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For BIE Schools Transitioning To Tribal Control, The Shift Isn't Easy

More than Words - Saving Paiute Language

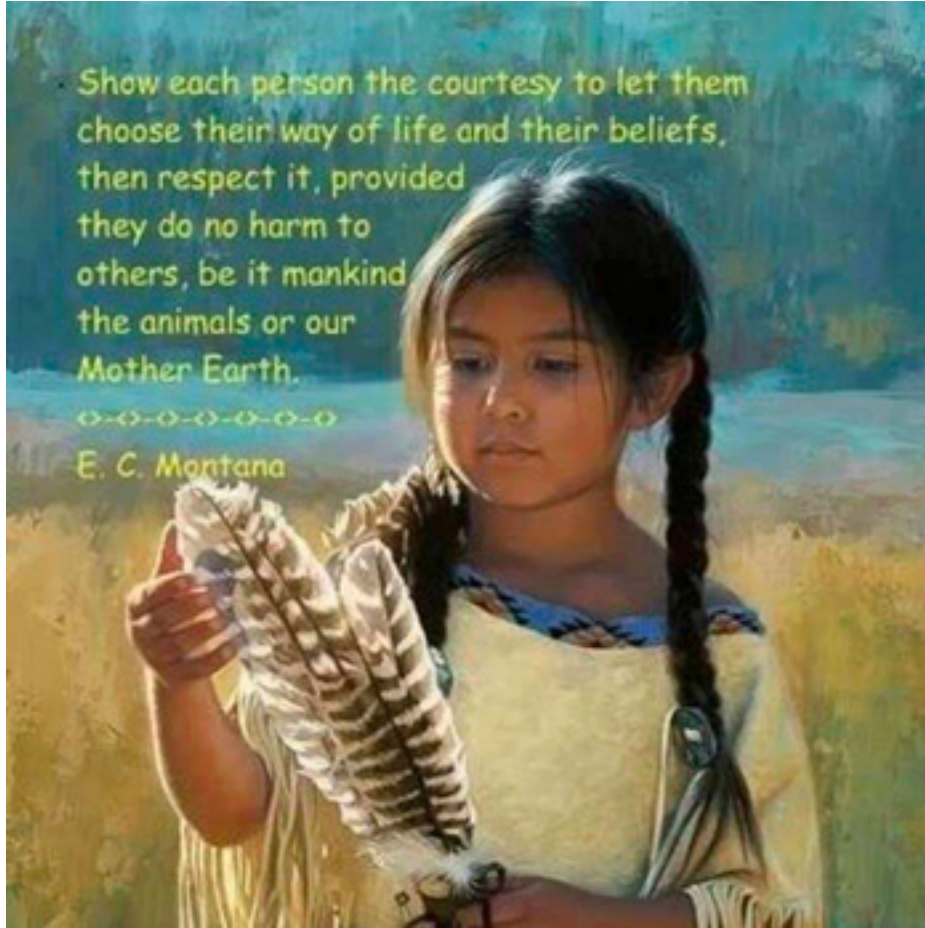
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For BIE Schools Transitioning To Tribal Control, The Shift Isn't Easy

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In a small trailer on the eastern fringes of the snowcapped Sierra Nevada, UC Santa Cruz linguist Maziar Toosarvandani hunches over a laptop, tapping notes, while two women, Edith McCann and Madeline Stevens, both in their nineties, speak words in a vanishing tongue into a small microphone.



photo Jeremy Miller

“How would I use the word ‘*noggute*’ [NO-guh-tay]?” Toosarvandani asks the two women seated opposite him.

“*Noggute*?” McCann asks, looking puzzled.

“Is *noggute* a word?” asks Toosarvandani.

“No. I don’t think so,” says McCann. Stevens, seated beside her, laughs aloud.

Toosarvandani tries again. “So if I carry something, I could say something like *Nuu ka tuba no’o*.”

“That means, ‘You’re carrying pine nuts,’” McCann replies.

“Yeah. So what if I say *noggute*? Doesn’t that mean to carry it for someone else?”

“*Noggute*?”

“*Noggute*.”

“Yes, I guess it does,” says McCann.

For the last decade, the effort in Bridgeport has progressed just like this, in fits and starts, through painstaking queries and distillations of aging memories. Toosarvandani and his colleague Grace Dick, a teacher and native speaker of Northern Paiute, are collecting fragments of this critically endangered language, a dialect of Northern Paiute spoken exclusively around Bridgeport, California.

Make no mistake – in spite of the slow pace of the proceedings, this is a race against time. This dialect of Northern Paiute is down to its last handful of speakers. In fact, only 300 or 400 people

speak any of the dozen or so Northern Paiute dialects that still exist today. Most of these speakers live on remote reservations in Oregon and Nevada.

The dictionary Toosarvandani and Dick are building is up to a few thousand words. In addition to compiling vocabulary, the group is documenting stories and “procedural narratives,” small instructive bits of dialogue that relay cultural practices and customs – how to weave a baby basket, say, or gather and prepare *tebape*, or pine nuts, one of the tribe’s staple foods.

Northern Paiute is part of the northern branch of the Uto-Aztecan family, a group of related languages once spoken from the hardwood stands of North America to the rainforests of Central America. North American relatives of Northern Paiute peoples include the Shoshone, Comanche, and Hopi. A related language, Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wat) – which to this day is spoken by roughly a million-and-a-half people in southern Mexico – was the native language of the Aztecs.

The diminishment of the indigenous languages of the Americas began with European contact, in the fifteenth century. But between the mid-1800s and the middle of the twentieth century, efforts to eradicate indigenous languages were pursued with a concerted and genocidal vigor. The silencing of the language found its fullest expression in the dozens of so-called Indian boarding schools set up by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The Northern Paiute children were sent to the Stewart Indian School in Carson City, Nevada. In the 90 years between the school’s opening in 1890 to its closure in 1980, thousands of Native children – Northern Paiutes, Washoes, and Shoshones, among others – were forced to leave their families and take up residence at the school. Today, Stewart School is an historic site. On the school’s website are several haunting images, including some with Native children dressed in western garb – in tennis skirts, in football uniforms, in suits and ties. The effort to “civilize” Native children – “to kill the Indian and save the man,” as it was described by Richard Henry Pratt, an early proponent of Native “education” – was often as cruel as it was concerted.

Dick recounts one particularly horrific form of corporal punishment practiced at Stewart for the “crime” of speaking in one’s native tongue: The children were told to hold hands; then the child at the end of the line was told to stick a finger in a light socket, electrocuting the entire group. “If you got punished every time you spoke,” Dick says, “you learned very quickly not to speak.”

The critical endangerment of Northern Paiute mirrors the condition of indigenous languages worldwide. Like organisms, languages evolve in concert with their local environments. Regions with higher biodiversity, the tropics, for instance, tend to harbor a higher concentration of languages and dialects, while fewer tongues exist in areas of lower biodiversity, such as the Arctic. But as the world gets smaller – as we cut down forests, dam and divert rivers, blast through mountains, destroy local habitats, and displace people from their ancestral homes – many of the world’s languages are dying out. With each language we lose, we also lose an invaluable trove of knowledge about human history, culture, and the natural environment.

The greatest diversity of languages resides with the world’s Indigenous peoples – often marginalized groups who have lived in intimate contact with the natural world for thousands of years and who have a deep knowledge of local lands, plants, animals, and ecosystems. “These languages reflect the places where they are spoken,” says Veronica Grondona, a professor of linguistics at Eastern Michigan University who works with several Indigenous tribes in the Triple Frontier region along the borders of Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay. “Speakers of native languages will know, for example, the names of specific plants found in the area where the language is spoken.” Often, says Grondona, this highly specific local knowledge – much of it unknown to science to this day – is passed down orally, from one generation to the next.

The [Endangered Languages Project](#) – a joint effort between the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and Eastern Michigan University – estimates that about half of the world's 7,000 languages are in immediate danger of extinction by the year 2100. According to the group, the world has lost more than 600 languages and 28 language families since the 1960s. The project also estimates that one language goes extinct approximately every three months and that more than 450 existing languages – accounting for roughly 10 percent of all tongues worldwide – have fewer than 10 speakers left.

The trend is driven by a number of factors, notably, urbanization and the concurrent rise of dominant languages such as English, Spanish, and French (as well as through deliberate policies of linguistic assimilation by dominant cultures, as in the case of the Paiutes). Television, which Michael Krauss called “cultural nerve gas,” has also played a pernicious role in the loss of native tongues. But above all, the main culprit is globalization and its attendant displacement, which has meant increased migration from the rural periphery into urban centers, where newcomers are forced to adapt to new cultures and languages. “When you move from a rural area to a big city where you don't speak the language, simple survival becomes your first priority,” says Grondona. “Many of these migrants stop speaking their native language entirely. Once you lose a language you lose the traditional knowledge of that group.”

Amid this grim news, however, is a trace of hope. Some researchers believe that this “dual extinction crisis,” can actually offer a new way forward in conservation. A 2014 [World Wildlife Fund](#) report asserts that a joint effort between environmentalists and cultural preservationists would have a “double payoff” – not only preserving our biological and cultural diversity but also ensuring that traditional environmental knowledge can be shared and adapted to help protect local ecosystems, landforms, and cultural sites.

Which is to say, the effort to save Northern Paiute is not ultimately about building mere lists of words; it is a means of preserving a language and a way of life uniquely adapted to the Great Basin. In turn, as this new line of thinking suggests, we may find that the Northern Paiute language is a key tool in helping us better understand and protect the threatened terrain of the Great Basin.

After my visit to Bridgeport, on a searing day in late June, I drive east out of California's Owens Valley, following a Chevy pickup into the sage and piñon-stippled high country of the White Mountains. Behind the wheel of the Chevy is Northern Paiute elder Marlin Thompson.

Thompson has traveled from his hometown of Yerington, Nevada, on his monthly rounds as a manager of the USDA's Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, delivering food to poor and elderly members of the Northern Paiute and Shoshone tribes in the Owens Valley and the remote Fish Lake Valley, on the eastern slope of the White Mountains. In addition to his “day job” with the USDA, Thompson is an artisan and archivist who is documenting the steady disappearance of Northern Paiute language and culture.

We continue east, climbing toward the 7,300-foot summit of Westgard Pass. After dozens of hairpin turns, Thompson pulls over and walks a little way up a dirt road, into a small side canyon with stands of piñon pines. Northern Paiute, he says, survived in remote valleys and canyons just like this one. “Eventually some people escaped from the army and the forts and came back to their homeland. The older generation kept the history going,” Thompson says. “That's why we have a language at all today.”

The air is notably cooler up here, 4,000 feet above the floor of the Owens Valley. Thompson sits down on a stump, scanning the trees for cones. Several years of severe drought have taken their toll and the branches of many trees have turned an ominous yellow – signs of a bad year for the tribe's annual pine nut harvest, he fears.

A large and imposing man, Thompson wears dark sunglasses, which sit atop his wide nose and conceal sad eyes. A ponytail runs midway down his back. Traditionally, families lived together in extended groups, Thompson says. As a child he slept under the same roof with six or seven other family members – brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents. This arrangement served Native people for millennia, allowing them to forge close familial bonds and establish an effective division of labor. The elders would teach the children while the men and women were away hunting and gathering. In oral cultures this was the critical vehicle by which traditions and language were passed down from generation to generation.

But nowadays, those extended familial bonds have been severed. Children move away for jobs in cities such as Reno or Las Vegas while the elderly are left alone. In the Fish Lake Valley, where Thompson is traveling today, many of the Shoshone elders live in isolated homes that lack electricity or running water. “It’s a hard life, but it’s the life they are used to,” he says. “They don’t know any other way. But most don’t have any family around to help them.”

The families of the Fish Lake Valley call Thompson by the sobriquet “Numaga,” after a famous Paiute leader. “He was a great warrior, but the name itself means ‘giver of food,’” Thompson explains. I climb into Thompson’s truck and we take a detour, into the bristlecone pines. The trees, among the oldest living things on Earth, grow near the timberline, at about 10,000 feet. In a secluded grove on the backside of the mountain is “Methuselah,” a tree that emerged from the rocky soil more than 4,000 years ago – a sapling when the precursor of Northern Paiute, a proto-Uto-Aztecan language, was spoken across the Great Basin.

From a bare ridgeline, a sweep of the Northern Paiutes’ ancestral territory can be seen – the jagged summits of the eastern Sierra Nevada diving sharply into the pale expanse of the Owens Valley, decimated by water diversion projects in the early twentieth century. From this high perch, one can imagine the tribe’s various bands scattered in small enclaves across the dry valley – in places where alpine streams burst from the mountain valleys and onto the valley floor, in sheltered canyons where water is sweet and game abundant.



photo Jeremy Miller

Forged over millennia, Northern Paiute is a lexicon of navigation, of hunting and gathering, says Native archivist Marlin Thompson.

Their language is a lexicon of navigation, of hunting and gathering, Thompson says. It is a tongue forged over millennia as the Northern Paiute people negotiated the arid basin and range landscapes of eastern California and Nevada. But it’s important to remember that the region was not always defined by scarcity. “Prior to the drought, there was a lot of water here,” Thompson says, describing the vast lakes scattered throughout Great Basin during the Pleistocene. “The old songs and legends tell about the water and animals and fish, the sort of food you’d find near large bodies of water.”

The ancestral homeland of the Paiutes extends from Mono Lake in the south, east to Nevada and north into Idaho and Oregon. Today, there are more than 20 recognized bands, each defined and named for the unique traditional food source found in a particular region. The band

affiliated with Mono Lake, for example, refers to itself as the *Koodzabe Duka'a*, or “brine fly pupae eaters” – a traditional food source found in the saline waters of Mono Lake. The band that hails from the Sweetwater Valley of Nevada – some 50 miles to the north, refer to themselves the *Pehabe Pa'a*, or the “pine nut eaters.” The geographic isolation of these far-flung bands played a role in the development of disparate dialects.

But today isolation has transformed into deprivation. Thompson paints a picture of a fragmented people, disconnected from their land and language. “There’s no use for any of these things anymore – how to gather food, make bowls, make arrowheads – things that people once depended on,” Thompson says with a waver in his voice. “The language is where that knowledge is kept. But it will all be gone in 10 years or less.”

Thompson slides a CD into the player. The background pops with static before a faint drum can be heard. Then a voice emerges, thin and haunting, the beat, insistent and dirge-like. To my untrained ear, the words are like water, each flowing imperceptibly into the next. Thompson says the singer was a well-respected elder named Ed Williams, whom he recorded in the 1990s, when Williams was in his 90s. “He’s talking about the big bull pines around Mono Lake,” Thompson explains. The song is old, depicting the eviction of the Paiutes by US soldiers in the 1860s. “The Paiutes are fighting the soldiers. The soldiers have long swords and they are trying to stab the Indians as they are dodging in and out of the trees.”

Another song comes on, this one telling of a Fourth of July celebration on the Walker River Reservation, in western Nevada. Again, Thompson translates:

July, July, on the Fourth of July, I will go to Schurz. I will stand in the shade under the tall trees where the cool breezes blow. I will watch the people play hand game.

“Then he asks the Creator to bless every step of his way home,” Thompson concludes, as the song trails off into a wall of digital snow.

A couple of weeks after my visit with Thompson, I travel to the town of Nixon, Nevada, near Reno, on the south shore of Pyramid Lake. I have come to meet with elder and noted storyteller Ralph Burns, who works at the Pyramid Lake Paiute Museum. On the day of my visit, there’s a threat of storms and flash floods. Like the Great Salt Lake, Pyramid Lake is a remnant of the Ice Age Lake Lahontan, a massive body of water reduced to a fraction of its former size since the retreat of the ice sheets began 12,000 years ago.

I find Burns seated in the museum’s stockroom, a ball-cap that reads VIETNAM VETERAN pulled low over his friendly eyes. Burns is a storyteller and preservationist – and it’s fitting that his work is being carried out at Pyramid Lake. It’s not only the place he was born, but where, more than a century and a half ago, the erasure of Northern Paiute culture began in earnest. The Paiute War of 1860 started when White settlers in the nearby town of Williams Station kidnapped two Paiute children. In reprisal, the Paiutes ambushed the settlement, managing to free the children but killing several settlers in the process. The events precipitated an attack on Pyramid Lake by an armed militia, which the Paiutes successfully repelled. But a second attack by a much larger army – one led by famed Texas Ranger John Hays – drove the Paiutes out of Pyramid Lake. The survivors were sent to the Warm Springs Reservation, in northern Oregon. But Burns’s family stayed put, surviving in secluded valleys and washes around the lake until the Paiutes were finally allowed to return to the Pyramid Lake Reservation in the 1870s.

“Every time an elder dies it’s like closing down a library.”

One consequence of this stubborn familial attachment to the land, says Burns, was a childhood immersed in the local landscape, culture, and language. Burns recalls crawling through ditches and climbing over rugged mountainsides. He lived with his grandmother in a household where

the old ways of hunting, gathering, and cooking were practiced – and where Northern Paiute was spoken exclusively. He remembers listening to his grandmother and the other elders tell the old stories, many of them about the prophecies of Wovoka, the Paiute mystic and creator of the Ghost Dance movement, which was said to have the power to bring back the dead and drive White interlopers out of Indian lands.

“I kick myself in the butt today because I should have paid more attention,” Burns says. “I could hear them talking, you know – talking about the old, old ways. I can still hear them today, in my memory.” His idyllic childhood ended abruptly, however. He was drafted for Vietnam, where he served a harrowing tour as an infantryman. After the war, Burns returned to his job as a painter in the Bay Area. Then, in the 1990s, he came back to Pyramid Lake, taking a job as a janitor at the museum. Around the same time, researchers had completed a survey of speakers in the communities of the Pyramid Lake Reservation and found that of the 1,700 people living there, only 71 spoke the language fluently. All were over the age of 65. Today, says Burns, only about four fluent speakers of the Pyramid Lake dialect remain. “I can count them on one hand,” Burns says. “Every time an elder dies it’s like closing down a library.”

Faced with such dire numbers, Burns set about scouring his memory, collecting fragments of stories heard decades ago in his grandmother’s house. During his 20-plus years at the museum, Burns was promoted to the position of “storyteller” (though “building maintenance” is still part of his job title), compiling thousands of Northern Paiute words in the Pyramid Lake dialect along with hundreds of stories – ones he has recited to diverse audiences, from local schoolchildren to elected officials in Washington, DC. In 2013, he received a National Endowment of the Arts award for his efforts.

In addition to collecting stories, Burns has also been instrumental in establishing a Northern Paiute language program in the Washoe County high schools. Today, along with the typical offerings such as Spanish, French, and German, Northern Paiute is an elective that can be used to meet the district’s world language requirement. Burns also teaches a class for adults at the community center at the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony – and he invites me to sit in later that night.

Unlike the rural settings of Pyramid Lake and Bridgeport, the Reno-Sparks colony lies in the heart of downtown. Above small wood-frame houses, the white edifice of the Grand Sierra casino cuts a rectangular swath in the evening sky. Behind the community center, children play in a wash littered with construction debris. The boys talk giddily about using the cast-off materials to build a fortress.

Inside a small modular building posted with a sign that reads EDUCATION, Burns works with two younger teachers, Stacey Burns (no relation to Ralph) and Christina Thomas, both of whom have taught Northern Paiute language classes in the Washoe County schools. “The boarding schools took our identity and pretty much our whole way of living,” says Stacey Burns, who now works as the language and culture coordinator for the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. “Teaching the language in the local schools is helping us undo that history.”

On the night I attend, there are only four students. They sit in rapt attention as Burns and Thomas write dozens of words on a board. The lesson is focused on adjectives that signify location and the cardinal directions: *kwenahanakwa* (north), *petanakwa* (south), *taba tsebooena* (east), *taba egana* (west). Burns prompts the students in Northern Paiute. “Which direction is east?” Who is sitting across from you?” The students follow along good-naturedly, laughing collectively as they try to decipher his gentle instructions. When the students get the right answer, Burns responds with a smile and an informal “cool,” or an encouraging *pesa* (good).

During a break, Christina Thomas and I sit in a small courtyard behind the classroom. Thomas, 31, grew up in Pyramid Lake and has been teaching for five years. She says

she sees her work as a small but vital part of the larger effort to preserve the tribe's identity and history. "Without our language we are just like everyone else," Thomas told me. "We lose the stories of our ancestors. Our way of life is in the language."

Thomas is also a noted Native singer and has performed across the state, recently for Joe Biden and Michelle Obama, and has used her fine voice as a teaching tool. I ask if she can teach me a song and she suggests a simple tune, one ideal for beginners like me. It's called *Taba Tseboena*, "the sun emerging song," which, as I learned earlier in class, is also the Northern Paiute term for the direction east. "TA-ba SEE-boy-na, TA-ba SEE-boy-na, ya-HAY, ya-WAY" she sings. Her voice rises and falls sweetly in the cool evening air, intermingling with the sounds of wind in the cottonwoods and the laughter of children. To my untrained ears, it is the sound of hope.

Jeremy Miller's last article for *Earth Island Journal*, "[Drowned Heart](#)," appeared in the Winter 2015 issue.



[Isabel Blondet](#)

[November 19 at 4:18pm · Edited ·](#)

After the American Civil War, several native communities, like the Ute, took in black people displaced by the war, including orphaned children. They had little to offer but they opened their homes and integrated them in their communities and families.

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[The Marshall Islands Are](#) [Disappearing](#)

By CORAL DAVENPORT and JOSH HANER

Most of the Marshall Islands rise less than six feet above sea level. For the Marshallese,

the destructive power of the rising seas is already an inescapable part of daily life.

Attachments: [image001.png](#) [American Indian Veteran Newsletter - November 2015.pdf](#)
[Sharing the Nov. 2015 American Indian Veterans Newsletter.](#)

Clan-Destine Talks “Being Native American” for Native American Heritage Month

Native American Heritage Month

Published November 30, 2015

SANTA FE –...

nativenewsonline.net|By [Levi Rickert](#)

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[November 30 at 6:00am](#) ·

Yerington Monday: Indian
Reservations Near Yerington

There are many famous Native American tribes who played a part in the history of the state and whose tribal territories and homelands are located in the present day state of Nevada. The names of the Nevada tribes included the Koso, Paiute, Panamint, Shoshoni, Walapi, Washoe and Ute tribes.



Free Webinar: Grant Writing 101

The Native Learning Center will host a free “Grant Writing 101” Webinar with an instructor from the Seven Sisters Community Development Group, LLC on December 16th from 2:00-3:00pm EST. This training is designed for staff from tribes, tribal departments, and Native nonprofit organizations to gain an introduction to the grant writing process, and is a great opportunity for finance and program staff at your Club to gain critical skills. Participants will learn about strategies to assess their funding needs and research techniques to identify appropriate funding sources. The session will also feature grant-writing tips for success.

For more information and to register, read more at [NAClubs.org](#).

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NobleCause Grants

NobleCause is hosting a grant competition to mobilize nonprofits to address the challenges facing their communities. Clubs can submit applications that outline their innovative solutions and receive grants between \$6,500 and \$50,000. Learn more at www.NAClubs.org.

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### **Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Native Services Unit**

In February 2013, the partnership between [Boys & Girls Clubs of America](#) (BGCA) and communities with Native Clubs strengthened even more with the development of the [Native](#)

[Services Unit](#) (NSU)! Based out of BGCA's Southwest Service Center in Richardson, TX, the NSU is committed to addressing the challenges and issues unique to Native lands. The NSU has very ambitious goals to aid in the sustainability and development of all Native Boys & Girls Clubs. [Click here](#) for an interactive map of Native Boys & Girls Clubs.

To learn more about team members of the NSU, as well as the specific Native organizations team members serve, click on their names below.

### **Teresa Walch, National Vice President of Specialized & Organizational Development, BGCA**

Teresa Walch is the National Vice President of Specialized & Organizational Services for Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Teresa has worked in the Boys & Girls Club Movement for over 15 years; of which 6 years have been with the national organization.

Previously, Teresa was the CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Abilene, TX and CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Benton County, AR. Prior to joining the movement, Teresa held the position of Finance Director for the Department of Defense AAFES Europe, served as a juvenile probation officer, a Department of Defense elementary school teacher and Schools Officer for the Department of Defense Europe.

As the National Vice President of of Specialized & Organizational Services, Teresa leads the Native Services team that provides customized services to Native organizations throughout the US. She also leads the Club Advancement team that provides turnaround and transformation services to underperforming organizations. She oversees the Club Financial Service department that provides on-site consultation, training and audit oversight for all Boys & Girls Club organizations. Board Leadership Services is also led by Teresa and provides board training, award programs and resources to local organizations and national staff. She also works with various national partners throughout the US on special projects that advance local organizations.

Teresa holds a Bachelors degree in Business Administration with a minor in Education and a Masters Degree in Human Relations.

Teresa is a speaker on the topic of Women in Leadership and Youth issues and was nominated by the Department of Defense Schools Europe as one of the 10 Outstanding Young Americans. She has received numerous awards to include the Commanders Distinguished Civilian Service Award and the BGCA Eroll Sewell Leadership Award. Teresa's family was also selected as the Family of the Year representing Dyess Air Force Base, Texas.

### **Carla Knapp, National Director, Native Services, BGCA**

### **Linda Wiltse, Director of Organizational Development, Native Services, BGCA**

### **Kelly Concho-Hayes, Director of Organizational Development, Native Services, BGCA**

**Tim Reiplinger, Director of Organizational Development, Native Services, BGCA**

**Linda Ashley, Club Liaison Services Specialist**

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### **For BIE Schools Transitioning To Tribal Control, The Shift Isn't Easy**

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) funds nearly 200 schools across Indian Country, but fully one third of those schools are still run by officials in Washington,... [kjzz.org](http://kjzz.org)

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