When I was a little girl we were always moving from one place to another. I used to see my mother getting ready to leave a spot. As soon as I sensed we were going to pack up the canoe, I would scurry around, picking up odds and ends of material and bundle up my stuff together. If my parents didn’t want to take my bundle, I would cry and scream until they put it in the canoe. It got to be that when it was time to pack up, they would start yelling “Ozhiitaan” [Get ready! Get ready!]. So they called me “Ozhiitaan” [the little one who gets ready]. As I got older my name became Ozhiitaan, Maria. My English name was Maria Wesley. When I was in grade 2 the teacher asked me, “What is your name?”

“Maria,” I said.

“That sounds like a Catholic name. We’ll call you Moriah.” But they still spelled it Maria, but with an ‘h’ — Mariah.

Maria is one of many Anishinaabe who has been instrumental in the actualization of the Aboriginal languages being officially taught in the provincial schools in Ontario. For many years the First Nations people have been concerned with the loss of our Languages, that our children are not speaking the Language and are, therefore, not aware of the Native cultural nuances in behaviour, world view, religion, values, interpretation and in their attitudes towards themselves and their own peoples. Because of her respect, regard and caring for our Peoples and our culture, Maria has worked with many individuals to have the language recognized by the Canadian public. Because Maria is Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), her work has specifically been with the Anishinaabe language; however, with the work that she and her friends have done with the Anishinaabe language, it has been able to be used to advance the validation and respect of the other Languages of the First Nations People.

One of the aspects of the Native Language that concerned Maria is the fact that “you can’t apply English into Ojibwe. For example, going to court — how does it apply to my language?”

“The court will ask you, ‘Did you have a relationship with this man?’ The court didn’t mean ‘did you have a relationship with this man?’ The court meant, ‘did you have sexual intercourse with this man?’ But they don’t say that. Therefore, the answer the Indian gives does not apply to what the court really means. What they ask the defendant does not translate to ‘relationship,’ and the defendant does not give the answer the court wants. Then all kinds of problems arise, one being that the translator is blamed for the mix-up and gets into trouble. [Maria has been a translator many times. She knows.]

Another example of how you can’t apply English into Ojibwe: one realizes that when one goes to court, he has broken the law, and has done something wrong. It is a black-and-white thing. The person thinks ‘It’s up to them to decide what to do with me. I broke their law. Therefore I must be punished in court.’ They know it’s up to the courts to determine what’s going to happen to them; they’re at the mercy of the courts. When they are asked, ‘Did you not tell the police...?’, they will reply, ‘Well, I must have said it if that’s what you have written down.’”

[Maria recounts how we’ve worked together to have the Native Language Instructors’ Programme (NLIP) come together:]

In the summer of 1973 a one-day workshop was held in Fort Frances to discuss our concerns about the loss of our language and what we could do about it and keeping it alive. Thirty of us were able to get together. We found that with the younger generation, there was almost a 100% loss. The ones who have lost the language are the first ones that work the hardest at retaining it or trying to get it back. At this meeting we established the need for training language teachers. Because the writ-
Native Language was piecemeal. Only papers (who was qualified when there was money left over, in other words, when the money was available, knowing of it was only piecemeal. “Oh, well, we’ll give it to the Indians,” they would say. Anyone within the education system (for example, Confederation College, Indian Affairs, local school boards and social services) would throw a course together. In the summer of 1974, we held a week-long workshop again in a hotel in Fort Frances. This was the first Native Language Teachers’ Workshop.

In the summer of 1975, we held the second Native Language Teachers’ Workshop, this time right in the residential school on the Couchiching Reserve.

All along we talked about how the teaching of units would help teach the Language the best way. We discussed Language curriculum in terms of having units on Story Telling, the Family, Music, the Seasons, etc., etc. John Nichols (not Native), who has been studying the Ojibwe Language for many years, was a big help to us as he taught aspects of the grammar and structure of the Ojibwe Language. There are many cases where you cannot transpose English structure to Ojibwe structure (there are also many cases where you can’t directly interchange Ojibwe structure into English Structure). The syllabic writing system was also taught.

When we talk about the Native teachers, they had the knowledge, they had the information. They gave this to the instructors at the workshops. However, these teachers never completed a unit on their own. White people (the instructors) told them how long to make them.

My message [Maria’s] is: you have the knowledge, learn how to do it. You sit at that desk and they pick your brains. We have the skills; we have the knowledge. Use them.

In planning units, White people had the writing skills. They collected the money to develop and finish the Units. Meanwhile they used us to collect the information that would go with the education components they developed. They knew the goals and objectives, the rationales and the time frames. What we hope to accomplish is to find the language components and complete the units ourselves.

They hire a Native Language teacher. They hand her her lesson. Plunk. She had no idea how to teach it, but by handing her the lesson, they expect her to know all about teaching it. She had no idea of the time frame. They need it at the office. They never showed her how to do it and they never gave her what she needed. Native teachers didn’t know the rationale, the goals, or how to set it up, or how to set up tests, evaluate and the variances. The system is set up so that the classroom teacher or the principal takes credit for what the student learns.

During 1975-76, two workshops were held at Walpole Island. The people who attended the Fort Frances workshops went there. Everybody went — Cree, Ojibwe and Iroquois speakers who were interested in having the Native Language taught in the schools. And we rehashed all our continuing problems.

In the summer of 1976 we took the NLIP program to Sudbury, where the education space was available at Laurentian. At this time, the Iroquois speakers broke off and set up their own program at the University of Western Ontario. They fought to become teachers and when they realized the Language was a viable subject, they retrained and took regular teachers’ courses. Native Studies was included. When these student-teachers graduated in 1978, all the language teachers took part.

A Native Language Advisory Committee was established in 1976. Mary Mitchell, from the Indian Affairs office in Toronto, worked for us as the NL coordinator.

The need was established for funding for training NL teachers because they were getting money only that was left over. The money was now there. Now the need is to set up a training package to train Native teachers.

One of the things we found out about holding our NLIP course in Sudbury was that it was too far away from the homes that many people came from. People had families and leaving them for six weeks was just too much. They’d go home for a weekend and many never came back. They just couldn’t go home for a visit, and so they had to quit. Ones from Kenora, for
example, couldn’t finish; however, the ones who lived close by finished their course.

Meanwhile, for these past several years, Language instruction had been given in Thunder Bay, as Mary Mitchell’s office had moved there. A Native Language course as a credit to a B.A. programme in Thunder Bay had been held at the University in 1978. So in 1978, the NLIP programme returned to Thunder Bay. Up to this point, the NLIP programme was still using the same format as had been all along.

At this point in time we found out that after four years of taking the NLIP courses, the people had nothing to show for it. They weren’t recognized by the Ministry of Education. Local school boards didn’t recognize them. They had no certification, because it was not under the umbrella of a recognized educational system, such as a university, a Board of Education, a Ministry of Education, a college, etc. So nobody would hire them. They couldn’t get a salary.

It was, therefore, up to the Native Language Advisory Committee to find the way to get certification and to validate the work that was being done by us “nobodies.”

The NLIP went to the Dean of Lakehead University to establish a course under the umbrella of Lakehead University, so those taking the courses could get accreditation. Many many meetings were held that year. Finally, Dean Simpleton agreed that there should be official recognition of the NLIP courses that were taken. He was very open to suggestion.

It got off the ground and in July 1978 and ’79 the courses began. Now those who started in 1973 had to repeat all those years. The courses would take eight years to get that piece of paper. No credit was given for all those years put in. It was a sickening situation. I felt sorry for them. There was fear of giving up just to get that paper.

But they stayed with it — because the system says you have to do it. I had to appreciate those people for persevering (about twenty-four from north western Ontario).

This was the turning point for everyone because they would get certification — to the extent that their salary base would change. They could have recognition as Native Language speakers.

Now we’ve established these courses. The onus is now on the NL teachers to take it even further, to organize themselves so they can command the funding or even deal with the issues that concern them as an organization — for example, changing courses so they’ll have impact and relevance.

Teachers keep redefining goals and objectives, so that these don’t remain at the level they were when they first started.

Teachers need to organize themselves for discussion purposes. The distances are very great. They work in isolation within the school system, and they are not within working distance of each other. They should demand and command P.D. days, separate from the school system. They should get help for developing resources. They should support each other. Someone has to pull it together. They have to be organized in order to do that. Right now they are under the immediate boards for whom they work and they have no understanding of the unique problems and relations to teaching NSL (Native as a Second Language).

Funding for the development of curricula, funding for travel. They have to lobby to the Department of Indian Affairs, the Secretary of State. There is money available for Native Language. They have to pull it in.

We who worked with the NLIP at its infancy, we knew the need, we knew what the Native Language teachers lacked: their prestige. They have to feel like they’re accomplishing something. We carried them. We helped them. When they struggled with their units, we got “experts” to help them. We counselled them when they were at the end of their rope. They found out what their language is, what their language is about. How does this word fit into your language? What does it mean?

We’re not here to correct you, but to help you. Problems in developing units, they ran into a brick wall. Change it around to your teaching method, for example, a trip to the store. What can you build from that? 1. make a colouring book. 2. different jobs in the store. 3. kinds of people who go in.

They stayed.

This spring in the Treaty 3 area, the Native Language teachers are going to meet as a group in Kenora to form an organization to accomplish all of this. They want to set the stage for their future activity.

Today you live in Kenora. You had eight children; you lost a boy three years ago in a car accident (not alcohol-related) and you have four of your own grandchildren. But there’s an extended family in your life: since your sister has died, her daughters have become your daughters and you have become the diT, kookoom (grandmother) of their children.

The reason I made it, I never had alcohol problems.
I had my first drink when I was thirty-five. I always thought I'd never be any different from my mother in her drinking habits and in her behaviour when she was drunk. The way we were living in fear, always running—I didn't want that for my children. It was that fear that prevented me from drinking. I was too busy anyway, looking after my sisters. Mom died in 1944, from childbirth, a boy. He was adopted out until he grew up, but he always knew who he was. There was also a two year-old girl. Because there was trouble with the Indian agent, I couldn't do it and manage it. Another family fostered her until she was five. It was at this time my Dad took me out of school to teach me the traditional customs. For three years I lived on the trapline and learned how to trap, skin beaver, muskrat, mink and all the animals that were killed, how to set nets and look after them, how to preserve wild meat and fish, how to hunt moose, and more. 

The soul of her work is building self-esteem to be proud. The Centre helps groups of women on the Reserves to meet their goals. It is a resource centre for all aspects of Ojibwe Culture. There's a constant display at the Centre to show the work they do. The Centre acts as a liaison between those who know the culture and those who don't and want to find out and want to know about their background.

In accordance with Canadian immigration requirements, this advertisement is directed to Canadian citizens and permanent residents.

York University, Division of Social Science, invites applications for one or more tenure-stream appointments in an interdisciplinary program in Urban Studies, commencing July 1, 1990. Rank is open, depending on qualifications and experience. The Urban Studies Program is an interdisciplinary social science program offering honours undergraduate degrees in conjunction with seven social science departments (Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Political Science, Psychology and Sociology). The successful candidate must be able to participate in a team-taught interdisciplinary course on Urban Development and be able to offer one or more courses in an area of urban specialization. Ph.D. or equivalent and a demonstrated ability in research are required.

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