

Heritage Voices: Programs



Anishinaabemdaa

294 River Street, Manistee, MI 49660

www.anishinaabemdaa.com

About the Program Director

Kenny Pheasant is the director and sole language instructor of Anishinaabemdaa, an Anishinaabe language program located in Manistee, Michigan. He is from the Wikwemikong Anishinaabe First Nation and grew up on the Manitoulin Island reservation in Ontario, Canada. Pheasant has been teaching Anishinaabemowin to people of all ages for over twenty years, partly because his childhood was steeped in traditional Anishinaabe language, culture, and history. "When I was growing up, everybody spoke Anishinaabemowin" recalls Pheasant. "We used it in the schools, on the playground, everywhere."



He also learned about the history of his Anishinaabe tribe through the reservation's elders and through everyday life. "My history, I was living it," he says; "It was a very important component in our daily lives." This childhood spent on the isolated reservation, learning about his people's history and culture, left Pheasant with an immense sense of pride in his identity as an Anishinaabe, and allowed him to overcome the prejudice that he faced when he left Manitoulin Island to attend high school in Espanola, a town an hour away from Manitoulin Island.

Anishinaabemdaa is the name of the program, which means "let's speak our language."

Anishinaabemowin is the name of the language.

Anishinaabe refers to the name of the nation. The names of the tribes within the nation are Ojibwe/Chippewa, Odawa/Ottawa, and Bodwe'aadamiinh/Potawatomi.

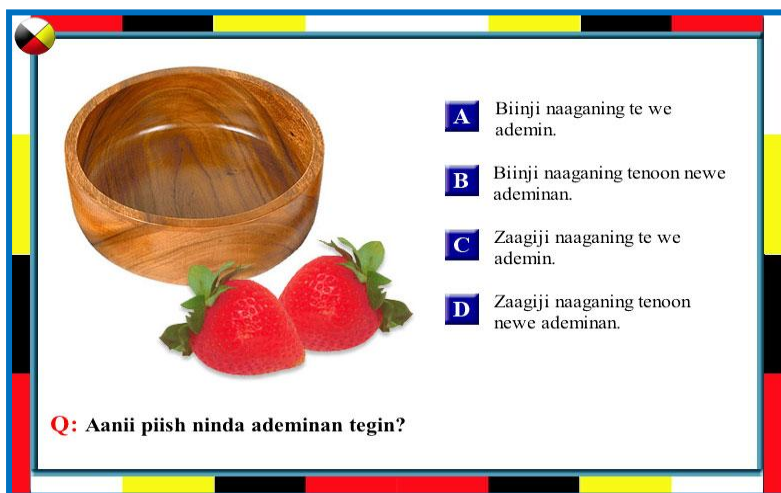
Pheasant's first teaching experience came during his high school years when, working at a meat counter in a grocery store in Manitowaning, where he began teaching Anishinaabemowin words and phrases to the customers. Unlike his fellow high school students, who used to taunt him because of his Indian heritage, the customers enjoyed speaking Anishinaabemowin. "I would ask what they wanted and they would answer in Anishinaabemowin, and the owner of the store thought it was the greatest thing in the world," says Pheasant. "It didn't offend anybody."

It was clear even in high school that Pheasant had a passion for sharing his language and culture with the world. As a result, Pheasant chose the preservation of Anishinaabe as his life's mission, continuing to share the culture and language whenever possible. "I never turn down a chance to do a presentation in a school," he says, "because I want people to understand our ways." For Pheasant, education allows him to confront the general ignorance about his people and culture that pervades North America. Ultimately, he hopes to overcome the type of prejudice he encountered.

About the program

The Anishinaabemdaa program was founded in 1988 to teach Anishinaabemowin, the ancestral language of the Anishinaabe people, to members of various Anishinaabe tribes in Michigan. Pheasant operates elementary school and community-based classes for the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians in Manistee, Michigan, and will offer a for-credit high school language class in the fall of 2009.

The program also includes a summer language camp that attracts over 700 people, two language-teaching CD-ROMs, and an interactive language [Web site](#). All aspects of the program are overseen by Kenny Pheasant.



A screen shot from the Anishinaabemowin CD-ROM, a language-learning program designed by Kenny Pheasant.

Pheasant continued his impromptu meat counter classes when he relocated to Michigan and began working at another local grocery store. There he encountered a native Anishinaabe who, upon hearing that Pheasant was fluent in the ancestral language, asked him to teach a class at the local college. With his only teaching experience limited to the phrases he shared with his customers, he reacted by saying, "I'm not a teacher."

But the native Anishinaabe was persistent, talking him into teaching the class by telling him, "You know the language. You just have to say the words." To Pheasant's surprise, his first class at Northwestern Michigan College was so popular that students had to be turned away. It was then that Pheasant found his calling as a language teacher.

Since then, the classroom-based part of the program has expanded far beyond the original community language classes. In addition to continuing the community program for the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, and the planned high school classes, Pheasant also works with fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders in different elementary schools. Pheasant has also spent time teaching classes for the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, the Little Traverse Bay Band, the Grand Rapids Indian Education center, and the Odawa institute.

"It gets a little crazy sometimes," says Pheasant, "but I love it; I love what I do." He adds that he frequently signs letters and emails by saying "My job is my life," a statement which speaks to the deep passion that he has for teaching his native language and culture.

Another indication of the commitment Pheasant has to his language is the language-learning technology he has authored. The Anishinaabemdaa Web site and the Anishinaabemowin and Anishinaabemdaa language CD-ROMs were created using a grant from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA). "I was getting a lot of phone calls, questions about the language," says Pheasant, "and it was overwhelming."

He envisioned the CD-ROMs and the Web site as going hand-in-hand with each other; if people were using the CDs and had an unanswered question, they could consult the language-learning module on the Web site. Both the Web site and the CD-ROMs are now used to teach Anishinaabemowin to more people than Pheasant could possibly reach in person. Students are forming Anishinaabemowin practice groups at universities, and schools all over the country are purchasing the CD-ROMs to use in their classrooms. Pheasant understands that teaching with technology is an important facet of his language program. "We live in an electronic world," he says, "and I'm just trying to keep up with everything."

Pheasant has had opportunities to experience first-hand the impact that this technology has had on Anishinaabemowin students. "I was at a conference," he recalls, "and this man stops and sits down with me and tells me, 'When you came up with these CDs, I had my doubts. But my grandchildren's school bought your CDs, and I've seen an amazing growth in their language, and I want to thank you.'"



Kenny Pheasant addresses the attendees of the Anishinaabe Family Language/Culture Camp.

The Anishinaabe Family Language/Culture Camp is another important aspect of the Anishinaabemdaa program. The three-day language and culture camp is now in its sixteenth year and draws over 700 people from as far away as California, Oklahoma and Canada.

The camp is a place where Anishinaabemowin is spoken first, no matter what a particular speaker's skill level. It also includes cultural presentations, craft workshops and demonstrations, traditional song and dance, and discussion of Anishinaabe spirituality.

The intent of the camp is not to teach the complexities of the Anishinaabemowin language, which Pheasant knows would be impossible in the course of three days, but rather to get people interested in their language, culture, and history. "It brings a lot of people, it brings curiosity, and it creates interest," says Pheasant, adding "When people go back home after the camp, they'll have an understanding of what the language brings to us." Pheasant believes that both the culture and the spirituality of the Anishinaabe are contained in the language, and he sees the language camp as a way to get his people interested in preserving their culture, spirituality, and history through their traditional language.

One of the aspects of Anishinaabe history that Pheasant focuses on in his classes, on the Web site and CD-ROMs, and during the language camp, is the Indian residential school system. Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing until the mid-20th century, Native American history is rife with stories of children who were forcibly taken from their families and sent to boarding schools run by the United States government or, in the case of Pheasant's family, the Canadian government. At these schools, "children were forced to assimilate to the dominant culture," says Pheasant. "They were dressed alike, taught the history of the colonial powers, and beaten if they spoke their native languages."

Pheasant's own father was a product of the Canadian residential school system. "The first time he got caught speaking his own language, he was hit in the face by a priest," says Pheasant, because Indian children were not allowed to speak their mother tongues anywhere on the property.

Despite the pressure to assimilate, Pheasant's father was lucky; he managed to hold on to his identity as an Anishinaabe. "The things he taught me were so rich in Anishinaabe culture and language," recalls Pheasant. "He would take the time to explain things in the finest detail."

Most students did not maintain their Indian identity in the way the Pheasant's father did; in fact, according to Pheasant, "most children were assimilated; they dressed just like the other person ... they learned to be servants, to work for other people."



Jeremiah Pheasant (Maahiinganhs Emshkogaabwit, "young wolf that stands strong") dancing at the Anishinaabe Family Language/Culture camp

Pheasant blames the residential schools for the catastrophic language loss suffered by American Indian communities over the last century. "I firmly believe that all Native Americans have been affected by residential schools," says Pheasant, "because if it wasn't for the residential schools, all of us would still be speaking our language." Despite the setbacks that his tribe has faced, Pheasant still has hope that Anishinaabe language and culture can be restored and once again become a source of pride. He hopes that "people will speak their language one day, the way it used to be, the way I remember it." According to Pheasant, "Anishinaabemowin is the spirit of the Anishinaabe nation. Without the language, we are totally assimilated." His hope is to stop assimilation and to make the members of his nation realize how important their language and culture are to preserving their identity as Anishinaabe.

Pheasant tells two stories that make his dream seem within the reach of possibility.

When he first started teaching children's language classes, he decided to do an experiment. "I told the kids to take a piece of paper and draw me an Indian ... Most of them, they drew an Indian with a headband and a feather. One child even drew a casino beside the Indian," says Pheasant. "So I started my program, and worked with them for several months ... and then I asked them again, in my last class, to draw me an Indian. And they drew me, standing in front of them, with my long hair and my keychain hanging off my belt." When one hears a story like this, and realizes that a child's perception of his own identity can be changed by a kind teacher in the space of a few months, the goal of revitalizing Anishinaabemowin doesn't seem so difficult.

The next story, which takes place in Oklahoma in a small town called Apache in 1982, shows how many Native American languages share many of the same words and how this creates a strong connection between different Indian nations. As Pheasant explains, he was working unloading a semi truck at a grocery store when, at the top of the conveyer belt, he noticed a tall man that he had never seen before. Pheasant explains, "He had his long hair in braids and he looked at me and said 'Hey, are you an Indian,' and I replied, 'yes, but I am not from around here.'"

The Tall Man asked me where I was from and, when I told him I was from Ontario Canada, he asked me "Oh. Do you speak your language?" I told him yes, but I didn't think he would understand it (since he was from Oklahoma and I was from Ontario.) The Tall Man was very persistent, however, and asked me how to say the word for skunk. I answered him, "Zhagaag." His eyes got bigger as he stopped the conveyer and told me "Wait, that's how we say it." "I thought that he was just kidding around," said Pheasant, "but when I asked how he said a word, it was just how I say it."

This was the beginning of a great friendship and after this encounter, explains Pheasant, "he attended ceremonies and shared his experience on the lodge with others from the Ottawa Nation of Oklahoma on the northeast part of Oklahoma. I saw him once a week and we kept comparing our language and speaking to each other until I moved." But when Pheasant started the Anishinaabe Family Language/Culture Camps in Michigan, he invited the Tall Man and his friends and family from Oklahoma to come to the camp. Says Pheasant proudly, "they did, and they have been coming since then. All of their fluent speakers have walked on into the spirit world now, so they use the CD-ROM'S, my audio CD's and the Anishinaabemdaa site to keep learning Anishinaabemowin."

To learn more about Anishinaabemdaa, [read the program profile](#).

For more information, or if you wish to contact Kenny Pheasant, visit the [Anishinaabemdaa Web site](#).

About the Author



Alexandra Tafoya Israel is a Linguistics and Languages special major at Swarthmore College and served as an intern with the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages.

Her research interests include Indigenous North American languages, language policy in the United States, and Russian and East European languages and culture.

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