to find that her bulldog, Allie, had destroyed her $300 Coach bag. Allie also has chewed through screen doors, couches and shoes.

"One time she ate one of my friend's sandals that he was absolutely obsessed with," Rachel says. "I had to drive all the way to the Outer Banks to buy him a new pair!"

Her African Grey Parrot has eaten every key off her laptop computer and numerous wallets have gone missing. Some of Butler's items have been ruined as well.

"I'm big on video games and Dixon's eaten some of those," Butler says, referring to Rachel's feisty black-and-white Boston Terrier. "One day he ate about $200 worth of stuff!"

"There's always something interesting going on," Rachel adds, mentioning that her birds enjoy bathing in the dogs' water bowls. "A lot of the time they're just all running around at once," she says laughing.

With the financial strains and long hours spent caring for her pets, Rachel is now trying to downsize, sticking mainly to fish.

"Rachel's problem is she likes all animals, so if anything comes in with a cute face it's coming home," Butler says.

"I'll just stick with saltwater fish. They don't poop on the floor," he says with a smirk.

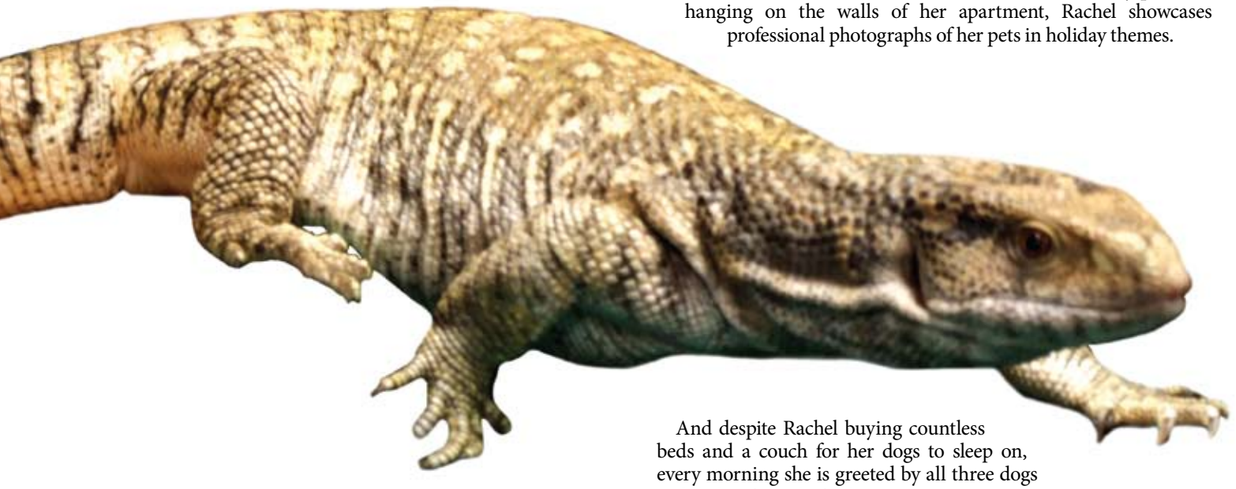
Rachel also is downsizing because of the great amount of space her animals require, although she is able to live — crammed yet content — in the bottom level of her grandparents' house.

Rachel says that she is limited as to where she can live because no one will rent to someone with that many animals.

"I am very lucky that my grandparents let me stay here," she says. "Otherwise, I would have to buy my own house." Rachel says she is grateful to have the support of her parents and boyfriend as well, who help take off some of the pressure.

"I am lucky because my parents are available to me, so I am still able to go on vacations and lead somewhat of a normal life," Rachel says.

While her pets can be difficult to manage at times, Rachel says that her animals are like children to her. Rather than family portraits hanging on the walls of her apartment, Rachel showcases professional photographs of her pets in holiday themes.



And despite Rachel buying countless beds and a couch for her dogs to sleep on, every morning she is greeted by all three dogs cuddled up in bed with her.

"They are worse than kids, but I still love all of them."

"*They are* worse *than kids*, but I still love all of them."

RACHEL HARPER,
Sylvia's Pets

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Salvation*by* Translation

Saving nearly extinct languages is just a day on the job for former JMU professor Marion Bittinger

story by **Eileen Graham** | photography by **Ashley Beaudin**

Marion Bittinger hunched in her hooded down coat, staring through the glass. The howling winds outside threatened to rip the drying animal skins off the boxy roof seen from her hotel room. After hearing of two men found dead in the blizzard outside, she lifted her camera to snap pictures from inside her room, documenting her third trip to the Arctic Circle.

Bittinger is in Kotzebue, Alaska, home to the Inupiat Eskimos. But she isn't on a frosty vacation — she's at work.

As a part of the Endangered Languages program with Rosetta Stone, an educational language software company that started in Harrisonburg, Va., Bittinger travels to remote locations to develop software for communities that want to preserve native languages.

The mission of the Endangered Languages program is to revitalize the language within the community where it was born. The program started in 2004 after a few groups joined with Rosetta Stone to create software for their personal use.

"We don't sell or distribute it to others," Bittinger explains. So far, six different Native American or Alaskan Native tribes have contracted with Rosetta Stone for custom software.

As the program manager, Bittinger meets regularly with members of the tribes, either remotely or on site, to discuss a plan of action. The program has finished three languages so far and has five more in progress. She made her most recent trip to Alaska to record audio clips of the language for the software.

Now back in her warm, buzzing Rosetta Stone office, Bittinger jokes about her lack of physical activity in Alaska, saying, "In that kind of weather, you can't spend that much time recreating anyway."

Bittinger asserts that the international success of the software is because it is immersion-based. "You only see the language you're learning," she explains. For example, a native English speaker wanting to learn Spanish would never hear the English translation of a word or phrase. "You learn by associating the language with visual and audio, in small pieces — phrases and sentences," she says.

The team begins with a basic template for the program and customizes with specific linguistic and cultural features. The staff works remotely and then goes on location for photos and to record audio with native speakers. Once the project is complete, the Endangered Languages program staff travels again to the location to train the native speakers to use the software in their schools and communities.

"Time can vary a great deal — it could take up to four years to complete a project, depending on a team's availability," she says. And time is of the essence when languages are quickly disappearing.

Bittinger brings her boots, muddy from her last caving trip, on all of her travels.

"He said, *'You know, I always used to hate white people.'* This opened the door for him to communicate his history."

MARION BITTINGER, *language expert*

Of the 6,800 languages in the world, Bittinger says about half could be extinct by the end of this century, "extinct" meaning all active speakers are deceased. "A few hundred of these [languages] will be in North America alone," she says.

So where are all of these North American languages? These communities are scattered around the United States in urban areas and others are accessible only by air or, in warmer summer months, by sea. Bittinger's most recent trip to Alaska was to record audio clips of the language for the software.

Bittinger attributes the death of several languages in North America to the boarding-school structure in the American educational system. In this system, many children were forced to leave their communities for schooling and learn the English language.

"Students were often physically punished for speaking their native language," Bittinger says. She gazes at the ceiling and states flatly, "You kill the Indian, save the man," quoting Captain Richard Pratt, founder of an experiment that involved teaching Native Americans to read and write English and dressing them as American soldiers.

Howard Michael Gelfand, a history professor at James Madison University, notes that other movements have contributed to the weakening of the Native Americans' culture. The Dawes Act of 1887 began the individual distribution of land to Native Americans, starting in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, the allotments were white castoffs and not substantial enough for economic viability. The forced assimilation mandated by the act led to confusion and immense anger on the part of the Native Americans as their communal lifestyle deteriorated. "As a result, their languages went on a steep decline," Gelfand says.

Today, traditional groups of Native Americans remain, striving to reclaim their language and culture, but succeeding primarily with their most tangible asset: land. Gelfand, an Arizona native, testifies that Phoenix is a perfect example of the divisions today. "Flying into Phoenix, you can literally see the reservations with the suburbs surrounding them," he says.

After traveling to several of the program locations, including Alaska and Canada, the Endangered Languages team became attached to the people they helped.

"All the projects I've been really connected to emotionally," Bittinger says. After working most thoroughly with the Navajo Indians in the Four Corners area of the western United States, the Navajo project is where her heart is.

She finds that most groups take a while to warm up to the team because of their weariness with white culture. "We're white corporate America and everything that represents when we go up there," she says. "I have to be a good listener."

As she was recording audio tracks for the Inuit Labrador community in Nain, Newfoundland and Labrador, she was approached by an Inuit man who had been rather unfriendly.

"He said, 'You know, I always used to hate white people,'" Bittinger recalls. "This opened the door for him to communicate his history. If they can see you have a personal interest, they will respect that."

When she isn't jetting off to far-flung civilizations, Bittinger maintains her connection with her clients by reading Native American publications online. "I like to keep up on local issues with the tribe," she says. "Those issues have a direct impact on the people I work with."

After studying language in college and living in Spain for three years, Bittinger spent 20 years teaching Spanish in Harrisonburg and at JMU. She decided to give up teaching language to work with Rosetta Stone.

Bittinger's enthusiasm for languages pervades her life. Her husband, Antonio Martinez, 54, shares her love for culture and new languages. "I go with her only when she'll take me," he jokes. "I'm actually extremely jealous." He has tagged along twice to the Navajo reservation and once to the Mohawk community in Canada.

"It's a world within a world," Martinez says. "They don't want to be like us. There are people living in sod-roof hogans within a morning's drive of Phoenix."

Bittinger considers herself lucky because of the people who surround her. "All of us who work within the program are trained in languages and have a passion for what we do. This job allows me to really see people and a language firsthand, in a way that very few people do."

Her mouth breaks into a crinkly smile as she says, "I always knew I wanted to study languages."

One thing is clear: at 51, Bittinger has finally found her dream job.

Bittinger checks her voice mail while on a three-day backpacking vacation on the flanks of Mt. Baker in Washington.

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