



First Voices: Montana tribes working to keep elders' stories alive

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A project that keeps the ancestral stories passed down through Native American tribes alive and gives young people a chance to express themselves through digital performance and filmmaking will be expanding to the Crow reservation next fall.

First Voices works with students at reservation high schools and tribal colleges. The students work with tribal elders and storytellers to produce the videos.

“I came to know that a lot of the elders were dying, and it made me very sad because if the elders are dying the stories are dying. What are the young people holding onto?” said Preeti Vasudevan, founder of the project.

That was the impetus for forming First Voices, to keep the stories passed on through oral traditions to tribal elders and knowledge keepers alive in their first language.

“It’s harder to find than you might imagine. Many are second-language speakers. Very few are first-language speakers,” said Vasudevan.



The students do much more than just record interviews. They bring the stories alive through performance art.

“For the students who are involved with creating a digital story, they get this deep dive with all these professional artists into different artistic disciplines, and they get to find their way to tell the story. We don’t come to them and say, 'Here is what you are going to tell.' And then also the finished stories become an educational resource,” said Mary Serbe, who is also involved with the project and hosted a recent fundraiser at Kirk’s Grocery in Billings.

Shandiim Kaline is a member of the Northern Cheyenne who worked on the project during her senior year at Lame Deer High School.

“It was a way for native kids or teenagers to get their art out there to be creative. Before 'Reservation Dogs' before any of that, natives didn’t really have a voice. And if we did, most media was insensitive about their presentations. To me, it was a good way to have the outlet with our art.”

Henry Real Bird, a noted Crow poet and storyteller, spoke at the event. He talked about the importance of the project as it moves to the Crow reservation.

“To be able to tell the stories and the rhythms that are in the stories and to be able to pass them on like old times,” Real Bird says.



Those involved with the project say it serves several purposes. One of course is keeping these tribal stories from the past alive, and another is the experience the students involved gain for their futures.

"It builds leadership, team building, confidence. It heals trauma and also helps build skill sets, like I can make a film and do choreography," said Vasudevan.

For more information about the First Voices project, [click here](#).