

# THE LIVES BEHIND LANGUAGE

by Emma Mafi (Microbiology '25)

BYU has been praised for its diversity of language courses; and for the language instructors, sharing their culture and language with students is more than impressive—it is meaningful.

**MANY UNIVERSITIES TEACH FOREIGN LANGUAGES**, though few offer quite as many as BYU. The College of Humanities teaches 84 languages regularly, making the university a cornucopia of language knowledge, and critical to this effort are the adjunct faculty who help make it possible. Two adjunct faculty—Alina Hovsoyan, who teaches Armenian, and Rena Dunn, who teaches Navajo—explain that being part of a BYU language program means more than simply teaching a language: It means sharing their identity.

**FINDING STRENGTH IN CULTURE** Dunn grew up on a Navajo (or Diné) reservation in Arizona and now teaches her native language at BYU, a position she considers to be an important calling in her life. “I love teaching my language and culture to others so they can be proud of who they are,” she says, explaining that learning about other traditions can help develop one’s sense of self. For Native students, she says that “knowing your tribe’s traditions and culture helps you become a stronger person.” Because the Navajo language is in danger of extinction, teaching has manifested as both a blessing and a responsibility to help preserve her culture for posterity. By teaching Navajo to both Native and non-Native students at BYU, she helps maintain Diné customs for generations to come.

Many of Dunn’s students have used their understanding of Navajo in various professional settings; some of her students go on to work on reservations, employing their language skills daily to communicate and connect with tribal members and customs.

Dunn believes that learning a tribe’s customs and traditions can give any student an extra measure of personal strength. These topics can especially bolster Native students by connecting them with their relatives in ways that can only be done with the help of language. Learning Navajo, Dunn says, “makes you know the power you have because of what your ancestors went through. It helps you know that you can do anything you want and can overcome any challenge before you.”

## MAKING CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE

Similarly, Hovsoyan grew up in Yerevan, Armenia, but moved shortly

after war broke out in 1993. Since then, her language has become more than just a tool for communicating—it has become a symbol of her heritage. Hovsoyan finds the chance to teach the Armenian language and customs “deeply personal and sacred.” Sharing her culture with students in this capacity, she continues, allows her “to honor where I come from and to inspire others to find meaning and belonging through language and human connection.”

This connection became prominent in 2020 when war again broke out in Armenia. Hovsoyan’s students responded with prayers and fundraisers for those affected, using their background with Armenia to better understand the conflict. She has also introduced students to her country’s strength and resilience through art at BYU’s Museum of Art, cultural activities, and current events, helping her classes connect with the country despite the distance.

Hovsoyan says that sharing personal experiences with her Armenian roots “allows students to experience a culture rooted in spirituality, creativity, and community—a culture that teaches not just words but ways of seeing the world.” In teaching her language, Hovsoyan has seen students take part in rich and meaningful interactions with the world around them by virtue of their ability to understand and respect different cultures.

Dunn and Hovsoyan agree that their work goes beyond grammar patterns and vocabulary quizzes; it invites students to develop empathy for another culture and to dare to see the world differently. Hovsoyan says, “In each class, it feels like I’m planting seeds of connection, and I feel grateful to witness them grow.”

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Photos by Adobe Stock, courtesy of Rena Dunn (LEFT) and Alina Hovsoyan (RIGHT).