

The Importance of Indigenous Language
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Hello! My name is Lisa Casarez, my Hidatsa name is Pink blossom, (Nugabugii Hihci) and I'm happy and honored to have joined the North Dakota Women's Network Board. I'm originally from California, but moved to North Dakota as a kid, and I am still here! I am a member of the Three Affiliated Tribes (Hidatsa) of the Fort Berthold Reservation and live in New Town with my daughter Phoebe.

There are many common themes that we all face as women, whatever our backgrounds. But there are other issues that Native women and women of color face apart from that as well. It is that disparity I hope to help highlight and join the Women's Network to bring to light for all women of North Dakota.

I am thrilled to share a bit about the work I do, concerning one of our Tribal languages of the Three Affiliated Tribes and native to North Dakota, which is Mandan (Nu'eta), Hidatsa and Arikara (Sahnish). I identify as Hidatsa and am most familiar with the Hidatsa language. Currently I am working on a grant from the Endangered Language Fund, matched by my Tribe, in order to sit and learn from fluent speakers in a private immersion setting in communities across Fort Berthold.

It doesn't seem to be a usual career path, even for people on the Reservation, and there are as many rewards as there are challenges. Learning my Hidatsa language stems from my desire to be connected to my people, my family, and to be able to be true to who I am as a Hidatsa woman. There are studies that have shown how much better Native people fare in all aspects of life when they are connected to their language and culture. It is a positive channel to address many social problems such as substance abuse, unemployment, low self-esteem, etc. that many Native people face.

I speak to my 4 year old daughter in as much Hidatsa as I can, even while I'm learning it. Doing so is a constant reminder of why I do what I do, for her and for the future of our language and our people. To see her learn and grow and to respond to me in the language, to have those moments of insight of how our language works and what words mean, it is a sense of fulfillment beyond words. It is because of this feeling, I encourage everyone no matter what your background, to get in touch with who you are and where your ancestry comes from. The sense of connection is something I think can (for the most part) help people.

Women are often credited with being culture bearers, who pass down language, arts, knowledge and information to the next generation. This is one way for me to give back to my community and pass on what I have been taught from my elders, teachers, and relatives.

I believe this is also connected to the quality of life for Native women, who experience the highest rates of rape and assault. Reclaiming our language and culture is the best thing we can do for ourselves and our children.

In saying that, I would always like to serve in some capacity of advocating for indigenous language and cultural revitalization and use it as a means of bridging the gap and create more understanding of who we are as Native women and Native people. One of my goals is to help make our language widely spoken by our people again.