

ECHOES of the Past



RainKeep sculpture dedicated at Casey Farm

by WANDA HOPKINS

Wanda Hopkins has been offering her Native voice in classrooms, churches, and cultural events throughout Rhode Island for more than thirty years. She has served as a Narragansett tribal councilwoman and chair of the Tomaquag Museum in Exeter, Rhode Island. She is currently a member of the Native American Advisory Council at the University of Rhode Island, where she is working on a master's degree in English.

Historic Casey Farm in Saunderstown, Rhode Island, is a place where the past and present merge on a continuum of ecological and cultural preservation. Ancient stone walls enclose vibrant flower, herb, and vegetable gardens. The farm is a charming reminder of how generous Mother Earth is with her bounty of life-sustaining gifts. She offers her bounty to sustain generations and uses the process of planting to teach humankind life lessons in harmonious productivity. This past June, echoes of gratitude from the past mingled with the present as the “Three Sisters” RainKeep was dedicated at Casey

Farm. If there’s one place water is held sacred, it is on a farm.

“Water is Sacred” is a mantra made famous by several thousand water protectors in 2016 at Standing Rock, North Dakota (#NODAPL). This sentiment is also held by two Rhode Island artists, Deborah Spears Moorehead and Allison Newsome, who share a passion for water preservation and conservation. The two created “Three Sisters” RainKeep, an industrious work of art installed at Casey Farm to collect water for its Three Sisters Garden.

“Deborah is from the Eastern Woodlands and I from the Redwoods. We share a concern for water in our art,” Newsome

explained. “When we collaborate, our ideas flow harmoniously.”

Moorehead and Newsome created the sculpture for the 2020 PVDfest, an annual arts festival sponsored by the municipal Arts, Culture and Tourism Department of Providence, Rhode Island; and FirstWorks, a Providence-based arts and cultural organization.

The Casey Farm dedication ceremony began with a land acknowledgment offered by Lorén Spears, director of the Tomaquag Museum in Essex, Rhode Island. Spears is a member of the Narragansett Tribe, the people indigenous to Rhode Island. She presented her introduction

PAGE 16 Artist Allison Newsome speaks to the crowd gathered for the dedication ceremony. **RIGHT** Newsome (left) and “Three Sisters” RainKeep collaborator Deborah Spears Moorehead share a moment at the dedication. Photographs by Nicolas Hyacinthe.

in the Narragansett language and acknowledged the continued effort of cultural endurance and sustainability made by the Narragansett. Spears blessed the past, present, and future generations of Narragansett, welcomed all to the land, and in closing blessed the dedication ceremony.

Jane Hennedy, Historic New England’s site manager for southern Rhode Island, spoke about the organization’s collaborative efforts with Spears, which include an exhibit they developed for Casey Farm that displays Narragansett farming tools. Hennedy and Spears’s work representing the Native American presence was key to Historic New England’s acquisition of “Three Sisters” RainKeep. The sculpture is a reminder that Indigenous people still inhabit the land and helps to highlight their contributions. Hennedy and Spears have produced a wave of influence that offers the public a means to study a more accurate historical account of early America. During the dedication ceremony, Vin Cipolla, Historic New England’s president and CEO, shared words of admiration for the work done at Casey Farm.

Newsome and Moorehead talked of how their friendship blossomed during the construction of “Three Sisters” RainKeep. The women took inspiration from a Native American story about the Three Sisters: Corn, Bean, and Squash. The following is a version of the story based on its telling by Narragansett Elder Paulla Dove Jennings, a professional storyteller, educator, and children’s book author:

Mother Earth’s three daughters, Corn, Bean, and Squash, were not getting along with each other. They each had very distinct personalities and this made getting along quite difficult. Corn was tall and thin with long yellow hair, and she wore a green shawl. She loved reaching for the sky and playing in the sun, but her feet would get scorched when exposed too long. Bean enjoyed winding around exploring everything but sometimes she would get lost. Squash was plump and round and preferred remaining close to her mother. She wore a wide, green skirt that covered every place she sat.

Each daughter thought her way of being in the world was best. This resulted in constant bickering. One day Mother Earth brought them together and explained that each one was special and unique. She told them that sharing their gifts would bring health and wellness to them all. The daughters decided to give it a try.

Mother Earth created a mound about the size of a pregnant woman in her ninth month. She planted her daughter Corn in the mound. Corn began to grow straight with her green shawl tightly wrapped around her. She began reaching for the sun. Then Bean was added to the mound, and she began to grow, winding up around her sister. Then Squash was planted in the mound and her wide, green dress kept it moist and shaded from the sun. The three sisters—Corn, Bean, and Squash—began to appreciate each other’s gifts. Corn enjoyed the way she could be in the sun without her feet getting burned, Bean was happy that she could wind around and not get lost, and Squash liked that she could be close to both her mother and sisters.



The Three Sisters learned to value one another for their unique gifts and became inseparable. The Narragansett people plant the sisters together to ensure a healthy harvest. This life lesson in appreciating differences is especially helpful in teaching the benefits of diversity.

The Three Sisters crops could be seen planted in their mound looking over the dedication celebration, their story translated into repoussé (a hammered metalworking technique) aluminum imagery throughout the eight-foot vertical columns of rain chains close to the top of the sculpture. The images will remind visitors of Indigenous ecological and cultural sustainability.

The Nettukkusq Singers, an intertribal female vocal group founded by Moorehead, performed celebration songs that honored women, ecological sustainability, and Native American culture. “Nettukkusq” means “my sister” in the Algonquian Natick dialect. The Native American voice echoed throughout the dedication ceremony, saying we are still here. The ceremony ended with children being invited to gather water from the “Three Sisters” RainKeep to water the garden. 🌿