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Navajo President Buu Nygren returns to alma mater USC to address need to preserve Indigenous languages, cultures

LOS ANGELES – Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren brought the importance of Navajo language and history to students of his alma mater at the University of Southern California through the reading of a children's book.

The President and First Lady Jasmine Blackwater-Nygren were invited to take part in the USC Rossier School of Education monthly book club discussion on Tuesday as an extension of November's Native American Heritage Month.

The discussion emphasized the role of education to preserve Navajo language and culture.

The club read the book *Dzani Yazhi Naazbaa': Little Woman Warrior Who Came Home*.

It's an emotional historical children's novel about a little

Navajo girl and her family who were forced to walk 450 miles from their home at the base of Black Mesa to imprisonment at Bosque Redondo in New Mexico territory during the Long Walk era of 1864.

The picture book was written for children in grades 1 to 6 by the late Dr. Evangeline Parsons Yazzie, a longtime professor of Navajo language at Northern Arizona University, acclaimed writer of children's and young adult books written in Navajo, and author of

the first textbook adopted by public schools to teach the Navajo language.



Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren and First Lady Jasmine Blackwater-Nygren spoke to students at his alma mater the University of Southern California about the power of Navajo language in literature.

"It's intense," President Nygren said of the book. "It might even be better for an older audience, but it's a story everyone should know."

He said hearing the story in Navajo made it more meaningful for him, accentuating the importance of preserving the Navajo language.

"The people who signed the Treaty of 1868 knew no English," he said. "Sharing this story in our language

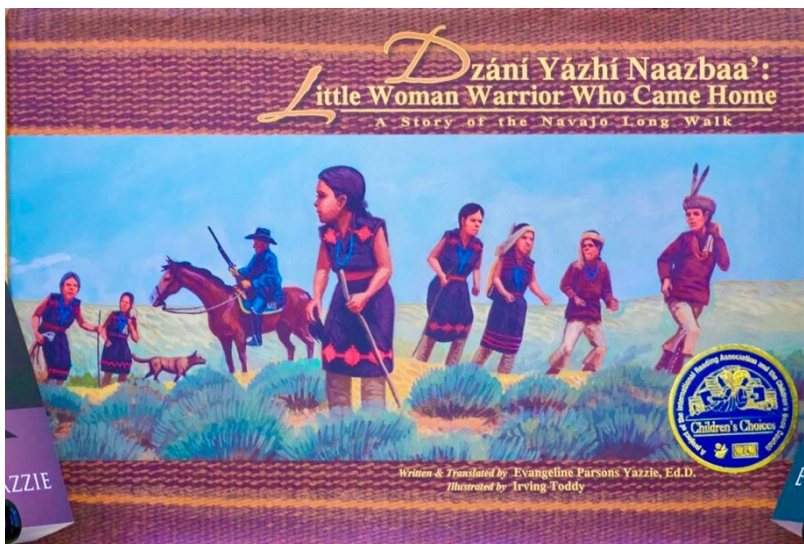
honors their resilience and ensures our ancestors' experiences are remembered.”

The President and First Lady were welcomed by USC Rossier School of Education Dean Pedro Noguera. Both are avid readers of Navajo language children’s books to their two pre-school daughters.

“Language is not just about culture,” Dean Noguera said. “It’s about knowledge. When we lose a language, we lose a way of understanding the world.”

First Lady Blackwater-Nygren said Navajo parents today rely heavily on schools to teach their children their Native language. Navajo language immersion programs are the most valuable, she said.

Even though the story of *Little Woman Warrior Who Came Home* is a children’s historical novel set more than 156 years ago, historical traumas like those of the boarding school era continue to affect living generations of Navajo people, she said.



“When Navajos were taken to boarding schools and continued to speak Navajo, they would put a hot piece of coal on their tongues,” she said. “While it’s important to tell these stories and not dwell on the negative, we need to teach our children resilience and pride in their heritage.”

President Nygren said his concern as *Diné Binant’a’í*, or the People’s leader, is the decline of the Navajo



language. So he has made its preservation and use his administration’s priority.

“Nearly half of our people speak Navajo, but that number drops dramatically with each generation,” he said. “We need to act now.”

To demonstrate the power of language, and how it connects people to their history and identity, the President read from *Little Woman Warrior* in Navajo.

He told the students the need continues for resources like Native American centers at universities to help Indigenous students feel connected and provide academic support.

Dr. Yazzie taught at NAU for 24 years. She held a Master of Arts degree in Bilingual Multicultural Education and a Doctorate in Education with a focus on Native Language Maintenance and Preservation.

Her textbook *Rediscovering the Navajo Language* was adopted by the New Mexico State Department of Education in 2008, the first state to adopt an American Indian language textbook.

Her writing accolades include the International Reading Association Children’s Choices Book Award, the Notable Children’s Social Studies Trade Book Award, the Independent Publisher Book Awards for Non-fiction, and the Storytelling World Award.

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