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Wakening Wôpanâak

BY DONNA LAURENT CARUSO

If the Wampanoag could bring back their language without a single Native speaker, then anything is possible," said Anne Makepeace, the creator of a documentary about the revitalization of the Wôpanâak language. "I think this film can serve as a cautionary tale for Native people whose languages are endangered and a model of inspiration for those working to preserve and revitalize their languages."

The Wampanoag people greeted and helped the Pilgrims but ultimately lost most of their land; their language had not been spoken in a century.

We Still Live Here As Nutayuneân opens with Jesse Little Doe Baird (Mashpee Wampanoag) driving past Wampanoag signs while traveling from Mashpee to the ferry to Martha's Vineyard. Baird lives there in a home built by her husband, Jason, who is also the medicine man of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), and their 6-year-old daughter, who is now the first Wampanoag to speak their ancestral language from childhood.

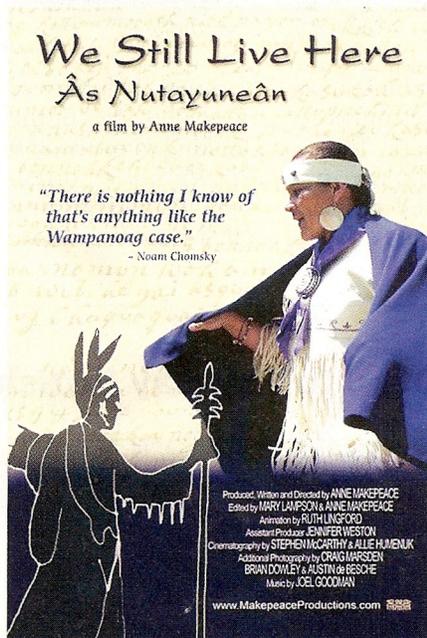
While waiting for the ferry, Baird, who has been speaking Wampanoag for more than a decade, speaks of her visions: "It was prophesied that language would go away from us and when the appointed time came, there would be a way made for the language to return."

She explained that the ancestors requested her to first ask other Wampanoag people whether they wanted to bring the language home. She queried the groups (beginning with Mashpee and Aquinnah) and it was agreed they wanted to do so. Her question brought communities together. "This never happens," Baird said, smiling.

Baird had been a co-founder of the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project (with the late Helen Manning, Aquinnah Wampanoag) since 1993. Baird ultimately earned a master's degree in linguistics in 2000 at the Massachusetts In-

stitute of Technology, working alongside indigenous languages scholar Ken Hale, also now deceased and a descendant of colonists. Makepeace herself acknowledges she descended from colonists "who stole their land."

Baird was initially angry that she would need the help of "a white man" to take the next steps for her language pro-



grams. But she came to understand that the descendants of those who broke the circle of language would be vital to close the circle again. Last September, Baird's work was recognized with a MacArthur Foundation genius grant of \$500,000. That same week, The Wôpanâak Language Project was awarded a \$530,000 federal grant.

The foundation wrote, "Wampanoag... was spoken by tens of thousands of people in southeast New England when 17th century Puritan missionaries learned the language, rendered it phonetically in the Roman alphabet and used it to translate

the King James Bible for the purpose of conversion...." The foundation further wrote that Baird is providing "precious links to our nation's complex past."

Makepeace's film shows some of the original Wôpanâak documents that Baird used to create her dictionary: grammar and school lessons, deeds, letters, petitions, even notes in the margins of family Bibles. The documentary shows how Baird learns new words using vowel and pronunciation charts, and dictionaries from one of the 40 Algonquian languages still spoken, such as Passamaquoddy. It also shows classroom students struggling to learn "Wamp." But Baird's dedication is such that you may find yourself whispering your own first new phrases.

Tobias Vanderhoop, the Aquinnah tribal administrator, describes how children—and therefore language and culture—were stolen. The camera scans an original English document and you read each column: an unnamed child, their sex, then age, then price and place they are sent. Fifteen years later, the children might return home from servitude in places like Lexington or Cambridge.

"I think it pleases the Creator," said Eva Blake, Assonet Wampanoag, in a voice-over while the film shows the viewer a recent Aquinnah pow wow.

Because of Baird's work, we learn one of the many Wampanoag creation stories, and Makepeace devises a way to tell us by using a series of animation films that solve the cultural and language problem of presenting Natives' dreams. The films were created by Ruth Lingford, a Harvard animation professor.

Just this February, Baird was in Hale's hometown of Lexington, Massachusetts giving a presentation. Coming full circle, she told a children's story that she wrote: "*Sâpabeekanubtyâtôn*" ("Let's Make Soup").

Visit MakepeaceProductions.com for DVD-ordering information and clips from the film. 🌀