

## SHALER AREA

## 'Little' project could have big impact on saving world languages

BY BETHANY HOFSTETTER  
STAFF WRITER

When Alexa Little learned that up to half of the world's 6,500 languages could be extinct within a generation she knew she had to do something.

"I saw this and thought I care about this, and I thought if I didn't do something maybe no one will," said Little, a senior at Shaler Area High School.

Little organized and held a conference last week for students at Avonworth, Deer Lakes, Hampton, Shaler Area and Pine-Richland to introduce the next generation of professionals to the current plight of world languages.

"I can't fly to Nepal and record a language, but ... I'm holding this conference to spread the word and get people interested," Little said.

Little contacted Mark Turin, director of the World Oral Literature Project, to give the keynote speech and kick off the Linguistics and Endangered Languages Conference.

The World Oral Literature Project started in January 2009 at the University of Cambridge where Turin is a research associate at the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology. It is a global initiative to document and make accessible endangered oral languages before they disappear without record.

Currently, the project has supported 18 field proj-

ects to document different cultures and languages.

"The diversity of the planet's species and languages, and the forces that threaten their vitality, are now well-understood and well-resourced fields of scholarship and activism. The same is not true for culture," Turin said in an e-mail, adding that languages are the primary vehicles to transmit people's ideas.

"Our project is the only organization offering targeted funding for urgent fieldwork anywhere in the world to document endangered oral literature and verbal arts."

Lori Levin, Alan Black and Robert Frederking, professors from Carnegie Mellon University's Language Technologies Institute, led three break-out sessions addressing computational linguistics and endangered languages, automatic speech-to-speech translation in endangered languages, and the effect of orality on cognition, respectively.

The conference introduced students to the latest research and technologies associated with language study which many students found enlightening.

Ron Reha, a senior at Pine-Richland, has an interest in international relations and government organizations and therefore languages. He attended the conference with the idea that uniformity was the answer, but learned the importance of preserving



PHOTO/BETHANY HOFSTETTER

ALEXA LITTLE, a senior at Shaler Area High School, holds a list of endangered languages that could become extinct in her generation. She is working to bring awareness of the plight of world languages and raise money for a World Oral Literature Project.

individual tradition.

"I was always of the mindset (that) to consolidate language would be the best to communicate internationally, but it really opens your eyes to the impact language has on culture," Reha said.

Hampton High School senior Kelly O'Keefe was drawn to the conference because of her love of language. O'Keefe is studying German, Spanish, French and Latin at Hampton High School, but never realized the number of other

languages in the world.

"It's really cool to know there are languages out there only a few people know," she said.

In addition to organizing the conference, Little also is raising funds for the World Oral Literature Project by holding a baked goods sale.

With each baked good purchased, Little would affix a sticker with the name of one of thousands of endangered languages for the purchase to re-

search. Little also distributed fundraising kits to the conference attendees and encouraged them to raise money for the project at

their own schools and communities.

"I know the \$200-some I raised is a tiny, tiny percentage of the money they need for the project," Little said. "But, it could help save one language."

Starting this July, the World Oral Literature Project will be colocated at Cambridge and Yale University.

Turin said Little's interest is "wonderful and heartening" and gives him hope for the future success of the project.

"It's an extremely positive sign that a young woman in the U.S. took the time to write and wants to be part of this initiative. The diversity of human language is part of our shared heritage as a species...so everyone can play a role," Turin said.

"Up to half of the world's 6,500 languages are endangered, and risk disappearing undocumented in the next generation.

"If students of Alexa's age can be motivated and get involved, we stand a better chance of documenting and understanding the human condition before it's too late."

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