

An Alutiiq Language Learner's Journey

by Candace "Cutmen" Branson, second language Alutiiq speaker and teacher

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KAM by Alutiiq Language
Speakers & Learners

Cama'! I am Candace Branson, an Alutiiq Language learner and teacher. I am the second or four children. My parents are Steve and Martha Branson. I am the first speaker of Alutiiq in our family since my great-grandmother. Fluent in her Alutiiq language, she was left at the Woody Island Orphanage around age five, where she was made to speak English and leave the language of her ancestors behind. One of the last times I saw her, I was in high school when I realized I wanted to learn Alutiiq. I asked her if she knew any, she said "Oh I used to, but I only remember the bad words now, and I can't teach you those."

I remember being in high school and hearing about a Master/Apprentice Program at the Alutiiq Museum, where master speakers were paired with learners, people who would one day become my colleagues, and some of my dearest friends. I got a lesson book from the museum and studied on my own before going away to college. When I came back from college in 2010, I was excited to return to the island and learn all I could about my ancestors' culture.



Candace Branson and Marya Halvorsen (on floor) practice speaking in Alutiiq with Elder speakers, Sophie Shepherd and Kathryn Chichenoff.

I started working for the Kodiak Area Native Association, and was sent to the Dig Afognak Harvest Camp. The camp was a culturally immersive experience, where I got to participate in plant collecting with Gayla Pedersen, listen to stories from Elders, watch a young man skin a harbor seal on the beach, under the direction of his grandfather. The most memorable part for me though was sitting with Teri Schneider & Gayla, when they exchanged a few sentences in Alutiiq over lunch! I couldn't believe my ears. "Where did you learn that?" I begged! They giggled at my desperate question and told me to go to Language Club! "It's on Wednesdays at noon."

When I got back to town that next week I went—the conference room had a handful of people, practicing the language, running lessons and taking notes. There were Elders and learners, and they seemed happy to have a new face in the room. I went back consistently, as often as I could, on my lunch break from my first ever "real job."

One day there were Elders in town from Akhiok who came to Language Club. They talked with such grace, sharing stories in the language.

It was like the best song I had ever heard. The tune was familiar, it filled my heart. I understood nothing, but I adored every second of it.

After a while, Alisha Drabek invited me to study at her house. She had made some lessons and wanted to try them out on someone. Her invitation and mentorship was a key for me. Working with her gave me another hour and a half of exposure and practice every week! She ran lessons with me, sometimes at the kitchen table where she explained how verb endings worked or when to use a certain postbase, and other times we sat on the living room floor and used her son's toys to practice the language. When she started to teach the Kodiak High School class I had another four hours a week of practice and instruction. I was learning so much!

At the same time, I still couldn't put sentences together well, and I was TERRIFIED to speak in front of most learners and all Elders. "What if I made a mistake?" "What if I can never make that noise?"

I remember practicing Alutiiq sounds in my bed at night, trying to sound like April when I made that amazing "llr" sound. I knew the

Elders had been working for a long time to bring the language back to life and I didn't want to embarrass anyone. I am sure that most of those feelings come from not wanting to look or sound like an idiot to this group of amazing people. It soon became obvious that if I was going to keep learning, I would also have to start teaching, as crazy as that sounded, since I had only just started learning!

By 2012, I had been learning for two years and was still struggling to get very far with what I had learned. I couldn't really talk about the things I wanted to talk about, tell stories, or even ask the right questions of an Elder on the phone to see if I could come visit them.

That spring, we had a trainer come to town; his name is Evan Gardner. He brought a method, called *Where Are Your Keys?* that catapulted my fluency. The idea is that you use tangible objects and realistic scenarios to get Elders to talk about the things you want to learn. Then you use a pattern of question and answer to tease out the specific form and function of the little piece of grammar extrapolated from the conversation. This process was and still is electrifying and fulfilling! The language I learned with this new method was sticking in my brain, and I could use it! Instead of studying, I had to practice it with another person! This meant that each new piece that I learned from an Elder or other learner, had to be practiced with other people. Lucky for me, there was a little bubble of learners who had sprung up in Kodiak. We started meeting in the evenings in the Native Village of Afognak library and we went to Elders' houses. We played language games for fun, building a community of language nerds—people who LOVE puns and are willing to translate silly things.

The real trick to this new method was that I had to be willing to make mistakes and just say things that I thought might make sense. I started speaking, and some of what I said worked! Many of my sentences did not, but the learners and Elders were understanding and loved that I was making an effort. They often knew what I was searching to say because I had set up the scenario, and they could tell me the right way to say it without

speaking English. When I got it, I would try to teach it to someone else.

In what felt like all of the sudden, I could talk about what I wanted to talk about, tell stories, and even ask the right questions to an Elder on the phone to see if I could come visit them. I finally moved from being a novice to an intermediate speaker.

The fear, fear of failure, or what people would think of me if I messed it all up, had held me back from becoming a speaker. When I was able to let all of that go, my relationships with Elders and learners improved and I was able to practice without all the extra pressure.

I hope the next group of language learners fly through the novice phase. I hope they can let go of the pressure to perform perfectly, and just start practicing as much as possible. I keep in mind, the time my mentors and teachers put into developing my fluency, and know that I owe every hour to the fluency of the next cohort of speakers.