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**Testimony for Lauren Hummingbird, Graduate, Tsalagi Tsunadeloquasdi  
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
August 22, 2018**

Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and members of the committee:

Osiyo, my name is Lauren Hummingbird, and it is my honor to provide testimony for this oversight hearing entitled “Examining Efforts to Maintain and Revitalize Native Languages for Future Generations”.

It is also my honor to represent the first graduating class of Tsalagi Tsunadeloquasdi School, Cherokee speakers, and the Cherokee Nation, the largest federally-recognized tribal government in the United States with more than 360,000 tribal citizens and headquartered in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

Preserving the Cherokee language is preserving Cherokee identity, as the heritage and traditions of the tribe are rooted in our language. For generations, our language has allowed us to pass along traditional Cherokee knowledge and values to our children.

The United Nations estimates that across the world more than half of the 6,000 globally spoken languages will disappear by the end of this century. I am proud to say that will not be the story of the Cherokee language. When languages are in jeopardy, there is more at stake than meets the eye. Our Native languages hold inherent cultural and social knowledge. That knowledge is embedded within our words, in the stories we tell, and the way we communicate with one another.

My testimony will cover three points. First, a Native language is not just a language; it is the foundation of a culture. Second, the revitalization of Native American languages is happening, it is happening now because it must happen now. Third, the generational pain suffered by past federal policies practices has brought us to this painful point. It is time that we, you and me, must act to support programs that preserve our Native languages.

**Personal History and Story**

In the 2003-2004 school year, the Cherokee Nation started the Cherokee Immersion School, Tsalagi Tsunadeloquasdi. I entered the school as a 3-year-old in the inaugural class 15 years

ago, and I graduated from Sequoyah High School<sup>1</sup> in May of this year. As I advanced through the immersion school year after year, the school continued to add new enrollees each year. Last year, 135 students were enrolled in pre-school through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The Cherokee Immersion School was the first and only school chartered under the Oklahoma Charter Schools Act of 2012, and reauthorized in 2016. Students follow the same state learning objectives as public school districts. The materials and content are converted into the Cherokee language. In 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, students split their time between Cherokee and English, and transition to all English curriculum in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, except for Cherokee language classes.

In order to understand why it is important for Native American languages to be revitalized, it is important to know something about Native American people. Native Americans today are still coping with federal policies and decisions that negatively impacted our ancestors. I experience many difficult emotions when I envision our ancestors as young children. They were told they would be punished for practicing our language and beliefs. It is difficult for me to understand that time and those practices because I envision a world where Native people were hated and looked upon as a lesser people. I do not understand what it was like for our elders to be physically brutalized for simply speaking their language. The mental and emotional scars remain today. I do not think anyone can understand what it was like. The mental and physical abuse of the past caused my people to become scared of the world, and it nearly cost me my culture.

Many of the Cherokee speakers became silent and quit speaking our language for fear of retribution. There are some courageous elders that continued to speak our language, and because of their courage, a small part of my language survived. I do not know where my people would be today if it were not for those who had the courage to practice our traditions and speak our language, no matter the punishment. I know many people who CAN speak our language, but refuse to do so due to the trauma caused by a Native American boarding school experience. A language is not just a small part of our culture...it is everything to us.

As a young Cherokee woman, knowing how to speak my language not only gives me the opportunity to keep my culture and language alive but it also shows the world that we are still here. We are not remnants of a past culture, but we are a thriving people. I started as a three-year-old in the Cherokee Immersion School. The school helped teach me who I am and the ways of my people. The Cherokee Immersion School helped raise me. As students, we never felt like we were in school because school was a second home. The teachers were and continue to be mother figures and father figures to the students. Our elder mentors are like our grandparents.

There are differences between a Native American language immersion school and a traditional English speaking public school. My experience is that immersion students did not learn anything in English and we did not have individually assigned textbooks. The immersion teachers had the

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<sup>1</sup> Cherokee Nation operates Sequoyah High School, a Bureau of Indian Education funded boarding school located in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. With an enrollment of 360 students representing more than 24 tribes, it is regionally and state accredited for grades 7-12.

additional responsibility of translating every textbook lesson into Cherokee. This happens well before classes begin. Public school teachers do not have this added responsibility. While public school students have libraries full of books to read for research or leisure, my Cherokee immersion class had no more than twenty children's books available in the Cherokee language. That was seven years ago, and things have greatly improved since then. Even though Immersion teachers have previously developed materials that they continue to use, we still do not have access to individual textbooks. There are more Cherokee children's books about our traditional stories, and some books are now being published in Cherokee by a few publishing companies.

As a young student, I did not realize that I would grow up differently than other children. We did not just learn about the normal everyday school subjects. We were taught about the traditional foods of our people and ways of life. On field trips, we would visit one place multiple times, but we would always learn something new about our way of life or a new word. Those are memories and knowledge that I would not trade for a public English speaking school experience. I believe that I understand my identity and I am happier because my parents took the risk of enrolling me into a new program that had no promise of success or sustainability.

As our education progressed, some parents became concerned that the immersion students would fall behind before entering into an English speaking high school. They believed that students would not understand the basic subjects of math, science, and geography. However, when my sixth grade class graduated in 2012 these parents witnessed that we were not behind. My classmates and I comprehended all of the required subjects. The only thing we did not know well was English, and we spoke what most call "broken English". However, with the assistance of a few summer classes we caught up with the traditional English-based public school students. We did struggle with the *desire* to learn English. We knew that our identity came from the Cherokee language and not the English language. We felt like we had to become someone different. Today, I find that I have to say something in Cherokee because I do not know how to properly convey the meaning and emotion in English.

I graduated from the Cherokee Immersion School in 2012, and graduated from high school with many of my immersion classmates in May 2018. We all graduated in the top of our class. Some classmates even completed numerous concurrent college credits. I am one of two immersion alumni that are still immersed in the language. I am currently a student in the Cherokee Nation's Language Master Apprentice Program for adult participants.

Immersion programs have far reaching effects on communities. Studies connect language loss to higher levels of substance abuse and poor health habits, both of which are heightened in Native communities. I believe those who speak their language or learn their heritage can reverse this trend of poor health and decision-making. Research also show that bilingual children out perform their monolingual peers in school. On average, bilingual students show twice the progress in reading and math levels than that of their monolingual peers.

There is such a visible gap between the elder generation of fluent speakers and the children that are attending the Immersion School. Eight years ago, no child was being taught their Native language on a daily basis. But today we have more than 130 students enrolled in the Immersion School. These are Cherokee children who know how to speak our language, not only to each other, but to the older generations as well. Our elders are such an important resource for immersion students. They know how our people lived and the skills we shared with the world. Our elders also teach about the pain and difficulties our ancestors faced during federal removal and forced assimilation practices. This new generation of Cherokee speakers is providing our elders hope and strength. The students learn from the elders that their ancestors overcame difficult times, survived and prospered. These lessons teach the students that they too are strong and can succeed in life.

When I entered the Immersion School, I did not know that Native American languages were dying or that some were already gone. I did not know my people were punished because they were Native American and Native language speakers. And I did not know that we, as Cherokees, were forced from our homelands. I did not understand that my peoples' rights and land were taken over lust of land and money. That lust and greed for land and money came at the expense of Native people, the language and culture.

It is hard for a Native American to talk about just their language. That is because a Native's language is so much more than just a language. It is the foundation of our culture. If I did not know my Cherokee language then I would not have such a great love for my people and our ways. I would not know my identity. I see people who do not know their Native language and they seem lost. I believe this is because they do not understand who they are without the knowledge of the language. I have been told there is a big hole in their heart because they know nothing about their culture.

Language programs similar to the Cherokee Immersion School, which was created by the Cherokee Nation tribal government, are long overdue. There are several tribes that have only one fluent speaker left. That means their language is nearly dead already. Some tribes are attempting to create their own Immersion School system, but they will face many difficult challenges without adequate support. Immersion schools are not fully funded by the federal government, and it is not a common practice. Immersion schools require a lot of courage and commitment from the tribe, teachers, parents and students.

In my home, although my parents are not Cherokee speakers, my maternal grandparents are fluent speakers, as well as their siblings. I enjoy speaking Cherokee with our elders. There are numerous occasions where I will sit with a group of elder speakers that do not expect me to understand their Cherokee spoken conversation. When they realize that I understand and answer them in the Cherokee language, it surprises them. Their facial expressions quickly turn from surprise to relief. I know our elders fear that our language will not survive, but immersion students like me provide hope for the future of our language.

One may ask, “Why should I care about the revitalization of the Native American languages that are left?” My answer refers to today’s most commonly known Native American language story. It is the story of the Navajo Code Talkers. As most are aware, the United States enlisted the help of Navajo speakers as “code talkers” during World War II to relay coded messages in Navajo. Without these Navajo speaking patriots, our history would be different today. Cherokee Nation also had code talkers that served the United States valiantly in WWI and helped our allies win.

Native American languages typically go unnoticed in United States. Our Native languages add vibrancy to America’s identity and culture. Without additional funding and commitments to preserve Native languages, our languages and identity will slowly die.

It is difficult for me to express the pain in my heart when I imagine the slow disappearance of our languages. Now is not the time for my generation to be complacent, and say it is simply “okay”, because it is not “okay”. The generational pain from federal policies that led to boarding schools and the Trail of Tears are still felt today. I feel it. Despite that pain, I want to learn more about my culture and who I am. I am steadfast in my beliefs, and I know I am not alone. No matter how difficult or time consuming or the resources needed to sustain language immersion programs we must preserve our languages.

### **Multigenerational Efforts to Preserve and Revitalize the Cherokee Language**

The Cherokee Nation estimates there are only 1,200 fluent speakers, and the average age is 65. Our language experts estimate that we lose 12 fluent Cherokee speakers each month. The Tribe developed the Immersion School, the Master-Apprentice Program and the 14<sup>th</sup> Generation Master Apprentice Program to address this growing decline of Cherokee speakers.

The Master-Apprentice program is designed to immerse adults in the Cherokee language by requiring more than 4,000 contact hours with Master speakers. Similar to the immersion school, enrollees spend on average 40 per week studying and speaking only Cherokee. This program has graduated six adult fluent speakers since the effort began in 2014. The 14<sup>th</sup> Generation Master Apprentice Program is designed specifically for high school students who want to continue their language education after school and during the summer. This program has about a dozen Sequoyah High School enrollees and interest is growing.

These multigenerational programs help preserve and promote the use of the Cherokee language for generations to come and fill the gaps between Immersion School, high school, and home. The youth, who have been educated in the Immersion School, are among the most valuable Cherokee language assets going forward. The Cherokee Nation has made significant investments in these children, and we must keep exposing them to language learning opportunities. Without the aggressive commitment from our tribal government and our businesses, the future of the Cherokee language would be in jeopardy. I am proud to say that is not the case.

## *Conclusion*

I have provided personal testimony and stories as a young Cherokee language speaker and learner. I have also shared my personal perspective and concerns. I provided a brief view into the monumental work the Cherokee Nation has undertaken to keep our language flourishing.

Creating new speakers, and in turn letting them pass along what they have learned, will keep Native languages flourishing for generations to come. Supporting cultural education and growing the language curriculum will help the children succeed on their lifelong journey and allow them to reach their God-given potential in school, in life and as Native speakers.

I ask that you remember my stories and information as you consider future initiatives and funding. Thank you for again for this opportunity to testify. Wado.