

## Trailblazer dies: Piegan Institute co-founder's efforts to revitalize Native languages helped spark revolution

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Darrell Robes Kipp, educator, author, historian, filmmaker and one of the co-founders of the Piegan Institute in Browning, died Thursday evening at Blackfeet Community Hospital, according to his son, Darren Kipp. He was 69.

Kipp had been sick for about five weeks with a recurrence of kidney cancer, said friend and co-worker Rosalyn LaPier, a faculty member of the environmental studies program at the University of Montana and board member of the Piegan Institute.

Darren Kipp remembered his father fondly Friday evening.

"I am a sad son, but I am a thankful son," he said. "I had a really good dad."

Darren Kipp was extremely close with his father, sharing a love of filmmaking. They worked on several projects together.

"A lot of guys spend time going hunting and fishing with their fathers," said Darren Kipp, a documentary filmmaker who lives on Lower St. Mary Lake. "I went to sweats, bundle openings and pipe ceremonies. That was my relationship with my father. We had a very good relationship."

His father, who is universally described as incredibly wise and intelligent, shared some secrets with Darren.

"One thing he always told me was stay clear of careless people," Darren Kipp said. "That's why he was successful. He was not complex. There were no problems in my dad's life."

Kipp, whose Pikuni name was Apiniokio Peta, or Morning Eagle, co-founded the Piegan Institute in 1987, dedicated to archiving and preserving the Blackfoot language. The institute's Cuts Wood School is the private elementary school that immerses young people in the Blackfoot language using a teaching method called total physical response.

The Harvard-trained Kipp became a leader in the preservation of the Blackfoot language and culture and was author of numerous books on topics such as Blackfeet mythology. In 2004, Kipp and composer Robert Kapilow collaborated on a choral and orchestral work called "Summer Sun, Winter Moon," which was commissioned for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial.

And Darrell Kipp was not just successful with the Piegan Institute.

"That was just one part of him," said Darren, emphasizing that his father was instrumental in the spay-neuter clinic in Browning and many, many other things that piqued his interest.

Darrell Kipp's overriding philosophy was simple and deep: "Whatever benefits the tribe must benefit the individual, and whatever benefits the individual must benefit the tribe, as well," Darren remembered.

LaPier, who had known Darrell Kipp since the early 1990s and worked with him at the Piegan Institute since 1999, said Kipp's legacy will be felt throughout the United States.

"It's one of those things that his legacy will be felt nationwide more than local," LaPier said. "He both encouraged a lot of people and inspired a lot of people to work on Native language revitalization. A lot of programs started all over in different Native communities."

LaPier said in Montana examples of revitalization efforts inspired by Kipp's work include the White Clay Immersion School on the Fort Belknap Reservation and the Nkwusm Salish Language Institute in Arlee.

Another program that has been a big beneficiary of Kipp's work is the Nigaane Ojibwe immersion program in Leech Lake, Minn.

Leslie Harper, the program's director, said Kipp's message was simple.

"What are you waiting for?" she remembered him asking. "Don't ask permission to save your language. Just do it."

She said it was such commonsense, but oftentimes people would plan and plan and plan something like language revitalization and nothing would ever happen.

"He spurred a lot of people into action all over the U.S.," she said. "Get brave and jump in and do it."

Kipp's work at the immersion school in Browning was truly groundbreaking, said Harper, who benefitted from Kipp's counsel frequently as she worked on the program in Minnesota.

She paused, realizing with Kipp's death that he would no longer be there as a mentor.

"I would always tell people to call Darrell Kipp in Montana," she said. "And now we have to take what he told us and pass it on."

The Grotto Foundation, which aims to increase understanding of American cultural heritage, the cultures of nations, and the individual's responsibility to fellow human beings, has booklet on its website that stemmed from a transcription of a seminar Kipp put on for a group interested in starting the Nigaane Ojibwe immersion program.

It's titled "Encouragement, Guidance, Insights, and Lessons Learned for Native Language Activists Developing Their Own Tribal Language Programs," and it's used across the United States, LaPier said.

"A lot of people (involved in Native language revitalization) use it," LaPier said. "Even if they haven't met him, they have read his booklet or heard of it. It's seen as this Bible that people use."

On a personal level, LaPier said she will greatly miss Kipp.

"He was always eternally optimistic, and he always saw the good in people ..." she said. "That was a real part of him and wasn't fake."

In fact, he was always genuine, LaPier said.

“He was smart, funny, very engaging, gregarious,” she said. “What people loved about him is that he talked to people at their level. In the town of Browning talking to street people or at Harvard talking to academics, he was able to bridge all of those different worlds. He made people feel like he was hearing them and that they were special.”

Tom Cook, with the Montana Historical Society, remembered Kipp as extraordinary.

“Darrell was a great man,” Cook wrote in email tribute to his friend. “I talked to him many times over the years, especially during the Lewis and Clark commemoration, which he taught me was not a celebration. He was a great teacher and storyteller — both of serious stuff and stuff that made you laugh. We had many a good time. The things he did for the people and especially the young ones with his language and pride teachings is legacy enough for most. But he was far more than that. He taught us all what it means to be human and to learn, to confront and to forgive. One is tempted to say he lived in two worlds, but for me I like to think he lived in a world that was big enough for all of us. He will be honored in the next place. He already earned his honors here. He will be missed.”

Born on Oct. 23, 1944, Kipp, whose grandfather was a survivor of the Baker Massacre of 1870, grew up east of Browning on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. He received his bachelor’s degree from Eastern Montana College in Billings in 1966.

Kipp served in the U.S. military before earning a teaching certificate at Eastern in 1970. He and his wife, Roberta, returned to Browning, where Kipp first taught in the school system and then took a job with the Community Action Plan.

He later earned a master’s degree from Harvard University and a master of fine arts degree from Vermont College.

Kipp became an ardent supporter of the Blackfoot language, urging people to learn the tongue of their ancestors.

“Tribal languages can be revitalized to sooth our children’s hearts again if people stop long enough to embrace them,” Kipp wrote on the Piegan Institute’s website.

He was dogged in his determination to revive tribal tongues and spread that enthusiasm. Kipp is featured on visitmt.com’s website, where he introduces the world to the Blackfoot language in a video.

“Everything in Montana that you see, every waterfall, every river, every pass, everywhere you go has been described uniquely in Indian languages for thousands and thousands of years,” Kipp says in the video.

He is survived by his wife of 45 years, Roberta Ray Kipp, son, Darren Kipp, sister, Geraldine Oscar, and brother, Donald Kipp.

Rosary will be Sunday night, with burial services on Monday morning, LaPier said.