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# Why kumtuks Chinook?



*When Maureen Albanese was a girl, one of her father's frequent words was "kumtuks," Chinook jargon for "understand." It was just one of many words he would spout from the historical language that had been cobbled together by First Nations, traders and settlers as they struggled to communicate in multi-language B.C.'s early days.*

By **Kelly Sinoski**

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Vancouver, BC: JUNE 27, 2015 -- Jay Powell leads a workshop on the Chinook Jargon language at the Creekside community centre in Vancouver, BC Saturday, June 27, 2015. The once widely spoken First nations language is nearly extinct. (Photo by Jason Payne/PNG) (For story by Kelly Sinoski) PHOTO BY JASON PAYNE /VANCOUVER SUN

VANCOUVER -- When Maureen Albanese was a girl, one of her father's frequent words was "kumtuk," Chinook jargon for "understand."

It was just one of many words he would spout from the historical language that had been cobbled together by First Nations, traders and settlers as they struggled to communicate in multi-language B.C.'s early days.

"I guess he picked it up. I just remember him saying things," Albanese said. "My mother would tell me stories

of how the native women would giggle when they called her ‘klootchman.’”

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Many of those words came back to Albanese Saturday during a language lesson in Chinook wawa, or jargon, at Creekside Community Centre.



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The lesson, taught by Jay Powell, a retired professor of anthropology at the University of B.C., aims to revive the forgotten tongue while highlighting the province’s cultural roots.

Some 25 people gathered for the lesson, which came with a few ground rules: they would ditch their real name for the day in favour of a Chinook word and later

on include at least one Chinook word in conversation with each other.

Albanese, for instance, was “Kloshe,” meaning “good, while Powell was “Tyee” or “chief”. Others wore name tags reading Pukpuk (a punch, the boxer) or Chotub (the flea, one who leaps).

The idea was to teach the Chinook basics, such as hello, my friend, “Klahowya, nika tillcum;” and how are you, “Kahta Mika” and have the participants speak snippets of conversation, while learning traditional crafts using cedar and deer hide.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“We would all be the poorer if we didn’t remember our history. (This is) one of the things that gives B.C. the sense of coming together,” Powell said.


“We’re seeing native languages dying out without being revived all over the coast. Chinook may not be the answer but what it does is clearly provide us with a linguistic mechanism to look back at our community heritage.”

The daylong event brought of together a mix of participants for different reasons, including Albanese


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who was reminded of her father, and 12-year-old Negan Nekoonan, who wanted to step outside her comfort zone and took photographs of the different words to practice them at home with her mother and brother.

Lisa Smith, who is writing a historical novel about Emily Patterson, considered to be the first nurse in the Vancouver area, in 1873, said she thought the lesson would be helpful for her book.

“I don’t know if (Patterson) spoke it but she definitely would have encountered Chinook,” said Smith, who chose the name Sopena (jumping flea). “It’s really interesting. It’s nice to see these languages revived.”

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Bill McLennan noted B.C. had one of the most diverse sets of languages anywhere when Chinook jargon was developed. Former Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan said it was this history that prompted him to organize the event. He said that while most pidgin languages are rooted in English, Chinook is unique because it is steeped in “proud native foundations” — evidence that First Nations languages were predominant here in the 1800s.

He said the “trade language” was designed to be learned quickly and hopes that some of the participants will be willing to meet regularly, either once a week or once a month, to practise speaking it.

Powell plans to hold a Chinook Wawa immersion weekend to kickstart the regular meetups. Those interested can sign up here:

[chinookwawa@globalcivic.org](mailto:chinookwawa@globalcivic.org).

“This was such an important part of our history,” Sullivan said. “To me, it represents what we should aspire to.”

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*CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story spelled 'kumtuks' and 'kootchman' differently.*

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