

-Finding a voice

BY KIMBERLEY FEHR | PHOTOS CLAUDETTE CARRACEDO

On the brink of extinction, the Squamish language survives on the tenacity of the nation's youth

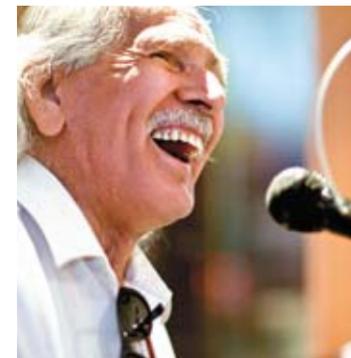


"Our Kulture," a duet by local rapper Discreet Da Chosen 1 and the Sto:lo band Ostwelve, blares in the background as 27-year-old Orene Askew gets everything in order behind the scenes, preparing to go live for her weekly show *Sne'waylh* on Vancouver's Co-op Radio.

Unlike the song, Askew doesn't belt out her love for her Squamish culture; she talks it out with activists like today's guest, 83-year-old Haida elder Bill Lightbown; with artists like Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, and athletes like 2007 World Champion hoop dancer Dallas Arcand.

The cornerstone of the show is 10 to 15 minutes of basic Squamish language lessons – *sne'waylh* means "our teachings" in Squamish. The show also covers everything from the Alberta tar sands and mining in First Nations territory to Squamish band elections and the importance of cultural traditions like storytelling.

"I'm having the time of my life," she says when the show is over, her brown eyes aglow. "I have so much knowledge about my culture, I feel I need to share it, I need to educate people about it."



Opposite: Orene Askew. Above: Askew interviews guests on her Squamish-language Co-op Radio program, Tuesdays 1-2 p.m., 102.7 FM.

Askew, who is half Squamish and half African American, grew up on the Mission Reserve in North Vancouver, near Lonsdale. She speaks Squamish, sort of, but she's not fluent – and she's not alone. Only 10 fluent Squamish language speakers remain out of nearly 4,000 band members, and most are over 65 years old. The language is dying.

"Nearly extinct," is the term used by the May 2010 *Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages*, prepared by the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council. The report found that less than five per cent of First Nations people in B.C. are fluent in their own language – an after-effect of more than a century of residential schools, where First Nations children as young as five were taken from their families, forced to speak English and often subjected to physical and sexual abuse.

Askew tells the story of a good friend of her grandmother's. "She spoke Squamish fluently. That's all they spoke at home. When she was taken away to the residential school, she had no idea what was going on. She doesn't speak it anymore, she doesn't know it at all – not one word. She was 12 then; now she's 88. She said, 'They stripped everything from me.' I think stories like that need to be told."

While many First Nations languages in B.C. are teetering on the brink of oblivion, the good news is that 40 per cent of the semi-fluent speakers are under the age of 25. And organizations like Vancouver Foundation are acknowledging the need to preserve First Nations language and culture.

In 2009, Vancouver Foundation donors gave a total of \$325,000 to programs that help B.C. First Nations either preserve their language, territory and culture, or overcome economic issues in their communities. *Sne'waylh* received \$15,000, which helps cover wages for Askew, who landed the part-time job just after graduating from BCIT's radio broadcasting program. She also works at a liquor store, DJs weddings and plays lacrosse for the North Shore Indians.

Being the only native person out of 80 people in the BCIT program, she says she was very quiet in her first year. She says she felt like she didn't deserve to be there, so she didn't say much. One of her instructors called her on it. "She said to me, 'What are you doing here? What is your purpose? I know you are good enough to do this; I just don't know what is wrong with you?'"

It brought Askew to tears, but it also got her out of her shell. She got an internship at *The Beat 94.5 FM*, and worked so hard in the second year of the program that she graduated with an 87 per cent average.

"I took all that negativity and said 'I've got to prove these people wrong,'" says Askew. "Second year I felt like my opinion was important – and you couldn't get me to shut up." **VF**

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