

Algonquian Language Revitalization Project brings instruction, resources to Stony Brook University

By Liza N. Burby Newsday November 10, 2023



Lizbeth González at Stony Brook University last month. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

When he was a younger man, Unkechaug Nation Chief Harry Wallace had a vision.

Wallace said he was told of three sacred bundles — one of which was the talking sticks, a tool of Indigenous democracy that allowed people to take turns speaking. He interpreted this as a message to preserve his community’s language, which had not been spoken for generations, in part due to governmental repression that forced Native Americans to forgo many of their traditions.

“That meant that our language was not lost. It simply went into a safe place,” said Wallace. “And it was my mission, my vision, to uncover that safe place and provide a secure place where it could be relearned in a safe, loving way.”



Unkechaug Nation Chief Harry Wallace with a copy of a Native American word list made by Thomas Jefferson. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara

Today, Wallace's vision — along with that of many other members of the Unkechaug, Shinnecock and Montaukett nations on Long Island — has been realized through the Algonquian Language Revitalization Project.

The project, the result of more than a decade's worth of collaboration, has produced a language class, a dictionary and a Native American resource library based at Stony Brook University.

According to program coordinator Lizbeth González, the project is part of a national movement to reclaim Native American languages. In some cases, she said, researchers have relied on elders who can speak the languages fluently. But on Long Island, organizers have had to work meticulously, reaching back nearly 400 years to recreate the languages once spoken here.

“There were no teaching materials until the ALRP started to teach,” said González.

“There were no classes until we offered them. There was no curriculum until we created one.”

A family of languages

The Algonquian language is the largest Indigenous language family group, north of Mexico, to be spoken in North America. It was spoken from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, from the northwest down to North Carolina.

But with the opening of Native American boarding schools in the United States and Canada, which operated from 1819 to 1969, children were forcibly removed from their homes and stripped of their languages, spirituality and way of dress. Wallace, who grew up in Little Neck, said he had family members who died in one of them.

“There were kids who ran away and families who hid their children to protect them from government intervention all throughout North America,” said Wallace, a practicing attorney who owns and runs a smoke shop on the Poospatuck Reservation, home of the state-recognized Unkechaug tribe, in Mastic.

Even as the U.S. government was working to suppress Native American languages, there were others working to preserve them. It was these sources that Wallace said he used during his initial research. Among them were “The Eliot Indian Bible” from 1661; an 1830 vocabulary by Josiah Cotton; and a 1903 dictionary created by James Hammond Trumbull, all in the Natick language of Massachusetts, which is an Algonquian dialect. Wallace said he also consulted “A Key Into the Language of America,” written by Roger Williams in 1643 about the Rhode Island Narragansett language. Another source was a 202-word list Thomas Jefferson wrote during a visit to the Poospatuck Reservation on Long Island in 1791, during which he interviewed two Unkechaug female elders, with a young woman serving as an interpreter.

Dialects on Long Island

While Wallace and others were compiling the Unkechaug vocabulary, Tina Tarrant and her late mother, Elizabeth “Chee Chee” Thunderbird Haile — who González said was considered a Shinnecock culture bearer and a driving force in the project — worked on the Shinnecock dialect. Leighton Delgado, 70, who is of Montaukett descent, studied the Mohegan dialect, which was spoken by members of the Montaukett Nation.



The late Elizabeth “Chee Chee” Thunderbird Haile contributed to the project. Credit: Randee Daddona

The three dialects, which Delgado said are considered a continuum, are: the R-dialect spoken by the Unkechaug, the N-dialect spoken by the Shinnecock and the Y-dialect spoken by the Montaukett.

“These dialect designations indicate letter/sound changes in words and phrases,” said Delgado, a retired electronic engineer who recently moved from Amityville to upstate Kingston. For example, he said, the phrase “it is good” can be expressed three different ways depending on the tribal group: in Unkechaug, the word is *wurikun* (pronounced

wu-REE-gun), in Shinnecock it is *wunikun* (pronounced wu-NEE-gun), and in Montaukett, it is *wuyikun* (pronounced WEE-gun).

As a result, Delgado said interpreting the phonetic spellings used in old documents was a challenge. To establish spelling consistency, the project members adopted an alphabet system developed by Mohegan linguist Stephanie Fielding, based on four diaries written by her ancestor Fidelia Fielding.

“Stephanie’s dictionary was the reference material that helped us to really be able to reclaim the Long Island languages,” Delgado said.

Using the dictionary, members of the project — including several students in Stony Brook University’s linguistics department — created the Unkechaug Language Glossary, which has two volumes: Unkechaug-to-English and English-to-Unkechaug. The glossary now has more than 1,500 words, each with several conjugations.

Saying 'good morning'

The Algonquian dialects spoken on Long Island are based on phrases that reflect concepts, said Wallace.

“The word *wiqáhsun* in the dictionary would be ‘good morning.’ But what it really reflects is a way of life that ‘I see you in the light,’ ” he said. “Our language is considered sacred, so when we are reflecting those sacred thoughts, when you translate *aquay*, the dictionary would say ‘hello,’ but what it really reflects is that ‘I acknowledge you.’ The word for thank you, *táput ni*, translates to ‘it is enough.’”

The dialects also teach a different perspective, said González, a visiting scholar at Stony Brook and state appellate court judge. “For example, there is no gender in the language. There is no he or she. There is no hierarchy. The language reflects a horizontal society where everyone is equal. So the more we study it, the more

understanding we receive as to who we are and what we are called to do, and who we are called to be.”

González said that as a person whose language has been impacted by colonization — her ancestors from Puerto Rico spoke Taíno — the “ability to work on a language project that awakens and reclaims the languages that were spoken here for centuries was, and continues to be, an extraordinary opportunity to redress a wrong.”

Wallace was not the only one with a vision.

Haile, the Shinnecock educator, had a dream to ensure Native American children learned their language. So in 2009, a group including her, Wallace and González visited Yale University linguist Claire Bower, who is known for her work with Australian Indigenous languages. Bower said she advised them on language revitalization and helped them apply for a grant and find source materials.

In 2014, Bower connected Wallace and González with Conor Quinn, the critical and community languages coordinator in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Southern Maine. It was Quinn who developed the Stony Brook University curriculum.

The next step was getting help from Stony Brook. González, a 1974 graduate, and Wallace approached officials in the Department of Linguistics in 2014 about a possible Algonquian language class offered to both Native American residents and Stony Brook students.

500 students so far

Their first class was held in January 2017. Since then, more than 500 students have taken the course, with many increasingly from out of state because the classes are offered online.

The classes, which cover all the Eastern Long Island dialects, are taught by co-facilitators from the Native American communities. They use the writing system developed by Fielding, who was one of the first teachers. Participants are a mix of Stony Brook undergraduate and graduate students and community members, including grandparents who Quinn said are teaching the language to their grandchildren, as well as new parents.

Among them is Veronica Treadwell, 58, a licensed social worker who lives on the Poospatuck Reservation. Treadwell said she started the class this summer and has been teaching her grandson, who is 2, vocabulary as she learns it.

“We’ve lost so many of our elders and the new generation, we are forgetting who we are and where we come from,” she said. “When we think of the language, it’s not just words. It explains our culture. It explains why we do some of the things we do and how it can continue to connect us to our elders who have passed.”

Marilyn Morrison, chief of the Roanoke-Hatteras Indians of Dare County, North Carolina, is one of the new students who have taken the course online.

Morrison, 73, who also started taking the class this summer, is leading the effort for official state tribal recognition in North Carolina and believes the class is important in that effort.

“As we say the words in class, there’s a certain rhythm that really touches my heart. And I feel that’s some type of connection to my ancestors,” Morrison said.

As more students become proficient, González hopes they will start to teach others.

“We encourage our students to teach what you know at home, around the dinner table, at work, at any meeting or ceremony where you are called to introduce yourself, to use the language everywhere you go,” she said. “That is how you reclaim a language.”

In addition to the glossary and the language course, a small library of materials on East Coast Native American languages and cultures opened in April after a decadelong initiative run by Stony Brook's linguistics department. Housed in a newly renovated room on the ground floor of the university's Social & Behavioral Sciences Building, it includes Wallace's personal library of books, tapes, handwritten notes and articles. He also contributed artwork from Lydia and Christopher Chavez and Russell Peters, all Native American artists, and a copy of Jefferson's 202-word list (the original is at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia).

Rare books

In addition, the project received a donation of more than 170 boxes of books from the Huntington Free Library in the Bronx, including rare collections of Native American languages and significant documents.

To date, half of the books have been cataloged, shelved and preserved through the painstaking work of Stony Brook students. Stony Brook linguistics professor Lori Repetti, who was department chair when the work began, said it included finding the books' Library of Congress call numbers, creating time-consuming metadata and identifying the books that needed restoration.



Linguistics professor Lori Repetti has supported the resource library at Stony Brook University since the beginning. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara

“Many of the books also needed to be specially handled and then specially treated; they had red rot or mold,” she said. “We bought special supplies to be able to treat the books. The ones that we were successful in treating are now put out here on display.”

There are now nearly 1,500 books and journals in the collection, including 28 Native dictionaries.

Repetti said the department has been committed through three different chairs to maintaining the library and working with the community on the language courses. “The Linguistics Department and Stony Brook University are here to support the local Indigenous communities. That’s a commitment that we made many years ago,” she said.

That commitment includes financial funding for the project, which is also supported through grants.

Though much has been achieved, González said the project remains a work in progress: “My hope is that (the project will) continue to develop language leaders and materials so the language will be used and expanded when we are far gone. . . . The fact that we are intergenerational gives us hope.”

She added, “This is a way to make things right.”

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that Harry Wallace had a vision of three sacred bundles.

Learn more

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the Algonquian Language Revitalization Project classes have been taught online. Classes are held Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Wednesdays from 7 to 8 p.m. There is a \$50 registration fee for nonmatriculated Stony Brook University students.

To register for the course, Structure of an Uncommonly Taught Language, LAN 111 (fall) and LAN 112 (spring), contact Stony Brook University’s Admissions office at 631-632-6868 or email enroll@stonybrook.edu for a registration form.

The project’s catalog is available to the public [here](#).

New York courts explore alternative hours to enhance access and reduce backlogs

By Robert Abruzzese Brooklyn Daily Eagle November 9, 2023