

# Hopi language brought to life through song and media

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According to a recent survey conducted at Hopi, 30 to 40% children do not speak their language and only 15% speak Hopi fluently. This information was no surprise to Hopi educators like Anita Poleahla, but it was alarming. Poleahla, who was hired by the Hopi Tribe ten years ago to develop a Hopi language curriculum, joined forces with Ferrell Secakuku in a unique endeavor to reintroduce the language into Hopi homes-through song and pictures.

The pair presented some of their songs-brought to life by puppets, a model of a cornfield, beans, squash and melon seeds and even painting-at the Church of the Red Rocks in Sedona on the evening of April 10. They also presented two compact disc presentations-one emphasizing the importance of Hopi foods to healthy bodies and another presenting scenes from a young woman's coming of age.

Poleahla and Secakuku's presentation was part of the 2006 Sedona Lecture Series presented by the Sedona Muses and the Museum of Northern Arizona. They were introduced to a group of over 150 people by MNA Director Robert Breunig.

"We heard about this, and realized we had to do something," Secakuku said. "We asked ourselves, why can't we be original? Hopi are a visual people, and singing is a way of painting a picture."

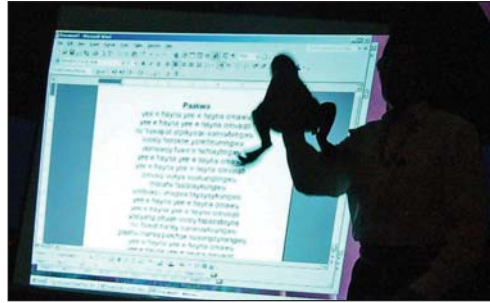
Our mandate as Hopi people is that our language is our culture, Secakuku explained. "If we forget our language, we are no longer Hopi. All of the chants in Hopi tell stories. If people can't understand the words, they can't appreciate the singing. Songs put heart into our culture."

Secakuku said that one of their songs followed the familiar lyrics of "Old MacDonald had a farm," but the challenge was that Hopi people did not have that kind of farm, or the same kind of animals, so the pair had to write about animals that Hopi youth grow up with.

The first song presented by Poleahla and Secakuku was inspired by his childhood.

"When I was little, and I played outside, it would rain. It used to rain a lot, and when it rained I would see a lot of frogs. I used to think that the frogs came [down] with the rain," Secakuku said. "I asked my father about it, and he said, 'yes, it rains frogs.' I didn't know then that the frogs were buried underneath the dirt, and when it rained they would emerge from the mud. I used to watch them play around, and they would make a lot of noise."

Inviting members of the audience to "be a kid tonight," Poleahla and Secakuku launched into a rhythmic song about frogs-paakwa-with the words in Hopi projected on a screen behind



**Ferrell Secakuku sings a song about paakwa--frogs--with the aid of modern technology-a computer.**

**Photo by S.J. Wilson**

the pair.

Another song-illustrated with slide show pictures of a young Hopi girl-spoke of a "dance" into womanhood through good healthy food.

"I grew up, I am dancing for all of you. I learned this so I dance for you," text with the pictures read. "I am made of Hopi foods." These foods include corn cake, blue corn tortillas, corn silk, blue corn flour balls, and somiviki-a sweet corn mush encased in corn husks.

"The songs are repetitious," Secakuku explained. "That is the best way to teach Hopi. Students can see the picture, and hear the words. By the third week our students could sing the song. When we hear Hopi High School students speaking Hopi, we feel that we've made a contribution."

Another childhood memory inspired Secakuku to write a song about chipmunks.

"About 20 steps behind my house, there was a big cliff," Secakuku said. "I used to sit at the edge of the cliff and see chipmunks playing at the edge. Indigenous animals make a contribution to life. When we learn our religion, we know animals have a contribution in our lives."

The pair launched into the song after setting up a "stage" representing the edge of a mesa. Secakuku demonstrated careful hours of chipmunk watching with deft, well choreographed movements of a chipmunk puppet cavorting along the ledge.

After the song, Secakuku said that he didn't appreciate the message of the chipmunk until he was older-that the animals' play taught him to be happy and playful.

Secakuku described the process a young Hopi girl goes through-beginning with the placement in a dark room by an aunt for four days-and ending with her emergence with the hairstyle of a young woman available for marriage and a platter of food that she takes home to her family.

This explanation preceded the presentation of a slide show CD presentation showing the experiences of a Hopi girl as she enters the world

of womanhood. Her transformation is evident in the regal way she holds herself, cloaked in the regalia of Hopi womanhood.

Members of the audience were curious about the Hopi language-written in English characters to phonetically represent Hopi words-that framed photos.

Poleahla explained the process of setting the Hopi language into three different dictionaries-and in her description of the differences in the four Hopi dialects, made what seemed complicated to English-only speakers seem simple.

"We adopted a writing system that includes the German umlaut "o" and a glottal stop, that was easily adaptable to our four dialects," Poleahla said. "There are also absences of characters in different dialects." An example is where one dialect uses a "p" sound while another uses a "v" sound.

"I wrote the curriculum in Third Mesa dialect," Poleahla explained. "We begin with learning the alphabet, stressing that each student remember his or her dialect. I explain to each speaker what he or she would change with their dialect, then everyone starts reading. By [the class entitled] Hopi III, I see that they can modify words to accompany their dialect. I am thrilled to see that they are able to speak in their own dialects."

Poleahla also pointed out that when they sing together, she and Secakuku sing in their own dialects-and that this explained where people heard a difference in their pronunciation in singing.

Secakuku described the clown that appears in Hopi dances, saying that it is believed that if he makes one person laugh, he has done his job. This lesson has been modified to his own belief about language.

"If we can teach one child to speak Hopi, we are successful," Secakuku explained.

Secakuku corrected a commonly held assumption about the decline of the Hopi language-that people didn't care to pass on the language.

"We were sent away from home for our education," Secakuku said. "People of different tribes came together and people fell in love, and because they only knew their own languages, English became the common language in the home. Their children grew up speaking English."

Secakuku commended the establishment of Hopi High School, saying that it was no longer necessary to send Hopi children away for education.

"We are starting with young parents," Secakuku said. "We don't want to go into the politics. We concentrate on the mandate from our elders not to lose our language."