

Courter: Harrison subject of film at Sundance

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City Beat

K. David Harrison, an assistant professor in the linguistics department at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, finds himself today in a place he never imagined he would be, and he has been in some unusual places around the world.

Harrison, a 1984 Tennessee Temple High School graduate who got his Ph.D. from Yale, spends his days researching and lecturing on the languages of the world. This weekend he is in Utah at the Sundance Film Festival discussing his role in a documentary called "The Linguists."

The documentary, created by filmmakers Seth Kramer, Daniel A. Miller and Jeremy Newberger of Ironbound Films, follows Harrison and colleague Greg Anderson as they travel to Siberia, India and Bolivia to document vanishing languages.

Harrison is the author of "When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge." He is also co-founder and research director of the Living Tongues Institute in Oregon.

Harrison's visit to Sundance is just his latest brush with celebrity. He recently appeared on an episode of "The Colbert Report" to discuss the book and his work.

"I'm embarrassed to say I didn't know who he was," Harrison said of the mock-conservative talk-show host. Friends and colleagues warned him he'd be wise to study the show before going toe-to-toe with the quick-witted Colbert.

"I prepped for it, and it helped," Harrison said. "It was amazing, and he is an amazing person. Two of his writers came up afterward and said how much they'd enjoyed the book and researching it."

Harrison said he is not much interested in the celebrity that has come his way, except that it has provided him a venue for discussing his work.

Scientists estimate that there are 7,000 languages in the world today but that they are dying at an alarming rate. Once the last speaker dies, the language is lost.

"Once it's gone, it cannot be replaced, and along with it goes some of the history of that community," Harrison said.

In many cases, the field work done by Harrison and Anderson involves finding the last one or two people on Earth who speak a particular language. These people are often in very remote parts of the

globe. One journalist likened them to Indiana Jones.

Harrison, who speaks five languages, said he feels the filmmakers captured "the spirit of science adventure."

He hopes the attention will continue what he says is a "growing global movement to revitalize language."

"There are many reasons to keep a language," he said. "A bilingual brain is smarter, and knowledge is valuable."

The key is creating an environment where kids are proud to learn and to use a second language, he said.

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