

ᏍᏏᏉᏍᏔᏅ (We Will Speak)

A Feature-Length Documentary

Directed By O'GYW / Schon Duncan and Michael McDermit

Executive Produced by Wes Studi

Year of Release: 2023

Runtime: 94 minutes

Languages: Cherokee & English (w/ English Subtitles)

Contacts

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Social Media

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/dadiwonisifilm/>
https://www.instagram.com/blurry_pictures/

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/dadiwonisifilm/>

Logline

With fewer than 1,500 fluent speakers left, a small group of Cherokee activists race to save their language from disappearing.

Note: There are three federally recognized Tribes of Cherokee (Cherokee Nation, United Keetoowah Band, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians); our film features participants and representatives from all of them. In any press or write ups, we ask that “Cherokee Nation” be avoided as a blanket term to identify the Tribal affiliation for all the participants in this film. This is a story of Cherokee people from all Cherokee Tribes. ᏍᏏᏉᏍᏔᏅ / Thank you!

Synopsis

The Cherokee language is deeply tied to Cherokee identity; yet generations of assimilation efforts by the U.S. government and anti-Indigenous stigmas have forced the Tri-Council of Cherokee tribes to declare a State of Emergency for the language in 2019. While there are 430,000 Cherokee citizens in the three federally recognized tribes, fewer than an estimated 1,500 fluent speakers remain—the majority of whom are elderly. The covid pandemic has unfortunately hastened the course. Language activists, artists, and the youth must now lead the charge of urgent radical revitalization efforts to help save the language from the brink of extinction.

This feature-length documentary was shot on-location in Oklahoma and North Carolina throughout 2019-2022; through intimate interviews, vérité footage of community gatherings,

and extensive archival materials, the film explores the nuanced ways the Cherokee language is vital to maintaining a unique cultural identity and relationship with the world. The collaborative project is also meant to act as an empowering agent of hope for Indigenous voices despite enduring inequity and oppression.

Awards

Winner, Hibulb Cultural Center Film Festival, 2023

Best Oklahoma Feature, DeadCenter Film Festival, 2023

Best Documentary, Circle Cinema Film Festival, 2023

Runner Up: Best Indigenous Feature, Albuquerque Film and Music Experience, 2023

Directors	ᎠᎩᎠᎠ / Schon Duncan & Michael McDermit
Producers	ᎠᎠᎠ / Keli Gonzales & Laura Heberton
Cinematographer	Jacob Koestler
Executive Producers	Wes Studi, The McClellan-Sorell Family, Thomas Sadoski, Gill Holland, Katherine Harper, Mark Shlomchik, & Ben Speiser
Editor	Jacob Koestler
Original Score	Matt Miller
Color	Kyungchan Min
Cast	ᎠᎠᎠ / Carolyn Swepston (Cherokee Nation) ᎠᎠᎠ / Keli Gonzales (Cherokee Nation) ᎠᎩᎠᎠ / Schon Duncan (United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee)

Crew Bios

ᎠᎩᎠᎠ / Schon Duncan is a proud member of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. They were born and raised in Stilwell, Oklahoma, and are a product of language work provided by elders/teachers in their early years and beyond. In 2014, they graduated from Northeastern State University and completed the Cherokee Language Master Apprentice Program in 2019. Recently, Duncan began a teaching career as a Cherokee Language Teacher at Dahlenogah Public School. ᎠᎠᎠᎠ (WE WILL SPEAK) is their first feature length documentary.

Michael McDermit makes and produces documentary films, books and other projects under a small independent creative imprint, *Blurry Pictures*. BP documentaries have enjoyed fruitful film festival runs at the Atlanta Film Festival, Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, Provincetown International Film Festival, Cleveland International Film Festival, Dallas International Film Festival, and the RiverRun International Film Festival, among others. BP film STRAWBERRY FOREVER, about McDermit's father's struggle with aphasia, took home the Audience Choice Award at the 2021 disABILITY Film Festival. McDermit earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon. In addition to filmmaking, he teaches English and Writing to underserved college students in South Los Angeles.

ƆWΛ / Keli Gonzales is a Cherokee artist from Welling, Oklahoma. Drawing on her experiences as a Cherokee woman, Gonzales creates paintings and drawings portraying the Cherokee people in a way that is true to life. She is the producer of the documentary ᄒᄒᄒᄒ (WHAT THEY'VE BEEN TAUGHT), which premiered at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival and is part of the *Los Angeles Times* "Short Docs" series.

Laura Heberton is a producer and screenwriter of award-winning, ground-breaking narrative and documentary films with a focus on strong storytelling by writer-directors bringing a unique perspective to the cinematic landscape. Features she has worked on have all premiered at the top festivals worldwide, including Berlin, Sundance, SXSW, CPH:DOX and Tribeca and have been nominated for Spirit and Cinema Eye Honors Awards. Her films have received support numerous times from prestigious organizations such as SFFILM/Kenneth Rainin Foundation, Gotham Film and Media Institute (formerly IFP), the Sundance Institute, US in Progress Poland, Austin Film Society, Rotterdam's Cinemart and Rooftop Films. She is a Cannes Producing Fellow.

Jacob Koestler is an artist and musician from Johnstown, Pennsylvania. He holds an MFA from the Photography and Integrated Media program at Ohio University. His practice includes photography, film and multimedia installation. Koestler is also a co-founder of Blurry Pictures, a collaborative project that produces films, books and other printed matter. Koestler's artwork has been exhibited and published throughout the United States and internationally. After a decade working in arts education, he has recently returned to Pennsylvania to manage a tree farm and event space with his family.

Wes Studi is an internationally acclaimed actor and musician from small-town Oklahoma. He credits his passion and multi-faceted background for his powerful character portrayals that forever changed a Hollywood stereotype. Drawing from his rich life experience, Wes moved audiences with unforgettable performances in *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Geronimo: An American Legend*, and *Heat*, as well as James Cameron's *Avatar*, and so many others. Breaking new ground, he brought fully-developed Native American characters to the screen, and then took his craft a step further highlighting the success of Native Americans in non-traditional roles. In 2019, Wes received the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Governors Award, an honorary Oscar statuette, given to honor extraordinary distinction in lifetime achievement.

Director's Statement

This documentary project represents a culmination of the last decade of my life, in which I have returned to our language and am now working to revitalize it. This film documents intimate parts of Cherokee culture that many people (even many Cherokee tribal citizens) don't have access to. Among other things, it explores secluded communities in rural Oklahoma where the Cherokee language is still being spoken and taught by first-language speakers. As a citizen of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, my positionality and knowledge on the crisis at hand has afforded me a unique opportunity to involve voices in our communities who are often overlooked by other media producers. Many of the subjects in the film are my colleagues,

teachers, friends, family, and, most importantly, some of the tribes' remaining first-language speakers. The film crew is also largely composed of other Cherokee/Keetoowah citizens in roles of production, including camera operators, musicians, translators, and animators. The Cherokee history and personal stories told in this film not only stand to bring awareness to the issue of language loss, but also are meant to inspire people to join into the work of ongoing language revitalization. This documentary represents my greatest effort of reaching the widest audience about this work to showcase the warriors and elders who are in the trenches, hoping you join the fight. Your support of this project is most appreciated. GV.

–O'GYW 6'Y / Schon Duncan

Press

https://www.cherokeephoenix.org/entertainment/we-will-speak-provides-intimate-look-into-cherokee-language/article_5ed29872-3ddd-11ed-8b58-3fb83cc1cfb7.html

https://www.cherokeephoenix.org/entertainment/we-will-speak-premieres-in-tahlequah-wes-s-tudi-joins-production/article_b1cboebo-d7bb-11ed-9f5f-b7b7b8ecb7d8.html

<https://www.thecinematropolis.com/preserving-indigenous-language-interview-michael-mcdermit-dcff23/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jScoMiWtNQ>

<http://canjournal.org/2023/03/%eae%a3%eae%a7%eae%bc%eae%92%eae%9f-we-will-speak-at-ciff/>

<https://moveablefest.com/schon-duncan-keli-gonzales-jacob-koestler-michael-mcdermit-we-will-speak/>

https://www.ukb-nsn.gov/files/ugd/bo63c3_f506f6483e3b4fe18d8cb15f714bc974.pdf

Festivals/Screenings

Cleveland International Film Festival 2023

FilmFort @ Treefort Music Festival 2023

Cinema Columbus Festival 2023

RiverRun International Film Festival 2023

Atlanta Film Festival 2023

Dreamspeakers International Indigenous Film Festival 2023

Symposium of the American Indian 2023

IFFBoston 2023

Dallas International Film Festival 2023

Reel Representation Florida 2023

DeadCenter Film Festival 2023

Provincetown International Film Festival 2023

Free State Film Festival 2023
Cherokee Speakers' Bureau 2023
Circle Cinema Film Festival 2023
Museum of the Cherokee Indian: The Way We Speak to the World 2023
Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival 2023
Omak Stampede 2023
Albuquerque Film and Music Experience 2023
Fort Smith International Film Festival 2023
AlterNative Film Festival 2023
Appalachian Big Ideas Festival 2023
Native Circle Film Festival 2023
NatiVisions Film Festival 2023
Twin Cities Film Festival 2023
Tacoma International Film Festival 2023
Bainbridge Island International Film Festival 2023
Red Nation Film Festival, 2023
Garifuna International Indigenous Film Festival, 2023
Eastern Oregon Film Festival, 2023
Native Spirit International Film Festival 2023
AlterNative Film Festival, 2023
Global Education Center Nashville 2024
Smithsonian Presents: Mother Tongue Film Festival, 2024
South Arts: Southern Circuit of Independent Filmmakers Tour 2024