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Garrison filmmakers focus on dying languages

By [BARBARA LIVINGSTON NACKMAN](#)
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GARRISON

Three young filmmakers, including one from Cold Spring and another from Yorktown, have just completed a documentary on the world's "dying" languages. Nearly 3,500 of the world's 7,000 spoken tongues are rapidly disappearing.

Intrigued by learning that some world languages are threatened with never being heard again, the three accompanied two academic linguists around the world as they investigated languages on the verge of extinction.

They traveled to rugged terrain in Siberia, India and Bolivia to find answers and consider what forces - racism, local violence, economic upheaval - were root causes. They also went to the Southwestern United States, where at least 200 languages spoken by American Indians living on reservations are endangered.

"We really felt like the Indiana Joneses of linguistic study and moviemaking combined," said Jeremy Newberger, 33, of Yorktown, Ironbound Films' chief executive officer.

He, along with colleagues Daniel A. Miller, 35, of Cold Spring and Seth Kramer, 36, of Red Hook, N.Y., worked on "The Linguists" for nearly four years, as it became a passion as well as a professional pursuit.

"Language is so connected to culture in ways I had never thought about," said Miller, noting that it offers a bond between generations and often a secret way to talk.

"The Linguists" will be released this month, and they hope it will be featured at major film gatherings, including the Sundance, Tribeca and New York festivals.

"It was a difficult task to make a movie about language that is exciting and that people would want to see," Kramer said. "We try to find issues we think are important, and to raise consciousness. This really fit the bill and, also, the issue is completely and utterly fascinating."

Most of the dying languages are only spoken, with no written versions.

For the project, the three had to wear the same clothes for two-week stretches, camp in tents if they were lucky, and work while sick. But they said they were overwhelmed with what they learned about the differences between - and similarities among - people.

Making "The Linguists," they said, opened their eyes and provided rich, colorful material.

Johnny Hill Jr., 53, of Parker, Ariz., tells them that his native Chemehuevi tribal tongue will exist as long as he does, but not much more. He dreams in it, and English is his second language.

Raised by his grandmother, who died at 102 when he was 21, Hill completed his sophomore year of high school before beginning work as a farmer. He is now a heavy-equipment operator for the federal government.

More information

Ironbound Films works out of a Garrison-based studio along the Hudson River (where, incidentally, "Hello, Dolly!" was filmed).

It also produces business videos, podcasts and Internet-based programs. In 2006, it produced "America Rebuilds II: Return to Ground Zero," a post-9/11 film released to critical acclaim.

Check out these sites for more information:

www.thelinguists.com

www.ironboundfilms.com

www.livingtongues.org

He doesn't have any children and said there isn't anyone who wants to learn the language, and he is not sure he is capable of teaching it.

His wife is from a Nevada tribe and speaks a different Indian language.

"I know I have something special," said Hill, who lives near the Colorado River with the Mohave tribe. "I could just about cry knowing that, soon, the language of my people won't be heard anymore. But a man like me, there isn't much I can do."

Cut to the National Science Foundation, which commissioned the film. It features the work of linguists K. David Harrison, assistant professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College and research director at Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages; and Gregory Anderson, a specialist in Siberian languages and founding director of Living Tongues in Salem, Ore.

Harrison said he hoped the film "will help to raise public awareness of the problem, inspire people to study linguistics and perhaps to take up the kind of work we do."

"It also will provide a place for small and marginalized cultures, some seldom before seen or heard outside of their local villages, to reach a worldwide audience, expressing their ideas, attitudes and thoughts about cultural survival," he said.

"Small languages that have never been written, represent a link to our ancient, spoken past, containing stories, wisdom and technologies that helped humans survive and thrive over millennia."
