

Red rock, blue sky

Sandia Security Police Officer Thelma Holman bridges two worlds

Story by Bill Murphy Photos by Randy Montoya

From a place called "Hua-na-tota" came the ancestors.

With their language and their arts and their gods they came from Hua-na-tota to a canyon rimmed by red rock and watered by a flowing stream and here they built many villages, many fortresses.

The rains came and watered their valley. The corn grew and the people thrived and were strong. In their tongue — in the kivas and around the hearths — in their own Towa tongue they told the stories of the ancestors — and of the time before the ancestors, the time of creation.

The Europeans came and there was peace and then war and finally conquest and a bitter peace and the people were moved from their many ancient villages to the one village, the village they called Walatowa.

That was long ago, 300 years ago. But the people kept their arts; they kept their language. And the European God and the gods of the ancestors dwelled together in the people's hearts, the people of Walatowa, the people of Jemez Pueblo.



A mother and a daughter sit side by side, the good gray clay from the south end of the village on a table between them. Within the clump of clay, dense and wet, are bowls and vases, waiting to be drawn out. With their hands, the mother and daughter shape the bowls. They craft them from the raw clay into things of beauty. They will fire them and paint them and their beauty will lift up the hearts of all who see them, who hold them, who use them.



Thelma Holman (4211) is a member of Sandia's Pro Force. Her mother Juanita Yepa, retired now, for 22 years was a custodian at Sandia. Juanita lives in Jemez Pueblo to this day; Thelma resides in Albuquerque with her husband and son (a daughter just joined the US Marine Corps and will deploy to the Middle East soon.). On pueblo feast days, Thelma comes back to Jemez, back to her roots, back to the home of her mother and father, Johnny.



Under the roof of her parents on this feast day, Thelma sits with her mother. They shape clay bowls and vases, working quickly. They have done this — together — many times, the mother passing on to the daughter everything she has learned. They are comfortable, familiar, family. Mother and daughter. Juanita and Thelma.

The mother, Juanita, is the faster of the two; this isn't a race, but her hands have done this so many times, countless times, over the decades that the shapes emerge fluidly out of the clay.



On this feast day, Nov. 12, Juanita welcomes visitors to her home with posole and red chile and enchiladas and fresh breads and pies. Such pies. Such posole. One is privileged to share this special day among new friends. From the plaza in the village center, one hears the dancers. Many have come to this place this day to see these dances and everyone is welcome.



Thelma talks of many things as her hands shape a wedding vase. She has been making pottery ever since she could remember. Before pottery, there were mud pies and sand castles. Like Thelma, Juanita talks about many things. When one admires her turquoise necklace, heavy with rich sky-blue stones, Juanita explains how she comes by such striking jewelry. When she is set up on the plaza in Santa Fe to sell her work, she'll sometimes admire a piece of jewelry by a neighboring artist. They make a trade, vase for necklace, pot for bracelet.



Juanita talks about the gray clay she's working with and the red clay she sometimes uses. The red clay comes from the north end of the village. The red clay is softer, she says. Thelma agrees, the red clay is softer. It's easier to work with, easier to make smooth, better to paint. And gathering the clay — the red clay and the gray clay — is a family affair. "My brother gets the clay and cleans it for us," Thelma says. In its native state, the clay is full of twigs and leaves and small stones. By the time the women begin to work it into beautiful and useful things, it's smooth and cool and moist, all promise and potential.



Today, Thelma and Juanita are dressed in their feast day garb, bright and colorful, a harmonious, almost musical, link to where they come from, to those who came before.

For colleagues and friends who know Thelma only from the workplace, the contrast is striking. Her work attire, the uniform of a Sandia SPO, firearm included, seems utterly at odds with this traditionally dressed Jemez woman. Thelma concedes that "it's like two different worlds," but takes the differences in stride.



How did she end up in security, one wonders? "I was one girl among four brothers," Thelma says. "Everything they did, I had to do." So perhaps it was sibling rivalry of a sort that led her to study computer analysis at New Mexico Tech after graduating from high school in 1981. Maybe growing up around so many brothers had something to do with her decision to join the Army Reserve and serve as a National Forest Service firefighter before joining Sandia's security force in 1986.



Making pottery, for Thelma, isn't just about the ends. It's about connections: connections to her family, her village, and even to those who came to this valley hundreds of years ago. "I feel like I'm close to home" when crafting clay into beautiful objects, she says. "I think about my mom, about our culture, about how I grew up." And there's a spiritual connection. "Whenever I start a new pot, I pray. I ask God to guide me."



Outdoors now, the autumn sun shines down on mother and daughter and plays off the red rocks at the north end of the village. The light bounces off the impossibly red walls and fills the valley. Traffic on the road to Jemez Springs slows at this place; the passengers in the cars, from Illinois, Missouri, Tennessee, have never seen such sights — such colors, such sun, such sky. Thelma and Juanita in their feast day garb in the shimmering light are holding some of their favorite works: A brightly painted drum, a wedding vase, a brilliantly painted pot that fills two arms. One looks across the valley to the far cliffs and sees no roads, no houses, no poles or wires. Just earth and sky.

One thinks of the mothers and daughters, the fathers and sons, the families and clans who came here before. One thinks back to those first dwellers here who came from Hua-na-tota. Who came here to Walatowa, which means, in the Jemez language, the unique Towa tongue, "This is the place."



THELMA HOLMAN, above left, and her mother, Juanita Yepa, standing before the red rocks at the north end of Jemez Pueblo, display some of their favorite works. Juanita holds a wedding vase and a painted drum (made by a friend), which she plays when she sings at her church. Thelma holds a pot that was two years in the making. In other photos, Thelma and her mother craft beautiful objects from the gray clay that is found at the south end of Jemez Pueblo. In the photo at the lower left, Thelma and Juanita pose in front of Juanita's home on Nov. 12, one of two feast days the pueblo observes each year. Joining the two is Juanita's dog, Trooper.

