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Keep Talking – Niugaa, Yugaa Screened at NMAI in DC

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KM by Alutiiq Language
Speakers & Learners

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In the Potomac Atrium circular performance hall at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), the Seminole men's drumming group *Uptown Boyz* surrounded a large drum. This urban drumming group is made up of men from the Seminole Tribe of Florida living and working in DC. They were dressed in a mix of suits and casual wear, just as they had gone to work that day.

The deep heartbeat of the drum pulsed as the drummers' voices chanted in unison. Sadie Coyle, her mother Janelle Barton, and I sat together on the stone bench edge, watching. We had traveled 12 hours the day before from Kodiak to DC to join Director Karen Weinberg and Kartemquin Film's Executive Producer Gordon Quinn (based in Chicago) for the screening of the Kodiak Alutiiq language documentary *Keep Talking – Niugaa, Yugaa*.

Keep Talking was chosen as the debut feature-length film to



Mother Tongue Film Festival Day 1 panel discussion with (left to right) Keep Talking Director Karen Weinberg; Porfirio Gutierrez and Director Yolanda Cruz from Oaxaca, Mexico; Alisha Drabek and Sadie Coyle (Keep Talking film participants); and panel moderator Gabriela Pérez Báez (Curator of Linguistics at the National Museum of Natural History).

kick off the Mother Tongue Film Festival on Mother Languages Day at NMAI. The Mother Tongue Film Festival is a collaboration between three Smithsonian organizations: NMAI, National Museum of Natural History – Arctic Studies Institute, and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, with additional support from the, Mexican Cultural Institute, the Smithsonian Latino Center, and the New Zealand Embassy.

Large film posters of Sadie Coyle dancing in her Alutiiq “falling snow” parka regalia had greeted us at the NMAI entrance. Sadie remarked, “This is real,” surprised at the surreal experience to see her image as the film’s poster child in the heart of the nation’s capitol.

The opening night program summarized the 79-minute film as “four Alaska Native women fighting to save Kodiak Alutiiq, an endangered language now spoken by less than 40 remaining fluent

Native Elders. Their small community travels to remote Afognak Island to start teaching kids Alutiiq. Sadie, 13, is inspired to begin learning the language and dances of her ancestors. Instead of getting swept up in the wake of historical trauma, these women overcome personal demons and build toward a brighter future. *Keep Talking* reveals the ultimate impact of language and culture revitalization, joy, and hope.” The documentary seeks to help the broader community understand the significance of Indigenous language revitalization and its effects toward positive wellbeing.

The *Keep Talking* film has so far been screened in Honolulu, Hawaii; Vancouver, BC; Chicago, IL; Anchorage; Kodiak; and now Washington, DC. It won first place in the ‘Made in Alaska’ Program at the Anchorage International Film Festival in December 2017.

The Public Broadcasting Service recently agreed to offer it to local PBS stations, making it

available to air starting this summer. Kartemquin Films and Vison Makers Media also plan to release the *Keep Talking* Film DVD in summer 2018, along with a curriculum guide to assist teachers and leaders as they engage students and communities with the film in hopes of inspiring their own language revitalization and wellness efforts.

While the drummers performed for us, participants enjoyed assembling and eating fresh tacos at the pre-film reception buffet. Karen Weinberg introduced us to NMAI and Arctic Studies Center staff, as well as Director Yolanda Cruz and her film subject Porfirio Gutierrez—a Zapotec master-weaver from Oaxaca, Mexico, who had also traveled a long way to support their film’s screening.

Together, we entered the Mary Louise and Elmer Rasmuson Theater adjacent to the Potomac Atrium. The theater donors’ names were a familiar reminder of Alaska, and the generosity of Alaska’s Rasmuson family across the nation.

Opening the film festival, we first watched an animated short: **68 Voices: Ja b’ajlmi sok ja chulchuli / El tigre y El Grillo**. The animation retold a traditional Tojolabal story of a tiger, a grasshopper and the power of small things.

Next, Yolanda Cruz’s 11-minute film *Kaa Duu* came on. It explores the Gutierrez family’s efforts to share their endangered ancestral Zapotec techniques for making and using natural textile dyes with other Zapotec weavers. Their cultural revitalization story mirrors the Alutiiq language community’s approach to pass on oral knowledge and grow the number of people who carry this knowledge before it is lost.

Then, the feature documentary and the shores of Afognak Island at Dig Afognak Camp appeared on

the screen along with the familiar voices of Kodiak Island Elders speaking Alutiiq.

Sadie Coyle, who is now taking college classes in the Alutiiq language, her mother Janelle, and I watched ourselves and our friends over the five years we had participated in the filming. Seeing ourselves and our Alutiiq language programs at different stages of our lives was most clearly marked by Sadie’s journey from a child at Kodiak Middle School to becoming a young woman attending Kodiak College.

After the film, we were called onto stage for a question and answer panel discussion. Sadie shared about her experience learning Alutiiq and traditional dancing, and what this has meant to her personally. We answered questions about Kodiak Alutiiq history. There were several Kodiak community members or friends in the audience who came up to visit as we left the stage, which further emphasizing how small our world really is.

After the panel discussion, the *Uptown Boyz* drumming group set up to play again. They invited all the film participants onto the stage to directly feel the full intensity of the drumming circle. Gathered around the drummers as they played for us, I closed my eyes and felt the drum as if it were my own heartbeat radiating from within my chest. The swirl of the men’s voices around us was overwhelming. The drummers gift to us was truly a blessing—in much the same way that the film has touched our hearts.

The Native Village of Afognak (NVA), Afognak Native Corporation, and the Kodiak Arts Council plan to sponsor a screening of the documentary again in Kodiak at the Auditorium on Saturday, May 26, 2018, during the Crab Festival.

You can learn more about *Keep Talking* at

www.keeptalkingthefilm.com

Listen to an interview about *Keep Talking* on NPR Worldview with Jerome McDonnell on January 5, 2018 (last 20 minutes of segment).

Learn more about the Alutiiq language at:

www.alutiiqlanguage.org,

www.alutiiqmuseum.org, or on

Facebook at “Alutiiq Language Speakers & Learners.”