



**“DON’T FALL INTO THE TRAP OF THINKING THAT YOU CAN’T DO IT JUST BECAUSE YOU HAVEN’T SEEN IT.”**



Kenneth “Tuffy” Helgeson 22  
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Tuffy Helgeson believes that cultural identity is something everybody needs and everyone has regardless of social circumstances. “The majority of students in my school,” he says, “have never had a first time look at cultural practices of their people. It’s something that every one of them wants, but they have no avenue to get to it.”

Growing up on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Tuffy was told that the Assiniboiné (Nakoda) language was not practical anymore. “It was almost an embarrassing thing for high school students,” he says. “They had no use for it. It was only used in ceremonial things which kids didn’t participate in.” But Tuffy’s uncle knew better. “Our ancestors didn’t speak English,” he reminded Tuffy. “So, if you want to learn your culture, you’d better learn the language.” Tuffy did just that. Today he is the Class 7 language instructor at Hays-Lodge Pole High School, as well as a certified traditional games specialist.

Tuffy grew up with the Nakoda language being his second language, but when he moved in with his grandmother, a native speaker, he began to use Nakoda as if it were his first. There are only 25 fluent speakers left on Fort Belknap, and he is the youngest. The rest are in their seventies and eighties. But Tuffy is trying to make it more accessible to youth both in school and in the community. He works hard to create situations where it can become a living language. He helped start round dances in the winter where kids can sing and dance and speak the language in a fun atmosphere. He was also part of a committee that started a powwow, which his community hadn’t had in 7 years.

“The biggest thing that always pushes me,” says Tuffy, “is the fact that we’re tied to all these things in our culture—the stories of creation and the balance of the world, and how everything needs to be in place so everything can maintain. Our language is one of those things. It has to be in place in order for things to make sense.”

“AN OLD MAN ONCE TOLD ME, AS LONG AS THERE IS AN EARTH YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE YOUR CULTURE BECAUSE EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW IS RIGHT OUT THERE ON THE EARTH. SO PAY ATTENTION TO THINGS AROUND YOU, BECAUSE YOU ALWAYS HAVE ACCESS TO IT IF YOU KNOW HOW TO LOOK FOR IT.”

