

07.31.11 > BOSTON UNCOMMON

> FIRST PERSON

Gift of the Gab

Mashpee Wampanoag linguist Jessie Little Doe Baird, 47, on bringing back her tribal tongue.



In 1993, you cofounded the project to reclaim Wopanaak, the language of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. Did you always want to become a linguist? This started when I saw my ancestors in a vision. They asked if we were ready to bring our native language home again, after losing it for more than a century. I gauged interest and every response was positive. > **Noam Chomsky once said he would have considered**

your work “impossible.” What drives you?

I feel I was born to do this. There’s a burning desire in me to reclaim what is Wampanoag.

> **A documentary on your tribe, *We Still Live Here*, screens today at the Woods Hole Film Festival. What do you want viewers to learn?** That studying our language and keeping our culture intact offers something to all of humanity. > **Your daughter, Mae, 7, is**

the first native Wopanaak speaker in over a century. How is that progressing?

Not well. Putting her in public school was detrimental, because everything is in English. She’ll speak [Wopanaak at home], but seems to socially shy away from it because no one can understand her.

> **How do you remedy that?** Through a federal grant, we’re training apprentices to be fluent speakers. Hopefully in 2015, we’ll

open up an elementary school in Mashpee where all the subjects are taught in Wopanaak. Children taught in their indigenous language are better able to cope with the pressures of their community.

> **How has life changed since you became a MacArthur Fellow last year?** The day I got the call, I was in tears just for the honor of someone recognizing what I do. It’s not a sexy career, and it’s lonely most

of the time. When they told me I was getting half a million dollars, I nearly fell off my chair. Some will go to language-related work. I also paid off medical bills and plan to install insulation in my living room. > **Besides education, how else would you like the language used?** I would like to write the stories of European contact from our own perspective. I want my ancestors’ voices heard.

— Jennifer L. Schwartz