

Preserving the Hopi language through modern media

By S.J. Wilson

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Flagstaff, Ariz. - It began two years ago, with a desire to preserve the Hopi language for future generations. Ferrell Secakuku and Anita Poleahla produced a CD entitled Learning Through Hopi Songs.

"We wanted to inspire younger children, to provide a way for them to hear the words, to put themselves into the Hopi language, to bring them back to speaking Hopi," Secakuku said. "We are working uphill-it's a challenge to bring back the Hopi language."

This is important to Secakuku and Poleahla. Like all Native cultures, the Hopi language is the root of Hopi culture and life, Secakuku insisted.

The duo has allies-support from parents and grandparents-and an unlikely friend named Natasa Garic, an international student of the Anthropology Department of Northern Arizona University.

Secakuku met Garic in a graduate level anthropology class-Pueblo Ethnology-and the two became friends.

This friendship led to Secakuku and Poleahla to enlist Garic's aid in illustrating a song from their CD.

"I thought this would be a good way to inspire the younger generation-along with their parents and grandparents," Secakuku said.

Garic presented the finished product, "Hopi Maidenhood Ceremony," on the afternoon of March 17 during a colloquia at the Anthropology Department, where she was joined by Secakuku and Poleahla.

Garic began the presentation by explaining to fellow students and faculty members that traditional Hopi education is much different from that of the western world.

"On Hopi, there are different ways of education. Girls learn how to grind corn and how to cook traditional foods," Garic said. "The men and boys meet together in the kivas during the winter for lessons.

In this way they learn respect for tribal elders."

Garic went on to explain that the learning style of Native American youth is experiential, and that culturally based, active experiences help engage their interest.

"If you've never been to Hopi, let me tell you, the world there is not the same. The pace is different," Garic said. "The people hold a different philosophy of life."

Garic, Secakuku and Poleahla decided to bring the Hopi maidenhood ceremony into Hopi homes and classrooms, to children who might not otherwise experience the ceremony. Rather than filming video footage of the ceremony, Garic decided to use still photographs, both modern and historic.

"I wanted children to associate the words of the song with the pictures. I wanted historic photos to represent cultural continuity," Garic explained. "I tried to make it about the young woman represented in the pictures, and about her family. I hope that the experience [of viewing the presentation] will spark an interest in other cultural roles."

Garic described the journey of a young girl becoming a maiden, learning to make traditional foods like piki bread and somiviki, and the butterfly whorl hairstyle announcing the young woman's new status. She shared a brief explanation of the maiden's ritual and social roles, of receiving gifts of commmeal and valuable advice for moving into adulthood.

As the chant of Poleahla and Secakuku pulses resonantly, viewers were treated to a slideshow of vignettes of Hopi life-of the family of a young woman entering her maidenhood. The photographs are compelling, moving through vistas of skyline beyond the edge of ancient villages, historic photos, family gatherings, and corn plants.

So far the audience of the film has primarily been school children, as well as a showing to teachers at the summer session of Hopi Day School. Garic agrees with Poleahla and Secakuku that this medium is a great way to teach, but she believes that the youth themselves can bring their own productions to life.

"Kids today have learned the technology," she said.

A self-described applied anthropologist, Garic told the gathering that the intention of her work is to prove that "there are other ways to do anthropology."

Poleahla, the Hopi Language teacher at Hopi Jr/Sr High School, describes herself at the "grassroots" level of technology.

"Forget about housework," she laughed. "This isn't really work, this is fun."

Songs from Learning Through Hopi Songs has received a lot of play in northern Arizona. "We hear the songs everywhere," Poleahla said. "We hear them on the radio, students are singing them."

"We are working on teaching material to accompany these songs. We are so fortunate to have Natasa to do this for us. This has been a new learning experience," Poleahla said.

Secakuku and Poleahla's audience are asking for the next CD-and it is in the works. Entitled Teaching Through Hopi Songs, fans of this duo can expect to see this new CD in late April or early May.

Look for Learning Through Hopi Songs at Hopi Fine Arts, owned and operated by Alf Secakuku, or at Tsakurshovi, owned and operated by Joseph and Janice Day.

Garic, who is a Serbian/Croatian from Slovenia, is fluent in English and Croatian, and speaks Italian and German. She is a 2002 graduate of NAU, majoring in Cultural Anthropology. She has always been interested in ancient cultures and Native people. She originally came to Arizona to study the Navajo, and has worked closely with the Hopi. A professional volleyball player, Garic is passionate about archaeology, petroglyphs, and the tracing of migration patterns.



Ferrell Secakuku, Natasa Garic and Anita Poleahla at Northern Arizona University.

Photo by S.J. Wilson