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Artist’s Statement

My name is Kerri Helme (AnuhQus), and I am a 29 year old Wampanoag traditional potter, artisan and historian from Mashpee, MA. Wampanoag means “People of the First Light.” We were the first Natives to interact with the Mayflower Pilgrims of Plymouth, MA in 1620. For about six years I have been working as an Artisan and Interpreter at the replicated 17th century Wampanoag Homesite at Plimoth Plantation, where our earliest cultural history is preserved.

When I arrived at Plimoth, no Native women were making or firing Native pottery at the museum; it was a “hole” in the program. This “hole” prompted me to want to learn how to replicate and create traditional Wampanoag pottery. I began teaching myself the needed skills by reading period sources, and closely studying the shapes, symbols, textures and construction details of ancient Native American clay pots from the Northeast, many preserved at the Robbins Museum in Middleborough, MA, overseen by the Massachusetts Archaeology Society.

My fascination for both the art and the science of the Native pottery grew, and each new discovery prompted new questions. What kind(s) of clays were used? What materials were added to strengthen the clay? What was done to make the various hand-laid coils in a pot properly bind together? How was Native clay-firing traditionally done? When was firing done? What shapes and decorative motifs were traditionally produced, and why?

I produce by hand a variety of Native clay pots in the traditional manner, as well as clay pipes, and small clay ornamental items. All my pots are produced by hand, using the coil method, and a variety of traditional tools. I enjoy studying the history and evolution of pottery, and in our 1,000 year old tradition, mostly make pots that have pointed bases--so they can be propped by stones in a fire for cooking--and they are finished with castellated tops.

Food tastes better when prepared in a traditional clay pot, as opposed to a metal one. I can still remember with great delight when I made my first clay pot, fired it, made soup in it over an open fire, and fed my son Koohookhowem (Lone Owl) or Pharaoh from it. That was the best.

Many unexpected benefits have resulted from my learning how to produce Native pottery in the traditional ways. At the Plimoth Plantation museum, we can now provide more accurate programs and explain more details about traditional village life—because traditional Native clay pots are again being designed and hand-crafted on site. On a tribal level, it is also immensely valuable that these skills continue—and be taught to our youth--because without regular attention, traditional skills can die out within one generation. On a very personal level, crafting and using these Wampanoag pots also helps me feel a much stronger connection to my ancestors, as I am in effect, walking in their moccasins. Continuing these skills helps us prepare and eat traditional cooked foods—in the traditional ways. It helps us revive lost arts. And it helps us remember who we are.