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Recent UBC graduate Aiyana Twigg won the 2022 Lieutenant Governor's medal for inclusion, democracy and reconciliation. (Courtesy of Aiyana Twigg)

UBC student wins Lieutenant-Governor medal for work on Indigenous language revitalization

Aiyana Twigg helps under-resourced communities to develop their own dictionaries, among other things

JANE SKRYPNEK / May 30, 2022 2:13pm / NEWS

Aiyana Twigg spent the last year and a half of her University of British Columbia undergrad studying the art of dictionary making. Not the physical compiling of the book, but the little-known research that goes into creating the vital resources.

The work is intensely personal for the 21-year-old Tobacco Plains Indian Band member. Twigg says there are only 20 known fluent speakers of her Ktunaxa language, despite the six bands and hundreds of people that make up the First Nation in Canada and the United States.

Similar losses are felt by hundreds of other Indigenous communities across both countries as a result of colonization and forced assimilation.

Dictionaries, Twigg believes, are integral to reversing this. Since January 2021, she's been working with UBC anthropology professor Mark Turin, creating online resources to guide communities on how to create their own dictionaries.

"For a lot of communities that are under-resourced, they don't have the funds to actually pay for linguists, or sometimes when linguists are creating the dictionaries for them it doesn't really fit their values," Twigg says.

The goal, instead, is to empower communities to be able to create them on their own.

The work is only one of multiple ways Twigg has been working to revitalize Indigenous languages, and one of numerous reasons she was awarded the 2022 Lieutenant Governor's medal for inclusion, democracy and reconciliation this month.

For her, language equals culture and rebuilding it equals healing.

"Language is at the heart of who we are," she says.

She's seen it first hand during the pandemic.

Wanting to create a space of connection and culture, Twigg started an Instagram page called [KtunaxaPride](#). She used it to share fun language and history lessons, and was quickly taken aback by the number of people engaging with her videos.

Indigenous people from other nations and communities started reaching out to Twigg and telling her she had inspired them to start learning their own languages and reconnect with their own cultures.

"It kind of grew to actually be this safe space, I think, for people to connect back to their roots or learn these things," Twigg says.

It also became a way for non-Indigenous people to engage with Indigenous culture and educate themselves, Twigg adds.

She graduated from UBC with a double major in First Nations and endangered languages and anthropology this month, leaving behind an impressive legacy of her

efforts. Between her time at the Okanagan and Vancouver campuses, Twigg worked as host with Aboriginal Programs and Services, a co-facilitator with the Indigenous Living Learning Community, a peer advisor with Arts Indigenous Student Advising, and a main facilitator for the Indigenous Leadership Collective.

Twigg says she's taking the next year off school to take part in an intensive language immersion program through the First Peoples' Cultural Council, work on curriculum development with her community members, and finish a research project identifying gaps in the Ktunaxa writing system.

From there, she plans to continue to follow her passion with a masters in Indigenous language revitalization. It is only when people have reclaimed their words and their voice that Twigg says she believes reconciliation can truly occur.