

[About HGSE](#)[Impact in the World](#)[Faculty & Research](#)[Academic Programs](#)[Library](#)[Admissions & Financial Aid](#)[Professional Education](#)[News & Events](#)

- Events
- Features & Releases
- e-Newsletters
- **Ed. Magazine**
- HGSE in the Media
- Webcasts

[Alumni & Friends](#)

Ed. magazine

THE MAGAZINE OF THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Kipp's Trip

Why one Blackfoot Indian left the reservation, did tours in the Vietnam War and at Harvard, then moved back home to save his tribe's dying language

By Karen Ogden



As a small boy on the rocky plains of the Blackfeet Reservation, Darrell Robes Kipp, Ed.M.'75, had never heard of a lawn, much less ivy-covered walls. After sounding out the exotic word in a storybook — l-a-w-n — Kipp asked an elderly neighbor woman what it meant.

She told him of the close-cut grass in distant Montana cities like Missoula and Great Falls. The lush, green grounds of Harvard would have been beyond the boy's imagination: Kipp's mother finished her sophomore year in high school and his father, the third grade.

Yet somehow — thanks in part to a chance encounter in a Denver elevator decades later — the inquisitive little boy would go on to earn a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Back home now in Blackfeet country, Kipp, 63, is still fascinated by words, only this time, those of his own people.

In 1995, he cofounded the Nizipuhwahsin Center, a Blackfeet language immersion school for grades K-8 that has become a model for indigenous peoples worldwide. Tribes from as far away as South Africa come to the remote Blackfeet Reservation, often at the rate of two a month, to observe Nizipuhwahsin's work. "Language is the true, essential human quality of an individual," says Kipp, a tall bear of a man with a long ponytail and a broad smile. "We think and feel our world in the language we speak."

The 28 students enrolled at Nizipuhwahsin take almost all of their lessons, from Montana history to earth science, in Blackfeet,



FALL 2008

- ▶ [Dean's Perspective](#)
- ▶ [Letters](#)
- ▶ [The Appian Way](#)
- ▶ [Investing in Education](#)
- ▶ [In the Media](#)
- ▶ [Alumni News and Notes](#)
- ▶ [Recess](#)
- ▶ [Previous Issues](#)

LETTERS TO THE
EDITOR

letters@gse.harvard.edu

or Piegan. The school is more than a bold experiment to save the Piegan language, of which fewer than 100 speakers remain. Nizipuhwahsin, which translates as “real speak,” is Kipp’s alternative to the public school system where Montana’s Native American children have historically floundered. Indian students in Montana dropped out at three times the rate of their white peers between 2000 and 2005, according to the state Office of Public Instruction. Although Native American students made up just under 10 percent of enrollment for grades 9–12, they accounted for 23 percent of dropouts. In his own high school class of 28, Kipp graduated 27th. Half of the 50 or so classmates he started with freshman year never wore a cap and gown.

Kipp grows angry when he talks about the dropout rates and dismal test scores that are the norm across much of Indian country. “Why is it that people don’t look at that and go ‘What the . . . ?’” he asks as sheets of cold spring rain drum against his living room windows in Browning, the reservation’s main town.

The reasons Indian children struggle are many and complex: poverty and social problems at home, drugs and alcohol, and lack of parental participation, to name a few. Fathers, if they’re around at all, often remember their own failures at school and are seldom seen at public school functions. Throwing money at the problem hasn’t helped, Kipp says. Per-student spending is much higher on the reservation than for the average public school student.

To Soothe Children’s Hearts

With Nizipuhwahsin, Kipp and cofounders Dorothy Still Smoking and Thomas Edward Little Plume started from scratch.

Gone are standardized tests. Students learn to speak Piegan through the “total physical response” method, acting out phrases as they learn them. They study in one of three open, airy classrooms, with older students pulling younger classmates along.

The Piegan language is complex and descriptive. Words that are summed up by one word in English require a short phrase. The word for moose, for example, is siksitaso, or “dark moving away.”

Each morning Nizipuhwasin’s students come together with their teachers in a big circle. The morning’s lesson focuses on one word or phrase, such as wild peppermint, or ahsi sooyoopuk, which translates as “good leaf.” Where does the plant grow? How does it reproduce? What did our people use it for? The lesson may encompass biology, geography, history, and social studies.

“The approach Darrell took . . . centers on his commitment to the real uses of language,” says Jackie Old Coyote, Ed.M.’04, director of education and outreach for the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. “Let’s preserve this language by just speaking it.”

“There’s a different attainment of information,” Kipp says. “I think it’s more holistic.”

Some of the teachers are native speakers, while others have studied Piegan to become fluent. Formal English grammar classes don’t start until the eighth grade at Nizipuhwasin. That may sound

alarmingly late, but Kipp says Nizipuhwahsin students quickly catch up to and even surpass their peers as they enter public high school because they're already familiar with the grammatical structures of two languages.

"The approach Darrell took . . . centers on his commitment to the real uses of language," says Jackie Old Coyote, Ed.M.'04, director of education and outreach for the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. "Let's preserve this language by just speaking it."

While Nizipuhwahsin's curriculum is based on the immersion model, its philosophy is rooted in something less tangible. Language, Kipp says, has the power to "soothe children's hearts." Kids who learn their native tongue gain an identity that will both connect them with their peoples' past and empower them to succeed in the modern world.

Or, as they say in Piegan, *okoyi*: to have a home.

Tourists and Troop Trains

Kipp describes his own childhood on the Blackfoot Reservation as pastoral. His parents settled in the rural community of Blackfoot, 25 miles east of the stunning peaks of Glacier National Park. Now just a scattering of weather-beaten cottages and trailers, the Blackfoot of Kipp's childhood was an idyllic village, built around a Great Northern railroad refueling stop for steam engines. His father was a "gandy dancer," the slang term for a railroad laborer; his mother, a maid at the large railroad hotel that anchored the town.

"Even today if I stay in a hotel room, I leave a large tip for the hotel maid in honor of my mother," Kipp says. Tall and skinny, Kipp hung with his buddies outside the railroad hotel to gawk at well-heeled tourists. Best of all were the Korean War-era troop trains bound for West Coast forts. As Kipp and his buddies approached, hands full of money would plunge out the train windows. The boys would jog into the hotel store to buy the GIs chocolates and cigarettes, earning a few coins for themselves.

Kipp learned in a one-room schoolhouse. At lunchtime, the older boys ran to a neighbor woman's home and hauled back a pot of watery soup. His home, like most, had no electricity or indoor plumbing.

"I don't think any of us owned a bike because we didn't have any sidewalks or streets," said Roy Rides At The Door, a classmate whose horse knew the way to the Kipps' home.

"Darrell, he was one of the big, older kids," says Rides At The Door, now a retired natural resources manager who says Kipp's example inspired him to go to college. "We'd follow him around."

Like Kipp, Rides At The Door remembers his elders speaking Piegan at home, but not to their children. "They loved us and realized in that day and age that it was necessary for us to speak English," Kipp says.

Open Wounds

Today, Kipp sees his native language as a lifeline for a people still reeling from deep psychological wounds of the past. He is only two generations removed from the war, plague, and starvation

that nearly extinguished his people. When the German explorer Prince Maximilian of Wied galloped into Blackfeet country in the 1830s, he estimated the tribe's population at up to 20,000.

By 1900 most estimates put their numbers below 5,000.

Kipp's great grandparents, whose name was Last Gun, were killed in the Baker Massacre of 1870. On a cold January night, a column of U.S. Army cavalry and infantry set out for revenge against a Piegan band, led by Mountain Chief, that was involved in a series of bloody skirmishes with the U.S. forces. The troops came upon what was thought to be Mountain Chief's camp and slaughtered nearly every soul.

Today, Kipp sees his native language as a lifeline for a people still reeling from deep psychological wounds of the past. He is only two generations removed from the war, plague, and starvation that nearly extinguished his people.

However, they hadn't found Mountain Chief's band: they had attacked a smallpox camp led by the peaceful Heavy Runner. According to a National Park Service history of the attack, the 173 dead and 20 wounded were mostly women, children, and men who were too sick to fight.

It is said that Col. Eugene Baker already knew he had the wrong camp when he ordered the attack.

Joseph Kipp, the scout who led the U.S. troops to Heavy Runner's camp, later adopted the orphaned children, including Darrell's seven-year-old grandfather, in an act of contrition.

As a young man, Darrell Kipp, like many of his peers, served the same U.S. military that killed his great grandparents, "one of the absurdities," he says, "that the Indian people live with."

It was at Harvard, from the teachings of renowned African American psychiatrist Chester Pierce, that Kipp came to understand how such atrocities still echo through Native American communities. Pierce lectured on the roots of violence in cultures that have suffered "extreme environments," like those inflicted on Indian tribes. Kipp came to understand that his people were collectively suffering from something akin to post-traumatic stress syndrome. Language, Kipp believes, has the power to heal those wounds.

"The core element that is necessary for us to truly regain our equilibrium and regain our sanity is to regain the good things about our heritage," Kipp says.

Getting Here

That Kipp went to college at all was a fluke.

After graduating from the eighth grade, Kipp's parents insisted that he continue at the reservation's high school in Browning, nine miles to the west. He had learned to read early as a small boy and, despite pitiful report cards, devoured Faulkner and Hemingway novels and joined the school's oratory club.

Shortly after graduation in 1962, Kipp ran into an acquaintance, a young man who was working as a school recruiter.

"Take this," he said, handing Kipp an application. "You should go

to Eastern. They've got a nice swimming pool. They've got a nice cafeteria."

Enticed, Kipp mailed in the application. He arrived at Eastern Montana College in Billings that fall with less than \$50 in his pocket and the notion that the school was free. He had no room assignment and no meal tickets.

"I think there were other equally ill-prepared Montana farm kids," says Kipp, as he reminisced in the living room of the home he shares with Roberta, his wife of almost 40 years. "We all lived on cots for the first week."

Outside, a wet spring storm sweeps off the Rocky Mountains, pushing the reservation's creeks and rivers over their banks. Inside, the couple's five rescue cats, Buffalo Head, Zen Man, Chicago, Scar Face, and Tuxedo, compete for a spot on the couch. The warm living room is tastefully decorated with ethnic treasures, some collected by Kipp during his world travels as a filmmaker, a passion he shares with his 37-year-old son, Darren, who is studying Piegan, as is the Kipps' 15-year-old great-niece, Kelly Kipp, whom they are raising.

Beyond the rain-spattered window, plastic grocery bags that drift across the reservation flap from tree branches in the wind. An abandoned car decays in a neighbor's yard. On the way to lunch at a local cafe, a pair of soaked, muddy mutts greets Kipp. A spayneuter effort is starting to curb the reservation's stray dog problem, Kipp says, but skinny, limping dogs still roam the streets.

He could have taken his Harvard degree and settled far away from this place, where 23 percent of households reported income of less than \$10,000 in the 2000 Census. But where others see depressing poverty and despair, Kipp sees opportunity.

"That's why I moved here and that's why many of us returned," he says. "We're solution seekers."

Bonehead English

Back at Eastern, Kipp continued to face hurdles. He failed a writing proficiency test and was put in "bonehead" English, which he took three times before he passed. Eventually, though, he fell in love with the English language and declared it his major.

Two weeks after graduation in 1966, Kipp answered the Vietnam draft and was soon on his way to South Korea, where he served in a signal corps unit. He considers his two years overseas as more of an interruption than a life-shaping experience.

After his discharge, Kipp returned to Billings where he earned his teaching certificate. In 1970, the newlywed went to work as an English teacher at the reservation's Browning High School, where he was one of the few Native American instructors. He once watched a teacher drag a boy down the hall in a headlock.

"As a student I was an inmate there, and when they hired me as a teacher, I was essentially a guard," he says. He quit after only a year and went to work as an administrator for the Community Action Program, part of the War on Poverty through the federal Office of Economic Opportunity.

By 1974, Kipp was restless and



pondering grad school. At a work-related conference in Denver, he decided to take the graduate record exams, which were being held there that week. In a hotel elevator on the way to the test, Kipp struck up a conversation with a businesswoman, telling her he was there to take the exams.



"Have you ever considered Harvard?" she asked. A few weeks later, she mailed him an Ed School application packet. It sat untouched for several months. But the week before it was due, Kipp scrambled and sent it in.

He first set foot on that Ivy League grass in 1974 and frequented all of Boston's campuses to hear readings by the likes of Kurt Vonnegut and Anthony Burgess. "I was like a kid in a candy store."

But his biggest influence was Pierce, the Harvard psychiatry professor, who urged him to return home with his degree. "Do not go home and look for a job," he advised. "Go home and look for a career, a career that involves in-depth change, that involves mastering the true energy of your people."

To Have a Home

Just how Kipp would carry out Pierce's advice came from another respected elder, the late Blackfoot spiritual leader George Kicking Woman. Kicking Woman invited Kipp and other young Blackfeet people to camp along Badger Creek on the reservation for four days to learn the tribe's sacred medicine lodge ceremony. Not a traditionalist, Kipp was skeptical at first, even annoyed. He was busy. And besides, what relevance did the ancient ceremony have to his life? "Why would a person like me participate here?" Kipp asked Kicking Woman as they walked along the shore of the creek. The old man reminded Kipp that his grandparents and their parents had come to this place before him.

Then he added, "If you come to the medicine lodge, people will be glad to see you."

The young man understood.

"It wasn't a big, deep answer," Kipp says. "It was a very poignant one."

It's the same feeling he tries to instill in Nizipuhwahsin's students: *okoyi*: to have a home.

A School Is Born

One of the young people camped alongside Badger Creek that summer was Dorothy Still Smoking. Kipp and Still Smoking were discussing the chaos and social breakdown that gripped the tribe when the topic of language came up.

"Who in your family speaks the language after your grandmother passes on? Who in my family speaks the language after my parents pass on? Do we still hear it down at the post office? We were just curious, and we're kind of academic nerds," Kipp says. "Being academically trained in the Western tradition, any time you have a question you simply apply research to it."

In 1987, Kipp, Still Smoking, and Thomas Edward Little Plume founded the nonprofit [Piegan Institute](#) to study and archive the language. The institute produced seminars and scores of research papers on the Blackfeet language. To test potential language-teaching methods, the institute established a preschool for a handful of children of the researchers. From there, Nizipuhwahsin was born.

From the start, the school has operated without any state or federal funding, meaning no strings are attached.

"It gives the opportunity to an Indian tribe to exercise their full sovereign right to educate their own," Kipp says.

The \$4.4 million spent to construct and operate the school since 1995 has come almost exclusively from private foundations and donors, including the school's biggest sponsor, the Lannan Foundation, a New Mexico-based family foundation. Other sponsors include the Kellogg and Ford foundations and Western artist Howard Terpning. Jane Fonda gave the first \$100,000 to build the school's half-million dollar facility.

Tuition is \$1,000, or whatever parents can afford.

Journey Home

Early on, not everyone shared their enthusiasm for saving Piegan. Some accused him of regressing or exploiting a broken part of the culture. Others harbored bad memories of the Indian boarding schools they were forced to attend, run by the U.S. government or missionaries who punished them for speaking the native language. But Kipp says the Piegan language holds the power to heal.

When adults begin learning Piegan, "one of the first things they want to do is they want to learn enough of their language to say a prayer," Kipp says. "Language is a journey home."

When adults begin learning Piegan, "one of the first things they want to do is they want to learn enough of their language to say a prayer," Kipp says. "Language is a journey home."

With 16 graduates and at least 30 more who have spent four years or more at the school, the numbers are quickly approaching those of elders who are native speakers. Five of the graduates are in college and a sixth is studying Japanese with the Marine Corps in Japan.

Kipp considers one of the ultimate signs of success the high rate of parental participation, especially of fathers.

"They're not afraid to get involved because it's a private school

and they view it radically different than they do a public school," he says.

Nizipuhwahsin marked its 20th anniversary with an exclusive premiere in July of the PBS documentary, *Summer Sun, Winter Moon*. Kipp, who earned an MFA in poetry from Vermont College, wrote the composition's libretto.

Kipp has nurtured his tribe in other ways, too. He is an original board member of Siyeh Development, the tribe's economic development arm, which in 1995 won a high honors distinction from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development through Harvard Kennedy School. He also has served 17 years as an appellate judge for the tribal court.

But Kipp's true passion remains in saving his people's native tongue, for which his efforts have made him a leader in the language preservation movement.

"[Kipp] was the one who sounded the siren," says Old Coyote. "He wasn't the only one, but he was the one who sounded it very loudly on a national level. Most Native American students at the [Ed School] know about and admire his work. He's sort of legendary in that sense."

Ixstuyi Aputa

Arriving at the local cafe, Kipp jests with two young Obama campaign volunteers who have stopped in for lunch. An older gentleman in jeans, Stetson, and rodeo jacket pushes through the cafe's western-style swinging doors.

"*Ixstuyi aputa*," he says to Kipp after exchanging greetings in Blackfoot. "The wind is bringing a cold rain." He's Johnny Tail Feathers, a traditionalist and cowboy who tends the tribe's buffalo herd, Kipp explains.

One day maybe all Blackfeet children will be able to understand their exchange, to speak a tongue that carries the essence, the secrets of their culture. But Kipp refuses to predict whether their experiment will succeed.

If the school fails, "we would just lock the doors and turn off the lights, disconnect the water, and walk away," he says. "If people said, 'Why is that nice building just sitting there unoccupied?' We would just say, 'That is the sanctum sanctorium of the Blackfeet language and that's where it died.'"

— *Karen Ogden is a former editor with the Great Falls Tribune, where she covered rural Montana and its Indian reservations. She has written extensively on Native American issues and culture.*

photos by Larry Beckner

About the Article

A version of this article originally appeared in the Fall 2008 issue of *Ed.*, the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

[Respond to this story with an e-mail to the editor.](#)