

## INTERVIEW WITH VENITA TAVEAPONT, TEACHER, UINTAH RIVER HIGH SCHOOL

NANCY GREEN: What is the Uintah River School?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: Uintah River High School is a charter high school, which makes it different from a regular public school. But one of the things that I find at Uintah River High School is that we have a lot more Ute students than non-Indian students. And I think we pay closer attention to how well the students are doing, and that they're successful. And I think one of the things that I stress as a teacher, is I build for success. And that's one of the things that I would like to do, is to ensure the students learn, as well as be successful at learning. And I try to help out in any way that I can. Like some people say, the art class is really easy. But one of the things that I do is I have them write papers. We do research. In my class that we have now, I'm teaching beading. And so they have to learn the history of beads. Where do the beads come from? Where do the hides come from? Where do the needles come from? Why do we use 11 needles? Why do we use a certain type of thread, and not another kind of thread? So they learn all of that. And they write a paper. And we also have tests. So it's not just learning how to bead work.

NANCY GREEN: Why is it important for the kids here to learn about beading, and about culture?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: Because they're going to be adults some day, and they are also going to be teachers, and if not in a classroom, then for their own children. And these are skills that they need to learn in order to participate in a cultural practice of keeping up the arts for our people. And at one point beading was a dying art. And I always tell them that, if they know how to bead, then they can earn a living from their beadwork -- if they had to. They have a skill that no one else can take away from them. And that they can make money in doing beadwork, or any other art, traditional art practice.

NANCY GREEN: I've heard that the drop-out rate for Ute kids is really high. Is it high? Is that a problem?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: Yes. The dropout rate for our Ute children is quite high. And I think perhaps one of the things that we need to realize, that they're in competition with the non-Indian students in the local high school -- in the public high school. And if you're not secure in your own identity, and secure in knowing your language and your culture, than you are going to have a problem anywhere you go. And if you are strong in those areas, then you're going to be strong in competing in the regular high school as well.

NANCY GREEN: Tell me more about that, why Ute kids have problems in conventional high schools.

VENITA TAVEAPONT: The reason why Ute students don't do well in high school, I think there's probably several different variables. And one of the things that I've found, in working with students in -- at the elementary level, was that we found that the students were in a learning mode called cooperative learning. And that cooperative learning means you help your neighbor. And, of course, in our culture, we help our neighbor. And the teacher that says, you do your own work, you keep your eyes on your own paper, you know, and -- that's more competitive. And our students aren't able to get away from that. And I remember from my own experience, I was in that kind of learning mode too. And so, to be competitive, it means you have to speak out. You have to be the first one to raise your hand. You have to be, you know, quite vocal. We're not taught to be quite vocal. And, even if you knew the answer, you had to be sure that was the answer. And, you know, when Johnny speaks up and gives you a wrong answer, it's okay. Because he feels secure in knowing who he is, and where he comes from. Today, our kids don't know. They're not secure in knowing who they are, and where they come from. They don't have the command of the Ute language. They may not participate in cultural practices. And so that's a part of their identity. And when you're not secure in your identity, you're not going to be willing to take that chance to give that answer and it may be wrong. So sometimes, like in my classes, what I do is I let them

practice. They practice and that's building for success. And most teachers don't have time for that. If they have 32 students in a classroom, they don't have time to build for success. They don't have time to have the students practice sometimes. And I remember being behind, and not being able to catch up because of that. I had a teacher that had two classes, and I happened to be in the third grade class. And there was a second grade class in the same classroom. And so, you know, if you're competing, and you're not from a culture that emphasizes competition, then you're not going to do as well. I'm not saying that I wasn't a good student, but I learned -- my grandfather had told me that you take the good from our culture, and what we do, and you take the good from the non-Indian culture, and you put it together, to be successful. And he said, you're going to have to talk and speak up, and you're going to have to compete with all of the students in your room -- in your classroom. And so, you know, from that - that's what we practice.

NANCY GREEN: So it sounds like traditional Ute culture doesn't stress competition. Explain that to me, in terms of education, what does Ute culture stress?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: One of the values of Ute culture is that we stress, not more competition, but more soul cooperation, and helping one another. And being in harmony with one another. Competition creates a conflict. And I'm better than you. I can do this better than anyone else. And that's not the way to be. And the way our culture and our traditional practices say is that you help one another -- and you're not any better than the next person. Because if you say that, then there's somebody else that's always better than you, for example, someone that plays basketball better than you. And that golfs better than you. That does bead work better than you. That does dances better than you. That sings better than you. There's always someone out there that does that better. So, when you put it out there, saying that you are best, then you better live up to that. And if you can't do that, then don't say that. And so we don't really stress competition. And that's a value that we didn't have in our culture. But now that's changing. You know, that's changing to where some people have put that into their family practices. And it's a good thing for some people, and it's not so good for some.

So, you know, there are limits, and people don't know how to gauge that limit.

NANCY GREEN: Do your kids, are they forced into the position now of walking between two worlds?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: Yes.

NANCY GREEN: Explain that to me. What does it mean to walk between two worlds? What's the experience like?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: Okay. You know, they have some people say that they walk in two worlds. You know, the non-Indian world and the Indian world. But one of the things that I've found, as an Indian person, is that I think you have to be strong in your own language, in your own culture, in your own identity, knowing where you come from, and in knowing where you're going and to be able to do that. If you lack knowledge, in either, then you're not going to be able to do that. If you have knowledge of non-Indian culture, non-Indian world, non-Indian language, you know, you're going to be able to do that successfully. But if you don't, if you don't have a good command of that, then you're not going to be able to do that. And I found that most of the Ute people that are successful can do that, but they also know their own language. They also know your own culture, and participate in the cultural practices, traditional practices, and they're able to move easily between the two worlds. And I find that, in my own experience, that in living in the Uintah Basin, and working with what we used to call the good ol' boys, you know, I knew what kind of language to use with them. And it's English, but it had to be the way they thought. And I couldn't do that if I didn't have knowledge of them. And, in working with my own people, I have to have knowledge about the language and the cultural practices--because if I didn't, then I would be ignorant, or looked at as ignorant, and being impolite and disrespectful. And so that helps me in my other world. And I think the students today, or young people today, have a hard time, because they don't have that knowledge of being able to move easily between the two. And sometimes I see them hurting because of that, not being able to. And my experiences, I try to share with them,

so they'll be able to see, and be able to do that.

NANCY GREEN: Why is it important for you to teach Ute kids Ute language?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: I think teaching here, and teaching Ute language, and the arts that I do here, is important because they need to learn how to be Ute. And I see too many of the students coming into this high school now, that have little knowledge or no knowledge of being Ute. And what I mean by saying being Ute is being able to communicate. Being able to have knowledge of Ute cultural practices. When I say cultural practices, it's not just beads and feathers. It's how your family is. It's the values that your family has. If education is a value, then that's going to be a part of your cultural practice. If religion is a value, then that's going to be a part of your cultural practice, whether if it's Christianity, or whether if it's traditional religion. Traditional spirituality. Then that's going to be a part of that. And so culture, to me, encompasses everything, and not just beads and feathers, like these people make it out to be. And when I say culture, there really is no separation from culture and language. Those things are together because -- well, how could you communicate if you didn't have knowledge about the culture? You know? There are certain things that we do, and certain ways that we say, things to one another. Or even to begin a group. You know, sometimes people don't know how to act in a group, or in public. And so -- or even how to act one on one. And so that's a part of that cultural practice. So I want the kids to be exposed to that. I want the students to be able to move easily from one place to another. And then we always get into discussions with -- about those white people. Yeah. And I want them to be able to recognize that, but also be able to deal with it. Be able work with non-Indian people. Because it -- you know, non-Indian -- not all non-Indian people are bad. And so I want them to be able to move between the two worlds. And, if they don't have knowledge of it, if they don't learn it anywhere, they don't learn it at home, then they need to learn it at school.

NANCY GREEN: What is the view of non-native people? Are some of the students uncomfortable around them?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: Some of the students are, because of their bad experiences at the high school. At the public high school. And they think that our teachers and -- well, especially -- will be the same way. You know? And I don't see them that way. And I thought, one -- I had one class that -- that freshman class that came in, and they were like, "I can't do this, I don't know how to do this. I'm dumb, I'm stupid." And so finally, I asked them, I said, "Who told you you were dumb? Who told you you were stupid? What told you you couldn't do things like that?" I said, "You can. You know, you have knowledge of this. But we just need to wake it up. We just need to get you going, and start practicing, and be successful." And I said, "I don't use the word 'try'. Because 'try' is a defeating word. I always say 'do'. 'I will do this'. Not 'I will try this'. You're already setting yourself up for failure when you say, I will try this. Because you already think, I'm not going to be successful." So that -- that's what I teach, is for success. And if I want them to have success, I want them to be strong in their own language, and their own culture, and their own traditional practices. I want them to be strong in that.

NANCY GREEN: How do you feel about your students?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: How I feel about my students is that I think they're great. And I think they have great potential. You know? Like I said, I don't know where they got the negative ideas from, but I try to tell them, you know, they're not that way. That they are successful. That they are knowledgeable. They do have skills that are worth building. And that's what I like to see, is them to do it. You know? And if they just sit back with that, an "I'll try" attitude, then -- then they've defeated themselves. So always build for success, because I want them to be that way. And one of the things that I noticed when I first came to teach here was that I have a divested interest in these kids, because they're my Tribal people. You know? And if I don't teach them the right way, and what I -- and what is expected of me to teach them, then I'm a failure. And I don't want to be a failure. So -- and that's what I teach is for success. And I want them to be able to have skills that they can market, and -- when they leave the school.

NANCY GREEN: Earlier, you were telling me earlier about the importance of Ute

language, and how language really tells you something about a culture. You mentioned the word “hate” is very different in English and in Ute, as is the word “love”. Can you explain that?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: I think teaching Ute language is important to the students, because it helps them to connect with their background. And there's a lot of things that are conveyed through the language, and that doesn't have meaning in English. And sometimes I get -- when I'm talking in English, I don't have all of the English word knowledge to convey what I want to. And I'll pull out a Ute word, to get across what I want to say to another Ute person. But when I'm speaking to an English-speaking person, I can't do that, because they wouldn't understand me. And so sometimes I tell them, “well, in my language, we have this word”. And I'll explain what the word means. And then they'll say, “Oh. I see.” But between the two, English and Ute language, the Ute language is a very descriptive language. In English, you have words like “whole”, that can mean a whole thing, or it could mean a hole in the ground. And we don't have words like that. Ute is very precise. And I think that, in our culture, in our cultural practices, in our traditional practices, you know, we need the language. Without that knowledge of the Ute language, those practices are going to be lost. Because they're something that's explained in our spirituality, or in our spiritual practices, that could be better conveyed using our own language rather than using English. English is such a harsh language. And where in Ute, it's not as harsh. And perhaps the intonation is the one that gives it meaning too. As well. And that's what we rely on. And sometimes I think we learn too much from the English about that, and then we tend to use some of that in speaking. And we really shouldn't.

An example of a harsh word would be hate. We use *hey hey*. When I hear the word “hate”, I envision something dark and evil. And when we say “hate” in the Ute language, we don't have a word for hate. We have a word for dislike, or distaste, or -- it all depends on what you're talking about. So that's what I mean about it being precise, because it has to be -- it can't be generalized. It's really precise. And our word for love, it doesn't really mean love. It means something that you hold dearly to yourself. And so

there really isn't an exact English translation for that. You know? I've been working with some translation in the past, English into Ute. And I think it's a lot harder to translate English into Ute rather than Ute into English. And you know, with -- working with some of my students, they say, Well, how come it's backwards? You know? How come Ute is backwards? And I said, Well, when you learn other languages, sometimes, you know, you find that English is backwards. So I'm kind of thinking that perhaps maybe English is backwards than -- than any of the other language.

NANCY GREEN: Is the Ute language dying? Is it a dying language?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: The Ute language is not very strong right now. And several years ago I did an informal assessment of how strong the Ute language was here on this reservation. You're going to have to understand that there are two other Ute reservations. And here, we have about 30 -- 3,200 people. Out of 3,200 people, perhaps there -- at that time, there were two hundred -- 250 affluent speakers. Fluent meaning that they could speak Ute all the way through, without any English. And the fluent speakers were in ages from 45 years on up. And when you're at 45, there may be exceptions to that. You may have maybe five or six under 45. But for 45 years, we did not produce a fluent speaker. And that time that I did the informal assessment was the year 2000. Between 2000 and 2008, quite a number of those speakers have passed on. So that makes it even more scary, that our language is dying. If we don't do anything about it. And, you know, sometimes I think that sometime -- I'm just putting a Band-Aid on something that's bigger. And the only way that I think our language will truly come back is everyone start speaking again, and everyone be emerged in the language. And I do as much as I can, with my own family, but it's not enough. Even with them, I find that they rely more on English than they do on the Ute language. In my family, my sisters and I, and my brothers -- my brothers, they understand the language, but they don't speak it. And my youngest brother is 30 -- 34. And so that's dying in my family. And it's sad, because, you know, a lot of our information or knowledge is transferred through the language. And we can't do that if we can't speak or understand the Ute language. We have a lot more people that can understand the language, but they can't speak it. And I

had a class here for those speakers, and they said that one of the things that happened to them, that stopped them from speaking, was the pronunciation. And people making fun of them and laughing at them the way they pronounced their words. And so it was a safe place for them to practice. And they caught on to the language quite fast. But they didn't keep up with the classes. And that's one of the things that -- one of the other things that I would like to work on, is commitment. It really does take commitment to do this. And if you don't have commitment, then you're not going to be able to. And I've had some young people that haven't been -- that have been successful in learning the language enough to where they can say their prayers in the language, or they can communicate simple sentences in the language, and be able to understand what other people are saying in the language. But I don't have one that is fluent. And like myself, you know, I find that now, if I don't practice speaking, then I'm not very fluent. And I can't say that I'm a fluent speaker, because I can't speak the Ute language clear through telling a story. Not unless I practice it first.

NANCY GREEN: You sound very dedicated. Yet I know that you're very sick right now. Explain to me about your illness, and why you still continue to come to the school.

VENITA TAVEAPONT: Oh. Last year, it was in March. I started feeling sick. But I didn't know what it was. And, since it was towards the end of the school year, I was able to complete the school year and do my regular job. But one of the things that I have been doing is that we take students out into the field, and we make visits back to Colorado, and to the original homeland of the Ute people. To make a re-connection with homeland, and also to look at archeological sites, and also, collecting plant specimens, so that we can create our own herbarium here. And later on we'll be able to do a comparison study between the plants that were there in Colorado that we used, and the plants that are here in Utah that we use. And we go hiking. And in June, when I went on one of those field trips, I was unable to hike as much as I could. And it really prevented me from doing as much as I wanted to. And I found out later on that month, that I had cancer. You know, when they say cancer, it's like, Wow. You're hit with something that's, I guess, inevitable that you're not going to be here very long. But I

decided then, that, you know, I may have that disease, but I'm going to do as much as I can to go through the process of healing. And one of the thoughts that I had, at that time, when I made that commitment, was I wanted to do it because of the students. You know, not only my students, but other children as well. And the work that I was doing. I wasn't done yet. I have several books that I have written, with the help of the elders, and -- I shouldn't say I have written. I should say that I'm just putting it together. And all the information that we've gathered, and things that we felt was important in the Ute language, we put those things together. And we weren't completed yet, there are things that I'm still working on, that I want to complete for our people. And I feel like my work isn't done. So I committed myself to fighting cancer. And I know it slowed me down quite a bit, and I went to an operation, and then I've done my radiation, and I've done now my chemo, and I have one more chemotherapy left. And I -- it's taken me this long. Since July to go through the whole process. And I know I've been out for a while, and they've been patient with me. And people have taken over my classes for me, and the students know what's going on with me. And I think that's really helped. It hasn't really hindered anything really. It's just that I'm a lot slower. But, you know, I've made a commitment to do this. And I always say that if you have knowledge, if you have the skill, you share it. And that's one of the things that we have been brought up with. You know? And we don't expect payment for it. And a lot of things that I have done, I've never really accepted payment for it, except, you know, being salaried here. But other than that, teaching other children, or teaching other people other kinds of skills, I've never really accepted payment for those things. Because you share it. The Creator gave you a gift, and you, in turn, give that gift to someone else. And so I've lived my life that way. It's that I share everything. And I see my work not done yet. So that's why I fought against cancer, and going through the process of healing right now.

NANCY GREEN: Your culture, your identity is important to you. What does it mean, to you, to be Ute?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: You know, when you talk about names of tribes, or names of people, you know, and when you translate the word for *Nuche*. That's our word for being Ute. Is *Nuche*. And it means the -- the people. And so if it's *Nuchu*, it's -- that's the plural. That's the people. But if it was *Nuche*, it's just one person. You know. And, in being a Ute person, and especially in this day and age, I think you have to think about that a Ute person knows their own language. Knows their own culture. Knows their own traditional practices. And they participate in those practices or not. You know? It's up to them. But to have that knowledge, and to be able to communicate with our own people, and to be able to move easily in the communities that surround us, back and forth, and to be able to interact with all generations, not just your own generation, but all generations, and being able to share whatever you have, being able to also teach other people, or to share that, in some way other than formal classes, then I think that's what being *Nuche* is to me. Also being able to have knowledge of our history. You know, the -- where we come from. And where am I going? And to have a definite idea of where I'll be in -- in five, ten years from now. And knowing how to get there. And I think it encompasses a lot of things, and not just your own culture and your own traditions, but everything in this day and age is what being *Nuche* means to me. And hopefully that I have been walking in a path that my grandmothers have wanted me to do, and my grandfather. And the people before them, what they wanted, or their grandchildren to do. I hope I'm walking in that path.

NANCY GREEN: It sounds like you are. So. Is there anything you would like to add-- about education, about the kids, what they're going through, teaching them?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: I know one of the things that when we were growing up, my grandfather and my grandmother, other people would tell us, don't copy. You know, they would tell us, in our language. (Whereupon, interviewee begins to speak in the Ute language.) Don't copy other people. You know? Because sometimes, when you copy people, it hurts you. And that's what I see the students doing now, or these -- or the young people. They copy other cultures, and other things that they shouldn't be copying, because it's going to hurt them. And when we started hearing about gang

involvement, with the students, and with the young people in our communities, that really put up a red flag, that they're not knowledgeable about themselves and their own identity, being secure in their own identity, or being secure in their own knowledge about their community or their families. Then something was wrong. And I felt that perhaps we needed to step up our teachings, and several of our departments got together and said, This is what we're going to do. So it became like a corroborative effort to reach out to our young people, and to steer them away from gang involvement. And it's been a battle, but I think at some point some of them want to leave it alone. But the peer pressure is so great. And I wish that our young people wouldn't listen to peer pressure, and just decide what's good for themselves by themselves and their families, and not listen to peer pressure. And education, I really stress that, with the students I have now. Because I tell them, if you have education, no one can take that away from you. You already have it. And nobody can say, No, that's not yours. It's mine. You can take it and run with it. I says after this, after high school, it's up to you to decide what you want to do, because that gives you your choices. If you get more education, then you'll have more choices. And I says, I told them, I says, if you're looking at money, you know, if you're looking at making a lot of money, then that's where it's going to be. But if you think that you can make money in the oil fields, because we have a lot of oil fields here, then you're only going to make money up until your back breaks, or you're physically unable to work in the oil field. And so if you're in good physical condition, then they're going to be there for about, maybe 20 years. But beyond that, you aren't going to be there.

NANCY GREEN: Do you think Ute kids have more challenges today?

VENITA TAVEAPONT: I think the Ute kids, nowadays, they have a lot more challenges, because of the influx of non-Indian people into our area. Well, when I was growing up, there weren't that many here. And now we have all types of cultures that have moved into the Uintah Basin. And there's a lot of influence from other cultures, other races than our own. So it becomes a little harder, and a little more challenging for them, to be able to stand up for themselves, and say that I'm a Ute person, and this is

me--and to acknowledge it, and to be proud of it, and yet to be able to deal in the community, rather than it be influenced by the negative influences that other people bring. And I think that's been a challenge for them, and -- Like I was talking about the gang situation. You know, I think that's something that's come in here and been -- it's been like, it's a great thing to have. You know? Your family. You stand up for one another, your brother and sister. Well, we always had that. But then they don't realize that we always had that, because they don't have that knowledge. And the peer pressure, and the challenge to drink, or to do drugs, or to do whatever, you know, is there. It's thrown up to them. And so they don't want to be looked at as a chicken, or whatever it is that they use. The terminology they use nowadays. And they don't want to be viewed as being weak, so they're going to accept that challenge. And that's something that I think that the family should really tell them. That, Hey, you're my family. You're part of my family, rather than just letting them go and do what they want to do.