

Peace Drum Project
The Elder's Stories
2012

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Introduction

As we conclude our twelfth year of *The Peace Drum Project* with the telling of these stories, it is fitting to remember why Cooperative Artists Institute started this project back in 2000. The project was created, in part, to address the fears that local elders had when encountering groups of young people on the street or on the subway. Even though many elders have grandchildren and connect well with them, an encounter between elders and youth-not-known-to-them can be very stressful. With their boisterous energy, baggy pants, hoodies, and penchant for moving in groups, teens can feel quite intimidating to our older community members. Since we at CAI already worked with both teens and elders, we understood how powerful the Arts and personal stories would be to bridge this divide. And so, *The Peace Drum Project* was born.

We are gratified by how this intergenerational conversation has worked. Hundreds of youthful and elder participants have experienced a positive change in their lives. In evaluations each year, the teens themselves rank their time with the elders as one of their favorite activities of the project. Many teens have stayed in touch with their elder partners, just as elders have followed their young partner's progress in school and afterwards. So, from our original goal, we know that we have created a powerful and lasting model for engaging young people with elders in a truly meaningful way. *The Peace Drum Project* helps to deepen the connections between youth and elders, and builds understanding and greater support for each group within the larger community.

As many of today's young people look forward to the future, they feel hope — but also anxiety — about their ability to succeed, especially in these difficult economic times. The lessons learned from the elders contain both wisdom and inspiration for succeeding and finding happiness, *even in difficult times*. Although many of the

elders have experienced hard times, they have endured. They continue to find happiness through ties to their families, friends, and activities in the community. Some of them came from early lives of poverty and racial or other forms of discrimination, yet they are full of humor, optimism, generosity, and spiritual grace. Many of them had hoped to go to college themselves, but were unable to because of economic constraints. Family came first, but neither responsibility nor hardship kept them from seeking their dreams. This is a powerful message to young people who face unprecedented costs for getting an education today. Life is never easy, but there are abundant rewards for hard work, engagement, flexibility, and moving steadily forward towards your goals.

The resilience of the elders is not only inspiring — it offers a road map for our teens who have this unique opportunity to connect with them, learn from their experiences, and honor their wisdom. *We recognize that we have really only scratched the surface of their stories in our interviews*, but we hope that you, too, will be inspired by the stories of these wonderful members of our community. This year we interviewed an interesting group of elders whose lives have opened the teens' eyes in new ways. One woman had her first child at 15, and went on to raise 9 children, while another completed a Master's degree and worked as both a chemist and a teacher among other adventures in her 91 years. Another of this year's elders grew up in Albania, and communicated the history of his country with vivid and enthusiastic stories. One of the elders is a teacher of martial arts and an author of a book on the subject, while another has spent her life fighting for the rights of the disabled as a person with Cerebral Palsy.

We are most appreciative to each of the elders who were willing to share their experiences and knowledge with our teens this year. Their stories provide a bridge between the generations, and create common ground that helps to build a stronger

community for us all. Today's young people need more opportunities to work with elders because their stories teach us so much. Many hopes, dreams, and challenges remain constant across the generations, and knowing that others have faced similar obstacles and have overcome them gives power to youthful dreams and aspirations.

The teens who took part in producing these stories include: Natasha Alvarez, Rafael Baez, Tamioka Banks-Tillman, Rakyah Brown, Johan Caminero, Steven Casiano, Rodely Destine, Joseph Dupuis, Joel Martinez, Alice Mejia, Jenny Nguyen, Taylese Parker, Gilberlyn Perea, Joseph Ruiz, and Janéa Williams. We thank them for their respectful manner, lively energy, and curious questioning.

Special thanks to: Sienora Haynes-Mells, RSC at Back of the Hill Apartments and Ana Batista-Diaz from Spencer House for their support of the project. Thanks also to the Egleston Square Branch Library (BPL) for welcoming our exhibit of drums and circulating the stories in the community this year. Our special appreciation to Curtis Jones, CAI Director, and to Brennan Clark, Stacey Norton, and Kerry Rumore for their volunteer support to make this year's project a success. And finally, thanks to Gloretta Baynes of AAMARP Studios for her advocacy, time, and energy in support and promotion of the project this year.

We dedicate these stories to the memory of Charles M. Holley (1937-2006), creator of *The Peace Drum Project* and Co-founder of Cooperative Artists Institute. He is greatly missed by all who knew and worked with him over the years.

Susan E. Porter, Assoc. Director
Cooperative Artists Institute
www.tribal-rhythms.org.

Raven Elliott

Interviewed by Rafael Baez, Taylese Parker & Jenny Nguyen

“My full name is Raven Eugenia Rivera and my married name is Elliot. The name Raven came from my mother’s sister. Sometimes classmates called me *Blackbird*. I was born on November 30th, 1920 in Greensboro, North Carolina. I lived with my parents, and my older brother and sister. My mother’s name was Greta Estelle Scott Rivera. My father’s name was Alexander McAlister Rivera. Daddy had two children from his first marriage, but his wife died. Then he married my mother and they had me, so I was the youngest. My brother Alex was seven years older than me, and my sister Doris was six years older than me.

My mother’s father was a barber. His wife, like most women at that time, did not work outside of the home. My father’s parents lived in Durham, North Carolina, and before that in Wilmington, NC. My grandpa on that side of the family was a night watchman for a bank. In Wilmington, he was an undertaker, just like his father was. My father had graduated from Howard University in Washington, DC, and was a dentist. My mother was a graduate of Fisk University, and taught English at Palmer Memorial Institute, a school founded in Sedalia, NC in 1902 for Black children living near Greensboro, NC. It’s still in existence today as a state historic park.

When I was growing up, sometimes I walked to my school — the Washington Street Public School. Sometimes Daddy would walk me to school on the way to his dental office in the Black business section of the city. Other times I got a ride to school. We didn’t have public transportation in the residential section, but they

did have buses in the downtown area. On the way to my school we had to pass Bennett College, a school for Black women. Mommy and Daddy were friends with the head of the school and that's where I learned to play tennis and a little bit of soccer too. When I was a child, all of the schools were totally segregated. Not just the schools were separate, but even the theaters were segregated. To go to the movies, Blacks had to go down the alley and up some iron steps to the balcony to get into the movie theater. So there was no regard for being Italian or German or Spanish or whatever, it was always just Black and White.

When I got out of school, I would go straight home. But one time, I took my skates to school with me. And, since I had my skates, I decided, I would come down *another* street instead of coming home the usual way, but that street carried me through the White neighborhood. On the way, one of my skates broke. So there I was on one skate with the other one in my hand. Then this little White boy stopped in front of me and pulled out a great big butcher knife from behind his back. He said '*Halt — What are you doing here?*' Well I had my skate in my hand, so I said, '*you better get out of my way or I'm going to wrap this around your head.*' He left and I went home the fastest way I could get there.

I called Daddy and told him what had happened. He excused himself from the patient he was working on and gave her another appointment. Then he came home and took me to the place where the boy had pulled the knife on me. It was just on the other side of the railroad tracks, not really that far away from my home. My Daddy went to every house and he got all of the grown-ups to get all of the children to come out in the front for me to identify the one who had pulled the knife. But I couldn't identify anybody. It was just a sea of faces to me, so I said, '*I don't know who did it, but whoever did it to me is really going to get in trouble!*'

The parents who came out of their houses with the kids asked: *'Who did it, because they are going to get a good whipping!'* So, I said, *'I'm sorry but I can't identify anybody. I should have never been coming through this way anyhow.'* And, they said, *'You can come through this way anytime you want to and skate right on through.'* Even though all the people were very cooperative, it was still the first time someone really tried to really hurt me because of my race. So this event is a very outstanding memory in my life. It's something I've never forgotten.

In Greensboro, we always had chores to do at home, and they were divided up according to your age. My brother was in charge of bringing in the coal from the coal bin outside for the Arcola. That was a big wood and coal-burning stove like a furnace that heated the house. Anyhow, when Mommy and Daddy went out to the movies or something, they had a grown-up stay with us while they were out. One night, they left a student from Bennett College to baby-sit for us. While they were out, my brother went out to get some coal for the Arcola and came running back inside saying, *'the house is on fire.'* I was asleep in bed, so my big sister ran upstairs to get me out of the bed in my blanket, get downstairs trying not to fall, and out of the house. The college student who was supposed to be there to take care of us, just went outside in the street and yelled, 'fire.' So my brother called the theater to tell my Daddy that the house was on fire and they should come home! Everything turned out OK, but I will always remember my sister making sure I got out of the house to safety.

When I was a child, I was a tomboy. My brother was a basketball player. He was on the basketball team at school, so I learned all about sports. I thought I should understand them, since I attended sports events at the school. But what can you remember about your life in the sixth grade? I don't know what I was doing other

than that I had a tent! It was my brother's tent, really, but it was in the yard so I would play in it.

Anne Woods and Dorothy McNair were my friends when I was a young girl. I still have some friends in North Carolina but not many. I lost track of my friends from that era when I moved to Atlantic City and then to New York. I am trying to see if I can find their e-mail addresses. But just trying to remember and keep track of those who were there with me is hard. Greensboro was way, way back.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown, who was the founder and President at Palmer Memorial Institute, was my godmother. I called her Aunt Lottie. You see we had very close ties at Palmer because my Daddy did lot of the dental work for the teachers and students there, so we were part of the Palmer family. We would always go out there on the weekend, to holiday events, or to any occasion that they had just for fun. Aunt Lottie had three nieces that she raised, so being little girls we always played together. I am still in touch with two of them. Charlotte is a week younger than I am. In fact, I talked to her yesterday. She is in a senior citizen's place. When I was on the phone with her, she said something about writing songs. I said, *'Writing songs, did you write songs?'* She said, *'sure I wrote songs.'* She told me the name of a song that she had written that was recorded by her brother-in-law, Nat King Cole. Believe it or not, I went on the computer and traced what she told me. I played a recording of the song she had written. That's what's great about computers!

We left North Carolina when I was about to go into the 7th grade. My Daddy, being very active in the local and National NAACP, did some political work that some White people in town really didn't like. So, we had to leave Greensboro

quickly for safety reasons. I didn't know what was happening but I knew we were being chased out of North Carolina; Mommy and Daddy just said that we were moving. So, while my Daddy went to Yonkers, NY to look for work, my Mom, my sister and I lived in Atlantic City at my Aunt Raven's house. We were there for a year, so that's why a lot of my early family photos are on the beach!

While I was living in Atlantic City, I fell in love with one of my classmates when we were in seventh grade. I used to look out the window and watch him walk down the street with his other girlfriends. I said, *'I'm going to marry him'* and I did! His name was Adolph Melvin Elliot, but later when we got married, I began to call him Biff.

That was in New Jersey, and the schools, like in Greensboro, were still segregated. But Daddy had gone straight to New York to start his practice all over again in a state where there wasn't as much segregation. So he had both Black and White patients. And when I got to New York, everybody was together in the same school, and we had all kinds of friends. In fact, my first boyfriend was German, and I didn't know *what* most of my classmates were. We were just all there together.

Later on, Biff moved to Long Island to live with his Aunt. My family lived in Yonkers, so Biff would get on the subway and come out to visit me. When he finished school, Biff went into the army. Everybody enlisted at that time during the Second World War. When I graduated from high school I went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. I liked science, so I studied that. But in college, at the beginning, you learned a little bit of everything; they teach you some history, some English and literature. At the beginning you would just be

trying to get acquainted and make friends. Then, after that, you decided what you wanted to major in.

I remember at Fisk, the big thing was for girls to smoke. You know you're grown and you're away from home, and your Momma isn't there to tell you not to smoke, so they would smoke. Well, I never liked to do things just because somebody said to do it, so my whole freshman year, I refused to smoke. Now my sophomore year, I went at it, and by the time I got through with college and graduate school, I was smoking a carton of Phillip Morris cigarettes every week — whole carton a week! Then one day when I was on my way to the hospital because I thought I was having a stroke, I decided to quit. At that time, I would buy cigarettes by the carton because it was cheaper that way, so I kept a whole carton of cigarettes for a year that I never touched. I just decided to quit, so I did. I believe that when you want to do something, you don't have to do it just because everybody else is doing it. You can make up your own mind about what you want to do, and when you want to do it. So when I got ready to quit, I quit.

The best job I ever had was teaching — I taught high school. Do you know the difference between organic chemistry and analytical chemistry? Well when I was at Fisk in Nashville it was right across the street from a medical school — the Meharry Medical College that was a place where they trained doctors, nurses and dentists. I was more interested in the chemistry of the human body, and *there* I could study the chemistry of the body — blood, urine, tissues — NOT bricks and mortar. So after I graduated from Fisk I stayed in Nashville and went to Meharry and studied Biochemistry. It was an adventure when I went to Meharry. I was lucky because Dr. Harold West, who taught Biochemistry, wanted a graduate student who was *majoring in Biochemistry*, and I *wanted* to study Biochemistry, so

I came along at just the right time. And that's what I got my Master's degree in — Biochemistry. Part of my training was to teach chemistry to nursing and pre-med students, and that's how I got interested in teaching.

Remember I told you that people used to call me *Blackbird*? I don't know why people teased that way, but I had to learn to live with it. They would tease me and say, '*Hey blackbird, hey crow.*' So, even when I was working on my Master's degree in Biochemistry, some of the students would pass by the door and say, '*Hi Blackbird.*' My response was always, '*Oh how are you?*' Then I'd go right on back to teaching the class. I would not let it throw me to be teased about my name. When you have something that could be used by others to hurt you, you have to figure out how to deal with it. Throughout my life, I have learned to live with the opportunities *and* the challenges that life presents. My life has included living in very segregated and very integrated places. People — all types — are affected by those who live around them and by what people say about them. I am amazed sometimes to think about all I have lived through!

By the time Biff got out of the army, I had finished high school and college. The whole time he was in the Army we were wrote letters to each other, and corresponding can do a lot. When he came home, he came to visit me in Yonkers and asked me to marry him. He asked Daddy for my hand in marriage. I had been asked to marry someone I met in college who was going to be a dentist, but I didn't really love him. I knew that the one I was corresponding with was the one I was going to marry. So after I graduated I left Yonkers and moved to Detroit to live with my sister. I knew if I lived at home Mommy and Daddy would control my social life. I didn't want Daddy to find a job for me, and I already knew who I wanted to marry.

So I went to live with my sister in Michigan, and Biff and I got engaged and then married in Detroit in her living room. I graduated from college at 21; I got my Master's degree at 24. Then I married Adolph at 26, and Paula was born about two years after that when I was about 28. Paula is Paula Rivera Elliott, my only child, Adolph's and mine.

So, after I graduated my interest in teaching grew. My first teaching assignment was at Miller High School in Detroit. This was right after the Supreme Court ruled that forced segregation was illegal in *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. Detroit, like many school districts in the south and north, maintained segregated schools. After the court ruling school districts were trying to figure out ways to keep things the way they were. It was also really hard to figure out how to make the changes needed to integrate the schools. At Miller, as a first year Biology teacher, I was also the only Black teacher. Miller HS was the school that Detroit's Black students attended. That was a hard situation to be in, especially knowing about segregation in the south, both as a little kid and later as a college student.

For reasons I never knew, I was told one morning by the principal that I wasn't coming back to teach, and to say goodbye to my students. It was all I could do not to cry for the rest of the day. I didn't know what was going on. Nobody told me anything but to '*call downtown*' to find out where I was being reassigned, and I assumed, *if* I was going to be reassigned. The next day I was told to go to another high school where I would be teaching. I was the *second* Black teacher in that school. I was really glad not to be the *only* one, but I still really wanted to teach Chemistry. In the Biology classroom where I taught, there was a small area full of plants. As part of my job, I was told that I had to take care of the plants *and* keep

them growing! I was also told that the teachers on that floor could bring their plants from home to school and that I would have to keep them alive in this area until spring. Then, they'd take them home. I didn't like having to take care of the teachers' plants, but I wanted to show I could do any work I was assigned.

Within your family, you sometimes have disagreements with family members, but you try not to have a conflict. It's the same thing at school. You can have disagreements, but I always tried to have a nice relationship with my students so that they weren't afraid of me but respected me. I taught at Northwestern High School for almost 30 years. When I first started teaching they had me teach Biology. After the man who was teaching Chemistry retired, they finally said I could teach Chemistry. After awhile, I wanted to teach a second year advanced Qualitative Chemistry lab course. Also, at that time, they said that Negroes didn't need to learn Chemistry. And I said, '*yes they do!*' So after pushing for it and buying my own books for the course, I taught second year advanced Chemistry and Biology, and I sponsored a very active Science Club. Along with the Science Club, I was the sponsor of the Cheer Team. Being in the classroom and working with the students in these two groups were very satisfying parts of my life at Northwestern.

Along with encouraging teaching, being close to my sister put me into contact with the Ford Motor Company. That's how I got to work at the Carver Lab. Do you know who George Washington Carver was? (*George Washington Carver was an agricultural chemist whose development of products derived from peanuts revolutionized the South's agricultural economy.*) Well, the Carver Lab was a laboratory that Henry Ford started. Ford was the founder of the Ford Motor Company in Detroit. He was impressed with what Carver did, and he wanted to do with the soybean, what Carver had done with the peanut.

So I worked there as a chemist. But where I worked wasn't in the main part of the Ford company, it was a research lab located in a house. Henry Ford was so wealthy, that this was kind of a hobby for him. This lab was in a whole beautiful house with a greenhouse full of plants and flowers, and the lab was in the basement in a big, big room. If any visitors came into the lab, you could say *'hello'* if they said *'hello'* to you, otherwise we were just working. Ford would come through to show his friends the pretty flowers, and they could look down into the big bowl where we were making the soymilk from the oil. We made soybean milk — that was the beginning of soymilk like we have today. They had already developed the process when I got there. We made the milk from the oil, and then they took the milk to the patients at the Henry Ford Hospital. Before it was available in stores, all of the patients at the hospital received that milk, so they were the guinea pigs for soymilk.

I never really met Henry Ford, but Paul Foster knew my sister, and he was Henry Ford's valet. If I had not had all of that training, I would not have gotten that job. My job was to try to make oil that could seal car doors so they would be waterproof. They wanted oil that would let them put a car through a car wash and you wouldn't get wet on the inside. So when I was there, that was the big project that we worked on — to create this oil that would be used in the manufacturing of cars to make them waterproof. I created the process to do it. I was proud that I was successful even though they never gave me the credit for figuring out that formula.

I've been extremely fortunate. I'm 91 and I've had time to have some experiences. If Paul Foster had not known my sister, I would not have gotten that job. And

everybody who worked in the lab at that time had to have a personal contact to get the job. You had to know somebody who knew somebody, as they say. All the way through life that's the way things go. It's what you know, who you know, and how you use it. The main thing is how you use it after you have the experience. See you couldn't go to the store back then and buy soymilk, but after Ford did all of this, now you can.

So it depends on where you are and what you want to do. Opportunities are all around you if you look for them. I have a friend who is 103. He worked as a servant for a White family. His employer owned a chain of women's dress shops, so when they entertained and had cocktail parties, they were entertaining the wealthy people. My friend who was the servant listened to their conversations. He invested his money the way he heard them talking about how they invested their money, and now he's a millionaire.

The happiest moment in my life was getting married and having a baby. I'm happy *now* because I have a cell phone, and there's so much new here in Boston. I'm learning something new every day that I live here. I have contacts with a lot of my former students, and I'm on the phone a lot to California, New York, North Carolina and South Carolina. It's my biggest pleasure is that I can do that.

You see getting old is strange. I'm trying to learn the computer, and I get mad with that! I am struggling. Very few of my friends even know how to use a computer, so most of my e-mails come from my cousin who lives in North Carolina. Her friends send her nice e-mails, and then she sends them to me almost every day! You know what made me upset the other day? They (Google) *changed*

something about the e-mail system. I'm upset about that because it was enough for me to learn what I *had* already learned.

The thing I look forward to in the morning now is a cup of coffee. It used to be a cup of coffee, reading the newspaper, and a cigarette, but now its just coffee and reading the paper. I never dreamed that I would be able to do what I'm doing here today which is talking to young people again. What else can I tell you? You live your life according to where you are and you take advantage of all the opportunities that area gives you. Or, you can look for opportunities in other places. In the meantime, keep track of your friends as you go along, because you'll never know when you'll need a friend."

Antonio De Jesus Estepan

Interviewed by Joseph Ruiz, Alice Mejia, and Gilberlyn Perea

“My name is Antonio De Jesus Estepan or Tony. My family calls me ‘Antonito.’ I was born January 17, 1947 in Santiago De Los Caballeros, Dominican Republic. It was a very small town with many conservative people and religious institutions that were Catholic, like the Sacred Heart Schools. Our family was small; I lived with my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters. My mother’s name was Francisca; my father’s name was Ramón. My siblings were Juan, José, Bernardo, and Hillary. My grandparents names were Emilo, Adelina, Hipólito, and Isabel.

There were no buses where I lived, so we had to walk around the neighborhood and to our elementary school called Republica de Venezuela. The middle school I went to was called Republica de Mexico, and our high school was Ulises Francisco Espaillat. After school I would stay home because it was a very dangerous time in the Dominican Republic and you were not allowed to wander. At that time, my close friend was Antonio, but my *best friend* was Marina. She was like a sister while we grew up together.

I loved to play in the park that was located in front of my home. I enjoyed going fishing, playing games like Blind Mans Bluff, Tag, and Hide and Seek, and I also enjoyed sports like Track and Field and Chinese Martial Arts. I had to be home by 9 o’clock *without any questions*, and I would always look my parents in the eye.

As a child we had a list of chores that was assigned by my dear father. My job every week was to mop the floors and tend to the garden. My family had 300

ducks, so we would eat eggs for breakfast almost every day, and we also ate the meat from the birds, too.

One of the scariest things I remember from childhood was learning how to swim. One time my friends left me alone and I almost drowned. While they were laughing, someone who I didn't know ended up saving my life. The funniest thing that I remember was when I was an altar boy at the church. I was carrying the cross during a parade, and then handed it off to someone else and left with my friends. When I got home later, the priest was waiting there with my mother!

When I was 13 I used to love physical activity and sports, but my friends and family didn't know. One morning I spotted a guy doing some slow activity and I decided to let my friends go on while I waited until the guy got finished. He had been doing martial arts, and he ended up accepting me as his student. I was his student for 22 years, and I learned a great deal of Tai Chi from him. One time there was a man who broke into our childhood home and tried to assault my sister. My martial arts background and training helped me to fight off this man.

I loved my high school experience because my teachers were all professionals in their fields. My favorite teacher taught biology. The student population of my school was about 1,800 and every single one of them loved this teacher! I was elected for four years consecutively to be the student leader for the entire school.

I did have some conflicts and disagreements with my family growing up because that is normal. My older sister thought she was the smartest, so we would always argue. One time I corrected her on a wrong statement so we started to fight and she threw a shoe at me. Then my mother made us come together to hug and make

up. I didn't really have any heroes as a child, but my mother was the number one person who helped me throughout my life. My father used to say *'If you fall down get up until the final victory.'*

During my teen years one of the biggest events that stands out in my memory — even though it was 47 years ago — was a civil revolt when more than 5,000 Dominicans died. I also remember the dictatorship of President Trujillo, and I remember when Trujillo was assassinated in 1961. The American military invasion of the Dominican Republic happened when I was 18 in 1965

One of the biggest challenges I faced after high school was going to college. I always wanted to be a medical doctor — a Pediatrician — but my father died suddenly of a heart attack so this was very difficult. I faced the challenge of switching career plans, so I eventually became a political scientist and worked for the government.

When I was twenty-two years old and a sophomore in college, I got married. My wife was nineteen at the time. I'm now divorced from my wife, but we did have four children together. My daughter's names are Darzee, Valni, Evelyn, and Aley.

Another thing I also recall from the 1960's was a new musical rhythm called *'The Twist.'* During the 70's and 80's the Beatles were huge with their famous song, *I Want to Hold Your Hand.*

The biggest adventure I've had in my life was moving to the capital city of Santo Domingo. The best job I ever had was working at the American Embassy in the

Dominican Republic. My job there was to purchase food for the ambassador and receive shipments. Then I came to the United States in 1988.

The hardest thing I've had to face my during my life was the passing of my younger brother. I overcame this by allowing myself time to heal. Also, my second daughter was born with epilepsy, and that was difficult to deal with. The happiest moments of my life were when my four daughters were born, and when they graduated from college and started their own families.

The greatest accomplishment in my life was when I authored a book in 1988 called *Kung Fu in America*. When I wake up every single morning I look forward to practicing Tai Chi.

An important lesson my mother taught me was to be honest, to not take away anything from anybody, and to not harm anyone ever. My father taught me to never raise a hand against a woman. The words of wisdom I wish to pass to you are these: *'A grain of sand doesn't make a dune but a million of them will.'*

Baftjar Hasanaj

Interviewed by Johan Caminero, Joel Martinez & Natasha Alvarez

“My Name is Baftjar Hasanaj and I do not have a nickname. I was born in Albania on August 22, 1936. I grew up with my parents and siblings, four brothers and four sisters. One of my sisters and one of my brothers passed away before I was four months old, so there are six siblings still living to this day. My sisters’ names are Fejzi and Lufto, and my brothers’ names are Taibe, Bukuri, and Sumbull. My mother’s name was Sultana, and my father’s name was Hyshi. The only grandmother I met was on my mother’s side and her name was Hanko. I primarily speak Albanian, but have been learning English since I moved to the United States 12 years ago.

As a child, when I would get home from school I would help my parents with chores around the house, but mainly I had to do my homework. I also liked to watch soccer, which is called “football”. I had a few female friends but many male friends when growing up. I liked comedy as a child and had many short funny conversations. I had the most fun when I played a game with other kids, where you gather in a circle and with a blanket over you and you hide an item from your friends. Then, they run around trying to find it and, sometimes you would get hit with it as a joke.

I wasn’t really able to choose where to go or what to do when I was young, but I did stay out of trouble. I loved to travel up a mountain near my home. Usually I went by bus to the very top, and overlooked the capital city while having picnics with my friends. During my teen years, I went everywhere with my friends and we

had lots of fun ‘hanging out’ together. The only two things I was afraid of were snakes, and punishment by my parents if I got caught not going to school or class!

When I was a young man, we experienced a very difficult economy in Albania after World War II. It was different from what happened in the United States where there was prosperity. When I was growing up, my family had house problems, money struggles, and we lived in poor areas. I come from a big family so everyone knew that they had their own jobs and chores to do around the house, and after school I would go to work. From my family I learned that education was extremely important and I was very thankful for getting one. My parents also taught me not to steal, to have manners, and not to touch others.

Who were *my* heroes when I was young? Well that is a story in itself. Albania only has one important national hero. His name was Gjergj (George) Kastrioti Skanderbeg. Our country is part of the Balkans (in Europe,) and in the 15th century, Albania was under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. At this time, Kruja was the capital city of Albania, and the Sultan’s army never “took” the capital. Gjony Kastrioti, Gjergj’s father was a vassal of the Sultan. He owed tribute to him so he had to ‘ransom’ his sons to fight in the Sultan’s army. So when Gjergj was 9 years old, the Sultan took him to Turkey to train in military school. He was very brave and fought with the Sultan’s army and won, so the Sultan promoted him to ‘Skanderbeg.’ Six months later he left Turkey with 300 horsemen and went to Albania to defend the capital. The people cheered him in the streets and welcomed him back to his country. He unified and empowered the Albanian people and defended their right to independence for twenty-five years until he died in 1468. For that time, the Turkish military never got into Kruja. He also helped to defend

other countries like Italy and Romania against invaders. There's a lot more to the story, but he is a hero who is celebrated by all Albanians.

I always dreamed of going to school, and I really enjoyed school, and especially learning about history. My high school in Albania was very large, but I had a lot of fun there. When I finished high school, I went on to college for construction to follow in my father's footsteps. But the economic conditions wouldn't allow me to continue my education, so after two years, I stopped going to college and went to work. I became a construction worker for 35 years, and this was the best job I ever had. I worked on large apartment buildings. I enjoyed this work because — in a way — you are making 'something out of nothing'. You start with all of these materials and you end up with something useful and complete.

I got married in Albania when I was 27 years old and my wife was 24. My wife's name was Nerenza; we have one son, Migen, and two daughters, Rozeta and Linda. Sadly, my wife passed away ten years ago.

All of my life has been full of change and challenge, but some of the hardest things I've had to overcome are money issues and my family members being sick. Some of the happiest moments of my life were when I married my wife, and when our children were born. Some of my greatest achievements were working in the construction business for 35 years and moving to the United States.”

Carrie O'Neal

**Interviewed by Rodely Destine, Tamieka Banks-Tillman,
Rakyah Brown & Alice Mejia**

“My name is Carrie O’Neal. I was born in Belzoni, Mississippi on December 8, 1932. I grew up in the country. I left my hometown at the age of 19. I went to Jackson, Mississippi and I stayed there until I moved to Chicago in 1951. I stayed in Chicago until 1968, then I came to Boston, and I’ve been here ever since!

My mother’s name was Janie (Gibbs) Williams, and my father’s name was Alex Williams. I didn’t know my grandparents except for my grandfather on my mother’s side. His name was Henry Gibbs. My mother passed away when I was three years old, so I grew up with my Aunt. Her name was Lee Bertha Gibbs Thompson — she’s the one who raised me. She’s still living, and she’s 102 years old now.

So, I grew up in a big family. I had three brothers. We all had the same mother. I’m the only girl and I’m the baby, too. My brothers have all passed on now. The oldest one was Jimmy Davis, then the middle one was T.C. Williams, and the youngest one was Harman Williams. My Aunt had a big family of her own. She was the mother of fifteen children, but when we were growing up there were about ten of them. She even had a set of twins when she was sixty something! Anyhow, there was a whole bunch of us and we shared everything. I’ve never had a disagreement with anyone. I get along well with everyone, probably because I grew up in such a big family.

I went to Mount Carmel Elementary School. It was the school in the neighborhood, so we walked there. When I was under 12, I had a best friend, but I don't remember her name. She moved to California and we lost touch. At that age, we played a lot like most kids. We liked to jump rope, to play Hide-and-Seek, play ball, Jack Rocks, and other stuff like that.

I never got into sports. We didn't have no computer, no TV, no nothing like that. When we came home from school we had chores to do. I had to do the dishes and I helped with the washing and the ironing because there were a whole bunch of us. We was in the country so we'd 'hang out' outside in the back of the house or something. My Aunt had rules around the house. On school days I had to do my chores, *then* do my homework, *and after that*, we could go outside and play. Yes, I had a curfew; we had to be in the house right around 7 o'clock.

No, I didn't have any favorite place to go. We weren't allowed to hang around in other folk's houses. But as teenagers we liked to jump rope and play Hopscotch. That was exercise. We liked doing whatever was fun, like seeing who could stay in the rope longest. For inside games, I liked Checkers and Jacks, but we couldn't play cards because my family thought of that as gambling!

The thing that scared me the most when I was young was the snakes. I was terrified of snakes! I never encountered a snake, I never got bitten by one, but when I see one, I can't even stand to watch them on TV. I guess we scare them as much as they scare us, but I just can't even look at them.

I liked school. It was fun when I was in high school but I didn't finish because I got married when I was fifteen years old. Yes, I was married. I dropped out of

school in 10th grade. So I got married in 1948, and I wasn't even grown up myself. By the time I was eighteen, I didn't have time for dreams because I already had three kids by then. My kids were almost like my sisters and brothers. I didn't really have any teenage adventures like other young people might have had because I got married so young.

No, I didn't really have any heroes at your age. If I needed advice, I'd go to my Aunt. I didn't like going to other people. If she couldn't tell me anything, then I was lost. I just talked to my Aunt on her birthday this year in February, and she still talks with sense and can remember about things from years ago. I visited her when she was 100 years old but I haven't been able to go back since. I don't travel like I used to since I'm old. I used to like to fly but I don't like to do that anymore, and the train takes too long. It's a lot! It takes about 23 hours from here to Chicago on the train—it's a long way.

W.Q Thompson was my first husband. He was the one I married when I was 15 and I had all the babies by. I moved to Chicago from "down South" and had all of my kids there; most of them are still there. I had nine kids, but I lost two of my sons two years ago, so now I have seven kids. My children's names are: William Q. Thompson (passed away in 2010), Mary Brantley, Larry Thompson (passed away in 2010), Tom Thompson, Brenda Thompson, Ronnie Thompson, Elaine Thompson, Kenny Thompson, and Katherine Thompson. I have twenty-five grandchildren and fifteen great-grandchildren.

Yes, I remember World War II because it was 1942; I was about 10 years old. I don't remember the details of what was going on...but it didn't really affect my life at that time. When I was growing up, I didn't know about the civil rights

movement. I heard about it, but I didn't know that much about it. In the 1960's, I remember when John F. Kennedy got killed. That affected me. At that time I lived in Chicago with my husband and my kids, and I just couldn't understand it. Why did it have to be him? I thought he was a good President, so, I was upset by that. In 1970's and 80's I was busy with my kids and work, but I remember that we would go out to enjoy live entertainment and things like that.

When I first came to Boston, I worked in a rubber factory in Malden, and I didn't like that at all. Then I went to work in a nursing home and I really liked that. The best job I ever had was being a nurse's assistant. I always liked taking care of people, and that was a job that I liked. I worked in nursing homes all of my life.

Well, it's a big adventure for me when I have all of my kids around me at once. I lost two of my sons a couple of months apart in 2010, but I have all of the rest of the seven of them together once in a while, and I love that. That was definitely the hardest thing for me — losing my two boys. How did I recover from that? Well, I was sick for months last year — I couldn't eat, I couldn't drink, and everything tasted awful to me. But I'm telling you that I had every test in the book, and they couldn't find anything wrong with me. So it's still a mystery because it suddenly went away. So I guess you could say that my greatest accomplishment would be to overcome the death of my boys.

What makes me happy now? Well, twice a week we have Bingo here; three times a week we have exercise. I like to participate in everything they offer here, but right now with this cold, I can't do the exercises. Still I like doing these things.

I'm an early riser so I get up really early every day. I wash up, have my coffee, then one of my daughters usually calls me on the phone. We talk, and then she prays with me. Then I just take it from there...clean the house or whatever needs to be done. I learned how to cook pretty good from my Aunt, so I like to make cornbread stuffing. I make collared greens and canned yams. I like the smoked turkey necks to go in the collared greens. I like making turkey wings and make gravy to go over them. I used to go out a lot more when I was younger, but now the only place I go is probably to church!

What did I learn from my family while I was growing up? I learned to understand my kids from how my Aunt brought me up. She didn't do a lot of beating; she just talked to you and tried to understand you that way. But I also learned if you do bad you're going to get punished for it! I learned to listen to your parents, and to respect your elders and don't talk back to them.

So here's my advice to you. I grew up too fast. I got married and had my first child at fifteen years old and I didn't really know what I was doing. I wouldn't advise that to anyone one. I would tell any girl, if you are married or not, have one or two kids, but don't have a house full of kids. I tell my own kids that too. Also, that getting an education is very important. Go to school and get as much out of it as you possibly can, and if possible, go to college."

Margaret M. Sullivan

Interviewed by Joseph Dupuis, Jenny Nguyen & Rakyah Brown

“My name is Margaret M. Sullivan, and my nickname is Peg or Peggy. I was born on July 14, 1943. I grew up in several places, and the first place was at home in Brighton. We didn’t live far from Brighton High School. Then I went to live at the Joseph P. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Brighton. I lived there for 5 ½ years.

When I was growing up there were seven adults in my family. We had a very extended family; we lived with my aunts and uncles. My mother’s name is also Margaret, and my father’s name was Michael. My mother’s mother was Appolonia, and she was married to Thomas Lynch. He worked for the MBTA. Then my other grandparents were Bridget and Michael Sullivan on my father’s side. Both of my grandfathers died when my parents were teenagers. When my father’s father died, he had to leave school and go to work to support his 6 brothers and sisters. I have two brothers and one sister. I’m the oldest, then came Mike, Marie was next, and then Bob is the youngest.

When I was six years old my brother Mike was born, and six months later I went to live at the Joseph P. Kennedy Memorial Hospital. Now it’s known as the Franciscan Children’s Hospital. So there at the hospital, I was raised with kids my own age, all of whom were handicapped. There I completed Grades 1-6. Boston Public School teachers taught us, but it was very different from what your classroom might be like. We had only six students in each class, and we were all in different grades. So it was almost like a one-room-schoolhouse that you might read about in *Little House on the Prairie*.

After the Kennedy Hospital, I entered St. Gabriel's School in Brighton for Grades seven and eight. I graduated with my class in 1957. This was a unique experience because I only had enough energy for morning classes, so Boston sent a home teacher in two days a week to cover my afternoon subjects. Then, I went to three different high schools. See, I've been to schools all over! First, I went to St. Aidan's High School in Brookline, which closed in 1958. No more 'regular' schools would take me, so I switched to the Industrial School for Crippled and Handicapped Children in Boston which later became the Cotting School. It was near the Boston Conservatory of Music. Anyway, I was bored there because the curriculum was too easy, so I left and went to the Massachusetts Hospital School (MHS) in Canton where the courses were more advanced. I didn't leave because of my grades, because I had all A's. My mother decided that since the MHS would be harder, and it would be better for me to repeat the tenth grade. So I did that and I finished high school there.

Yes, I liked school. My favorite subjects were English and Math. I also loved being on the Student Council, Editor of the school newspaper (Grades 11-12), President of the Travel Club (Grade 12), and finally, Mayor of the Campus. The atmosphere there was good; the hardest part was being away from home. That was a big sacrifice.

Did I have a best friend? That would be a very hard question to answer because I was moving around so much. You make friends by going out and doing things together, and since I couldn't go outside, friends were few and far between. My seventh grade nun at St. Gabriel's School was very nice. She would send students to visit me at home, but you don't make friends when a teacher sends the students.

They would come because they might get a higher grade, but that's not the way it works.

One of the fascinating things about my era was that I *wasn't permitted* to go to public schools. It was against the law to have anyone as handicapped as I was in a regular school. It wasn't until 1978 after I was out of college that the law was changed.

What did I do for fun when I was young? Well, I was a great tease! I loved to tease people. I'd tease the nuns, and I always tried to be '*in the know*,' and able to prove it! And, I liked to play Canasta; that was a card game. I also liked to play Scrabble. There weren't many things that I could do for fun when I was a teenager. I didn't have too many adventures because I was at home or at school all of the time. But once we went on family trip to Pocasset on Cape Cod for two weeks, and I really liked it there.

I did have some unusual experiences as a teenager. When I was 15, I was chosen to go on a trip to France — to Lourdes. I went with the nuns who raised me at the Kennedy School. One of the odd things about that trip was that I was asked to write a story about it for the hospital newspaper. I was quite a good writer, so it was also published in *The Boston Pilot*, a Catholic newspaper. That was unusual for someone 15 years old. I have the original copy; it was about 30 pages double-spaced! It was supposed to be published in *The Boston Herald*, but the Cardinal grabbed it for the church newspaper. So, that was one of the publications I did before college.

When I was young, my dream was to be a teacher, which was absolutely out of the question! But I didn't know what I could do, or where I would fit in. The world today is so much more open to the handicapped than it was when I was young. We're talking about a world you can't even imagine living in.

So now I can go back and answer your question about a best friend. When I was at Massachusetts Hospital School, one of my best friends was Martha. She had CP too. We were equal physically, and quickly became friends. We were like twins, and we remained in touch until she died two years ago. But friendship was not possible in high school because I was always the odd one out. The funny thing is that I didn't always realize that I was different. I thought we were all the same.

I didn't have any heroes in high school, but I did admire Edith Schneider. She was the woman who founded the *United Cerebral Palsy Group of Boston*. After college, I volunteered for two years in one of the many programs she founded.

A sort-of-scary thing happened when I was at the Massachusetts Hospital School. It was a big campus, and one day I was walking to a friend's class, *but not walking very well*. On my way over to the high school, I fell and I got my head stuck in the bars of the bridge railing. My friend's teacher could see me, and she said: "*Peggy, get in here! You're late for class.*" Luckily, another student went by and I asked her to tell the teacher that I was stuck and couldn't get out. Finally the teacher came to help me get out.

I've had many people in my life who have encouraged me, and my history teacher inspired me a lot. No, I didn't like history, but she was terrific. She made history

come alive for us, and she enabled me to do the work without that much effort because she was so good.

Yes I had chores to do at home when I was a teenager. *My job* was organizing the TV and the magazine area; we had a lot of magazines! I also had to take care of my brothers if my mother was out. And, I had to do my homework! But my biggest job was checking everybody else's homework. I'm the oldest, so I had to make sure that they did their homework, and that they did a good job. So that was important.

What did I learn from my family? Among other things, I learned about the importance of relying on one another. We stuck by one another, and that's important for any group to survive, you have to have everybody putting in 100%. But that came later in my family. When I was young, my brothers and sisters didn't realize I *was* part of their family because I lived away from home a lot. So, I had to earn my way into the family by helping out. Also, a good friend of my mother's taught me that you can accomplish anything you want, even if you do it a different way. That stuck with me.

I do remember the end of World War II. During the war food was rationed. If you wanted a banana or bread, you had to wait in line and all of that. Lots of things were rationed, because food and supplies had to go to the troops first. After the war, the biggest event I remember from the 1950's was the polio epidemic. That was in 1955. It was a virus, and lots of people were getting it right across the whole country. Polio took away your ability to move your arms and legs and it affected your breathing. People who got it were affected for life. So they created a vaccine, and we all got polio shots at school.

After I got out of high school, I went to college. I took one course at a time because that's all I could handle. That was a big challenge because my high school *was just for the handicapped*. When I started college, nobody would accept me on my own merits. I applied to 43 colleges and was turned down by 43 colleges because of my disability. It wasn't fair, but I ended up going to BU, and I also took some courses at BC. Because no college would allow me on campus without a "normal" person with me, Mom went with me and took notes. This was before the 504 (disability rights) legislation was passed. Students and professors alike were confused about which one of us was the *real* student. One professor even remarked during midterms, *'I didn't know your daughter could read.'* Others assumed that Mom couldn't find a baby sitter.

My most vivid memory from the 1960's and 1970's was the death of President Kennedy. And that's when there were Hippies, and protests against the war in Viet Nam. It was a very violent time, especially in Boston with school busing issues and race riots. I lived across the street from a housing project, and there were stabbings and shootings almost every day. You weren't safe anywhere, regardless of what cause you believed in.

I was in high school when the space program began. I was living at home when President John F. Kennedy got shot. That was in 1963 the year after I got out of high school. I would say that the civil rights movement affected me more than anything else. I identified with the Black people even though I'm White, because they couldn't ride on the bus or do a lot of other things. At that time, disabled people were not allowed to go into stores, or on the bus. Even at church people didn't want me there. One day, Mom was visited by a good friend. She cried

when she had to tell Mom that a group of women from the parish had decided that my presence at Mass distracted them from prayer because my gait was unsteady. Mom responded that she would continue to attend Mass, and added, but, '*you can all go to h....!*' I was attending the parish school at the time. Prejudice knows no bounds.

My biggest adventure in life so far would probably be going over to Denmark to participate in sports. I was in the First International Sports Competition for persons with Cerebral Palsy (CP.) The happiest moment of my life was winning the *Best All-Around Athlete* in Class 5A of CP sports. It was awarded both for attitude and the number of medals won during a single national 'meet.' You were defined by the degree of your disability, so I was a step above being in a wheel chair, but between that and people who could walk well. I won it two years in a row in the nationwide competition, and my second trophy was won in 99-degree heat!

The best job I ever had was being a volunteer teacher's aide in Brookline, MA. I taught students in Grades 2, 3, and 4 at both Heath and Devotion Schools over 17 years. I also rotated through every Brookline School with the *Understanding Disabilities Program*. Previously, I had directed an in-service program for Boston College School of Nursing for three years. I helped train the student nurses to work with handicapped people and learn how to take care of us. I taught them about what we needed. So I've done a lot of different things in my life!

I wanted to go out and be part of society. I worked on the last amendment to the Massachusetts Constitution because I wanted to be able to have my own checking

account. It's true! It wasn't allowed before that. That's why we had to pass equal rights laws.

The most difficult thing I ever did was moving out of my family home into my own apartment because I had never lived on my own. Another thing that equaled that was overcoming the prejudice against the handicapped. We had to fight for the right to live independently. Once I had a disagreement with my sister over whether or not I should go to visit a building that my mother was being admitted to. I'm very close to my Mother and I wanted to check it out, but my sister didn't think it was necessary. So I got my own aide and I went anyway, and it was no extra work for my sister.

What makes me happy now is helping other people. My mother is 93 years young. Where she lives, they have an activity director who is leaving her job. So I sat down the other night and wrote a poem about her. My mother just called me this afternoon to say how good it was. I e-mailed it to my mother. I like to help in any way that I can.

So the only thing I don't think you asked me about is writing. I am a published writer. I've published articles in the newspapers and in magazines. One of the things I write about is volunteering. Many people think that volunteers don't do anything, but a volunteer job is just as important as any other job. I am what they would call a professional volunteer. Because I wasn't able to do a regular job, I became a very good volunteer. Almost everything I've told you about has been done as a volunteer.

When I get up in the morning, I look forward to a busy day! I think my greatest accomplishment has been becoming the person that I am now. My words of wisdom for you are simply that *'NOTHING is impossible if you work at it and trust in God.'*”