

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hello, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Ron Corn Jr, educator and one of the handful of native speakers of Menominee. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Ron Corn Jr.**

Yeah, no problem.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. So it'd be great if you could just give us a really brief overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at what you're currently working on and doing.

**Ron Corn Jr.**

All right, that'll be interesting. So, in an educational sense, I have little to talk about in the way of post-secondary education. I completed my high school here on the reservation and immediately started to find my way through the language with the elders that were here. As the elders started to leave, you know, little by little, then I started to seek other routes through linguistic avenues and, and stuff like that. And I don't know exactly how to classify my language journey, but I would say it was probably more of a naturalistic approach as far as not having any real access to meaningful grammar, charts, or even to be conscious of grammar. So I learned as much as I could, just from asking, *how do you say this? Or how do you say that?* and then eventually hanging out with the elders and their conversations and adding to my vocabulary and ability. Much later, finally, starting to understand the basics of grammar, and eventually, probably, what are the basics of linguistics, and then being able to apply it to what I had in the way of vocabulary and speech.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And so I want to focus on the positive because there's so much incredible work going on. But can you just first explain to us how we got to this point where there's so few native speakers of the language, and why it's vitally important that we work to revitalize it?

**Ron Corn Jr.**

Yeah, sure. You know, I don't know how far to go into this. But there was obviously a pretty pointed attempt to discourage native language use and the different language communities and never really understanding the full depth of that myself being from the sort of the generation that I'm born in. Probably one of the most impactful things that I came across in my research was a clip out of the third annual report to the Wisconsin State Historical Society. In the introduction, and as you're reading through it, you can, you can come across a passage in there that says, *interesting glimpses are also given to the red man who's curious and mythic ways so far as we can snatch its fragments from the rapidly receding past should be gathered with pious care, for that strange race and will shortly forever disappear from our borders, and future generations will only know of them what history preserves.* You know, things like that coupled with the sort of more popular or more known stuff about the American Indian boarding school era, *kill the Indian save the man* type mentality. And I'm so it's so it was a very intentional effort to take languages

and and lifeways from our ancestors. So, you know, without getting too far into that, the obvious deterioration of the language you share on the reservation, even being viewed by many as a useless thing to know or learn. But as we get into the sort of more difficult times here in the more modern day, where we're dealing with poverty, systemic poverty, and lack of opportunity, and you know, we've got our certain issues, we're starting to figure out that there's something to this language or something when we learn our languages, that gives us some power back. And as we start to gain that power back, we're seeing the value, the non-monetary value of the language, and what it has in a promise for the people.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, I've heard others say language is medicine, and I think that similar sentiment kind of goes along with what you're saying. So now let's focus on the good. What is your strategy to approaching language revitalization from a more kind of organizational and high up level, and then how does that translate into specific programs?

### **Ron Corn Jr.**

Well, for me right at this moment, so probably is important to talk a little bit about how we got to this point. So currently, a friend of mine and a few, few others are kind of locked in arms starting a nonprofit so we can further determine the direction of the revitalization effort. And it comes by way of, I started as a language teacher in the high school here on the reservation, I believe in 2004, maybe, I was hired. And I did eight or nine years there. Coming out of that, sort of evolved into the college level stuff I did a few semesters at UWGB, I taught a few semesters at CMN here on the reservation, then sort of did a short stint of contracting, consulting kind of stuff with middle school and stuff like that. So I got a really good idea of how the language is applied in all these different levels and the current systems that are here, which all sort of prepared me uniquely for the language immersion endeavor that the tribe has recently started on. So in 2015, I was hired by the Menominee Indian tribe to start up an immersion program, a language immersion program, which focused on sort of building the capacity to serve such a movement. So we started out by hiring trainees, whose job it was to learn the language to then go on and work in some of these immersion spaces. And what we ended up doing was we took 10 trainees, we put them through a 14 month curriculum that I had designed. And a few of those folks moved on into a daycare immersion setting where they were taking in children from birth, I think 10 months was the oldest one. And so since then, we've been taking in new streams of trainees and then shifting the ones over who completed successfully into the daycare programming, to the point now where we've got three operating daycare rooms, and are presenting to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for a charter immersion school endeavor here with our local school district. So that's sort of where the work with the tribe had sort of reached its pinnacle for me. We had one of our earlier language trainees come back with a linguistics degree, and has sort of, along with the director of the language and culture commission department, has sort of assumed that work, where I have shifted into this nonprofit venture. And for me, the big benefit or the grand scheme behind what we're doing here, is to really try to catch a lot more community folks where it isn't maybe so academically oriented. So that, without being particular about how we do it in the classroom, what the teaching styles and methods are, that's how we get to where we're at here.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, I've read some incredible articles and seen so many incredible things about it. And you know, you didn't want to talk necessarily about all the specifics in the classroom. But it looks like to be such a fun and welcoming place. And so I imagine that's an incredible thing that's going on, and I'll leave a couple links in the transcript if people want to learn more. You've also been in the news a lot about the approach that you take with language with your own family. So can you kind of talk about how you're raising your children in regards to language? Is that 100% immersion in your household? Is it super structured? What does that look like?

**Ron Corn Jr.**

Yeah, so for that it is a really interesting dynamic. So I think probably what people would know most is about the video that was released in partnership with the DPI series that was put out the ways.org. But to really get a fuller picture. You know, it was tough. It was tough to figure this out. So I've got two daughters. My two oldest daughters, I guess I'll say I have four daughters. So my two oldest daughters. When they were first born, I had done something very similar for them in the way of staying in the language, when specifically speaking with them. They grew to know many, you know, many words, and they could understand language pretty easily. However, at about, you know, when one was two and the other was three at the local daycare and I, you know, I don't think it's to any fault of the daycare, but just being put into a dominant language system where, where the dominant language wasn't what you were hearing at home, they sort of really rebelled from, from the Menominee, and begin to correct me at home, like tell me that, you know, that wasn't how to say it. And this is how to say it and stuff. And so it was, it was a little perplexing for me. And I really kind of even felt bad for them that maybe they felt that way. And I don't know how it happened. But in my mind, I was thinking maybe they're using these words at school and being told no, that that's not how to say it. And they're supposed to say, like this or something. But anyway, that sort of was a gut check. And I didn't know how to manage it, I was young myself, I'm, you know, I'm still relatively young. But back then, you know, I didn't know how to respond to it. So I actually let off a little bit. So my third and fourth born children, I didn't quite do so much of that with them. Then again, the documentary there focuses on the last of my children, the youngest. And so I said, you know, now I know a little bit more about how things work and stuff. And this is something that we want to do. So we pushed really hard with her. And she was actually really a part of the catalyst for how my own speaking took more advancement, leaps, because I would take her with me to elders homes, and they would be excited to interact with her because she could understand them. So then, in the way of that, I was learning small little mechanical words in the language that I hadn't learned. So that was really good. So there again, without a speaking community, though, I realized the limitations of what I could deliver. So she got, again, to the point where she could use a bunch of words, she understands a ton of language, but never really made the transition into a fully functional fluency. So if that about sums up my house, I have five of my own children, who can all understand a ton of words, and a couple of them can use a bunch of them. But it isn't all up fluency. Now I have a grandson, who is also in the immersion room, but then he also lives under my roof. So for him, he's two and a half years old, and I've never used direct English with him.

And he's also getting the immersion from the school. So that should be a game changer for us at home.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, and like you mentioned, that input is so important. And of course, you can provide it and the daycare can. But when they're in the community, if they don't necessarily have that constant flow of language it is really difficult to have that ability to be a producer of the language, not just someone who's able to receptively understand it. So the wider non-Menominee speaking or affiliated community may see this as a really important topic, but they aren't necessarily sure what they can do to help or be allies. So is there any way that the outside community can support whether it's financially or just like contributing to an environment where all languages are supported? Is it more like self educating about the history of language oppression and erasure to make sure they're not contributing to it, or any thoughts there?

**Ron Corn Jr.**

Yeah. Well, in general, that's probably a main focus of this nonprofit work is to create more access to the language. So in the inception of it, we sort of really rolled this out about a year ago. In an idea phase, in response to the pandemic, we created a series of videos, language basics, so to speak. And we promoted it online. And we continue to run two nights a week Zoom sessions with the folks who really took that up. And they tend to be Menominee and Menominee descendant folks that live all around the United States who attend, you know, religiously, and these guys are building a speaking community that isn't even here on the reservation. And then we're sort of trying to cast a more local net and get a lot of new language warriors some really vital information so that they can also make that transition from sort of clunky kind of knowing a lot of words, but not really knowing how to sew them together. And we want Menomini yoU here, the nonprofit, to be the catalyst that can change out and put things together and help help the speaking community grow. And as far as folks who may be near but don't feel directly associated, it never hurts to learn some of somebody else's language. And it certainly helps to support those communities in any way that you see fit. And I think you know, there's a sort of thing going on where it's like *you're in America, speak English*, you know, and so, if we can at all help that old attitude sail away that would be good. So if you feel receptive to languages that have historically been on this land, certainly educate the folks around you about how important these are for the people in these different communities.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so in celebration of that multilingualism, we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to seek more than one language. So can you give me one reason you can answer in English, in Menominee, a mix of both, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

**Ron Corn Jr.**

Oh, yeah. [Reply in Menominee]

So, I guess I'll say a little bit of stuff like that. But, you know, I don't know if anyone listening here has seen some of the other stuff. So I don't want to be too redundant. But I really do believe that language is the key to everything. And I probably believe that because it was true for me. And so when we actually, when we start communicating in our language, that's going to be awesome. But once our language starts to teach us back the lessons that our ancestors knew, that's where that power, that medicine, starts coming back. And in the deep realizations of the connections of humanity that are embedded in the language, that you can teach in a class on a board and stuff like that. But when you actually come to these realizations, in your own time, you decode those grand messages that are embedded in your language. That is very hard to deny the power in that. So I guess I would leave you with those words.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well, thank you so much. So well said. You have so much knowledge that you shared with us. And I just hope you have a great rest of your day because this was really valuable and I know everybody else will have learned a lot from what you had to share.

**Ron Corn Jr.**

Allright. Wāēwāēnen