

## Tribal college's Tohono O'odham Language Center is leading effort to preserve and revitalize the O'odham language

Sells, AZ- Though many adult members of the Tohono O'odham Nation speak their tribal language fluently, each new generation of Tohono O'odham youth is becoming less fluent in their native language.

This trend is called a critical situation by tribal educators, and over the past several years Tohono O'odham Community College has joined the local community in an effort to preserve and revitalize the O'odham language.

To support this effort the college has established the Tohono O'odham Language Center, and named as co-directors Ron Geronimo and Leslie Luna. They say the center is the culmination of years of hard work and collaboration by numerous people on the Tohono O'odham Nation. Though the new Center is hosted by Tohono O'odham Community College, the co-directors emphasized that the O'odham Language Center belongs to all on the Nation and will serve the greater O'odham community.

They explain that while many adults on the Nation speak Tohono O'odham, few young people are growing up speaking the language fluently. This critical state of the language was made clear to the community in a Language Symposium at the Himdag Ki: in December 2018. The mission of the Tohono O'odham Language Center is to address that critical situation by preserving and revitalizing the O'odham language.

The O'odham Language Center is exploring immersion programs and other best practices from indigenous language centers around the world. With the help of Research Specialist Adam Andrews, the co-directors are also looking at how technology can effectively help with language preservation and revitalization. After a period of investigation, the Language Center will begin activities and programs designed to strengthen and spread the Tohono O'odham Language.

In addition, the O'odham Language Center will be a central, one-stop shop for all materials using and related to the O'odham language, in both written and audiovisual formats. The O'odham

language collection will be managed in partnership with TOCC's O'ohana Ki: (the College Library). The Center will welcome the community and will be open to the public.

Geronimo and Luna are grateful to the many partners who helped plan the center and will continue to be involved in its programs, including the Himdag Ki:, the Tohono O'odham Nation Education Department, the Baboquivari Unified School District, local Bureau of Indian Education schools, the University of Arizona's American Indian Language Development Institute, and the O'odham Piipaash Language Program.

The Language Center will work with the other O'odham-speaking sovereign nations—the Ak-Chin Indian Community, the Gila River Indian Community, and the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community—as well as with the O'odham in Mexico.

The Language Center will also collaborate with personnel and groups at TOCC who focus on O'odham language and culture. With help from TOCC's Cultural Liaison Juana Jose and Tohono O'odham Language faculty, Geronimo and Luna plan for the Center to film and interpret elder oral histories. The TOCC Himdag Committee gave input to the design for the Language Center. Geronimo, who is a member of the Himdag Committee, said he will continue to confer with the group about the Language Center's plans and activities.

Tohono O'odham Community College President Paul Robertson mentioned that the college is grateful to the Tohono O'odham Legislative Council for the funds that it appropriated for the Language Center's operations. He said, "The College is thrilled and inspired by the Nation's support for operating the Center for its first three years. Governmental support for language revitalization efforts has proven to be a powerful factor driving successful language revitalization efforts. TOCC is humbled and challenged by the opportunity to engage in this important work."

Several career positions will become available at the O'odham Language

Center: two language specialists, a multimedia specialist, and a receptionist. Various internships will be offered to Tohono O'odham Community College students.

A 5,750-square foot building on TOCC's S-cuk Du'ag Mašcamakuđ will house the O'odham Language Center. The building will include a classroom, meeting space, a recording studio, multimedia workshop, healing spaces, a kitchen, and offices. While current staff is working from home due to the pandemic, the Center may open in a temporary space at Komekuđ 'E-Wa:'osidk Mašcamakuđ, TOCC's campus in Sells, before the building is complete.

Both co-directors are fluent O'odham speakers who learned the language from their families. In another way, the two bring complementary backgrounds and perspectives to the O'odham Language Center. Geronimo is from Ge'e Oidag, Sells District, while Luna is from Ku:gaj in Gu Vo District.

Geronimo studied linguistics at the University of Arizona, has taught Tohono O'odham language and culture at both college and elementary school levels, and developed the Tohono O'odham Studies program at TOCC.

Luna majored in psychology at the University of Arizona and worked in college scholarships, admissions, and records. He has extensive experience with data collection and management. He started his career as a bilingual teacher's aide at Tohono O'odham High School at a time when most students spoke fluent Tohono O'odham. He said he is glad to be working again with the O'odham language.

Geronimo remembers contributing to an O'odham language dictionary as a volunteer in the late 1990s and at that



Tohono O'odham Language Center Co-Directors Ron Geronimo (top), M.A.; and Leslie Luna, B.A. Photos by M. Lee.

time wishing that there were a way and a place where one could focus on the Tohono O'odham language with undivided attention. His dream appears to have come true. The personnel of the O'odham Language Center will work full time on the center's mission to revitalize the O'odham language.

### Family of Delphina Lewis thanks the community

The Anghill, Jesus, and Antone families express their appreciation to the Sif Oidak District leadership, Rosary group, the Range Boss, the Anegam Community Council; workers, cooks, family, and friends for their assistance in preparation, during, and throughout the one-day burial services for our beloved Delphina Lewis on June 27, 2020. With gratitude and appreciation. Thank you.

**Tohono O'odham Nation**

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