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*"I love and work and sing  
I listen to the Spirit.  
In all things I speak my mind.  
I walk without fear.  
I am Cherokee."*

*Marilou Awiakta (Cherokee), Song of the  
Grandmothers (Awiakta, M., 1997)*

# **THE ATSE AN IMMERSION MODEL THAT HOLDS KITUWAH THE KEY TO THE FUTURE OF THE ACADEMY CHEROKEE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

## **THE ATSE KITUWAH ACADEMY – CHEROKEE IMMERSION PROGRAM**

Facing the magnificent new home of the Atse Kituwah Academy (New Kituwah Academy), more than one hundred visitors sat in a half circle enjoying the warm October sun. They were waiting for the Grand Opening Celebration to begin. Cherokee words began to gently float through the fall air when elders of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the United Keetowah Band of Cherokee, and the Cherokee Nation opened the celebration with prayers. Cherokee words soared skywards when renowned Cherokee vocalist Paula Nelson sang the Cherokee anthem. Cherokee words strung into sentences, songs, prayers, stories, and oral teachings form the invisible bond between past generations, the audience honoring the mission of the academy, and the lively young children dressed in traditional Cherokee attire who carried the ribbon to be cut to officially open the Atse Kituwah Academy on this warm October afternoon (Kituwah Celebration Program, October 7, 2009).

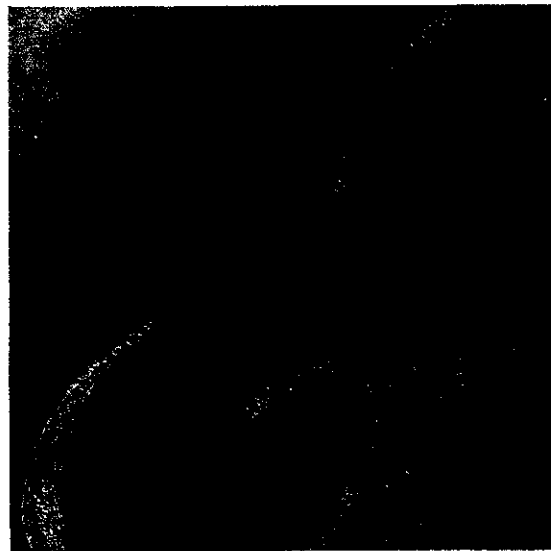
The Academy houses the new Cherokee immersion school in Cherokee, North Carolina. Cherokee is located on the Qualla Boundary in the mountains of the western part of the state, the contemporary homeland of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). In 2005, a comprehensive study of the health of the Cherokee language revealed that of a population of over 10,000 EBCI members, only about 420 members were fluent speakers. Of these, 72% were older than 51 years. Only 2% of all households used the Cherokee language at home. The study estimated that the last fluent speaker will pass away in about 25 years (Kituwah Celebration Program, October 7, 2009). The EBCI has reacted forcefully to these dire statistics. Two years after the publication of the study, the Kituwah Language Revitalization Initiative was in place to guide a comprehensive multi-pronged tribal effort to save and revitalize the Cherokee language. Supported by the tribal government and supplemented by programs to re-establish public usage of Cherokee in local media and the community at large, the immersion school has become a key component of the Kituwah Initiative (see below). In addition to supporting the

Atse Kituwah Academy, the EBCI has forged a partnership with Western Carolina University (NC) to create teaching licensure programs for language teachers through university courses and internships and to conduct language revitalization research and scholarship. In October of 2007, the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina, Northeastern State University, and the United Keetowah Band of Cherokee Indians formed the Cherokee Language Consortium to unite linguistic resources and organize joint programs to revitalize and strengthen Cherokee language. Such unity of purpose and action is firmly grounded in the knowledge that "the values, culture, and spirituality of Cherokee peoples are embodied in our language and culture" (Kituwah Celebration Program, October 7, 2009).

## **CHEROKEE HISTORY AND LANGUAGE**

The traditional homeland of the Cherokee encompassed over forty thousand square miles and extended across eight states, including North and South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. The near destruction of the Cherokee nation culminated in the forced removal of fifteen thousand Cherokee men, women, and children during the infamous Trail of Tears, 1838-1839. In the twenty-first century, the Cherokee constitute the largest American Indian tribe in the United States with over 300,000 members. Cherokee, a member of the Iroquoian language family, is now spoken mainly in two dialects, the Middle dialect among the EBCI, and the Overhill dialect among members of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. Despite its gravely endangered status, Cherokee speakers constitute the seventh largest group of indigenous language speakers in the United States and Canada (King, D., 1988).

Today's perilous state of the Cherokee language is not simply an accident of history, nor is it an isolated incident when compared to the status of other North American indigenous languages. It is estimated that at the beginning of the European invasion of



"Turtle Island", the indigenous name of the Americas, a minimum of sixty-two language families existed, all of whom sub-divided into almost countless local languages. Numerous language isolates were spoken in addition to the more than sixty-two language families. It is a widely shared characteristic of North American indigenous languages, including Cherokee, that a sentence can be expressed in just one word composed of multiple syllables (polysynthetic language structure). Languages became extinct or threatened by extinction through two devastating European imports: contagious diseases and colonialism (Bender, M., 2007).

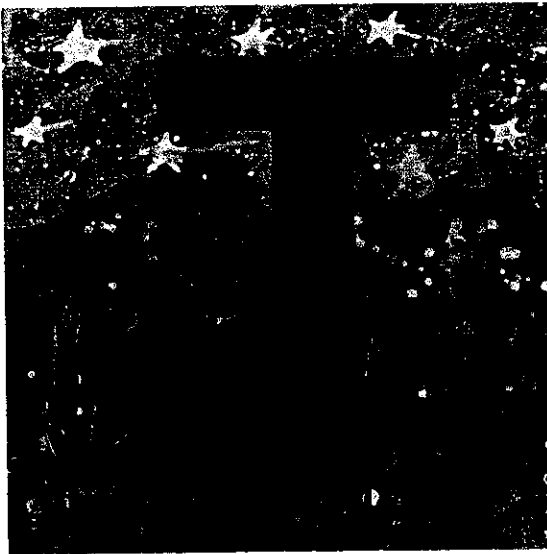
Native Americans had no immunity against the European transmission of measles, smallpox, influenza, diphtheria, cholera, bubonic plague, and tuberculosis. It is estimated that over 90% of indigenous populations in Mesoamerica died of epidemics between 1519 and 1619. From Mesoamerica, epidemics swept north through Spanish Florida. The English brought diseases to the Atlantic coast with equally devastating results. Colonialism worked toward the destruction of indigenous peoples, their languages and cultures through forced removals from their homelands, through enslavement, through destruction of traditional economies, and most significantly, through forced assimilation (Waselkov, G., Wood, P., & Hatley, H., 2006).

Whereas early missionaries such as the Jesuits made an attempt to learn indigenous languages and practice bi-lingualism, the United States government enforced assimilation through the creation of boarding schools, where children were strictly forbidden to speak their native languages, and were taught to be ashamed of their language and heritage as "primitive" and "heathen". In her remarks at the Grand Opening Celebration of the Atse Kituwah Academy, Renissa Walker, tribal manager of the Kituwah Preservation and Education Program (KPEP) and an immersion parent, powerfully evoked memories of EBCI members who attended Boarding School in Cherokee and were not allowed to speak their native language.

And yet there is also a remarkable story of resistance and pride in the Cherokee language to counterbalance the destructive impact of European invasion. Throughout history, the Cherokee people strove to maintain control over educating their children and young people by adapting oral usage to writing and by creating Cherokee educational institutions. By 1851, young Cherokee men and women were able to attend Cherokee seminaries in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. A brilliant Cherokee linguist, Sequoyah (born ca. 1778) developed a Cherokee syllabary in 1821, which the Cherokee people rapidly adopted. The first Cherokee newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix, used the syllabary from its inception in 1828. The Atse Kituwah Academy is the most recent example of Cherokee educational leadership (Conley, R., 2007; King, D., 1988).

## BACKGROUND ON THE CHEROKEE IMMERSION PROGRAM

The Cherokee Language Program began its journey to establish an immersion program in 2004 through several collaborative projects with the local community that provided a support network for the program initiators. In the spring of 2004 a partnership with Tribal Child Care made it possible to open the first immersion class for seven children ages two to six months in the infant/toddler wing of the Dora Reed Center, a preschool located in Cherokee. In the six months that followed, the program merged with



Cultural Resources to form the Kituwah Preservation and Education Program (KPEP) that focused on immersion education, community language programs and cultural resources. From 2005-08, the program worked to build stronger ties with the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetowah Band of Cherokee in Oklahoma and to increase the number of students in the program. A partnership with Western Carolina University (NC) and Northeastern State University (OK), and the Cherokee Nation established support for the language revitalization initiative as well as collaboration to share research and resources. The EBCI began another partnership in 2009 with the Cherokee Central Schools that led to the founding of the Atse Kituwah Academy as a satellite program under their auspices (Kituwah

Celebration Program, October 7, 2009).

The Atse Kituwah Academy (New Kituwah Academy) represents the future of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). The community's unification efforts in recent years demonstrate its dedication and commitment to the school's mission to revitalize and sustain the Cherokee language and culture. A distinguishing feature of the Atse Kituwah Academy's immersion program is that children begin their language experience at age two. Currently, 27 children are enrolled in the pre-Kindergarten program (ages two to five), and six in the Kindergarten program (Kituwah Celebration Program, October 7, 2009). The immediate and long-range plans for the Academy are to provide an immersion program in Cherokee for pre-Kindergarten through grade 12, adding a grade of children ages one to two in 2010, and birth to one year in 2011.

## ATSE KITUWAH ACADEMY MISSION STATEMENT

"The Kituwah Academy provides a nurturing learning environment in a language immersion setting where students, families, and the community work in partnership to rekindle our language and to instill pride in being 'Kituwah First.'

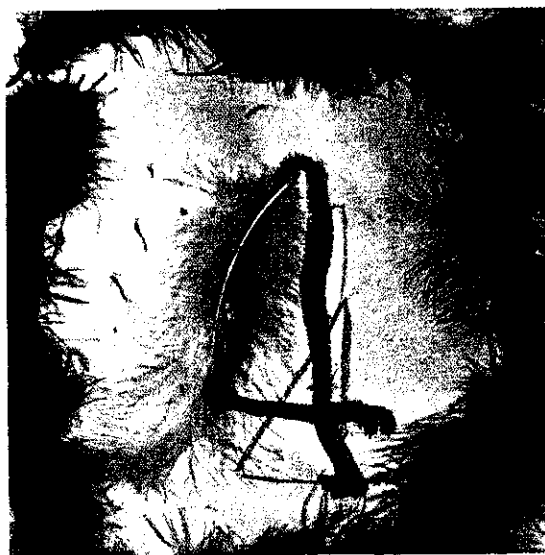
**We believe that:**

- "Kituwah First" is the primary focus of the Kituwah Academy. Cherokee language, culture, traditions, and history are the foundations of the school and its instructional programs.
- The development of a second language enhances all areas of students' academic development. Challenging education experiences are provided in order to maximize brain development, especially in the first five years of a child's life.
- Instruction is student-centered, provided in a loving, nurturing environment. Learning occurs best when it is hands-on, experiential, and richly contextual.
- The tradition of helping those who need help, Gadugi, will inspire a sense of community and instill cultural pride in students.
- Parents and families have the first responsibility in educating their children. Strong parental commitment is essential in reaching our vision of producing fluent speakers.
- The fluent speaking community is the heart and soul of AniKituwagi. Without the language, we cease to exist as Kituwah." (Kituwah Celebration Program, October 7, 2009)

The criteria for admission to the Atse Kituwah Academy reflect the high level of responsibility of the stakeholders involved.

in the immersion program. According to Gilliam Jackson, Atse Kituwah Academy Administrator, the admissions process begins with an interview that the selection committee conducts with the parents of the prospective student. In order for the child to be considered seriously for admission, parents must demonstrate commitment to the school's mission to sustaining the language and culture. One criterion for admission is clear evidence of the parents' interest in the Cherokee language. This can be demonstrated in a variety of ways including classes in Cherokee the parents have taken and family associations with the remaining speakers of Cherokee. The selection committee is also interested in knowing how the parents will support the students' language development, asking, for example, if there are family members who can and will speak Cherokee with the students and the frequency of involvement with these family members (Personal Interview with Gilliam Jackson, October 18, 2009). Parents are expected, to the best of their ability, to support language use in the home and to provide opportunities for their children to interact on a regular basis with family members and others who speak Cherokee so that they are able to further their proficiency development outside of school. Actively involved as volunteers in the classroom and participants in school events and Kituwah Preservation and Education Program-sponsored activities such as the annual Kituwah Celebration and the Language Revitalization Symposium (Walker, R., 2009), parents of children in the Cherokee immersion program also play an important leadership role. The Cherokee Immersion Parents Board serves as a means of communication between the Board, the parents of students in the program, the Kituwah Preservation and Education Group, administration, and staff. They also coordinate fundraising events, programs, and activities for the school. The Board members' vision is to immerse themselves in the life, language, and love of their children (Parent Board Bylaws, accessed October 25, 2009 from [www.fluent1.com](http://www.fluent1.com)).

The Atse Kituwah Academy employs teachers who are speakers of Cherokee. Teachers of pre-school age children hold a North Carolina license for pre-Kindergarten, and those who teach in the elementary grades hold the license for grades K-5. Currently, there are eight language specialists and three assistants in the pre-Kindergarten program and one Kindergarten teacher. The immersion program follows the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, and the Cherokee Language Consortium meets regularly to assist the school with the development of the language used in the curriculum that is adapted from the Cherokee Nation Curriculum. This collaborative plan is another means to document the Cherokee language formally and ensure its survival for many years to come (Walker, R, 2009). The teachers rely heavily on the Sequoyah Syllabary for developing the students' literacy. According to Gilliam Jackson, the school faces challenges in finding appropriate resources to use to teach reading and writing, and they work closely with the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma to find authentic materials and books to use in instruction



(Personal Interview with Gilliam Jackson, October 18, 2009). The immersion program leaders also work closely with specialists in the local community who assist with language and translation needs and finding appropriate cultural resources.

The Kituwah Preservation and Education Program currently offers a language career plan to encourage community members' involvement in educational experiences affiliated with the immersion program. There are in-service training and professional development available for the four career paths identified as critical to the survival and growth of the Academy: Community Language Instructor, Language Specialist Assistant and Instructional Assistant in grades K-5, Language Specialist in grades K-5, and elementary grades teacher in grades K-5. The present Community Language

Instructor is proficient in Cherokee and is able to write phonetically using the Sequoyah Syllabary and translate from English to Cherokee and Cherokee to English. The Language Specialist Assistant and Instructional Assistant are fluent in Cherokee, complete coursework in child development at the local community college, and work in the Kindergarten through grade 5 classrooms. The Language Specialist is fluent in Cherokee and has completed advanced coursework in child development. This specialist is assigned to work in an elementary grades classroom. The Academy Teacher who is not Cherokee, is a licensed elementary grades teacher and receives specialized in-service training and professional development from the Cherokee Central Schools (Walker, R., 2009). Western Carolina University offers a program in Cherokee Studies to enhance these career paths.

It is essential to the program leaders that they nurture and support the teachers in the Academy because their expertise is critical to the long-term goals of the program. The enrollment in the pre-Kindergarten through Kindergarten classes has been purposefully monitored and kept at a low number so that teachers will feel positive about their work with the youngest children in the immersion program and will want to continue for many years as language specialists. One way that the program is providing additional support to the immersion program is through the Second Language Learners Mentors Program. These are students living in the community who have demonstrated a willingness to learn the language and an interest in teaching. They receive training in the

summer beginning at age nine or ten in both language and teaching, and at the age of 14, they become interns, serving as instructional aids in immersion classrooms. One such young Cherokee woman who is a Second Language Learner, Kelly Murphy, dedicated several years to learning Cherokee so that she could work with the very young pre-school children. Interviewed to become an intern at age 15 and selected for fluency in the language and passion for teaching in the immersion program, she is today, at the age of 20, pursuing a degree in Early Childhood Education. Kelly's career choice is evidence of how the new generation of speakers plays an important role in the revitalization

efforts (Personal Interview with Gilliam Jackson, October 18, 2009). This unique feature of the immersion program, which aims to provide additional speakers of the Cherokee language in the classroom, has the benefit of offering young people the opportunity to gain proficiency in Cherokee through interactions with the youngest learners in the program, thus increasing the number of speakers of Cherokee (Walker, R. 2009).



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## THE FUTURE OF THE CHEROKEE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The success to date of the revitalization efforts to sustain the Cherokee language and culture in this small community tucked away in the mountains of western North Carolina has made a positive impact in many ways. According to Gilliam Jackson, there is an enormous amount of pride in the language and culture that has grown significantly over the past five years. Enrollment in adult Cherokee language classes has increased, reflecting a desire to support and promote the revitalization efforts. The movement to ensure that the language and culture survive has energized the community, and there is good reason to believe that the children who have been a part of the Cherokee immersion experience at the Atse Kituwah Academy will carry forward their heritage for generations to come. They are the future of the Cherokee language and culture (Personal Interview with Gilliam Jackson, October 18, 2009).

*The authors are grateful to Gilliam Jackson, the Kituwah Academy Administrator, for his advice, support, and contributions to this article.*

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## Electronic Resources about Cherokee Indian Culture, Language, and History

**Official website of the Museum of the Cherokee Indians in Cherokee, NC**  
[www.cherokeemuseum.org](http://www.cherokeemuseum.org)

**Official website of the Cherokee Heritage Center in Tahlequah, Oklahoma**  
[www.cherokeeheritage.org](http://www.cherokeeheritage.org)

**Official website of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians**  
[www.nc-chokeee.com](http://www.nc-chokeee.com)

**Official language website of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians**  
[www.fluent1.com](http://www.fluent1.com)

**Official website of the United Keetoowah Band, Oklahoma**  
[www.unitedkeetoowahband.org](http://www.unitedkeetoowahband.org)

**Official visitors' website of Cherokee, North Carolina**  
[www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php](http://www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php)

**History of the Cherokee Indians**  
[www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=56](http://www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=56)

**Cherokee legends**  
[www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=96](http://www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=96)

**Cherokee poetry**  
[www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=73](http://www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=73)