

The Journey of ØELÁSTENOT

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ØELÁSTENOT TFE NE SNÁ ĆSE LÁ,E SEN ET WSÁNEĆ. ØELÁSTENOT is my traditional name and I am from WSÁNEĆ (Saanich) Territory located in the southern part of what is now known as Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. I have connections to the SENĆOFEN language through my mother’s territory in WSÁNEĆ and to the Hul’q’umi’num language through my father’s territory in Cowichan (Duncan, BC). Both are Coast Salish languages. SENĆOFEN and Hul’q’umi’num, along with most First Nations languages, were passed orally from generation to generation and hold our history, stories, and teachings. My love for both languages comes from each of my grandparents, my heroes who spoke SENĆOFEN and Hul’q’umi’num as their first languages. I want my mom, my children, and my family to speak our languages like our ancestors did. Currently, I am in my last semester of the W,SENĆOFEN IST Language Revitalization Program at the University of Victoria. This program is designed to help revitalize the SENĆOFEN language and develop teachers to build the SENĆOFEN immersion program in our ŁÁU,WELNEW Tribal School.

I began my own SENĆOFEN language learning journey in 1988, when my family moved from Cowichan to WSÁNEĆ territory. My maternal grandma would speak the language with us grandchildren, though she rarely used full sentences. She would often tell us “EWE” (meaning “no”) when we would run into the house telling her tall tales about what we thought were ghosts or mystical animals outside. She would say, “You’re such a SPEX,” which meant “You’re full of it.” Because my parents did not speak the language in our home, I only heard different words here and there growing up.

I know that deep down my mother and my late father wanted to learn their true languages, but, due to the legacy of residential and Catholic day schools, they could not bring themselves to learn their languages. Before my father went in for heart surgery and passed away in 2018, he talked about the dreams he was having about his Elders visiting him and speaking Hul’q’umi’num to him. His goal was to sit with his cousin and learn again. The direction that was given to him was to teach the young people the important ways of life he was taught. My father grew up with his great-grandparents who only spoke Hul’q’umi’num. Until the age of four, Hul’q’umi’num was his first language. Years later, I could see the frustration he felt as an adult watching some of his cousins speak the language and knowing that his first language was beaten out of him when he was at the Catholic day school.

My mother grew up hearing the SENĆOFEN language but, because of my great-grandfather and late grandmother’s experiences while attending the residential school, she would not teach her children the SENĆOFEN language. My mother and her ten siblings were not taught because my grandma did not want them to experience any beatings for speaking SENĆOFEN. I want to be a part of giving them healing by returning to our teachings, traditions, and worldview as WSÁNEĆ people and by speaking SENĆOFEN. My family has suffered silently for so long, feeling ashamed for speaking the language that connects us to every part of who we are as WILNEW (Indigenous) people.

I attended the ŁÁU,WELNEW Tribal School from 1988 to 1993, where I continued to be exposed to the language. The Elders in our community worked very hard to apply for funding to build a school of our own, where our SENĆOFEN language, history, and culture could be revitalized. This school grew to have Elders from our communities coming in and teaching the children the SENĆOFEN language and our ways of life. When I started attending the ŁÁU,WELNEW Tribal School, there were just one or two language teachers for the whole school. I was able to learn the basic vocabulary and sounds of the

alphabet, but there was not yet an immersion program implemented at that time.

When I was a teenager, I felt connected to our SENĆOFEN language through my elders. When I was surrounded by them physically to learn the language, I could fully engage in our culture and traditions. I would listen to conversations between my paternal grandparents, who were fluent Hul'q'umi'num speakers. I always felt a stronger connection between them when they spoke to one another in the language about family connections, teachings, and the future. When they would try to translate, I knew that what did not make sense in English would mean more in Hul'q'umi'num. Oftentimes, they would talk back and forth in Hul'q'umi'num to discuss ways to explain the teachings or family connections in English. My paternal grandfather always spoke about the younger generation losing the way of life because of the loss of the language. He would say, "They [young people] are always in a rush and think they know it all!" I knew he was speaking indirectly at us grandchildren, including my siblings, my cousins, and me. He observed the overall respect for each other and our cultural practices diminishing in the community and in our traditional longhouses, which are places for our cultural practices, a place to heal and teach about the traditional ways of life. My grandfather's wish was to have someone to pass down the language to who could take over speaking at our traditional gatherings.

Later in her life, my maternal grandmother became a language teacher/mentor to members of the WSÁNEĆ community. She found the strength to push past her fear for the young people of being hurt or punished for speaking the language and was asked to join the language revitalization group that taught language classes at the new ŁÁU,WELNEW Tribal School. Her everyday life was living and breathing culture and tradition—longhouse, slahal (a traditional guessing game played with bones in which each team sings songs to make the game more exciting) tournaments, and various ceremonies year round. I was always fascinated by her vast knowledge of our cultural way of life. It was always fascinating for me to watch her prepare and guide my aunts, uncles, and older cousins when our communities were getting ready to gather for ceremonies or slahal tournaments.

When I was in my early twenties, I did not feel ready to decide what career path I wanted to take. I thought I would find the perfect time to go back to school, slow down, and learn our language. Twice, I made attempts to go back to school, but I struggled to find a program close to home that worked with my home life. Ten years after these attempts to return to school, followed by the loss of my grandparents and recent loss of my father, my path has led me back to my roots, to where I began my SENĆOFEN journey when I was eight years old.

Now, my dream is to graduate from the W,SENĆOFEN IST program, continue on to the Bachelors of Education in Indigenous Language Revitalization program at the University of Victoria, and begin to teach my mom, siblings, and family SENĆOFEN. The time I have spent in the W,SENĆOFEN IST program—learning each word of SENĆOFEN, being out on the lands of our WSÁNEĆ people, and listening to creation stories—has changed my worldview drastically. This is what I want for my family. I want each of them to take back their power through the language. I want to give the light of life and healing to our whole family through SENĆOFEN. I feel that each year the SENĆOFEN programs will grow and, as more of the children and youth strive for cultural connection, we will see a thriving SENĆOFEN speaking WSÁNEĆ community. We will unite as one and speak our language once again.