

Yearning to learn Ojibwe

I am a 22-year-old Anishinaabe from Lake Manitoba First Nation, and my language has eluded me my whole life. I can't speak it. I never could.

Kyle Edwards

December 1, 2015



Kyle Edwards on M'chigeeng First Nation, one of six Anishinaabe communities on Manitoulin Island that have pledged to be fully bilingual by 2030. Its Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute offers a program in Ojibwe immersion in conjunction with Sault College. (Photograph by Cole Garside)

The gravel road beneath my feet has turned to mud. The rain is starting to come down hard. I've been driving for six hours, it's about to get dark, and this is the first time I've been to Manitoulin Island. To my left is nothing but dense brush; to my right, I see the flat top of Lake Huron's North Channel as the dark blue sky fades to black.

I hear the distant murmur of voices coming from the bush, but I don't know where they are coming from. I've made it from Toronto to the Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute on M'Chigeeng First Nation, but the Ojibwe immersion class has headed to a campsite for an exercise. I keep walking until I spot a trail, manoeuvre through the bushes and the feisty burrs, to find the group around a large fire with a teapot sitting on a metal rack near the edge of the flames. The school has hacked a clearing in the bush big enough for the fire and three small, white, army-style tents. Although the immersion students go overnight camping, these are for other classes, and the city boy in me is relieved we will not be sleeping on the spartan cots inside.

"Kyle?" says Rhonda Hopkins, the instructor. There are some other words before my name, but I have no idea what they mean. She waves her hand at me and I finally understand she's asking me to introduce myself. "*Aanii, Kyle ndishnikaaz* (Hello, my name is Kyle)," I say.

Hopkins stands up and speaks, using exaggerated gestures the way people do when they're talking to someone who doesn't understand their language. "We're surrounded by medicine," one student says, translating for my benefit. "*Miigwetch*," Hopkins says, thanking her for including me. I look up at the trees, because I know this is what they're talking about. Their colour removed by darkness, I see a blend of cedar, pine, tamarack and balsam fir, all of which have a role in Indigenous healing. Cedar, one of the four sacred medicines, is often used to make tea; its aroma improves respiration. In smudging, it cleanses and wards off negative energy. I sit close to the fire to escape the cold rain, only to have the smoke burn my eyes as the droplets sizzle on the hot wood. Someone holds an umbrella over me. I'm an outsider, but I feel included.

We are all here because we are Anishinaabe. The immersion class, a certificate program offered in conjunction with Sault College in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., is fulfilling part of the Anishinabek language declaration of the United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo Mnising, who pledged in 2012 to ensure the six First Nation communities on Manitoulin Island are fully bilingual by 2030.

Listening to the students speak Ojibwe takes me back to my grandparents' house in Lake Manitoba First Nation, about two hours northwest of Winnipeg. When I was 13, I lived with my *Kookoo* and *Shoomis* for a year while my mother finished her undergraduate degree in social work at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. They spoke to each other almost entirely in Ojibwe, also known as Anishinaabemowin, and, for a time, I got the gist of what they were saying to each other and to me. I remember my *Kookoo* making me count as high as I could every night before I went to sleep. Even when I moved to Winnipeg in high school, I still made frequent visits home to the reserve, where the music of the language was a constant in my life. I haven't heard this much Ojibwe in the three years since I moved to Toronto to study journalism at Ryerson University. It is calming, almost therapeutic.

I am a 22-year-old Anishinaabe from Lake Manitoba First Nation, and my language has eluded me my whole life. I can't speak it. I never could.

My mother can't speak it, either, but she can understand it. When my *Shoomis* finished Grade 8 on the reserve, he was forced to go to Sandy Bay Indian Residential School, a two-hour drive from the community, where Ojibwe was forbidden. He tried to teach the language to his five children, but there was little opportunity to speak it outside the home, because school was taught entirely in English. They believed the children would have more opportunities in life if they spoke English anyway.

My mother's family is all I have; she had me at 16 and my biological father left when I was young. Since then, my mom has worked her way to three university degrees, and only ever wanted the best education for me. That's why, when I was in Grade 3, she took me out of the elementary school on the reserve and sent me to school in the neighbouring municipality of Eriksdale. There had been huge layoffs because there was no funding, and my mom was afraid my education would suffer. At great expense—about \$4,000 a year—the family paid for me to go to school in Eriksdale. Every morning, my *Kookoo* would drive me to the point where the reserve's gravel road turned into municipal pavement, and that's where the bus would be waiting.

I will always feel a sense of great desolation when I think about the missed opportunity to learn my language, surrounded by native Ojibwe speakers, but I do not fault my family. I am, like so many Indigenous people before me, shaped by time and place, although I find it shocking that, even in the 1990s, there was no money or will for Aboriginal-language classes for my generation.

That world was lost to me when, at 14, I moved to Winnipeg to be with my mother, my stepfather and my younger brother. Even though the city is home to the largest Indigenous population in Canada, I lived in the multicultural Maples neighbourhood in the northwest, and went to a diverse high school, where my best friends were my white hockey teammates. Even after high school, when I went to the University of Manitoba, where there are 2,000 Indigenous students, I did not join any Aboriginal community groups, and I quickly dropped out after the first semester.

When I enrolled in Ryerson's journalism program, I was excited about the opportunity to write stories. One of the reasons I chose the downtown Toronto school was because its faculty included Indigenous professors such as Hayden King and Pamela Palmater. I promised myself that, this time around, I would seek out the school's Indigenous community and become more involved. When I got there, I realized how small that community is; there are few Indigenous courses and no language classes. But its Aboriginal Student Services—and the space it provides—makes me feel at home in the big city.

I also found the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, where I took an Ojibwe class from Alex Jacobs, who has single-handedly taught the language for more than 25 years. But I get discouraged, because sometimes I feel disconnected from my heritage and shocked by how little exposure my fellow students have had to Indigenous culture. I've had students walk up to me and ask me straight to my face if I'm Aboriginal, which wouldn't be so bad if they didn't ask me if I pay taxes. (The answer is yes, because I don't live on the reserve.) During Social Justice Week, on a day devoted to Indigenous people, a staff member at the student centre told me and my friends to shut down our smudging ceremony, because the smoke—designed to repel negativity—was “bothering other students.”

The eight students in this Ojibwe program refuse to give up. For John and Patsy Turner, the classes are a matter of cultural survival. The only fluent Anishinaabemowin speaker on Temagami First Nation, elder Mary Katt, died last December. “After she died, I said to myself, ‘I have to do this now; now is the time,’ ” Patsy tells me. John is a contractor and Patsy has been teaching at the reserve school for 17 years, teaching Ojibwe for four of those. The community pays the \$3,450 tuition, but the Turners pay travel costs. To get to class, once a week, they take their motorboat across the lake to a community landing, where they pick up their car and make the six-hour drive to M’Chigeeng. After class ends at 9 p.m., they drive north to Sudbury, where they spend the night before driving back to Temagami. “I’m the language teacher in our community,” says Patsy, “and I know I’m not the best person to be teaching it. The opportunity to pass on that fluent language in its original state in that local area, it’s passed.”



Edwards at Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute, which delivers both college and university programs to people on Manitoulin Island. (Photograph by Cole Garside)

The class is run by the Kenjgewin Teg Educational Institute, which delivers college and university programming, as well as trades and adult education, to First Nations communities on the island. The part-time certificate program began in 2006 and has graduated five classes so far. The Ojibwe language, once spoken more commonly than English by Indigenous communities around the Great Lakes and stretching west to Saskatchewan, south to the midwestern United States and north to Trout Lake, now has an estimated 9,000 fluent speakers in Ontario.

Hopkins, the instructor, is from Wikwemikong First Nation, a community on the eastern end of Manitoulin Island, and she has been teaching Anishinaabe for 35 years, including 14 on American reserves and at community colleges in Michigan and Kansas. “I want them to experience the language,” she says of her students, “because the culture is embedded in the language.”

Most of the students are older; some want to teach Ojibwe, while others want to reclaim the language that was stolen from them through the systematic removal of Indigenous children from their communities, and by outlawing the language and trying to extinguish their culture. “Anishinaabe people want their spirituality, and their spirituality is what keeps them in balance,” Hopkins says.

At the fire, I talk to Andrew Pangowish, who lives in Toronto, where he is an assistant to Jacobs, the elder and cultural leader at the Native Canadian Centre. Tall with broad shoulders, he wears his long black hair in a braid. I ask him what motivates him to learn Ojibwe. “*Aabdek nwii kendan waashi anishnaabemyaanh jibwa ndaadzoowad ndo binoojiihnag,*” he says. “I have to learn the language before my kids are born.” Pangowish’s words move me, not only because he has no children on the way, but because it reminds me why this is so important. I think of my baby brother, Sage, born in July, and feel pained that he may struggle, like me, with his sense of identity well into his university years, an internal dissonance that could be quieted with a simple gift: an introduction to his native tongue.

After the rain-drenched outing is over, we head back to the educational institute for a final group circle. I deeply believe immersion is the only way to renew my language, and I admire the determination of these people. Still, it makes me angry. It should not be such a struggle to learn Ojibwe, but it is.

Lynn Migwans, a graduate of the immersion program, used to wash dishes for elders in M’Chigeeng in exchange for conversation, and now prides herself on her fluency. Her nickname was Zigime, which means “the fly.” “I heard this one gentleman say it’s nobody’s fault that you don’t know the language; it’s your fault that you’re not learning it.”

I carry these words with me on the drive home the next day and it deepens my resolve to dedicate myself to my language. It also reminds me that the road ahead is not as smooth as that road to the Eriksdale school. I will have to fight for my birthright, but I am prepared. I have joined the TRC Working Group at Ryerson, and we have asked the administration to implement the calls to action on post-secondary education contained in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)'s final report. Here is No. 16: *We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages.*

Despite the fact that the school is built on traditional territory of the Mississauga's New Credit First Nation, on campus, it doesn't feel as though the TRC recommendations are a priority. I am not surprised to discover that the school's namesake, Egerton Ryerson, was a strong advocate for public education for everyone but Indigenous children, and was a key player in the establishment of the residential school system.

John, Patsy, Andrew and I—we can't do this alone. We have to work together, nation to nation, in order to change. We cannot recreate the past, but we can forge a new vision for the future Anishinaabe people.

Update