



Learning Gitxsanimaax at Wrinch Memorial Hospital

March 19, 2020

By *Samantha Ponting, HSA Communications*

Angie Combs, aboriginal patient liaison worker at Wrinch Memorial Hospital in Hazelton, BC, recalls that staff at the hospital would occasionally ask her to teach them some words and phrases in Gitxsanimaax, the language spoken by the Gitxsan First Nation. The hospital is on Gitxsan territory, which spans 33,000 square kilometers across northwest BC.

"I started with speaking phrases like, 'How are you today,'" said Combs.

"They would forget, so I tried to spell them phonetically, and that worked really well," she said. In a matter of time, Combs decided to write a phrasebook on the Gitxsanimaax language.

Now the phrasebook is included in the orientation kits for hospital staff, said Combs.



"They're really excited about it," she said. "We keep ordering books because it's really in big demand."

Production is supported by the Northwest East Indigenous Health Improvement Committee. First established in 2005, Indigenous Health Improvement Committees bring together leaders in Indigenous health and Northern Health to help identify and decrease barriers to health care experienced by Indigenous patients, and support overall health and wellness.

Now the phrasebooks are being circulated in other corners of the community.

"Coast Mountain College wanted a bunch the other day," she explained. She said that the phrasebook has now been distributed to different community health stations and the band office.

"I am planning on taking it to the public library here in Hazelton," she said.

HSA member and settler Ruth Brady is a medical laboratory technologist at the hospital who tries to use Gitxsanimaax to make patients from the Gitxsan Nation feel more comfortable at the hospital. She often interacts with patients when drawing blood from them.

"I put a printed copy of a few statements behind the chair, so if I felt like I wanted to say 'hello,' I could. Sometimes I never could remember how it started. I've got it written phonetically. There are a couple other phrases there, like 'thank you' - 'Ham i yaa.'"



"Languages don't come easily to me," explains Brady. "I didn't do well in Latin or French either."

"But it is there so that if someone wanted to greet somebody, they could."

According to Brady, one of the easiest Gitxanimaax words is "luugwilam," which means "really good."

"Someone may ask, 'how are you doing?' And you might say, 'luugwilam,'" said Brady.



“When a doctor or nurse will say one or two words to the patient in our language, it’s like music to the ears,” said Combs.

The phrasebook is just one of the many ways Combs is working to make the hospital a more inclusive and accessible space for Indigenous patients and their families.

She works with the healthcare staff to coordinate translation, when needed, and sometimes supports Indigenous patients with completing forms and other paperwork. She provides spiritual assistance, such as smudging or connecting patients to a minister, and provides patients with culturally relevant information.

“I work on discharge plans, and it really helps that I know a lot of people that are in our area, and I know our families,” she said.

Combs said her role also involves providing information to patients on Aboriginal health and resources, and advocating for First Nations patient and family health care services.

When asked what advice she would give to health care staff who would like to make health care services safer and more inclusive for Indigenous patients, Combs said that it is important to learn about First Nations communities.

“Some staff have come to me and asked me about the community. Learn about the community and what we do,” she said.

“A lot of what I’ve heard patients say is they don’t like to be in the hospital because they don’t like institutions. If you understand where they’re coming from, it would be helpful,” she said.

Learning about history

Brady said that the Indigenous cultural awareness training offered to healthcare staff by Northern Health was educational for her.

“It’s a very good course because there’s history included. I knew a lot about the history [of colonization], but it’s even worse than I thought.”

“There’s of course a very negative history to when the settlers came. We refer to ourselves now as settlers,” said Brady.

“People came and thought they knew better and didn’t see a lot of value in the Gitksan way of life, the religion, the governance, and the feast system. Everything was made illegal. Feasts were made illegal.”

According to the Gitksan website, feasts were banned by the federal government in 1884. It describes feasts as “the central political and social institution of the Gitksan culture.” As of this time, “Anyone caught feasting can now be jailed, as can non-natives who have knowledge of a feast and fail to report it.” The potlatch - or the feast house - was illegal until 1951.

And in 1889, the *Federal Fisheries Act* was passed banning Indigenous peoples from selling fish and owning fishing licenses.

Members of the Gitksan Nation actively resisted these bans and took action to maintain the feast system, despite some being jailed.

Unjust laws targeting First Nations’ governance systems and cultural and spiritual practices existed alongside the theft of land by the colonial government. The reserve system, solidified under Indian Act, was part of a strategy to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their territories and make way for white settlement.

Without consent from leadership, the reserves of Kitwanooc, Gitanmaax, Kispiox and Glen Vowell were established, following the appointment of a joint federal-provincial commission in 1876, according to the website, which states that, “B.C. allocates 10 acres per head of household for natives. Non-natives are allowed to claim up to 320 acres per person.”

“Since contact, the Gitksan have always asserted ownership of, jurisdiction over, and the right to self-government on, Gitksan Territory,” reads the nation’s website.

This article originally appeared in the March 2020 issue of HSA's magazine The Report. To read the full issue, [click here](#).

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