄] Thank you.

Gordon: Thank you very much. That was awesome. Awesome. Beautiful. Well said. Beautiful language. And I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart and on behalf of Legacy Hope Foundation and the Indigenous Languages Podcast Project that we're working on. For your contribution and your time, I really, really appreciate your time, for spending this hour with us to talk about your language recognition. [Cree]

Andrew: [Thank you]

Michele: You're welcome.