

## Tending our garden: Capacity building in the Myaamia community

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### **ABSTRACT**

Language revitalization, as a movement or emerging field in the United States, is only approximately three decades in the making for most tribal communities. Its beginnings appear to coincide with the passage of the 1990 Native American Languages Act and the voices of alarm from linguists' and native communities that attempt to raise awareness of the impact the loss of languages will have on communities. Three decades is just enough time to get a glimpse of the complex social, political and cultural issues that face tribal communities as they attempt to breathe new life into their languages. The Myaamia effort was born during this time of great uncertainty. Adding to this complexity was the reality that the Myaamia community did not have any remaining speakers by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, but extensive archival materials spread across the country and parts of Canada. With no models to follow for development of their unprecedented effort, a core of individuals set out to see what might be possible. This is a story of perseverance in the face of extensive obstacles. This personal account articulated by two individuals (Julie Olds and Daryl Baldwin), both citizens of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, and central to the launch of this effort, provide an in-depth account of one community's attempt to claw their way into the present and set a course of accomplishments that would serve as the foundation for future growth. To aid in their understanding, Julie developed a metaphor of an unattended garden to help make sense of what they were up against. The garden metaphor drives a powerful intellectual space in this effort and is woven throughout this story as they recount their experiences and struggles to achieve something for the benefit of their community and tribal nation. A core value in Myaamia culture is the notion of ayaakwaamisioni 'striving to achieve' and this account is an example of that highly valued cultural attribute. Their

journey, in their own words, is personal and reveling. They share it here in hopes that other communities will find parallels with their own language journeys and comfort in knowing that great accomplishments and benefits can in fact be realized from archive-based efforts in language and cultural revitalization.

## RESUMEN

La revitalización lingüística en los Estados Unidos es un movimiento o campo de acción emergente que para la mayoría de las tribus data de tan sólo tres décadas. Su inicio parece coincidir tanto con la aprobación en 1990 de la ley conocida como *Native American Languages Act*, y de los reclamos de alerta de lingüistas y comunidades indígenas quienes buscaban crear conciencia acerca del impacto que la pérdida de lenguas tendría en sus comunidades. Un periodo de tres décadas es suficiente tiempo para darnos una idea de la complejidad social, política y cultural que las tribus enfrentan en sus esfuerzos por darles un respiro de vida a sus lenguas. El esfuerzo a favor de la lengua Myaamia inicio durante este tiempo de gran incertidumbre. Aunado a la complejidad está la realidad de la lengua Myaamia que para mediados del siglo XX no contaba ya con hablantes, aunque sí contaba con extensas colecciones de documentación histórica dispersas en archivos en Estados Unidos y Canadá. Con base en estas colecciones, pero sin un modelo a seguir, un grupo de individuos se abocaron a una tarea sin precedentes y que parecía imposible. Esta es una historia de perseverancia ante una serie de fuertes obstáculos. Esta narrativa personal la hacen dos individuos (Julie Olds y Daryl Baldwin), ambos ciudadanos de la *Miami Tribe of Oklahoma* quienes fueron esenciales en la labor. Ambos ofrecen un recuento detallado del esfuerzo de una comunidad por reintegrarse al presente y poner en marcha una serie de logros que servirían como cimientos para un crecimiento a futuro. Para ayudar a entender los esfuerzos, Julie presenta la metáfora de un jardín desatendido que permite al lector visualizar a lo que se enfrentó la comunidad. La metáfora del jardín genera un espacio intelectual muy potente en este esfuerzo y se entreteje en la historia de las experiencias y luchas para lograr algo que beneficiara a la comunidad y nación tribal. Un valor importante de la cultura Myaamia es la noción de ayaakwaamisioni, 'esforzarse por lograr', y este recuento es un ejemplo de este valor cultural tan importante. La trayectoria que los autores recuentan en sus propias palabras es personal y reveladora. Los autores la comparten esperando que otras comunidades puedan encontrar en ella aspectos paralelos a los de sus propias trayectorias a favor de sus lenguas, y que puedan sentirse alentados al ver que la revitalización lingüística a partir de la documentación histórica puede generar grandes logros y beneficios.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Julie's dad raised a garden in the same spot for many years. The ground was always ready and waiting for the new growing season. In the fall and winter, there was no worry; he left it ready for the seeds of the next year or the return of new growth in the next growing season. Julie had no way of knowing at a young age how powerful the garden would serve as a metaphor for her life's work in language and cultural revitalization, work that is a matter of thoughtful planting, ground preparation, maintaining borders, weeding, tending, and constantly seeking companionate help to produce the fruits of our labor. All these processes are vividly present in our community work of rebuilding and maintaining our national identity through the revitalization of our language, culture, and ways of being.



Image 1: Tribal youth planting miincipi 'corn' during Eewansaapita Summer Educational Experience in Miami, Oklahoma 2009 (Photo by Andrew Strack, Myaamia Center).

Forced removal of Native Peoples from ancestral homes is like being forced away from that healthy space. When you leave a healthy garden that is providing for the community, and then go away and leave it for a period of time, it can continue to grow. Some things may emerge on their own, but it doesn't take long before the invasive weeds begin to encroach. And then it's just a matter of time before the weeds become dominant. And for a time, no new seeds are being planted and no

continuation is occurring to maintain the garden's health; there's no aeration or any of the things we do to ensure vitality.

That's very similar to what happened to our community. We're a tribe that's been forcibly relocated twice, leaving behind tribal members in two locations in the United States, in Indiana and in Kansas. We are a diaspora community: approximately eighty percent of our tribal members don't live in the fifty-mile radius of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma. That is our reality, which we must not lose sight of. We had to leave a healthy garden that had provided for the people for generations, since time immemorial, to live in a new place that doesn't have the same calendar, doesn't have the same growing season, and we started over, only to be uprooted again. Those transitions over time led to the losses and assimilation and being kept away from caring for the garden and restoring its health so that it can, in turn, care for the community. We had a long period during which we were not able to re-establish a healthy communal space. The absence of that allowed for the deterioration of our otherwise thriving garden space that fed and cared for the community.

That's the same as language being taken away, as culture and even family and the continuation of our ways were all thwarted during that time. We're now left with an untended garden full of weeds and a great deal of work to bring it back to its realized potential. When we started this revitalization work so long ago, we likened it to returning to our ancestral garden, trying to re-identify the edges of the space and what it looked like. We also had to get into the weeds and relocate what had been growing there to whatever extent we could. And then, as the work continued, the garden plot started to re-emerge; we could see it again. It's a garden space that will take time, likely generations, to reemerge.

When thinking about the philosophical backbone of this paper, a couple of things came to mind. The first is that what we know today as *Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki* 'The Myaamia people's awakening', which is a story of our reemergence that came from an elder community member who, after several years of observing what was ballooning in the community around language and culture revitalization, one day said, "You know, this just feels like we're waking up, awakening from a bad dream." It was important to recognize how we arrived at such a place of dormancy. The term *Eemamwiciki*, is now a very well used and understood term among our growing base of gardeners who drive our revitalization efforts. We often use it as an umbrella term to represent the overarching revitalization work. It's all things considered: *Eemamwiciki* is awareness, consciousness, or awakening, encompassing the entire process of revitalization, and its more than just language. It's also the name of a formalized educational team with staff from the tribe's Cultural Resources Office and the Myaamia Center at Miami University that oversees development and planning of educational programming for the tribal community.

What emerged from the period of dormancy was an elder population who possessed levels of cultural shame in our community. The last speakers of Myaamiaataweenki ‘the Myaamia language’ passed away sometime between the 1950s and 1970s. Elders often talked about their childhood when they were purposely not taught the language at home because their parents or grandparents didn’t want them to experience the shame and discrimination that they had experienced. For example, an elder in Indiana who was of advanced age in the 1990s shared with our group that when he was a little boy and used to go to his grandfather’s farm, his grandfather would speak to the animals in the Myaamiaataweenki. One time he asked his grandpa to teach him the language and was told, “Life will be too hard for you if you learn to speak our language.” So, the grandfather very purposely kept the language from him as something foreboding. Such degrees of cultural shame are embedded in the community and added to the many forces that caused our language to go dormant.

When we discuss losses associated with removal, it’s hard to talk about any of it without acknowledging the boarding school period and related oppressive experiences. The boarding school was a device intended to divide and rupture not only the family unit but also the cultural ties that bind our community to the long history of shared knowledge that diffuses to next generations when we live together. In Julie’s family, her grandmother and her grandmother’s two sisters were all sent to different boarding schools. Grandma was sent to Haskell in Kansas; Aunt Jo was sent to Riverside in California; and Aunt Mary was sent to Carlisle in Pennsylvania. That separation was intentional, and we all understand that.

With the second removal into Indian Territory, what is now known as Oklahoma, in 1883, our community was already weakening. After this second removal, we became surrounded by lots of other forcibly removed communities who were enduring similar pressures. Everyone was grasping for life in whatever way it came. There isn’t a Myaamia person who grew up in Oklahoma who didn’t grow up eating frybread and grape dumplings. Those aren’t what we would refer to as traditional Myaamia foods from the region that was home, but they are now basically contemporary Myaamia foods derived from a period when U.S. government supplied foods of flour and grease kept us alive. We’ve been eating them here since we arrived in Oklahoma. It’s difficult to really measure the losses. But we think of them and their implications to language loss.

As we began to think about approaching language revitalization through the metaphor of an unattended garden it speaks to the complexity of this work, which takes a lot of time and resources. One of the hardest things we’ve had to do is be patient with ourselves and with our community—to let things grow in the direction they’re going to grow; we don’t control it, we support and feed it. And then 20 years down the road, we start to see the benefits of that investment. We have done a lot of development and tending over the years, and there are definitely lessons to be learned here. We’ve made some mistakes along the way, and we’ve had some successes, both planned and

unplanned. There have been challenges, setbacks, and misfires, but all have been a necessary and needed contribution to the whole. The garden metaphor is about understanding the current environment that you're working with and being able to shape it in a way that produces something useful for everyone.

## **2. THE EMERGING EFFORT**

### **2.1 JULIE'S BACKGROUND**

My title is Cultural Resources Officer. When I first formally went to work for the tribe in February of 1997, I was hired as a clerk from a language grant and had no idea what would lie ahead. But once I started that work and was available on-site every day, as other cultural concerns were brought to the office, they were naturally channeled in my direction. By 1998 they formally named my position Cultural Preservation Officer, and then a few years later it became Cultural Resources Officer who oversees the work of the Cultural Resources Office (CRO). In this office, we have various departments. For example, we have an office that deals with NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and we have cultural education and historic preservation through our Tribal Historic Preservation Office. This collective work is currently carried out by 18 staff in the CRO.

Alongside the development of the CRO, I uncomfortably acknowledge that I served as a member of tribal leadership and, therefore, I wore two hats. I was elected in the fall of 1996, and I took the job as language clerk in February of 1997. My position in cultural resources, however, changed everything about how I looked at my responsibility and tribal leadership. It changed how I believed tribal leadership should support and embrace efforts for language reclamation or revitalization, regardless of the challenges. Due to the way our tribal constitution is written, elected leaders serve on a 5-person Business Committee. Being on the business committee, allowed me the opportunity to interpret the importance of Eemamwiciki 'our awakening' to the other tribal leaders. I had to help them understand why it came up as a budget item each year, and why the activities we proposed were beneficial to our community, whether it was a new program or a new community gathering, or whatever the case. It's important to understand that up until this time tribal leaders understood language and cultural transmission as the responsibility of the family, not leadership. Responsibility for the preservation of language and culture had not yet been conceptualized as central to the role of leadership. But in this new day when families were not passing important cultural information to the next generation, it became clear that leadership would need to take on this responsibility. It was difficult for them to embrace this but if the identity of the nation was to survive, it had to become central to tribal government along with the development of a new educational model to promote it.



Image 2: Miami Tribe Elected Leaders constitutionally referred to as the Business Committee in circa 2000 (Photo by Sexton Photography).

When I first came to work for the tribe, the year started with an annual winter stomp dance. My sister and my brother helped run the dance, which started maybe two years before I ran for office. The stomp dance is what got me interested in wanting to move home and get involved in revitalization work as I initially saw the dance as a means to connect to my cultural heritage. I quickly realized that we had some elders of advanced age who we needed to learn from. I reached out to two or three who lived locally; at first, they were reluctant but then decided they would trust to let us come and visit.

I remember visiting an elder at her house. We had all our recording equipment with us and were ready to capture what we hoped would be nuggets of cultural knowledge. I remember she came walking down the hall carrying a little box from which she pulled out copies of minutes from many years of past annual meetings. I cried all the way home. And after some reflection, I thought, “That’s it. That’s how they’ve stayed alive.” I began to realize so many families held onto whatever they had throughout all the upheaval, in a proverbial bundle—that family knowledge bundle, we might say—

that maintained a knowledge continuum, even if everyone's knowledge bundle had become small. Tribal government, family ties, and land was all that was left in most cases. Our identity emerged during the mid-1990s around issues of sovereignty—as a people to be a people—even if that fiber of identity was just worn away to fragile threads.

When I ran for office and was elected, the other four tribal leaders were all 25 to 35 years older than me, and I was considered the young kid on the block. I was 32, and as far as they were concerned, very new and very green. And so, there's the first level of change. This new kid on the block comes in, and it wasn't very long after I was elected in the fall of 1996 that we received a grant award from the Administration for Native Americans (discussed in more detail below), which funded a paid position. At the time, it was not the custom of the Miami Tribe for tribal leaders to work for the tribe. As best I know, I was the first tribal leader to have a paid position for the tribe. Today, it is much more common for tribal leaders to hold staff positions within the tribe.

## **2.2 DARYL'S BACKGROUND**

I was born and raised in Northwest Ohio near the heart of our ancestral homelands of northern Indiana. I grew up away from my tribe but close to the history of my ancestors, which was visible and present throughout my childhood. When I became involved in our language awakening efforts, there were a couple of forces at work within me, for example, a strong desire to know something about my own heritage beyond the powwows and intertribal influences that surrounded me and venture outside my comfort zone to explore what the world had to offer for my future. The latter was the one that really pushed me to leave a position in the construction field for 10 years and go back to college. I was a first-generation college student, which was a pretty scary transition for me, especially because I was married and had two kids—not an ideal time to quit your job and go to school, but we did it.

At the University of Montana, I studied wildlife biology and was really interested in how tribes were developing environmental departments. I wanted to continue studying wildlife biology but was unable to get accepted into the graduate program. Regardless of this setback, I wanted to continue with graduate level studies. During this time, I was communicating with an elder from Indiana who played an important role in encouraging me to continue working with the language. Her name was Lora Siders and she passed in September of 2000. Anyhow, during our phone call she said, "You know, you seem to have a love for the language," because at the time my wife and I were trying to incorporate the language in the home with our kids. She said, "Have you ever thought about studying language?" As it turned out, I had become familiar with a faculty member on campus named Dr. Anthony Mattina, who is a well-known Salish linguist. So, I walked into Dr. Mattina's office and asked, "Tony, this is a long shot, but what do you think about me doing linguistic research at the master's level?" To which he replied, "When do you want to start?" I said, "How about in two weeks when the next semester

starts?” He commented on my low GRE scores but said that he’d go to bat for me and see what he could do. With his support, I got in and, although I didn’t know it at that time, those two individuals, Lora and Tony, changed the direction of my life. This change would catapult me into the undeveloped and largely undefined field of indigenous language revitalization, which would become my life’s pursuit.



Image 3: Daryl and Lora Siders reviewing language materials at Seven Pillars language camp Peru, Indiana 1997 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

The linguistic program at The University of Montana was the best change for me, and I absolutely loved linguistics. I really did well in it and graduated with a high GPA. My linguistics training would lay a foundation for me to support language teaching at the community level. Looking back on that, I have to chuckle because linguistics is not going to solve the need to revitalize languages. It has a very important role, and we employ two full-time linguists at the Myaamia Center. That’s how important I think it is. And, for a dormant language such as Myaamiaatweenki, it was the driving force at the beginning of our venture into learning about our language – even the way I taught the language was very linguistics oriented. But now I know that it’s not the most important factor.

In 1998, when I was nearing the end of my graduate program, I couldn’t find work, but the tribe was starting to have some revenue. That’s when I moved to Oklahoma for a year. I happened to call Julie and said, “I can’t find work.” And she said, “Hey, we’re hiring an environmental director. You want

to come down to Oklahoma?” So, I moved from Missoula, Montana to Miami, Oklahoma to take on that position. I guess my Wildlife Biology degree came in handy after all. While I was working in the environmental department for the tribe, Julie and I began experimenting with some language programming for the local community, including a couple of evening programs. That was our first attempt to really try to do something with language in the community.

It’s important to understand that at this time there was no funding and no job prospects that directly supported language revitalization. I don’t believe there was an existing field for Indigenous language work just yet. A year later in 1999, I completed my master’s thesis on the Myaamia language remotely from Oklahoma, and then I left Oklahoma and my position with the tribe to move to West Lafayette, Indiana to take a position with a museum. The Museums at Prophetstown is where my family and I landed with the hopes of launching language programs in the Myaamia historic homelands. After a couple of years, the museum opportunity began to collapse, and I recall that period as very difficult. After 8 years of schooling, two moves, several attempts to create community language programming, and the pressures of family life with little income were all weighing heavily on me personally. After the museum job began to falter, I made the decision to abandon the community language efforts so I could get a ‘real job’ to support my growing family. If as individuals, we ever hit a low in our lives, this was certainly the time for me.

It is fair to say that our efforts to work with our language at the community level, and the difficulties in doing so, really came to a head in spring 2001 when I called Julie and said: “I can’t do this anymore.” We had worked for years with little support, and it was taking its toll on me personally and on my family. After a very difficult discussion with Julie, she responded, “Well, I’ve got one more idea. Let’s call Miami University and see if something might be possible.” I remember my response being “you go sister, but I am done.” I just couldn’t imagine at that time a major university would consider supporting an effort that had no direct connection to any campus programs. That said, you never really know what’s around the corner, what door is going to open, and whether or not you should step through it. I was already in a place of instability and didn’t need more uncertainty.

After some important negotiations between officials at Miami University and leaders of the Miami Tribe, the university eventually came back with a commitment to fund one position for three years and call it the Myaamia Project. In university language, a project means something ‘unofficial’ and so although they were willing to commit short-term to a request by the Miami Tribe, the future for this new venture remained uncertain. Officials agreed to revisit the newly formed Myaamia Project at the end of three years to see if it was worthy of continuation. Miami University’s commitment included one salary position for a director, and the Miami Tribe asked that I serve as the director of the new project. There were no tribal funds coming into this project during this time—it was funded solely by the university and would be the first time since leaving my career in construction in 1991 that I had a

decent salary with benefits. And so again, I moved my family from Lafayette, Indiana near Oxford, Ohio where Miami's campus is located. My wife and I were both tired and she told me that the family move near Oxford was her last and to: "make it work!" As they say, the rest is history.

### 2.3 COMMUNITY CONTEXT

When the Myaamia language revitalization movement began, Julie was able to observe leadership ideology around language and cultural issues of that time. In a way, she had her hand on the pulse of tribal leadership, and Daryl, who was already holding language programs up in Indiana for a time, was starting to get a sense of where the community was with respect to interest in language learning. Daryl was really interested in communal ideology at that time—understanding the community context you're presented with as you're beginning to launch something new is critical: How do people think about themselves, their language, their culture, their history, their future, their tribal nation? What forces have shaped the way we think about ourselves, whether it's boarding schools or removals? What are the effects of years of federally supported programs causing generations of tribal members to see their nation as a giant social service program? Inserting something like language and cultural revitalization can really challenge some of these long-held perceptions of what a tribe is and can do.



Image 4: Julie and Chief Floyd Leonard enjoying a moment at the Miami Tribe National Gathering of tribal members in Miami, Oklahoma 2000 (Photo courtesy of Myaamia Tribe of Oklahoma).

When Julie started working for the tribe, it was hard not to get excited and run down the hall to each other saying, "Look at this!" As we began to work with archival materials, we began discovering important information and wanted to share it! However, it wasn't long before she started noticing a wall forming among leadership. It took a little while to figure out why. None of our tribal leaders at the time were speakers to any extent. The context we stepped into was not an easy one, not easy at all. When you try to introduce something like language revitalization, you're initiating change and presenting knowledgeable individuals with information they don't know. And that can be very hard for some: people are comfortable with what they know, or what they think they know, and when something new comes along, it can be a challenge. And it was. It was very humbling and very challenging with a lot of frustration that bubbled up from time-to-time. Because of the change and new information that revitalization was creating, it took some time for everyone, for all of us, to adjust to this new reality.

## **2.4 SYNERGIES**

A number of things came together during this early period. There was Daryl's interest in speaking the language with his family, which was born out of his own need to strengthen his connection to his heritage and pass it on to his children in the home. There was David Costa, who was simply looking for a language to study and his advisor at UC Berkeley, Rich Rhodes, said, "Why don't you try this language, Miami? Nobody seems to know anything about it. We don't know if there are any speakers. We don't know how much material there is. Why don't you go see what you can find out?" And there was Julie, coming home from Kansas, wanting to re-engage with her tribe and found herself serving as an elected leader. The three of us merged at some point around language and, eventually, cultural revitalization. Although our points of origin with the eemamwicki 'awakening' emerged from different directions, we ultimately complemented each other well and our combination of interests (archival linguistics, tribal politics, language as identity) served as the launch pad for the effort today. We refer to our three points of entry as the three legs of this effort, referring to the collective support that was needed to begin the awakening.



Image 5: David Costa viewing an 18th Century Miami-Illinois language manuscript at Archive of the Jesuits in Quebec, Canada, 2019 (Photo by Theresa Rowat, Archive of the Jesuits).

Early in the 1990s, the message across Indian country was: if you lose your speakers, your language is extinct, dead—you're done. Prominent Native people would say this at conferences, and Daryl would think to himself, "I'm not buying it." We knew we had a lot of documentation, and Daryl wasn't quite ready to believe that nothing good could come from the utilization of that vast body of materials. Daryl: "I was not naive in believing I would ever be the kind of speaker that my ancestors were, but I was not convinced what I was hearing was coming from an informed and experienced place of mind. My early efforts to learn my language from documentation in the context of my immediate family was simply to prove to myself that something was in fact possible." David and Daryl had already been communicating regularly about the materials and their contents. David had been locating archival materials since 1988 and was uncovering all kinds of new language documentation that we didn't even know existed when this whole thing started. Initially, nobody knew whether there was enough documentation to say anything complete about the language, let alone reconstruct it and begin relearning. We certainly didn't know that after several years of mining archives scattered across the U.S. and Canada that we would end up with a source of language documentation spanning nearly 270 years. Once that was realized, Daryl started to think, "There's something that can be done here," and began exploring the possibilities. Daryl's immediate family became heavily involved and dedicated, choosing to homeschool to try and reincorporate the language as he and his wife Karen were learning it, as parents with their kids, and any cultural content that came with it.

The home effort lasted 18 years and we all learned important lessons from that early work. Not the least of which is that some aspects of the language can be revitalized and naturalized with children, who would then grow up with some level of association with their heritage and language and, over time, this would strengthen their ties of identity with their culture and community. This became the driving force for advancing, at the community level, what has become 30 years of experience in archive-based language revitalization. Returning to the garden metaphor, the archival records became the resources for understanding what should be growing there and what could grow again. And then, as the work continued for many years, the garden started to re-emerge, and we could see it again. The possibilities became very real for us and continue to strengthen with time. We need to be clear that revitalizing a language from documentation does not lead us back to an original form of the language or the ability to communicate in the language to the extent that our ancestors did. Rather, it allows us the opportunity to draw from grammatical structures, insights, and knowledge into expressive features and forms a context for cultural expression that serves a community's identity in the present. This has significant educational value to us as a tribal nation today.

## 2.5 TRIBAL SUPPORT

We are often stating that the context of revitalization and the use of archival materials for that work require a level of training, expertise, and resources that go well beyond the boundaries of how language and cultural transmission normally transfer in a healthy community environment. To garner those resources, the tribal nation must assume some level of responsibility in supporting the work for the benefit of its tribal citizens. That is an issue of education, research, development, and long-term sustainability planning. And so, as we began to realize the importance of community education with language being central in the early stages, it became clear to us that, as a small tribe, we just didn't have the resources needed to move this effort to higher levels of impact for the community. There was still a great deal of uncertainty and inexperience among us. There was no professional training for this kind of work at the community level and there were no jobs in language revitalization that one could apply for. Looking back, we don't know who in their right mind would take something like this on but, for whatever reason, we were young and motivated to do it. Community members and leadership observed our commitment, which eventually motivated them to take us seriously. Some tribal leaders and community members, at the time, may not have understood what we were attempting to do, they may not have even known what to do with it, but it was there, and it was taking root in the community garden. Over time, community and leadership ideology would begin to merge with the revitalization effort and become that single, stronger force needed to move forward. There were more and more community members who slowly began to gather around and say, "Yes, we're interested in this. We think this is good" and that eventually was communicated to tribal leadership, which would later become important when real financial resources were needed to advance the work.

To garner tribal leadership support in the early years (1990s), Julie, who was feeling pushback by some, arranged for a meeting with them. It wasn't that they didn't want to support the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) language grant to be finished or that they didn't generally support the language returning – they did. The hesitation by some was likely a reflection of not understanding what was happening. At that time, the second chief was a very frugal, careful spender and wanted no part of what we were proposing, to create monetary support that Daryl and David could use to advance the work. We were getting nowhere. Julie thought, "I have to get David and Daryl here to explain what was needed. All tribal leaders had to do is sit and listen. If I can just get them here and they'll listen, then we'll get over the hump." We used the ANA grant because, thankfully, the grant writer had written in some travel funds to bring them here for a language meeting. So, we just rolled the language meeting in with the opportunity for them to make a presentation for tribal leadership.

In 1998, Daryl traveled from Missoula to pitch to the tribe that they should get behind the language revitalization effort. Julie and David Costa were there. Chief Leonard had invited Chief Dawes from the Ottawa Tribe to sit in on this meeting. Chief Leonard respected Chief Dawes and valued his opinion

on such matters. Chief Dawes was considered by his community to be a speaker of Ottawa, and at the time was running his own language programs with his tribe. Julie opened the meeting with some comments but largely left it on David and Daryl's shoulders because, as an elected official, she wanted to stay in the background. After David and Daryl made their pitch, Chief Leonard looked over at Chief Dawes and said "Well, Chief, what do you think of this?" Chief Dawes sat there for a minute quietly and said, "I think this is a good thing. I think you should do this." And from that point on, we had support from tribal leadership. It took getting tribal leaders behind it for us to begin to make the next step. Had it not been for Chief Dawes, maybe we would've gotten there eventually, but his support was what Chief Leonard needed at that time. And once Chief Leonard said "Okay," then everybody else said "Okay." And things started to change at that point.



Image 6: Miami Chief Floyd Leonard and Ottawa Chief Charlie Dawes at Miami Nation Pow Wow, Miami, Oklahoma 2000 (Photo courtesy of Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

It's important to understand that not all tribes can move this way. You have to consider tribal financial resources, and even the size of a tribe can factor into how decisions are made and things get done. A lot of tribes have moved their language efforts completely outside the umbrella of tribal

government as a means to find the best path forward. But we were very committed to the idea that in the long run, if this was going to have real impact, it would need tribal resources, tribal support, and tribal leadership behind it.

Another important change that began to emerge during this time was when we were able to include tribal leaders in community programs as learners, so that it was no longer leadership sitting alongside and observing the community. When we started holding language events, young kids would pick it up so quickly. Imagine the feeling when they would go up to the chief and greet him and he didn't know what to say in return. We had to break down that wall of perceived separation and get tribal leaders to realize they were part of a whole and could also learn with the community. We had to help them gain knowledge, sometimes ahead of the process, so they would attend, whether it was a language gathering, a dance, or other event. We started sharing more and more internally. Julie would take little lists of words and share them with the business committee, with the tribal leadership, and encourage them, "Just be able to say *aya*. It's the ultimate icebreaker. It's almost like you don't have to say anything else after that. The kids come up, you just simply greet them, and they'll just jabber away, and you just let them do that and encourage them to keep doing it." And that's what they started to do. Once they felt comfortable, things continued to grow and change. Before long they were coming to language events and opportunities to learn. And while the older elected leadership was trying, the younger generation was participating. Today, those younger learners are now the leaders, and it's incredible to see the change in support and participation.

### **3. GENERATING RESOURCES**

When our community language programs were just getting started, we were a much smaller tribal nation in terms of our count of enrolled citizens. In the mid-1900s, there were about 1500 people on the tribe's citizenship rolls. We are at 7,000 today. That's not because of natural birth. It's because families are rejoining the nation and wanting to get involved, especially families that got left behind in Kansas and Indiana. When citizenship numbers go up, that brings in a whole new level of resources, but it also challenges us to respond to the growing needs coming to the nation, to participate in Myaamiaki Eemamwiciki, that awakening. As new gardeners arrive, the garden must grow and as it grows, more can be planted – our health returns.

The tribe didn't have any money at the time we began. When Julie was elected to tribal council in 1996, the monthly stipend for a business committee member was \$25 to help offset the fuel cost for the month to go to meetings. The week after she was elected Secretary-Treasurer, the previous Secretary-Treasurer had to go to her home and get the tribe's checkbook. She kept it at home on her desk and she had to bring it. There was no money. We were almost completely grant driven at the time, and it was a struggle.

Around that time, the tribe began a gaming division as an economic venture. In 1998 the Stables Casino opened (Modoc and Miami Tribe). One of the companies we worked with needed somewhere to put what they called a “ball call.” In early gaming, there was a little tumbler, balls with numbers on them would bounce around, and a picker would choose the number. They had come up with a way to go digital with that process, but the game had to be served from trust land to be a legal tribal gaming entity. Our tribal headquarters sat on trust land, and we had an old garage that was an appendage to the north side of tribal headquarters. We had a business manager at the time who had been trying so hard to get businesses going, and he came up with the idea to let them rent that for their ball call. The building didn’t have electricity, but he convinced them to pay in advance for a remodel so they could move forward with plans to rent. The gaming entity paid \$3,000 a month to rent the space from us. You would have thought that someone had handed Chief Leonard a check for a hundred thousand dollars!

That was the first spendable cash that we had ever had, to our knowledge. The tribe ended up renting another space to them. Pretty soon we were making \$15,000 a month and the money was starting to accumulate. Because Julie was Secretary-Treasurer, she knew how much money we had to work with. We had suggested to Chief Leonard, because the ANA grant was going to end, that we did not want to let our efforts working with the language go just because the grant ended. We had started something that needed to outlive the grant. And more than anything, we needed resources.

The gaming initiative made Julie’s position in cultural resources permanent, and then it was the Stables Casino that allowed the tribe to put some financial resources towards the Myaamia Project. Julie, in her role on the business committee, was able to set aside a percentage of casino revenue that would directly fund language development in perpetuity. In Oklahoma, tribes entered into ‘state compacts’ to handle a wide range of tax and income issues that included revenues from gaming enterprises. There were 13 line-items approved as ways the tribe could spend its own money from gaming revenues. It was literally that controlling. The tribe didn’t just get to make money and do whatever they wanted with it. It had to fit within these 13 lines, one of which was oddly worded – “language dictionary” with a definition further broadened to include anything related to language, culture, and Myaamia ways of knowing. This allowed us to secure a good amount of available funds for that period.

### **3.1 ADMINISTRATION FOR NATIVE AMERICANS (ANA) GRANT**

When the ANA grant was written in 1996, Julie did not work for the tribe and had not even been elected to the tribal government. Our tribal librarian, Karen Alexander, is a great lover of history. She had met David Costa when he came through the area in 1994 and continued to stay in touch with him over the years. So, with that interest, she decided to write a grant that supported language efforts. At

the time, ANA was only funding grants to communities that had remaining speakers to work with for revitalization. This was due to the belief that when languages were no longer spoken, they were extinct. Even the granting agencies of the time had incorporated the extinct ideology that was being perpetuated across Indian Country. If we were going to apply, we had to claim we had a speaker. To be fair to Chief Leonard, we believe that he did recall to some extent language from his father and his family, but it may have been a stretch to say that he was the last living speaker. But if we were to apply to the program, he was our only option.

The grant called for turning community members into language teachers in two years. We can laugh about it now, but at the time everybody thought it was possible. Karen Alexander wrote the grant, we got funded, and Julie took the position as language clerk. Then Karen said, “Here, we need to send this mailing out, inviting this opportunity to community members.” We think it was open to everyone age 16 and over, because one community member argued that his 14-year-old son, who was studying some kind of language at school, should be included because he had a very good grasp of language learning. So, we ended up including one younger person.

We had 40 tribal members attend two sessions during the summer of 1996, 20 in one class and 20 in the other. It was a weeklong grueling time for Daryl to come to Oklahoma and work with all these people, who were truly interested. Several were absolutely committed and wanted to learn, however within a couple of years after the grant ended, none of the 40 were engaged in trying to learn language to the extent that they could even teach it in their home. When thinking about that outcome and the funds that were used, you might look at the grant from a revitalization perspective and conclude that it was a failure in terms of what we thought we were going to accomplish. From another perspective, it was an incredible success because regardless of the outcome, it was a key experience for us to have and the lessons we learned would help us forge a path forward.

## **4. PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **4.1 OUR GARDEN**

When we started our language programs, we had to consider concerns held by some members of the community. Why do this? What’s the purpose of it? Can you breathe new life into a language that isn’t spoken anymore? Is this worthy of tribal resources? There were a lot of unknowns. Additionally, we were pushing back against beliefs that stem from mainstream experiences and education. Some members of our community believed our language was primitive, undeveloped, ancient, backwards, not useful to modern society and they were getting this from the public domain and media. When we started our language programs, those ideas were firmly in the community—we don’t know to what extent, but they were there, and we had to think about how we were going to navigate that. Eemamwicki ‘the awakening’ forced us to become aware of this and other obstacles: we had to

examine how we arrived here, what currently existed within the community, and how we might begin responding to some of those concerns.



Image 7: Original participants in the first grant funded language training by Administration for Native Americans (ANA) Grant in Miami, Oklahoma 1996 (Photo courtesy of Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

How much time does it take once damage is done before you can consider new things or revitalize something like language? We don't think we could have done this work if a large part of our community was still healing from the impacts of boarding schools. There would have been just too much anger, too much pain, too much frustration to move forward. As of this time, we no longer have any living elders in the community who are the product of boarding schools. We don't know how we would have gotten language and cultural revitalization off the ground if that experience was still in our presence. In the trajectory of injury and recovery, we do have to think of a timeline, and at what point a community is ready to begin that healing process after experiencing trauma. Each community has to figure this out for themselves.

We've used the garden analogy many times. We talk about it a lot, approaching this work as having to reclaim our garden. When we came to it, you could tell that there was a garden. The faded remnants of its existence were still in our collective memory, but the fog left from recent events clouded our ability to see its original form clearly. It still had recognizable borders and there were still things about it that you could tell had once thrived. But all these weeds had come up in a space that had not been

tended nor paid proper attention for a long while. We often talk about those weeds being the effects of removal, assimilation, and boarding schools—all these identified invasives, we might call them. When tribes are looking at starting language programs, we encourage an assessment of “Where are we today?” and identifying the weeds in their environment: “What do we have to remove first? What do we have to heal up before we can start really planting earnestly again?” And “Where do we plant? Which plants go first?” This is always a really great conversation, especially if you’re talking to communities. It always really helps them think about it.

Before starting a revitalization effort such as this, it is worth taking the time to understand how your garden got to be in the condition it is. We didn’t do that that per se: the wheels started rolling and we jumped on. So much of our development has been organic. At the beginning, never in our wildest dreams would we have ever guessed it would look like this today. If we had been asked at the time, “What’s the goal?” it simply would have been that our community would be using the language, lofty as even that is. In the beginning, we could not have imagined what might emerge as the work continued or realized the extent of the knowledge gained over time. These things were made possible, as we reflect, because we cleared some spaces of weeds that were hindering growth—not our own weeds, but invasives. Then we re-identified and to some extent redefined ourselves within the cleared space left behind: things that were silenced or stunted in their growth were rising up again, but in a different form. Once we cleared the weeds away, the garden was able to thrive, and things started growing that we never expected. It’s really incredible to realize that when given the opportunity, our innovative and creative selves can reemerge to meet the challenge.

So much of the garden metaphor works well in this context. For example, planting a seed doesn’t produce something right away. It needs to be tended and nurtured and, in some cases, lie dormant for a season before something sprouts. When we’re working with our young people, we often find ourselves looking at them as the seeds of the future. We don’t know what they’re going to grow into, but being able to nurture, support, and bring them along is our investment, and we may not see that investment for ten years or more. It’s very much a long, seasonal thing to engage with and stay on top of the weeds and the plantings. It requires active management and active participation. The other thing, too, as with a garden, not everyone’s going to come to this with the same set of tools and interests. Some people will love to weed, others will love to plant, and others will love to water or do other things. And somewhat jokingly, some just want to eat. So that metaphor really works for us. We talk about our garden all the time internally. Although the garden metaphor has worked well for us internally, we offer it here to others as a model for understanding the complexity of revitalization.

## 4.2 OUR WEB

Another metaphor we developed years ago when we started our youth programs was the concept of a web to demonstrate the connectivity of community and how individuals play unique roles. When we had our youth together, we would get in a circle with a big ball of twine. Daryl would hold on to one end and introduce himself in the language, then we would just randomly throw the ball around. Each child would grab the ball, hang on to their piece, and say their name, and when there are twenty kids in a circle it creates a web. Then we talked about how our existence as Myaamia people had lots of different aspects to it. We talked about things like land and governance, and the youth would choose topics as well. We asked them, “What are the things that connect us as Miami people?” Some would say stories, some would say games. And then we would say, “Let’s step back and tighten that web.” In the course of doing that, we would present the idea, “Well, what happens if we stop telling our stories?” or “What happens if we stop playing our games?” And then we would have one person let go of their piece of the web, and the web would stay intact. But as they slowly started to let go, the web would weaken. Eventually, we would ask the youth to let go of their string and ask the question: “what will keep us together as Myaamia people without these things?” After a short discussion we then ask them to help us revitalize our community and have them reach down and pick up their thread off the ground. When the web is up again, we ask another important question: “is it the same as our first web?” The answer is always moohci ‘no’ and this is our segue into the notion of ‘change’ in the community as an outcome of revitalization. After a short discussion about change we finally ask: “are we still a community?” And the answer is always iihia ‘yes’ because we are standing there holding an intact web with identifiable Myaamia features. Revitalization does in fact create change, sometimes uncomfortably, but what is centrally important is if we remain together as a community and share attributes that strengthen us as a group. Young children get this, and it has become a hallmark of our youth programs and an important physical metaphor for revitalization.

What’s really interesting for us today regarding the youth web activity is that when we started doing these activities back in the 1990s, we might get three or four people who would introduce themselves with their Myaamia name. Today at the Eewansaapita Summer Youth Educational Experience program, which now has sixty youth, the vast majority have a Myaamia name, which so clearly marks the change over time. And that makes us realize that our garden is taking shape. It’s slow, but it’s working, and it’s starting to emerge in a new generation who’ve shed the cultural shame of the past and can now embrace their future, whatever that’s going to look like – we don’t control that. In many ways, we are mending the present from the harms of our past. Language and cultural revitalization are helping us heal.

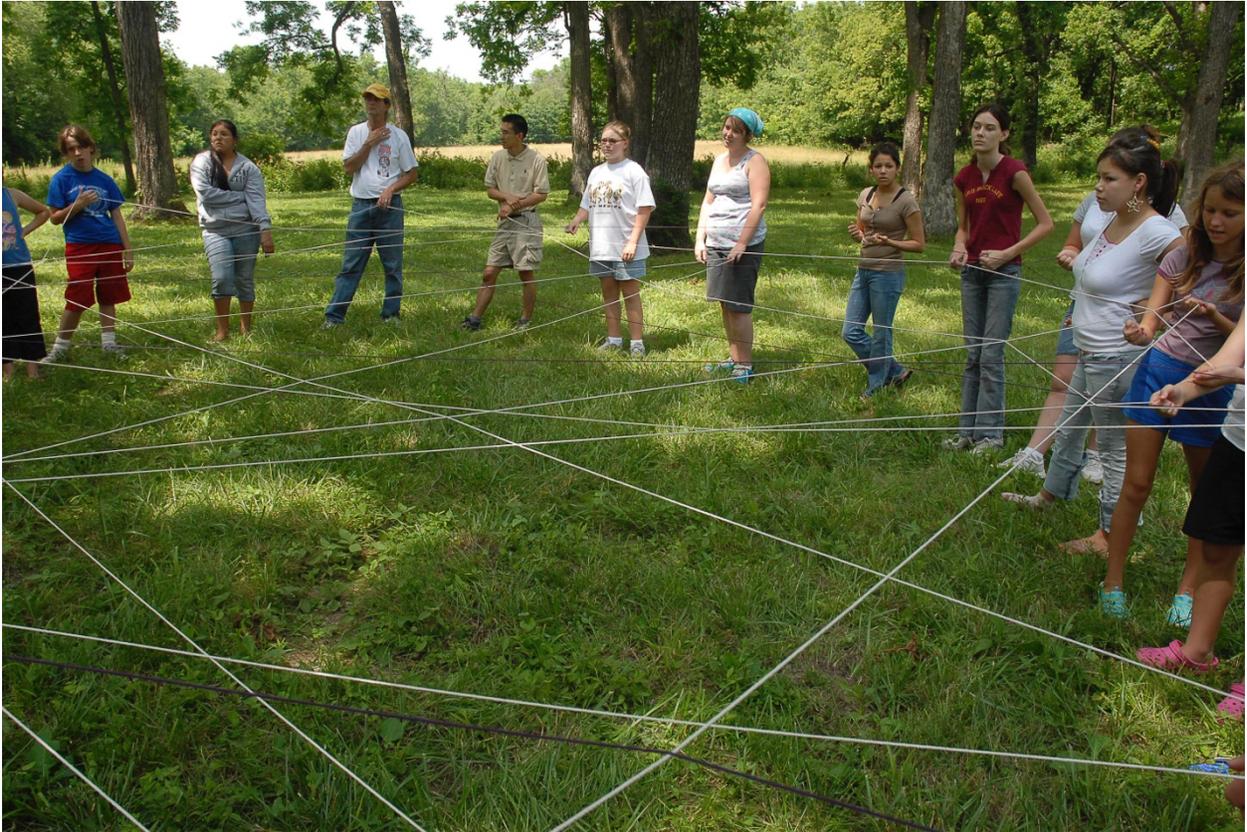


Image 8: Participants build a community web during Eewansaapita Summer Educational Experience in Miami, Oklahoma 2007 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

### 4.3 OUR UNITY

When the Miami Tribe started funding much of this work, they were very clear that whatever we built had to serve everyone. We did not have the luxury of grabbing a dozen kids and going off in a corner away from everybody else and trying to bring their proficiency up to some higher level. That was not acceptable in our community. It creates exclusivity and potentially breeds shame and causes the language to be a symbol of status that only a few get to achieve. Whatever we created, everyone had to be able to participate at whatever level they wanted to. That really forced us to think more broadly about the community and to develop goals for our work which, at this stage, are to connect Myaamia people with each other (we need people, because of the diaspora); and to connect them to their indigenous knowledge system. The goal to increase language proficiency is not there right now. Language use is spreading. It is growing. We hope that in the future proficiency will emerge on its own after we build a solid foundation, so that we can do more instead of relying on just a handful of people trying to carry the entire burden. To be honest, that will be up to a future generation.

## 5. REALIZING THE VISION

Our community wants their identity back as Myaamia people. We have come to know that there are two important ways of achieving this. One is coming together—physically, not virtually—as Myaamia people, as kin, because we’ve been blown apart by our history. The other is reconnecting to what we call our *Myaamia nipwaayoni* ‘Myaamia knowledge’. When we connect to that, we connect to each other and to the knowledge that makes us unique as a human group. Most everything we do today has to have those two components. As long as we stay true to those two things, we will continue to move forward and grow. Language is part of that. To what extent it’s part of it is also an organic process. We know how the language reclamation effort started. We know how it’s bumped along. We know where it is today, and we know that if we continue to “grow the garden,” there’ll be more we can do with our language in the future. It becomes complex in its infrastructure, but it’s about a people being a people, and the two important ingredients are each other, our own selves, and the knowledge system that we share. We can set aside all the things that divide us as human beings, including American politics, religion, and everything else that can live in a state like Oklahoma. We can come together as Myaamia people and be a people and rally around our ways of knowing and our ways of being. This has become central to the effort.

These are things we have learned through the process. We see this so often in other tribes with whom we come into contact. It is the process that will set the stage for what they need to know, and so they will know how to invest moving forward. And each process is going to be a little different for each community. That’s just the way it is.

We mentioned earlier an elder that Julie went to see who brought the box of resolutions and business committee meeting minutes. There are many ways to look at that box. At the time, Julie looked in the box and didn’t see what she expected to see. What was she looking for? She thought the elder might have a pipe, or who knows what – an object, a physical thing. The community of today knows that what was in the box is intangible. It’s what’s welling up inside them based on what the return of language and culture is providing: an identity, an ability to look in the mirror and see a Myaamia person, not an Indian. Before this movement began, a couple of generations of Myaamia people looked in the mirror and, if asked the question, “Are you Native American?” They might respond, “I’m Miami.” They didn’t say “Myaamia.” They didn’t know that there was a way to say it or what it meant. “Well, you don’t look it.” “Well, it was my grandma.” It was always tied to somebody who looked a certain way, especially for families who grew up away from the tribe and whose exposure was, absolutely appropriately, through stories that came down through their family lines. But depending on which story that was, when somebody would ask them, “Are you Myaamia?”, instead of talking about themselves, they would talk about Grandma or Grandpa – someone in the past. What we’ve seen occur over the last fifteen years, or maybe longer, is a re-centering for community members of all ages.

That knowledge comes back. They are able to internalize it and it becomes part of them, and it comes out in how they manifest their identity as Myaamia. That's the restorative healing power of the return of that healthy garden space, a communal space where we feed and share amongst ourselves. We all grow so much from it.



Image 9: Art activity during Eewansaapita Summer Educational Experience, Miami, Oklahoma 2007  
(Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

This return of understanding and knowing is affording every age and generation represented in the tribe's annual meeting the ability to say *niila Myaamia* 'I am Myaamia', and to know what they are saying and to possess knowledge about its meaning. They're going to be able to teach that. Not just the words, but everything it means because now they can go over and pick up *mahkisina meehkintiinki* 'Moccasin game' and play. They can count their score in the language, they can brag on winning, and they know exactly what they're doing. It's what they can do in the present. Now, it's no longer only what grandma did or said. Those things are still important to them, but now they've closed the generational gap, that void, of visible Myaamia ways into an extension that continues through them as living Myaamiaki. And now we live again.

Early on, there was a period of uncertainty, because once you've cleared the weeds out of the garden, or at least once you've identified what the weeds are, that's a challenge, because weeds can be embraced by community members inadvertently in the absence of the healthy plant. Sometimes those things can be represented by influences of shared intertribal knowledge that are embraced in the absence of inherent Myaamia knowledge. With the scattering of our community and our diasporic state, that is an incredible danger that we, and I'm sure many other tribes who faced removal, have had to deal with. People latched on to powwows and other tribes' cultures fill that void, that gap. We have generations who grew up away from the community, who grew up as children and grandchildren of the very elders who went through the boarding schools. Often the stories of those elders were held back because they were burdened by their memories of the punishment and loss. They didn't transfer knowledge, and they didn't encourage the young people in their families or in the community to seek it because it had negative connotations attached. The outcome is loss, and it was during that period of very little that the Cultural Resources Office was born in 2000 and the Myaamia Project in 2001. We started to clear away the weeds in order to plant as accurately and as quickly and as appropriately as possible, so that uniquely Miami things would begin to fill that space again.

As discussed earlier, when the language programs were still new, the tribe had started having a winter stomp dance. We're not even going to call it a Myaamia dance. That was the only cultural event that the Miami Tribe had hosted as a community, probably since arrival or not long after arrival in Indian Territory, even before it was Oklahoma, because things fell apart that quickly. Everybody latched onto this dance, they grasped it and held it tight. The year it began in the early 1990s, there were no Myaamia participants - no leaders, no shakers, no knowledge about what was going on. We were simply a host for an intertribal social event that had a huge turnout each winter, on average 400 or 500 people. But then we started having some other smaller events, and because of the work that's been done and the personal commitment and sacrifices by so many Myaamia people, we now have both leaders and shakers. We have people who dance at powwows. Is that an intertribal event? Yes.

Are they wearing clothes that are uniquely Myaamia? Yes. Everything's entirely different, and they internalize it. They can participate, bring it inside, interpret it as Myaamia, participate as Myaamia. And none of that would be happening if our revitalization efforts, the awakening, had not happened. It's really incredible to observe.

An effort such as this has developmental steps along the way. We are in a phase now where we find it incredibly important to advance our evaluation and assessment tools so that we can develop a deeper understanding of this effort, its impact, and how to improve it. To that end, it's important to point out that the work of our Nipwaayoni Acquisition and Assessment Team (NAATeam) is to document the impact of language and cultural revitalization on youth who participate in our cradle to grave programs. This is a major longitudinal study to document the effort, and we are starting to see indications that we are reaching new milestones. One milestone we observe in our youth is breaking the image of the Indian that has been so imposed on us and shaped us. We recently had 12 incoming freshmen at Miami University. Through a pre- and post-interview process our assessment team interviewed them. For the first time ever, a freshman tribe student, during the interview, looked over at one of the interviewers and said, "Are you Myaamia?" The interviewer, who is part of our team, is African American. We have reached a point in our community where one's hair color, eye color, or skin color no longer matters in the identification of Myaamia people. What has become central is what you know, as we were describing, whether you're connected to this community, some knowledge of and ability to use the language, and that's what we were striving for. The constraints of an Indian identity imposed on us by America will not help us strive forward as a multiracial tribal nation. We need to shift the identity markers to things that strengthen us, and we can only do that through our own educational efforts that promote a national identity rooted in knowledge, participation, and a long list of cultural features that define us as a people.

## **6. STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT**

It's always been interesting to us that this effort was built without a plan. We can't go to a bookshelf and pull something from the shelf and hand it to you and say, "Here's the Myaamia plan." In terms of strategic development, there is no plan, there never was a plan, and we don't know how there could have been a plan for all the aspects of peoplehood we were exploring. We were pushed and prodded along, and we just took what was available. Even our early projects were that way. We'd start things we thought were great ideas and they'd fall flat. Then we'd try something on a whim, and it would take off and we'd say, "Okay, I guess we're going that direction." We were pursuing the things that felt right for us, that we thought were good for us as a community, and we were driven by that. It wasn't like there was a goal that we set for ourselves and were trying to achieve that goal. Internally, we were thinking, "What do we need to be healthy again, to be strong again, to be Myaamia again?" All the

identity pieces are the things that tend to drive us. A lot of times it hinged on what resources were available at the time, both human and financial, at least on the Myaamia Center side. We now know there is a label for this approach called *strength-based development*.

## 6.1 COMPLEMENTARY ROLES OF THE MYAAMIA CENTER AND CULTURAL RESOURCES OFFICE

For any large garden that's going to serve a lot of people, you have to have human resources and a certain amount of organization. For a long time, Daryl was alone in the work at the Myaamia Project, and Julie was the only one in the cultural office in Oklahoma. We remember being on the phone one day and both lamenting that it's hard to be a lone warrior. We had distance and other barriers obstructing what we were trying to do. It was very challenging, and we would often talk about staying the course. It was the creation of the Myaamia Project that changed everything about our tools and our resources. We were able to effectively start reclaiming our space and had the people with the knowledge and skills to do that kind of research so that we could return good seed to that garden space.



Image 10: Daryl and Julie enjoying a moment during National Gathering week in Miami, Oklahoma 2022 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

Once our goals started to emerge, we looked at the Cultural Resources Office and what is now the Myaamia Center to figure out what our roles were going to be. They had to be complementary. When Daryl first came to Miami University and started the Myaamia Project, people in the tribal community looked at it as a “university thing” instead of as its intended tribal purpose. It was very natural to do that because we know there’s a huge wall between Native communities and academic institutions. We really wanted to break that wall down. The Cultural Resources Office largely handles things that are central to sovereignty for the tribal nation. That can include issues related to NAGPRA, or Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The Myaamia Center is the research and educational development piece: training teachers, developing curriculum, and building technologies so we can work together and advance what is needed. It’s become a right hand / left hand sort of operation, and no longer today do tribal members look at the Myaamia Center as just a university thing. The Myaamia Center is their center, working in their interest. We see it when they walk through the front door of the Myaamia Center on campus. For example, we just had a set of parents visiting campus for the first time, and they walked right in without any hesitation. They knew half the staff already. They were bringing their daughter, who is a senior in high school, also a product of our Eewansaapita Summer Youth Educational Experience who plans to go to school at Miami University, and it’s just their space. We didn’t want Miami youth to merely feel *welcome* at Miami University—we wanted them to feel like they *belonged* there. This is their homeland, this is their center, and they belong here. It’s taken twenty years to build that.

## 6.2 TRIBE-UNIVERSITY RELATIONSHIP

We had to consider the relationship we were in with Miami University, which we’re celebrating fifty years as of 2022. Initially, we didn’t know what the University wanted, and the University didn’t know what they wanted either regarding our community work. They largely left us alone between 2001 and 2013. We were not tied to any academic unit and reported to Student Affairs, now called the Division of Student Life. We stayed under the radar, and in that quiet space, we were able to figure out what kind of legs we were going to put under this effort. The hands-off approach by Miami University was very critical because we needed time to reflect, experiment, and find our purpose within this unique opportunity.

The funds the Miami Tribe committed to the Myaamia Project, and now the Myaamia Center, have a lot to do with sovereignty. It makes the partnership that we know today work. There’s reciprocity in shared costs and shared knowledge and shared resources. The university funded Daryl’s position, but the tribe was responsible for funding any other position that came along. So, the center’s staff over the years was mostly built by the tribe and for the tribe, and we all expected that would be the case.

The purpose for the tribe funding those positions is that the tribe gets to direct the Myaamia Center's work, and Miami University does not interfere in that process. To this day, the university does not direct the Center's growth and developmental path. With that said, we recognize that we're in a relationship, and as in any relationship there are needs on both sides. We're happy to share our work on campus and to do our best to meet the needs of Miami University so long as it doesn't infringe on what we do on the community side. We fully support and encourage the engagement of the university community in our work and community because that's how healthy relationships work, through mutual engagement.



Image 11: Chief Floyd Leonard and Miami University President Phillip Shriver share a moment during a gathering at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 2001 (Photo courtesy of Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

During the recent 50th anniversary celebration of the Myaamia Center in 2022, we had tribal leaders on campus for an entire week. Years ago, they might have come for a day or two, but they never would have come for an entire week and do all that they did, which included attending sports events where the Myaamia heritage logo was on the uniforms (it was even on ESPN), sitting in our meetings, consulting, and getting updates on projects. They attended art exhibits where tribal students had art displays, and there was language everywhere. This made us realize how important it is to

institutionalize our efforts. The effort of revitalization isn't just about language. It's about revitalizing a people, a culture, a knowledge system, and language is part of that. Being institutionalized, both in the tribe but also, in our case, in the university, is important because it is such a huge support system for us. Watching Miami University President Crawford and Miami Tribe of Oklahoma Chief Lankford speak emotionally during the 50th celebration event about their commitments and what this relationship means to them was pretty powerful. Many of the invited deans and vice-presidents sat up front, and the stands were filled with students, faculty, and staff from across campus.



Image 12: Chief Douglas Lankford and Miami University President Gregory Crawford engaged in a competitive mahkisina meehkintinki 'moccasin game' with students looking on at the Miami Tribe's Winter Gathering in Miami, Oklahoma 2017 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

It's rare for leadership to come together and be that invested in something and to feel for it in a way that emanates out to the people that they lead. Exhibiting that kind of leadership among different audiences (tribe and university) strengthens that relationship. It makes it very clear that this is important and that we're all invested and we're all here to help. It trickles down into the meetings that we have with other units on campus who we may be interested in engaging with around research

topics, technology development, or educational goals. The general community on campus is very supportive and wants to work with us across disciplines. Building that kind of synergy helps institutionalize the presence of the Miami Tribe on campus to a point where it's personal for people and they're able to share in an experience.

This is an effort in healing. Revitalization strengthens comfort with various aspects of our culture and language. When we have confidence and comfort in ourselves, we are more willing to share, even with those who are outside our community. When people finally get to a point where they have developed some self-esteem around their identity, they feel less challenged, and even some of the anger dissipates over the things that happened in our past. A community is more willing to share when they're more comfortable with their own selves. When we try to hold and protect everything and keep it away from everybody else who is not part of our community, we almost suffocate it. We're at a place here at Miami University and in our own development where we're comfortable sharing. We don't share everything, since there are certain aspects of our culture that should be left just for us and for certain circumstances. But sharing on campus allows us to express our cultural selves freely and allows our partners to share in that experience and demonstrate their commitment to the relationship.

It takes a while to get to a level of sharing that avoids misappropriation. We want our language to be used on campus and by those we share this relationship with. We want our youth to hear their language and see cultural expressions at events on campus. It allows them to see themselves as part of the larger society and observe that others value who they are. That is important. Our language is the language of the land no matter who is on that land and it has a right to be in that space. It's okay if university administrators stand up in the middle of a graduation and say something in Myaamia. We're proud of that because that is a representation of our relationship and the strengthening of both of us in the context of that relationship. And we push back against some who say, "Well, that's just misappropriation." No, it's not. They have our permission to do it, and we encourage them to do so.

## **7. LESSONS LEARNED: WHERE ARE WE NOW**

We've all heard the mantra "knowledge is power." We can't deny that that's true, but in the Miami Tribe's Cultural Resources Office we have completely shifted to a Myaamia way of thinking about that: "knowledge is responsibility." We encourage the people who work for us and who interact with community members who come home that knowledge is responsibility. When you are provided an opportunity to ingest and absorb and really understand that knowledge, and it becomes part of you, you do not get to use it as power against others who do not have it. You are now responsible for what you know, and how you share it, and how you perpetuate it. And the ways that you do that are with humility, with care, and with many other attributes that are embedded in the programs. When we talk about these things, we always try to include helping people as a key responsibility in our work.

As our understanding of this responsibility to the community developed, it quickly became important to figure out how to build a conduit between our historic homelands of Indiana and where the tribal nation sits today in NE Oklahoma and from any tribal property where we hold gatherings that afford community members the opportunity to come together. As students came from near and far for programs, they returned home with seeds from our shared community. They came and they learned, and they intermingled with community members and relatives they had never known before. They experienced new connections with Myaamia language and culture and left energized and more prepared to plant those seeds back home. We worked hard on taking advantage of these paths of reconnection. We didn't plan this outcome. It emerged from our focus to revitalize what we believed strengthened us. I guess this could be viewed as a strength-based strategy.



Image 13: Coming together as a community to engage in a traditional game of peekitahaminki 'Lacrosse' at Miami Tribe's National Gathering in Miami, Oklahoma 2023 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

More important than anything has been the healing that comes from returning to or having access to a garden that is producing again. Tribal members return home after going to tribal events where they've met so many people doing this work, and it begins to change the community landscape. The

very fact that with the return of language and dance and song and stories, and all the things that have come along with it, that exposure is both healing and restorative. It's like people have their own personal Eemamwiciki 'awakening' moment. They wake up and they start to realize that this identity is theirs as a Myaamia person. They begin to think about how they might reach out and grab a thread of that community web so they may hold tight.

### **7.1 PATIENCE – WAITING FOR A FUTURE GENERATION OF LEADERS TO EMERGE**

The Miami Tribe's leadership today is part of our generation, for the most part. At tribal gatherings, we can look out across the audience of over a hundred tribal members and at least half of them, if not more, are connected to this effort in some way. We always knew that once a majority of the voting population is participating in the language and cultural programs, that is when we're going to really start making change. They're going to begin electing leaders who understand the importance of this effort. That is a really important milestone.

Another thing we've come to realize is that the Myaamia Center and the Cultural Resources Office both had to create places where young professionals can take their degrees and their energies and their interests to do the good work of the Nation, growing professionally and seeing themselves as professionals. In the very early stages of this effort, when Daryl came to Miami University, there was no place to do this work. There was no field. There were no jobs. There was nothing. We had to create all the things that we didn't have so that people could bring their talents and their skills to this space, get paid a decent salary, and have benefits. That is an important part of capacity building, because it doesn't matter what we do if we don't create a platform for the next generation. That has been one of the dedicated goals of developing the Myaamia Center so that young Myaamia professionals had a space where they could come and be respected as professionals and do this work on that level.

Even when we have experiences where we feel connected to the work we do, and to the people around us, we have to accept the reality that all of it takes money, time, resources, and training. We can't push out job descriptions and find people to come and do this work. We must literally grow our applicants. Once we began staffing both the Myaamia Center and the Cultural Resources Office, we found that almost all our staff were products of our youth programs. Many of the nineteen individuals who currently work in the Myaamia Center were in our youth programs, and we've known some of them since they were ten years old. We raised our own gardeners, and we specifically trained them and gave them the space to be all they can be for this effort and for their community. We shaped them from the time they were small, reconnected them to the Myaamia knowledge system, let them mature and come into their own without expecting them to come and do this work. We had to create a space they could step into to strengthen their own identities. Then a small percent of them – and it is a small percent – will say, "You know, I want to do this as a career." Then, we create a supportive environment

that allows them to do that and where they can advance professionally and personally. We had to build that space—it didn't exist before, at least not for language and cultural development. The Cultural Resources Office and the Myaamia Center do that, and both require a tremendous amount of resources. All of that is the capacity-building part. It's not just the archive. It's the communications; it's the research; it's just all of it.

What we're doing is unprecedented for our tribal nation. Training in linguistics is important when archives are central to a revitalization effort, but other fields also need to build infrastructure to support such an effort. In developing our human resources for the Myaamia Center, several things became especially important. One was hiring a trained educator. George Ironstrack came along at the right time after finishing a graduate degree at Miami University. He had been in our youth program since he was in high school and had a steady presence in our efforts over the years. By 2008 we started to gain financial support from the Miami Tribe which allowed us to begin building out foundational positions within the center. George's addition to the team brought in somebody who was both a trained educator and already familiar with the language and cultural revitalization effort in the community. George started improving on the curriculum for our existing programs that Daryl had started, and we welcomed that trained support.

Another skill set became very useful to us. When the Myaamia Center started to develop, computer technology was advancing considerably. For a long time, even a well-trained individual couldn't necessarily manipulate technology for their own purpose, so being able to create and manage our own software was not an option early on. But about 2005, that started to change, and now, almost anybody can build simple web-based tech tools. We brought on one of our Myaamia Heritage students, Andrew Strack, who's especially skilled in video, photography, and some technology development. He started to help us build digital infrastructure within the Myaamia Project.

By 2008, there were just three employees: Daryl, George, and Andrew. During this period, we began to realize that to some degree we would be responsible for developing our own pedagogical approaches and tools. Understanding new technologies to meet our needs was also essential and has only increased with time. There are some off-the-shelf technologies we can use, but those most important to us have been developed by us and we maintain control over their development and long-term viability. Our development of the Indigenous Languages Digital Archive (ILDA) is a good example: we were so frustrated with how to handle all these archives that we literally created our own software platform to be able to do the work that we needed to do. We were quickly becoming overwhelmed by the amount of data we were producing through a growing base of research. A natural outcome was several small archives, but at that time we didn't have the resources to manage them. Today we have five primary archives that require at least a half-time position to manage each archive. These archives are critical as a source for educational materials and ongoing research. Two major archives include

our photographic archive with 80,000 images and our linguistic archive which currently holds 91,000 entries. New content is constantly being added to both archives and requests for information from them are made daily. Developing archives and managing the data is a huge undertaking that requires building the technological and management infrastructure.



Image 14: George Ironstrack and Myaamia Heritage Student Riley Theobald inspecting a field of Myaamia miincipi 'corn' growing near Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 2016 (Photo by Jeff Sabo, Miami University).

We have also benefited from a dedicated staff position focused on the university's relationship with the tribe. Bobbe Burke, who had been at Miami University since 1991, was the original liaison between the tribe and university when they created the Miami Heritage Program. She was funded by the university half-time, and once the Myaamia Project started we eventually took over her other half-time appointment so that she could be almost full-time in the Center. Her position would eventually merge into the Tribe Relations Office, which Kara Strass now directs. Kara's path is very typical. She earned a biology degree at Notre Dame, went out in the world working for a pharmaceutical company, then came to the realization, "This is not what I want to do with my life. I want to do something more meaningful." She wanted to make a career change and came to Oklahoma. Kara started talking to

Bobbie, who was aware of her own impending retirement, and got really intrigued about working in student affairs. Bobbie said, “Why don’t you talk to Daryl and me? Let’s see what we can do.” And we said, “Well, most of the people who work in the Center have master’s degrees, if you want to pursue something in student affairs.” So, we folded Kara into a graduate program. The tribe supported her graduate assistantship, and then for two years she trained under Bobbie and eventually became the new director. That was the first time that we had a tribal citizen in that position.



Image 15: Dedicated to improving student experiences at Miami University. Bobbe Burke and Kara Strass support students enrolled in the Myaamia Heritage Program at Miami University (Photo by Jonathan Fox, Myaamia Center).

Jared Nally, an Aanchitaakia Graduate Fellow, is another good example of someone who has benefited from the environment that’s been created at the Myaamia Center. He grew up in Kansas and didn’t go through the youth programs, and he always felt disconnected. He was accepted to Haskell Indian Nations University where he knew he would be in an intertribal space as a Myaamia person. This motivated him to attend the Myaamia National Gathering for the first time as a way to feel more connected with a Myaamia identity and with the community. Now he’s here at the Myaamia Center expanding his knowledge and sharing his craft and knowledge around weaving. The Myaamia

Center is a unique place where someone like Jared can begin connecting language, his knowledge of weaving technology, and the connections to ecology and botany. His research reconnects weaving traditions back to the land because the plants used for weaving come from Myaamia homelands. Daryl told him, “You know, fifteen years ago, I wouldn’t even believe these sorts of connections were possible to build, and here you are, actually doing it.”

One of the things that we realized in our work is that we’ve got younger people coming into our effort now. In terms of the actual effort of language revitalization, we’ve had lots of conversations about processes. It’s not a matter of going to the archive and learning how to say something in the language. It can be that simple, but usually it’s more complicated. Learning how to bring language from a two-hundred-year-old archive into our present environment, and deciding how it’s going to be used, reflects a natural process: speakers have always created ways to talk about new things as they’re happening, as their environment and lives changed. But language oppression and language loss have stopped that process for a long time. And now, trying to pick it back up again, there’s just a huge gap.

David Costa and Daryl have built a relationship over the years where they spend a fair amount of time looking into the archival materials, trying to develop an understanding of the concepts and everything about the grammar and the context for a particular term. For instance, we recently wrestled with coming up with a Myaamia word for our educational portal. We had to have conversations about what a “portal” is. We had to think about these new things with an informed cultural mind so that we could create language that might resemble the way our ancestors would have looked at it. It’s never going to be a hundred percent certain, but we want to create continuity through that process. Jarrid Baldwin is now our language teacher, and Hunter Lockwood is our new linguist in training. David and Daryl are themselves having to train Jarrid and Hunter in how to do that intellectual bridge building between past and present, because there’s nowhere else they’re going to be able to get that training. Cultural change is real and needs to be understood so that it doesn’t happen in a haphazard fashion. Recognizing foundational cultural concepts is absolutely necessary in that process. It’s not something taught in linguistics, or anthropology, or any other field. We’re learning in real time how to do it here in the Myaamia Center as a developing skill set. So, again, this is an example of a kind of capacity building.

One outcome of revitalization work is an acceptance for adaptation and change, which can be a very difficult topic for some. We want to be the best representation of our past, but we can’t *be* the past. And how that manifests itself in the present seems to be different from community to community. Accepting change, being willing to adapt, are skill sets that require understanding and some level of community consensus. We’ve heard it said again and again: things that refuse to change will eventually perish, and there’s probably some truth to that. If we are going to accept some level of change then the goal becomes to find those forces of change that help us or make us stronger. That’s

a reason to work with the younger generation. On the one hand, they'll bring a level of energy and acceptance for adaptation and change, but because they're young they can also be reckless and not totally aware of the possible repercussions of their decisions. Some of us who are central to this effort are beginning to enter elder status, and we see that's our role in the future.

Our role isn't to try to harness the younger generation or to control them, but to give them points of reflection, outcomes to think about. We want to give them opportunities in their lifetime to connect to a way of thinking about this work, but then also about their heritage so that they can make the best possible decisions as they begin to influence adaptation and change. That's the role we would have liked more of the previous generation of elders to have taken on for us when we were younger, but there were only a few able to do that. So, in many cases, not only are we creating a younger generation who are engaged in using the language, we're also now slowly creating an older generation that can support them in the context of this work. This means, in the future, that we'll be able to have the youth energy and the older experiences embedded in this work that can complement each other. That's really important and will take generations for that to emerge.

We have come so far in the last decade, if someone had said to us then, "When are you going to retire?" We would've said, "We don't know when we can do that," because we didn't know if a generation would be willing to step into the garden space ready to work. It's difficult in the beginning to have a longer view, or to know what the outcome might be, because early on no one was rising up to take on this enormous responsibility. It's like keeping balls in the air. You bounce one and catch another, and you have to just keep everything flowing and moving. And we didn't see anyone at the time that we would've been comfortable saying, "We think you can handle it." We knew the backstory, what we had to do to make the Cultural Resources Office and the Myaamia Center happen. And now we've come only a decade, and we realize, "We actually might get to retire!" There's someone who can do what we do – by the time we retire, there'll probably be more who are capable. And here's the best part: There are people who want our jobs. They want to do it. And that's all we need to know.

## **7.2 WORK WITH THE COMMUNITY (THEY DECIDE WHAT THEY WANT)**

One of the big lessons we've learned is to stop and pay attention to what you're doing, how it's impacting the community, and how they're responding to it. The vision for what you're doing should emerge out of the behaviors and response of the community, not from our own ideas of want and desire. That's what people who lead do. This is not the kind of work where you can control the outcome. We have some level of control in our home, or we can say, "Kids, this is the way it's going to be." But we can't do that in a community setting, and so things are different there.

It's also easy in an immersion environment to congregate around a small subset of the community that might have a similar affection for the language, or a willingness to sacrifice their time for such an

effort. That level of commitment is actually quite rare in the community. You may be able to congregate around that and create an opportunity in a space to move language learning up the proficiency scale rather quickly, but it leaves out the whole rest of the community. If you do that, then we always question whether the long-term viability will be there. We've seen that a few times with other tribes: they came in, they were intensive, and they really went at it. They did it for about twenty years, and then people just totally burned out or they didn't have the support needed to grow beyond the small group that started.



Image 15: An extended tribal family demonstrates their unity in support of language and the Chief's Challenge at National Gathering, Miami, Oklahoma 2018 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

In our programs, we went from zero to sixty, as it were, in a very short period of time. The effort grew in a lot of ways and much quicker than anybody would have expected. We can equate that growth to communal interest and a desire to come together as a community. For a while there was a disparity, in a really good way, between what the community wanted and what we could deliver. As time has gone on, we have developed a level of confidence around how this work further impacts the community, and we are more able to feed and respond to community interest. For example, when we started holding the winter gathering and storytelling event, the response in attendance was tremendous, and

very quickly it became community-driven. They wanted it, and we began to leave behind our earlier period of loss, silence, and dormancy. We cleared away a lot of the weeds, and then up come these living plants that are vibrant and healthy. Community members began to express their desire and interest. They began requesting things from us and their energy became a moving current pushing the work forward. You can look back through the years and see that constant uptick of offerings and gatherings hosted by the tribe, with expansion of budgets for program needs. It moved organically from the interest of the community. The push from the community affected us and we were required to listen and consider their wants. Daryl was managing the challenges and developing tools and human resources to reclaim the garden, which takes time. It's very much been a community empowered effort, and that is so important.

Participation in our programs was steady for many years, but in 2020, our numbers plummeted due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Our years of capacity building were challenged. When everything shut down in March 2020, we tried to respond by going remote with our summer programs that same summer, which start in June. It was too short of notice, and it was very, very difficult for us. But by the next year, in 2021, we had time to prepare and use all the resources in the Myaamia Center and the Cultural Resources Office to reposition ourselves for online youth programming. In 2021, all our youth and adult programs moved to an online format, and with the extra preparation our overall numbers came back up with a specific increase in adult participation through our Neehsapita program. The pandemic did impact age demographics and it will likely take a couple more years for programs to level off. One outcome was an increase in adults from the community diaspora who could participate for the first time on account of the online format. We'd built enough capacity over time that when something like a pandemic hit us, forcing us to shut down in-person programming, it didn't shut us down completely because we had built enough capacity to respond with online offerings. Maybe we were forced into online programming, and maybe we weren't ready for it, but we're very proud of the fact that we're now digitally ready to move forward as needed and keep our online programs as we move back into in-person programs.

### **7.3 BE REALISTIC AND DON'T WORRY ABOUT WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING. IT'S IMPORTANT TO STAND IN YOUR OWN TRUTH AND REALITY AND NOT WORRY ABOUT LARGER NARRATIVES**

It's unfortunate that in our vulnerable and emerging field of language revitalization, there is a wide range of opinions about how revitalization should be done. The messaging and the models most pointed to haven't changed much in the last 30+ years. What has changed is the realization that archives can be and are important resources for revitalization activities. However, the amount of capacity that needs to be built to make those archival materials accessible and useful is huge and

many communities do not have that infrastructure for a variety of reasons. It's easy to get lost in the jargon and messaging coming from all corners of Indian Country. At some point we had to largely ignore what was being said, often by individuals who don't do the work, and just stay focused on our community-based efforts and develop our skills to work with archival materials. The best advice we can give to others involved with these efforts is to let your work speak for itself and ignore the noise that surrounds you.

It is absolutely true that every community is unique, and we all have different challenges born from our shared American experience. For some communities, tribal government can be essential support while other communities have chosen to keep tribal politics at bay. Community culture and ideology can also significantly affect efforts. In our case, we had to influence community ideology over time and that happened through strategic education. Once the ideology shifted, we were able to do more and grow. In the beginning, the community did not want their language on the internet, but now they want their language everywhere. This is more an issue of confidence than anything else. When people are confident and feel secure, they are more willing to share.



Image 16: Myaamia Heritage Students examine a Myaamia basket from the collection at the National Museum of the American Indian, Suitland, Maryland 2015 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

The presence of L1 speakers also makes a significant difference. It's not a mystery how languages are passed on from one generation to another. Any infant born in a home where they are immersed in language and surrounded by a community of active speakers will grow up speaking that language. But when that natural system is disrupted, we are forced to do unnatural things in response. Having a speaker spend significant time with a baby reduces the need for trained teachers and language curriculum. But when those speakers are gone, we must find alternatives. The methods we are developing for bringing our community together to learn and reconnect have served us well, even in the absence of speakers and with the use of archival materials. No matter the situation, each community begins with whatever condition their garden is in, and from the fruits of their own labor they will succeed at something they can be proud of and will strengthen them.

One of the strengths of our work over the years is that we came from nothing. That has been a strength for a lot of communities working from documentation. There literally was nothing, no speakers. We didn't know how much language we had. We don't even know when our last speaker died. So, with this ground zero thinking, you can get somewhere. You're not going to get as far as other communities who have very different resources, but you will get somewhere. And it's a matter of finding your comfort zone, being comfortable with where you're at, and giving yourself the freedom to be yourself in your own shared space.

If you were to tell us 20 years ago that we would be doing some of the things we're able to do today, we would've said you're crazy. We don't know how we have been able to learn some of the details of our culture and language we thought were completely unattainable 20 years ago, but we're actually now starting to put enough of the pieces together to reconstruct and become very knowledgeable about many topics. It's important not to dampen the creative spirit that's in all of us and to let communities achieve at different levels. They're going to be able to achieve things they don't think are possible, and that's an important message. We always encourage others who approach us by saying, "Measure your space. Know your community, know your garden space, and start where you need to start. Don't assume that you have to start beyond that. Start in a way that's achievable. But more than anything, make it communal."

#### **7.4 WORKING ACROSS GENERATIONS**

Because we were a community that lost our speakers, it didn't give us a lot of opportunity to engage with elders. We had elders that were knowledgeable about their histories, especially their family histories. Back in the nineties we still had some elders that had some knowledge of harvesting plants, preparing foods, and maybe some of the more common games like bowl game and moccasin game. But outside of that there wasn't much opportunity, and some of the elders early on even said, "We're

not going to be able to speak this language. We might be able to say some things, but we're not going to speak this language." So, we really had to turn to the youth to create what was needed. And one of the things that we've come to realize is the youth are central to the force, the energy, of the revitalization effort. If there is an energy around this, it's coming from the youth, and you just can't expect elders to have that level of energy – the same desire to learn and desire to engage. There has to be a certain amount of life that gets breathed into this, and that is primarily done by the youth.

We've had a wonderful period from a very supportive Myaamia community of all ages. Very often a parent gets a notice in the newspaper or in the mail about the youth program. Sissy wants to go, so we send her. Then sissy comes home and she's carrying all kinds of seeds that she picked up. Next year, little brother says, "Well, I want to go." And then he goes. And then cousin says, "I want to go." Then grandma and grandpa and mom and dad, or aunts and uncles, show up with them at a following community event, whether it's a fall gathering or it's the camp out, and they say, "Yeah, she wanted to come. So, I brought her." That's what they say on the first visit: "I came because they (the child) wanted to come." Then on the second visit they say, "I'm coming, whether they want to come or not." Elders constantly express how happy they are to see the language and culture returning, because it had been so many years since they had felt it, probably since they were very small. You could see and feel their joy in seeing their children and grandchildren participating in whatever was happening, whether it was sitting at the very front of the room just wrapped in whatever story was being told or putting on their first little skirt and cans to learn to stomp. And we've had these family units participate in our programs many times. That's the energy of it once it's moving—it's communally driven. Our community wants it. They know what it is now. It's no longer the thing that Daryl and Julie do. It's what we all do, and the community wants it and expects it and it's the reason that they come home. They know what's waiting.

## 8. CLOSING REMARKS

As we have stressed many times, the garden metaphor really works, and we use it all the time. We use it with the other "r-words" too. So, the beginning is the reclamation period: reclaiming records, reclaiming the ability to speak *myaamiaataweenki* 'the Myaamia language'. And then revitalization: taking control of our garden. And then restoration: putting back into that space and replanting. The metaphor just works, and the whole team understands it, and they all use it because they understand it so well.

Over time, as you build out a community's identity and all that makes them who they are, there is an outward growth creating a greater platform for connectivity and for language use. That's the platform that has to be built. That's all part of capacity building from the inside out. We're experiencing the fruits of that early labor of seeing the possibility, tilling it, planting, and watching the garden slowly

emerge. Those seeds are germinating. Things are growing. More people are coming to the garden. It's what we're experiencing right now. And that's the affirmation, not only for us as individuals heavily invested in this, but for tribal leaders and for the community as a whole. That's what gives them a justification for spending tribal resources on an effort such as this: watching the healing process and the tribal nation coming together in support of what is being built.



Image 17: Supporting the Generations. The DeRome family came from near and far to gather together at National Gathering week, Miami, Oklahoma, 2023 (Photo by Karen Baldwin, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma).

In closing, it's important for us to admit we are still learning. Not just in terms of language and cultural content, but also still learning about how our community sees and understands this effort. Two years ago, during our national gathering that occurs at the end of June, we don't remember exactly what sparked it, but there was a bit of tension in the room as tribal leaders reported their activities. Chief Lankford stood up to the podium and said some very passionate and emotional things to all of us attending. One of the things he said was, "This is the only place you can get who you are. Your identity is here. That's what we do. This is the only place you can get it." And he got a standing ovation for that. And we thought, "Okay, that's what this is about. This is the heart of the energy source for

what drives this.” This is purely about rebuilding the tribe’s identity and everyone’s contribution to that. Watching for these indicators to emerge in real community contexts is key. As tribal educators and practitioners we need to stay in touch with our relatives in a way that informs us and helps us understand what moves them. This is another important skill we learned in the process of our work: learning how to listen and observe instead of speaking.

This is really a healing process for our community. We keep coming back to that time and time again. We’re really excited in our next phase to dive into the notions of community well-being and increase our stability and to better understand how language factors into that process. We don’t know enough right now to say more than that we believe it’s important, but in the next few years we’re going to have more to say about it. The vision lies within the people and it’s not always easy to see. This is the work of rebuilding the identity of the nation: language, culture, games, dance. It’s accomplished by bringing people together and reconnecting them to their unique Myaamia ways of knowing, speaking, and being. It’s all in there, and it’s the whole basket. We can’t just cherry pick one thing out and say we’re going to do this, such as revitalize a language. We have to wrap our arms as best we can around the whole basket. That perspective really solidified the work that we were doing, and how it was impacting the community as a whole. But if you’re going to grow something, you need motivation and energy. You have to tap into whatever energy comes from the community. It’s not about Daryl or Julie’s energy. It’s about the collective energy. It’s what they want, and we’re going to give it to them to the fullest extent that we can. And then we’ll let it grow from there.