

(Written Testimony for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on S.575, a bill to amend the Native American Languages Act to provide support of Native American language survival schools and for other purposes.)

Maruawe Ka Nanamənū! Hello to you, my friends and relations! Thank you for inviting the Comanches here. We support bill S.575 to amend the Native American Language Act because it will affect all tribal languages for the better.

My name is Geneva Woomavoyah Navarro from the Comanche Nation. I am 77 years old. Presently I am teaching the Comanche Language at the new Comanche Nation College in Lawton, Oklahoma. It opened in the Fall of 2002. Along with college courses, the Comanche Language was offered. I mainly teach the reading and writing of the language, as we have developed an alphabet of sounds for that purpose.

We are trying all types of teaching methods for the purpose of preserving the language. We also taught the language in full immersion programs, master apprentice programs, story and history telling, and the singing of songs that we can gather and remember, thank goodness! We are beginning to attract the interest of more younger people.

I have also taught full immersion in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico, since 1993. I have now moved back to Oklahoma to help save our language. I have taken full interest in all community language activities. I have belonged to the Comanche Language and Cultural Preservation Committee since it began in 1993, the Indigenous Language Institution, Oklahoma Native Language Association, and am on the board for the Native Language Elders Advisory Committee of Oklahoma.

The Comanches only have a few of us elders that speak our language. We are desperately trying to save, teach, and preserve our language and culture, because very few of our people under age 60 speak or understand. Even less people below the age of 50 speak the language. The majority of our young people do not speak or understand, and absolutely none of our youngest children know our language.

An updated survey taken this year, by a Native American research historian of the Oklahoma Historical Society, found that Oklahoma's thirty-nine tribes are in the most critical stage of language loss in history. This generation is experiencing an unprecedented loss of fluent tribal language speakers. To date eight Oklahoma tribes have no fluent language speakers left in their tribal membership. The criteria for language loss is: being an individual who can say a full spontaneous prayer or speak sentences without forgetting how to say certain words. The tribes with that criteria are: Delaware Tribe; Fort Sill Apache Tribe; the Kaw Nation; Miami Nation; Modoc Tribe; the Ottawa Tribe; Peoria Tribe of Oklahoma; and the Seneca-Cayuga Tribe of Oklahoma. Twelve additional Tribes are one generation away from language extinction: the Apache Tribe; Citizen Potawatomi Nation; Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma; Osage Tribe; Otoe-Missouri Tribe; Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma; Quapaw Nation; Sac and Fox Nation; Wichita and Affiliated Tribes; and the Wyandotte Nation.

The efforts by the Oklahoma Tribes will not produce another fluent speaker. The exception is the Cherokee and their tribal pre-school total immersion language program. These efforts will only produce individuals who will understand much of the language, be able to sing tribal hymns and ceremonial songs, say functional words to elders who are fluent language speakers, and recite prepared prayers.

Our language is so important because it is unique and lets us know who we are. Without our language we would be lost. It's important to speak it at home again. We have little or no support for teaching the language, both financially and in the greater society.

The generation of my parent's age had the language literally beaten out of them. So you can understand why they let their children only speak English. Luckily, those of us that had grandparents living learned from them, or those that were reared by their grandparents learned the language as I did. I had to stay with my grandparents as their interpreter because all their children were away at boarding school or working for a living. Being the eldest grandchild I had to stay with my grandparents because they could not, and would not, speak English. I was about seven years of age (after the first grade). I remember going to the BIA office to assist my grandfather with his business of making leases. I assisted my grandmother in buying groceries at the store. I had to take my grandmother to the "correct" restroom because she could not read or speak English. That was the time when we learned to become prejudice -- when there were two separate bathrooms for the white and colored people. We used the white bathroom.

We only spoke Comanche at home. My grandmother would be sad because I tried to teach her what I learned in school, but it was too hard for her to learn to speak English.

Now, when I am trying to teach my students who are having a hard time learning our language, I hold tears back, telling my students this is how hard it was for our people to learn the English language, as it is hard for you to learn the Comanche language.

I have heard so many horrible stories from my aunts and uncles of how they were punished for speaking our language. They were very afraid to speak Comanche in school. For this very reason my grandmother did not go to school. She was the youngest and her sisters told her how they were punished. So when her parents mentioned the government agent was coming the next day to take children away to school, she said she would run down to the creek and woods to hide all day until dark, to wait until the Indian agent was surely gone. She would tell me, "I am so sorry I did not go and take my punishment and learn to speak English...now I can't understand what the people are saying in town, and I can't read or use a pencil like you."

So the things that assimilation taught us was to forget our language, learn racism, prejudice actions, segregation, and all the glory of the Manifest Destiny. Was this the will of God for us to learn the white man's way and lose our language and everything we had?

For assimilating into the white society we were promised good lives. Instead we have been given alcoholism, disease, malnutrition, poverty, drug addiction and suicide. Was this the will of God from the Manifest Destiny policy?

I have experienced poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and much racism against me personally, most of my life. I grew up in one of the most racist southern states, Oklahoma (Indian Territory).

It is ironic that the different Native American languages of the Code Talkers helped saved our country in World War I and World War II after they tried to beat it out of our people and get rid of it, including the Comanche language.

My cousin was with the Comanche Code Talkers in the Normandy, Germany, invasion during World War II. That should tell people how important our language was then and still is. We will do all we can to help save our language but we also need help saving it because it wasn't all our fault that we are losing it.

We were blessed with our language because "the One that made us, that we cannot see" gave it to us. That is what we called God or Holy Spirit before any Christians talked to us. That is the way we prayed and gave thanks before any white people taught us. That is the way I learned to pray to the "One that lives behind the sun." We were thankful for everything on this earth. I did not become a Christian until I was eighteen years old and had to have a religious preference at boarding school other than the Native American church. That is another thing that was forced on us at boarding school, but that did not change my religious belief in the first way I learned and was taught in my first language. We pray to the "One we can not see" and believe that we will see all our loved ones that have gone before us in another happier world. That is still our belief and we will all speak our own language when we see one another again. At times I can hardly wait for that time. But now, I hopefully want to wait until we can teach our language to our children and grandchildren, so they can pass it on.

Assimilation is now called English Only and probably the main threat now against our languages from the "No Child Left Behind Act."

We want to include an Amendment to S.575 that would exempt teachers of Native American Languages in the public schools from having to obtain certification from outside their tribes. None of the speakers we have today have a college degree. We are all over sixty years of age, some are physically disabled and some are unable to drive, but we can still speak and remember our language.

Soobesü Námánü Sám̄oyetü numu níwánü etü.
Ukítsi nánü tásü nám̄niwánü hutui.
Uḅñitu tásü nám̄niwánü hutui nñ.

(Translation: A long time ago we all spoke Comanche.

Now we will all speak Comanche again.
From now on we will speak Comanche forever).