Carla’s ears perk up as the strange words swirl around her. She feels like she is drowning in the sea of an unknown language. Her teacher looks at her and with a smile slows down the sentence to improve understanding. Carla quickly scans her mind to retrieve any clues to the meaning of the words. Even as an adult, she often feels like a child learning the basic building blocks of life and society in her Basque class. Carla’s unfamiliarity with the new words has kept her on the edge of fully understanding their meaning. It is that very edge of understanding that drives her to continue learning.

Years later, Carla looks back on those first classes and is amazed by the cache of Basque words she has built, all diligently studied, carefully stored and made accessible with growing ease. Little by little, she is unlocking the nuances of the Basque language, regarded as one of the most complex to learn.
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Learning Basque, like any language, starts with simple vocabulary and
continues with refining pronunciation, controlling complex sentences and
eventually, incorporating colloquialisms or slang into conversation. Young
children and language enthusiasts from all backgrounds have become
activists in a growing movement to preserve the Basque language (Euskara).
Some students come from families with Basque heritage, while others have
only seen the North American Basque Association’s from the outside. This
Basque language renaissance is taking place on a global level, and Boise is
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For many, their passion to learn is rooted in the idea that language,
regardless of place, is a relevant part of identity. Through speaking the lan-
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The Basque language is a minority in its own homeland, where Spanish
and French are the lingua franca on each side of the region. “By learning
Basque, we show that it has merit,” said Mendive. “Many who know it don’t
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ing Basque is not a necessity for a person living in or visiting the Basque
Country. So, how has a language, threatened by extinction, continued to su-
vive and why do people learn Basque, even when they don’t have to?

In the 1955 BBC program Around the World, Orson Wells famously
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The seven provinces of the Basque Country are called País Vasco in Spanish,
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ethnic groups. Spanish became the official language after the eventual conquest by Castilian forces in the Basque Country. Simultaneously, the northern regions of the Basque Country were ceded to France, and French took over as the dominant idiom. The Basque language overlaps three political units: the Basque Autonomous Community (the provinces of Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa in Spain), Navarra (in Spain) and the Atlantic Pyrenees (the provinces of Lapurdi, Zuberoa and Béhe Nafarroa in France). The standing of Euskara in each area varies significantly, ranging from acceptance in the Autonomous Community to lack of acknowledgment in Navarra and France. But the history and geography of the Basque Country does not necessarily tell the story of its language. The Euskara Institute at the University of the Basque Country states that “languages exist in the minds of their speakers; they do not have a land of their own. Thus, when locating Euskara on the world’s map, we are simply pointing out those areas where Euskara speakers are more likely to be found, that is, where Euskara is most likely to be heard, or where it is most likely to be used as the primary language.” Basque, an “island language” originally isolated to the coastal and mountainous region between Spain and France, was transplanted with the initial waves of immigration to countries across the globe. In the late 19th century, many Basques made the journey to a world unknown in Idaho. The Basque migrants brought with them their food, dance, culture and, of course, language. The majority of the Idaho Basques came from the province of Bizkaia, bringing their own distinct dialect known as Bizkaieren. Throughout the early 1900s, the Basque community in Idaho
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saving euskara

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However, with the passing of time, the role of Euskara changed for Idaho’s Basque population. For many children born to Basque immigrants, Euskara was the language within families, but English was spoken among friends. Most Basques assimilated into American life. Euskara was the language of their past and the transmission rate from native Basque speakers to their children born in the United States was low. This was not atypical. Studies show that ethnic groups tend to lose their language by the third generation.

As the Basque language diminished through cultural adaptation in the U.S., it faced an even greater setback in the Basque Country. The aggressive regime of Gen. Franco (1939–75) prohibited the Basque language throughout the Spanish side of the Basque Country, meaning generations lost an opportunity to learn the language. Castilian Spanish replaced Basque; those who defined the Franco regime’s order to discontinue Basque were punished, severely in many cases. For Franco, the continuation of Euskara represented an attack on Spanish unity. The Basque language became highly controversial and politicized among the Basque community. Language is a foremost measure of Basque culture; in fact, Basques refer to themselves as Euskaldunak (one who speaks Basque), thus defining themselves by their language. The demise of the language, therefore, would signal a weakening of the community. During the final years of the Franco regime, the importance of Basque unity became more important than ever. To the Spanish government, the language became as dangerous as weapons or political organizing and thus became a target of oppression.

The language survived under the radar of the dictatorship through clandestine use in homes, isolated villages and in some cases, churches. Basque nationalism became a prominent feature in the fight against Franco’s vision of a homogeneous Spain. Extremist actions garnered attention. The language was fused with Spanish sentiments that opposed Basque extremism, making Basque more than a language, but also a political sign.

During the last years of the Franco dictatorship, “The greater Basque community came to realize that in order to promote the language efficiently a standard dialect was needed to ensure that children would learn the same language in school and that publications would use uniform vocabulary and spelling,” wrote Linda White and Thomas McGlanahan in their essay “Translating the Culture.” In the late 1960s, the Euskalzaindia (Academy of Basque Language) restarted the development of a standardized version of the Basque language, later known as Euskara Batua (unified Basque) or simply as Batua. Batua, created to overcome the gaps between provincial...
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dialec ts that became barriers to cultural unity, took pieces from those dialects and created a standard form of the language. By 1976, Batha was used in government administration, teaching and media. Batha itself has created controversy because some question the cultural integrity of a dialect that was created rather than organically born. However, Batha has done more than solely standardize a language; it has created a written roadmap of Basque that facilitates the learning and transmission of the language regardless of access to ikastolas (schools in Basque) and euskaltegis (Basque language schools). In most cases, people still speak in their colloquial dialects; those have not been lost. The creation of the standard form in Batha, along with other factors, has served as a medium for the revival of the language.

Born during the transition years after Franco’s dictatorship, Oihana Andion Martinez, a native Basque speaker now living in Idaho, reflected on the tension toward Basques in her home city of Pamplona. “I was not raised in a place where the government, like in the legal Basque Country or Catalonia, promoted and respected biculturalism. Instead, I remember a constant struggle to keep our heritage alive and present in everyday life. We were a minority in our own land.” The language one spoke often represented political leanings. “I remember when I was younger—and even now when I go back to the Basque Country—there is this question, ‘What are you?’ Meaning, are you Basque or are you Spanish? People from Spain, people from Navarra and people from Euskadi ask that question. You are always put in doubt, and you have to take sides. You are instantly defined by the answer you give,” Andion said.

In her homeland the pressure that comes from choosing the language is a very real factor in Basque speakers’ decisions to use the language. For some, Basque is spoken in the home, but Spanish or French is the preferred vernacular with friends. For others, Basque is the language that they consciously speak every day as a means to keep their culture alive. And for many, Basque is a distant part of the community in which they live. For those who use Basque in everyday life, there is ultimately a degree of choice involved.

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Euskara is the spoken language at the Boiseko Ikastola preschool. Opposite: Basque Museum whaling exhibit, a reminder of folkways that long predated Idaho's sheep camps.

Language do not necessarily speak it. "In the case of Euskara, because it is not an everyday necessity unless you make it so, we would speak Spanish because it was easier to communicate in the store, at the doctor, etc. And deep in our minds, I am sure we believed Euskara was a smaller language and that our bilingualism was less valuable than speaking Spanish and English," explained Andion about the conflict experienced by Basque speakers throughout the Basque Country. "Euskara had been stigmatized, secluded purposely by a bigger culture; the Spanish public policies were trying to dissipate the feeling of belonging to the Basque identity."

To combat language loss, ikastolas and euskaltegis provide education in the Basque language. Andion explained the role of the ikastola in promoting the language and culture: "My family belongs to a generation where speaking Basque or showing Basqueness was strictly prohibited and punished, but that era turned them into wild defenders of their culture. Like many other parents, they sent me to ikastola, where I became bilingual. In addition, we went to every protest and event in defense of our culture and language; they encouraged my speaking Basque, even if they didn't understand."

Idaho's Basque community has its own "wild defenders" of the language. Among the first was Joe Figueren, who was recruited by the Oinkaris to teach them a few words in 1963. He organized the first Basque language class taught in Idaho, and possibly the U.S., according to authors John and Mark Bieter in An Enduring Legacy. There were no instructional materials, so Figueren developed his own, writing a small book on the origins of the language and a grammar/vocabulary book. He taught language classes for several years and wrote a history of the Basques in 1972.

In 1998, the only Basque preschool outside the Basque Country, known as the Boiseko Ikastola, opened in Boise as the result of a group of determined parents and the commitment of the Basque Museum & Cultural Center. From economic support to learning materials, the Autonomous Basque Government in Spain played a major role in the Boiseko Ikastola. The preschool uses a full-immersion approach, educating children solely in Euskara is the spoken language at the Boiseko Ikastola preschool. Opposite: Basque Museum whaling exhibit, a reminder of folkways that long predated Idaho's sheep camps.
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Learning Euskara becomes a life-long journey. “By learning Euskara they are
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Cody Beaudreau defies the stereotype of the Basque language student.
His family is not Basque. He began to learn Basque simply out of curiosity.
“Seeing the immigrant and subsequent generational community of Basques
in Boise opened the door to the language. The more I learned the language,
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Beaudreau, who now has a strong command of the language. Beaudreau
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Cultural Center. “Adult learners are the ones who, in the diaspora, are making Euskara flourish and stay in their communities; I relate to them because even if they know there are a few places to make use of Euskara, they still learn it ... more than practicality, they give Euskara a deeper value,” Andion explained. Thirty students are taking classes offered through the museum’s programs and another eight are enrolled in Boise State courses during the spring 2014 semester.

Why do people learn such an “impractical” language? The common Basque saying “Euskara bizi nahi dut” provides an answer. Its meaning, “I want to live Basque,” speaks to a greater purpose for the Basque language than just communication. It is a way of life and a culture in its own right. Learning Euskara becomes a life-long journey. “By learning Euskara they are trying to develop a part of their identities; it is an exercise of introspection and connection with their roots; it is also a way to connect with other diaspora members by sharing a unifying symbol—Euskara,” said Andion.

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Huddled in the Basque Museum’s library, surrounded by literature and texts on all things Basque, Boise students use 21st century technology to learn the ancient language. Andion’s class watches short films in Euskara from EiTB, the Basque Country’s major media channel. Messages pop up on the screens of students’ phones from friends in the Basque Country. Websites and apps support Boise students by giving them a reason to use Basque in their everyday lives. Students like Beaudreau and Ciganda speak Basque with the everyday use of phones, tablets and computers. Ciganda’s phone is loaded with Basque language learning apps, such as Auskalo. Beaudreau regularly emails friends in Basque. Social media and technology have thrust the language into the everyday lives of Basque students throughout the world. People can have conversations in Basque on Google Chat.

Maria Esther Ciganda Zozoya, a Spanish teacher originally from Moses Lake, Washington, had a different journey to learn Basque. “When we traveled to see our families in Navarra, my dad’s family would use Basque. As a child, I would ask my dad to teach us Basque, but we just learned very simple things. The focus was on Spanish in our house because it was the common language between my parents since my mom never learned Basque.” After a trip to compete in a pelota competition in France, Ciganda was invigorated to learn the language of her parents’ families. “I decided I would return in the summer and go to a barnetegui (intensive Basque language school). She has returned to the Basque Country since 2011 to take summer classes. For Ciganda, learning Basque is a lifelong ambition based on her family’s strong Basque background. “It has always been my desire to learn it since I was a child and heard my cousins use the language. For me it has always been a personal pursuit, and I finally started to achieve the dream.”

A Boisean flashes her Euskadi tattoo at a Jaialdi celebration on Grove Street.

Language meets left-wing politics in this Gaztetxea “youth house” plea for Basque autonomy and cultural independence.
in a town [in the Basque Country] where a lot of Basque is spoken, so it was useful and practical to know and speak Basque. I saw firsthand that speaking Basque is like a key to culture. It lets you in. It went from being a hobby to being something that was actually practical,” Beaudreau said.

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Language meets left-wing politics in this Gaztetxea “youth house” plea for Basque autonomy and cultural independence.
For Basques like Andion, the future of Euskara is uncertain, but she hasn’t written off the survival of the language yet. “I don’t think anyone can predict the life expectancy of Euskara; as long as it stays alive, there will be hope. If Euskara has survived its troubled history, it only means that it has acquired the necessary tools to evolve and keep up with the modern world, no matter how old it is. As long as there are Euskara speakers interested in passing it along, Euskara will survive.”

Euskara continues to prove itself as a master of reinvention, a language of resilience, a dual representative of personal choice and communal solidarity, an agent for evolution through undeniable adversity. With its history of oppression and a future of uncertainty, the language continues to stay alive in the minds of its supporters. It represents more than the right to speak its words; it represents the right of people to choose their own identity and ultimately write their own history. It is the essence of “becoming Basque.”

Kattalina Marie Berriochoa, who speaks Basque and Spanish, holds a bachelor’s degree in political science-international relations and comparative politics and a minor in Spanish from the University of Montana, Missoula and a master’s degree in public administration from Boise State.
For Basques like Andion, the future of Euskara is uncertain, but she hasn’t written off the survival of the language yet. “I don’t think anyone can predict the life expectancy of Euskara; as long as it stays alive, there will be hope. If Euskara has survived its troubled history, it only means that it has acquired the necessary tools to evolve and keep up with the modern world, no matter how old it is. As long as there are Euskara speakers interested in passing it along, Euskara will survive.”

Euskara continues to prove itself as a master of reinvention, a language of resilience, a dual representative of personal choice and communal solidarity, an agent for evolution through undeniable adversity. With its history of oppression and a future of uncertainty, the language continues to stay alive in the minds of its supporters. It represents more than the right to speak its words; it represents the right of people to choose their own identity and ultimately write their own history. It is the essence of “becoming Basque.”

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