

Native tongue triggers split in the Navajo Nation's presidential election

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Elder Jay Tsosie remembers being punished in his childhood classrooms whenever he spoke Navajo. More than 60 years later, the Navajo tongue has triggered a major split in the upcoming presidential election of the country's largest sovereign Native American nation. Photo: John Glionna/Los Angeles Times/MCT

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Navajo elder Jay Tsosie flinches when he recalls the classroom punishments from his childhood.

Back when the 77-year-old was a skinny, rowdy schoolboy, teachers from the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) tried to drive out a part of Tsosie that is central to his very being — his native language.

When caught whispering Navajo to classmates, teachers washed his mouth out with soap. They also forced him to kneel on pencils and hold two heavy soda bottles in his outstretched arms. The BIA was part of the federal government that oversaw American Indian matters.

"Some days," Tsosie said, "I had to write on the blackboard 100 times: 'I will not speak Navajo.'"

Rule Aims To Protect The Language ...

More than 60 years later, the Navajo tongue has triggered a major split in the upcoming presidential election of the country's largest sovereign Native American nation.

Last week, the tribe's high court removed candidate Christopher Deschene from the ballot because other contenders claimed he wasn't fluent in Navajo. The ability to speak Navajo is a requirement for the office under tribal law. Deschene also refused to take a Navajo language test.

The subject may be politics, but the underlying issue is Navajo identity. "Our sacred language defines us as individuals and as a Nation," the justices wrote in their decision.

On Thursday, the high court postponed the election. The extra time will let officials print new ballots without Deschene's name.

Some support the court's ruling, calling fluency in Navajo essential to leading the nation of 300,000 members. The rule, they said, was a response to the BIA's efforts years ago to destroy the language.

... But Does It Punish Younger Navajos?

To ignore the rule, they say, insults elders such as Tsoosie who as a youth paid the price for speaking Navajo under the control of the BIA. Many said BIA stood for "Boss Indians Around."

But a 94-year-old woman who said she was Deschene's grandmother says he speaks Navajo well enough to carry on a conversation about his plans as president. "I understand him," she said in the Navajo language.

Others say the rule punishes younger Navajos for doing just what their own tribe encourages them to do: Get an education in the outside world.

Along the state road south to Gallup, New Mexico, is a route called the Code Talker Highway in memory of Navajo soldiers in the U.S. Army. During World War II, they used their native language as a code to transmit secret messages. Billboards show young Navajos in graduation gowns with inspiring slogans, such as "Climb the Ladder," "Go Out Into the World" and "Learn English."

Deschene, 43, was born in Los Angeles but grew up in Indian Country. He earned a master's degree in engineering and a law degree, and also served in the Marine Corps. As a result, many here call Deschene a role model, not an embarrassment.

Navajo No Matter What She Speaks

"We teach our kids to get that education and then to come back to the reservation and help their people, just like Chris did," said Art Huskey, 71, who stood outside the tribal council chambers. "Part of the sacrifice might be forgetting some of their Navajo."

Huskey and other protesters say that decades ago, 90 percent of tribal first-graders spoke the language fluently. But now only 30 percent speak it fluently. He said only one of his four children speaks Navajo, and none of his grandchildren.

Huskey was among the many people who protested Thursday outside the government building in Window Rock, Arizona, the capital of the Navajo Nation. The area is known for its rock formations and is sacred in Navajo culture.

Holding a protest sign, Mattie Christensen said she feels 100 percent Navajo, no matter what she speaks. "People try to put me down," she said. They tell her, "You can't even speak the language."

"Well," she said, "you can't take my culture away from me."

A Complicated Language To Learn

But Sarah White says the tribal president needs to speak Navajo. "If my grandson grows up not speaking Navajo, that's his choice, but if he ever ran for tribal president, I'd say, 'Learn the language first. That's the only way you're going to feel and taste the experience of everyday Navajo life.'"

Tsosie says that while he still speaks Navajo, he won't teach his grandchildren the complicated language that lacks clear terms for some English words. For example, "computer" becomes "thinking metal."

"What's the use?" Tsosie said. "We've been discouraged from using our language all our lives. Why make this an issue now when we have a bright young lawyer who wants to return to lead our tribe? Speaking the language is not going to do him any good, other than talking to the old folks. There are translators for that."

The protest became tense when a tribal officer ordered activists to remove their signs. "It doesn't look good," said Tribal Police Sergeant Stanley Ashley. "You don't see them at the White House."

"Is it against the law? Or you don't think it looks good?" one woman shouted.

In the end, the signs stayed, but there were moments of doubt, even for Navajo speakers. Three elders read one sign and still wracked their brains for a translation. Finally, one spoke up: "Somebody here wrote this sign. We should be able to figure this out."