

## LANGUAGE LIVES ON

Author John Smelcer shares knowledge of language with Truman students

BY ANNA GRACE, Assistant Features Editor

**J**ohn Smelcer has traveled many roads — whether dodging bison on the walk to school as a child in 50 below weather or participating in a car ride sing-along with author John Updike — but his current road led him to Truman State.

Smelcer presented at Truman about his native Ahtna culture March 27 and had a reading for his poetry March 28. Smelcer said he has written more than 40 books about a variety of subjects, taught subjects including creative writing, literature, Native Studies, linguistics, public speaking and cosmology for more than 20 years and currently is taking more religion classes from Harvard University. He said he has used Truman as a publisher for 10 years, which was his original connection to the University.

Smelcer said he is one of the last people alive who can speak, read and write two endangered Native American languages, Ahtna and Alutiiq. He worked with every living speaker of both languages, and created a dictionary for each, according to [www.ipl.org](http://www.ipl.org). He said he works to preserve the languages not because he gets a reward, but because he feels the responsibility of being the only one who can.

Smelcer said since the 1990s, there has been a national resurgence of ethnic studies and an increasing interest in Native American studies. He said classes already offered at Truman as well as added classes could be part of a program and Native American studies could be offered as a minor at Truman. He said he also would like to see more opportunity for students to understand racial awareness in

general.

"I think it would be really cool to have more student workshops on racial tolerance," Smelcer said. "The world would be such a happier place."

Smelcer said something he learned from his



John Smelcer

broad experiences is that people are the same everywhere, something he learned from teaching in Russia and Australia as well as spending time in various places throughout the United States. He said essentially everyone wants a happy life, to be liked by other people, a home, safety, education, access to jobs and happiness for their families. He said he has learned to look past appearance and realize the similarities between himself and other people.

Senior Ashley Butner, who was the liaison between Smelcer and Truman for his visit, said she had a Truman State University Press internship during the summer and had contact with Smelcer. She said she had an interest in a potential Native American Studies minor, and had the idea to bring him in as a speaker with experience on the topic. With the help of faculty sponsors English education professor Barbara Price, English professor Betsy Delmonico and anthropology professor Amber Johnson, Butner started making headway to bring Smelcer to campus.

Butner said Smelcer's three days on campus were busy. She said it was exciting to see her plans actually happen and she enjoyed being able to talk with Smelcer in person and have a good conversation after mainly email correspondence.

Butner said Smelcer was a great example of interdisciplinary education in action and how an interdisciplinary view is needed to solve real life problems. She said he had an interesting perspective and position and it was helpful for her to get opinions from someone with so much diverse experience.

Butner said she saw Smelcer loved the work he was doing. She said he seems to love to learn and has a need for understanding as well as an ability to explain.

The most valuable thing Butner said she learned was the view that there are positive and negative effects on culture from technology and globalization. She said she felt it was important and valuable work to preserve a culture and to collect records for a blueprint of a culture for future people.

## Ahtna Glossary

	bird:	ggaaggi	(gaw-gee)
	cat:	gusgeggaay	(guss-geh-guy)
	cow:	giliba'	(gill-ee-baw)
	dog:	lic'ae	(thlik-a)
	horse:	gon	(gon)
	frog:	naghaay	(na-guy-ee)
	white:	lggay	(ell-guy-ee)
	black:	lt'uuts'	(ell-toots')
	red:	del	(dell)
	yellow:	tsogh	(so)
	orange:	saghani gige'	(saw-gaw-nee-gig-eh)
	green:	tl'ogh	(tloe)

\*according to "Ahtna Noun Dictionary and Pronunciation Guide, 2nd Edition" compiled and edited by Dr. John E. Smelcer