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This Thanksgiving, American Indian tribes aspire to save their languages and culture

Banning, CA. (November 10th, 2006) - While most Americans will be enjoying a relaxing holiday this Thanksgiving, many American Indian tribes are focused on how to revitalize their vanishing languages. Over 45 tribes are now using the revolutionary Phraselator[®], a protected US Department of Defense technology to put the beautiful sound of their language back into the homes of tribal members.

From the 1930s to the 1970s, generations of Indian kids were sent to U.S. Government boarding schools where they were not allowed to speak their native languages. Native children who did were severely punished. Some kids had their mouths washed out with soap; some were beaten. "My mother was part of that boarding school era where Indian kids were made ashamed to be Indian," said Cherokee businessman, Don Thornton. Now Thornton uses the handheld Phraselator[®], a U.S. Government translation technology to help revitalize the native languages that were decimated during that era. His company, Thornton Media, Inc. (www.ndnlanguage.com) is the only language tool company in the world devoted to American Indian languages.

The revolutionary Phraselator[®] P2, developed by defense contractor Voxel International in the aftermath of 9/11, is a handheld unit that allows the user to instantly translate spoken English words and phrases into any Native language. Over \$12 million went into R & D, funded by DARPA, the research group that developed innovative technologies such as GPS, virtual reality and the internet itself. The Phraselator[®] was created to heighten communication in combat zones to save lives on both sides of the conflict. Phraselator[®] P2 holds tens of thousands of phrases, words, stories and songs in one machine. "It's like an entire language program in the palm of your hand," said Thornton. "You don't need to be a linguist to operate it or program it."

TMI has provided on-site training to native language teachers and speakers in widespread areas of North America. During their journeys, many heart-warming stories were told. "After I played with it I cried. This will help save our language," said Jane Dumas, a Kumeyaay elder from Southern California. "I have been waiting for such a tool all my life. Phraselator[®] P2 is what I need," said Terry Brockie, a Gros Ventre language teacher in Montana. "I would recommend anyone working with languages to get a Phraselator[®]. It could possibly save a language," said Ken Tuffy Helpeson, a Nakota language teacher in Montana. "This is a very interesting tool with tremendous potential. It has the ability to focus on our language and how precise it is," said Keith Weasel Head, from the Kainai Board of Education in Alberta, Canada.

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Quinton Roman Nose, Director of Education for the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribe of Oklahoma and a Board Member of the National Indian Education Association calls the revitalization of native languages “a top priority” of NIEA in 2006. Both NIEA and The National Congress of American Indians are sponsoring new legislation to fund native language programs.

"It's ironic," said Thornton, "that this tool, created by the US Government may help to save the languages that they attempted to wipe out for generations. With Phraselator[®] tribes can now have full control over their languages without the help of outsiders. TMI don't own a database of the recordings of any tribe. The only one I own was recorded by my grandma, Lucinda Robbins, a master speaker of Cherokee."

Once California had more languages than any place on earth. Most of these languages are dying or gone. “It’s not like German or Spanish,” said an elder, “if our language dies here it’s gone forever.” On Nov 22nd, a local tribe will be recording the Cahuilla language, only a handful of speakers are left.

For more information, please contact Kara at 818.284.1707

Thornton Media, Inc.

Don Thornton (Cherokee) has been referred to by the Native American Times as Indian Country’s “hi-tech guru”. He has worked as a filmmaker in Southern California for 20 years and founded TMI in 1995 to create positive images of American Indians. Thornton is also a former Indian journalist who also worked in American Indian social services for many years. An interest in neuroscience and Cherokee led Thornton to adapt hi-tech language products to Native languages including a line of Children’s toys.

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