

Peace Drum Project
The Elders' Stories
2010

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Introduction

This year, we celebrate the *tenth year* of *The Peace Drum Project*. With this accomplishment in mind, we considered how to emphasize the Arts-as-a-career for our teen participants, and how to connect them more deeply with artists living and working in this community. So, this year's stories feature the life experiences of many of the visiting artists that the teens have worked with in recent years in *The Peace Drum Project*. These stories bring to life the accomplishments of the older artists in our midst, and they serve to inspire the teens to seriously consider how a career — a life — in the Arts would be for them. Each story is inspiring in its own way, and together as a collection, they illustrate the tremendous variety of talents, cultural experiences, creativity, and spiritual authenticity of the Arts and artists in our community.

Today, as our young people look forward to the future, they feel great anxiety about their ability to succeed in such difficult economic times. The stories of these elder artists are full of wisdom about surviving tough times and overcoming life's sometimes-painful lessons. They illustrate how one can turn these unsettling or difficult experiences into creative and healing work by being open to new ideas and 'thinking outside the box.' They also remind the teens that learning is a life-long endeavor, and that the desire to grow and learn comes from *within you*, not just from parents, teachers and mentors. At least half of the artists featured in these stories attended the Boston Public Schools — some of the very schools attended by the teens — which further bridges the gap about who can "*make it in the Arts*," and what it takes to become a successful artist in our culture.

The *words of wisdom* found within these stories echo the advice and guidance of elders from previous years, emphasizing hard work, openness to opportunities, and the importance of friends and family in giving birth to dreams and self-

esteem. While some families **did not** want their child to ‘*suffer the life of an artist,*’ or thought it could not be a financially viable career, there were adults in almost every story who fueled and supported the dreams of the artists when they were young. There was always someone—a grandfather, a friend, a sister, a teacher, saying, ‘*Don’t give up on your dreams.*’

This is why we believe that *The Peace Drum Project* is so important for the social, educational and personal development these youth. Even when they sometimes don’t understand how this *immersion in the Arts* is changing them, the teens’ evaluations and self-assessments clearly show that these experiences are inspiring new ideas and more open minds, expanding positive friendships, reinforcing the courage to take artistic risks, developing their abilities to solve problems differently, and supporting their efforts to stay in school.

A very high percentage (97%) of participating teens in recent years have graduated from high school and have gone on to college or community college. Many of them have stayed in touch with their elder partners, and the elders have followed their young partners progress in school and afterwards. We believe that this partnership between young and old through stories offers a powerful model for engaging young people with elders in a positive and meaningful way. *The Peace Drum Project* deepens the connections between youth and elders, and it builds understanding and greater support for each group within the larger community. In evaluations each year, the youth themselves rank their time with the elders as one of their favorite activities of the project.

We are inspired by the lives of the artists that we have worked with this year. Many of them have come from early lives of poverty and racial discrimination, and some have experienced multiple hardships. Some have raised families under difficult circumstances and have lost children before their time. Yet, they are all full of warmth, humor, optimism, generosity, and hope for the future. Their

resilience is not only inspiring, but provides a road map for our teens who have this priceless opportunity to connect with them, learn from their experiences, and honor their wisdom. We regret that we could only scratch the surface of their stories in our interviews. These stories just whet our appetite to know more about these interesting and creative spirits who have taken this year's teens on a journey through the last sixty years from Boston to Japan, Sudan, Tennessee, the Midwest and more. We hope that you will also be inspired by these wonderful stories.

We are most appreciative to all of the elders who were willing to share their experiences and knowledge with the 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. Young people today need more opportunities to work with elders because their stories teach us that peace is not randomly found. It is built through patience, caring about your community, and hard work. Many hopes, dreams, and challenges remain constant across 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: Livymer Caceres, Nancy Cardona, Merilin Castillo, Rogenzo Cruickshank, Jasmine Dozier, Abdiel Fonseca, Jessica Harris, Shannon Hills, Marjourie Jimenez, Ivan Richiez, Johniesha Smith, and Erys Valdez. We thank them for their respectful manner, lively energy, and curious questioning. The teens also received great support from Peace Drum Interns who traveled with them to the various artists' studios and helped with the interviews. These interns include: Prema Bangera, Emily Cobb, Susanna Derby, Eric Robinson, and Chris Watson. Courtney Williams provided fundraising and promotions support.

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on several occasions. We extend special thanks to two artists— Susan Thompson and Curtis Jones —who were both visiting artists *and* elder artist participants with us this year! Susan and Curtis worked with elders and the teens during the year, and were also willing to share their stories with us.

We dedicate these stories in 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 the many project graduates, elders, and artists who knew and worked with him over the years.

Susan E. Porter, Director

The Peace Drum Project

http://www.tribal-rhythms.org/drum_exhibit.html

Barbara Ward Armstrong

Interviewed by Jasmine Dozier, Susy Derby & Prema Bangera

I was born on March 24, 1940 at the Cahill House in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My mother was Frances Cole Ward and my father was Richard Ward. I lived with my mother and father on Putnam Avenue in Cambridge. I lived there until 1952 when I was about eleven years old. My mother had nine babies, one after another, so she never weighed more than about 110 pounds. You can imagine a mother with that many kids, *a real skinny mother*. She spent her life raising children. Then when my mother was just 29 years old, my father died. I was seven years old.

I am the oldest of nine children: Barbara, Buzzy, Gene, Bob, Jackie, Paul and Paulette (the twins), Donny, and Steven. They are all living except my brother Buzzy, who passed a few years ago. I am 69 years old now, so they are all in their 60's with the exception of two who are in their 50's. But I hardly ever see them.

I spent my early childhood in a low-income neighborhood in Cambridge called '*the Coast*.' Looking back, I remember lots of glass on the street, and a lot of small run down apartments. There weren't a lot of trees. It was a really poor neighborhood on one level, but what I remember most about living there is that the back door of my house faced the Harvard University dormitories. So as a little girl I used to sit on the steps and all these foreign students would walk by our house. I was, as I am now, very loquacious — I like to talk. So I would talk to everybody who passed by the house. I never noticed how ragged and run

down the neighborhood was because I was always reacting to the energy of the people. To me, I lived in a palace; I really had no idea of how poor I was as a child.

When I was a kid, my mother used to sit on the front porch and she'd be writing notes on a piece of paper. Then, she'd give it to a Harvard student. I thought she was an artist, but I came to find out she was writing *lead sheets* for musicians. That's how she made extra money. Someone could hum a tune to her, and she was able to write the notes down on paper. So I learned that from her.

When I was young I had one best friend, Christine. She just died last month, so it's even hard to talk about. I still can't believe it. She would be 69. Christine and I used to sit on that front porch together and talk to the Harvard students — well, *she* never talked. She was my best friend, but I did all the talking because she was very, very shy. I was the one that wanted to touch everybody when I was a kid. I used to look at the Indian and African students and wonder, "*Who are they?*"

So, I didn't have many friends as a child, and I wasn't allowed to go out. My parents had rules about when I had to be home, and I was a pretty sheltered kid. Sometimes I wanted to break the rules and sneak out, but dance and creativity were my balance. I always was an intellectually curious kid. I spent a lot of time in the library, and read lots of books. We had no money, but the students used to bring books to me. So I could entertain myself very easily. I guess I was kind of a loner.

I had several nicknames growing up. I was called *Mousy*, because I was very,

very tiny. Then, I was called *Swift*, because I grew up with brothers. I was sort of a tomboy, and could play basketball real well— especially the forward position. I knew how to dip and shoot the basketball as well as the boys! I love basketball, it really is my favorite sport.

I never got into much trouble as a kid. I don't know how my mother did it with all of us kids. She had trouble with the boys occasionally. When I was a child, you didn't talk back to your parents. We were afraid to talk back. They would look at you with those eyes, and their eyes would tell you, '*you do what you are told.*' But it's different today.

The scariest thing that ever happened to me was when I was eleven years old. I was on Putnam Avenue and a big Black man waved to me. I was at the side of the street on Hughes Street. So I stopped my bike, and he reached out at me and held me down on the ground. It was almost dark, pulled his penis out, put it on my face, and tried to rape me. That's the worst thing that ever happened to me. I've never gotten over it. That's a fact. He dragged me into a yard. I always had a big mouth, so I opened up my mouth with everything that was in me, and I screamed. A man heard me screaming, and he and his wife ran out the house, and there was this man, totally exposed. Then some other neighbors heard the commotion, and they called the police. Eventually, the child predator was caught, arrested, and imprisoned.

So that's why I was moved in with my maternal grandmother, Jenora Cole. I was always scared after that event, and I was especially scared of boys. I threw up constantly for over a year after that. I'll never forget it, but I got over it.

There was a silence in my life after that experience. The way the elders coped with it, the way my mother coped with it *was that they didn't say anything*. As I grew to be an adult, I realized how painful that was for them. It was typical of their generation that they didn't talk about emotions, but I could sense by their protectiveness that they were hurt far more than I was by it. Gradually I began to want to ask the questions because I was hurting deeply inside, and I didn't understand the silence.

When I went to live with my grandmother, I was separated from the day- to-day life of my brothers and sisters. I had been moved to another neighborhood in Cambridge, so besides the emotional silence, I had a social silence to deal with. It was horrible. I no longer fit into the community where my friends were. My grandmother had moved me to a better Black neighborhood, so the Black kids in my old neighborhood thought I was a snob. I couldn't hang out with them anymore because I had to go home to Nana's house after school. So I was separated from them physically and socially. My grandmother's neighborhood was an up-and-coming Black neighborhood. I didn't feel I was good enough to mix with the Black girls there because I came from the poor neighborhood. So I was alone as a child for a while.

I stayed in the same school — the Houghton School — even though I was living in the other neighborhood with my grandmother. My grandmother was running the elevator in Harvard Square, so I would go to Harvard Square with her in the morning, then I would walk to the Houghton School in Central Square— my old neighborhood. Most of the teachers never knew that I was living outside of the neighborhood. I was valedictorian of my seventh grade class. My grandmother was an avid reader, and one of my teachers — who knew about

my living situation, and kept the secret that I was living with my grandmother— helped me a lot, too.

I think that maybe the most healing and transformative thing that I learned from my traumatic experiences as a child was that I was forced to deal with my feelings. Because the elders didn't talk about anything, I had to figure out things on my own. I was very inquisitive as a child, but I also had enough sense to surround myself with healthy people. I knew who to play with as a kid; if a child was negative to me, I found someone positive to play with.

I was a Black child in a primarily Black neighborhood, but I used to ride my bike all around Harvard Square. One day I was at Fresh Pond eating my lunch by myself and this young woman walked up to me and said, "*Who are you?*" That's how I meet people! She said, "*May I sit and talk with you?*" I found out she was a music teacher. She was Margaret Spencer, the mother of Elijah Wald, the famous guitarist. She said, "*I see you around here all the time! I teach music, so maybe sometime you want to come and see what I do?*"

So, I started voice lessons, and attending Christ Church in Harvard Square on some Sundays. You know that upset my grandmother! Margaret was the pianist at the church, so through her, I started meeting all of her Harvard friends. I started going to the camps where all of the kids of Harvard families went. It was a very international atmosphere, so I was blessed to have all of that in my life. It gave me permission to be me.

But I had to balance going to the gospel church with my maternal grandmother on some Sundays, going to the Methodist church with my paternal grandmother on other Sundays, and going to the Episcopalian church sometimes with

Margaret, too! That one was *'boring as hell.'* I couldn't stand the music, but I loved the activities! None of the churches moved me religiously, but I found my own spiritually.

I always wanted to know *the woman* my grandmother was, but our parents didn't tell us about their personal lives. I thought Nana was a nun, she was so proper! She always wanted to be an English teacher, but she only went to the eighth grade. Then she went to the Harvard Extension programs. While running the elevator in Harvard Square she would meet a lot of Harvard foreign students, so we started to house foreign students at our house, because that's how she made money.

Our house always had Indian and African students living on the second floor, and they were like my buddies. I remember I was probably fourteen when I first ate African food. So, here I was a Black child going to school with African clothes on. The Black kids thought I was a weirdo because I used to wrap myself up in a turban. They didn't understand it. Of course, at that time, I didn't know anything about the West Indian/Native American connection in my own family. My parents never told me — but all of this was really in my family history!

My Nana, Jenora Cole, never talked about it because she didn't fit anywhere either. She dressed like a Harvard professor, so she was a very elegant, dignified lady. She was pretty conservative, so they thought I was totally out of my mind with *my ethnic style*. But, Nana didn't discourage it either. She would just look at me and say, "*Are you wearing that to school today?*" And when I went to church with them on Sunday, the Black people at church just had that look like they were thinking, "*Where does she get those clothes*

from?” But, it’s just who I was!

There were always people around me who sensed my passion for music and art when I was a child. I didn’t know it then, but somebody else always picked me up and fed me what I needed. My life seemed to get better when I was about twelve. The dance teacher at the Cambridge Community Center saw me dance in a performance. She came up to me and said: “*You know, you dance pretty well. Have you ever studied dance before?*” I told her “*No.*” Well, she was a friend of Elma Lewis, and she recognized something different in me. So she said “*I know just the dance school for you.*” Elma Lewis was a dancer and a teacher. She was just amazing! So art and music became the center of my life.

I began taking dance lessons in Roxbury. Then the Black people who didn’t accept me in the upper-income neighborhood started reading about me in the newspaper. I started getting little stories in the *Cambridge Chronicle* about this ‘little Barbara Ward’ who was making these dolls, and making friends with old people. That’s how I was as a kid. I had mostly older friends. For a long time I didn’t have many ‘children friends.’ I think that was the beginning of me realizing that I had something special, but I didn’t really understand what I was suppose to do with my talent.

I was still just twelve or thirteen years old, and I was trying to figure out, *where do I belong? Why did my mother let me go? Why didn’t my mother come to visit me or call me?* See, my grandmother and my mother weren’t close, and come to find out my mother had a boyfriend. Nana didn’t like the fact that after my father died my mother had a boyfriend. I understand that now, but back then I had no idea. So I grew up between a grandmother and a mother who had conflict and they didn’t agree on how to raise me.

My mother resented my grandmother because I was closer to her. Then, it became the competition for the love between the mother and the grandmother. The pain that I had growing up was that once my mother let me go, she felt guilty about letting me go. Then she was envious of the closeness that I had with my grandmother, because Nana kind of took over the mother role. So I sensed that conflict between the two of them as a child. I didn't know who I should be loyal to, but I felt the tension. You know, if I hugged my grandmother in front of my mother, I might hurt one or the other. So the way I dealt with it was that I never touched either of them for the rest of my life. No hugs, no touches.

So, I was a pretty mixed up little kid. I didn't know who I belonged to or where I belonged. But it always came back to the same thing, I was able to go to my bedroom, take out my journal, and write down my thoughts and my stories. When I got lonely, I just got on my bicycle and rode all over Cambridge. Eventually I would find somebody old to talk to, so it went right back to the elders again.

Now that I'm older, I admire my mother so much. Unfortunately, she passed away in 2004. I call her my angel. She was my first angel, because for years I resented her since I thought she gave me away. When it was suggested that I live with my grandmother, Mom allowed that because she was afraid. She knew I was paranoid about boys and I didn't trust anyone to touch me or hug me — no physical contact after that incident. So, Mom was my first angel. My second angel was my grandmother, who just gave me everything. She allowed me to live with her, you know, she was a good female role model.

My husband, Howard ‘Pache’ Armstrong, would be my next angel. He was someone who came into my life, who loved me unconditionally. He brought me his love and experience, and he encouraged me to go back to my mother when I was an adult. He said to me one day, *"I want to meet your mother. I've known you for all these years, and I've never met your mother. You need to connect with your mother again."* Later he said to me, *"Barbara, your mother's eyes spoke the pain that she lived all of those years when you were separated. What you don't understand is that she hurt too. You need to go to your mother and forget about your pride."*

So, I did. I was afraid to see my mother again. I had the attitude — *"Why did you leave me?"* Then, the first thing my mother said to me was, *"How come you never called me after you went to live with Nana? Why didn't you come to visit me?"* Now we never hung out together, and it didn't bring us close together the way I wanted it to, but she gave me enough to realize that I understood her pain. She let me go because she loved me. The bottom line is that I became the artist that my mother wished she was. My mother admired and envied my artistic success, *and* she was proud to have influenced me creatively.

I am writing an autobiographical children's book about my life as a child. It's a long story, but now I have figured out that after the attempted rape, my mother was afraid that someone would try to hurt me again. So that's really why I was moved to live with my grandparents. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, but I didn't know it then. I say that my mother and grandmother were my angels, because you grow old enough to understand that sometimes people give you away because they love you and not because they don't.

The bad part is that once I was separated from my siblings, we never were close again, even though I have one brother who stays close. It separated me from them for the rest of my life. It's more complicated than that. When I look back at them and what they *didn't* have, I realize how blessed I was as an 'only child,' because Nana focused on me. I will always have mixed feelings and wonder what it would have been like to have grown up with my siblings. There's always a missing piece. So I learned importance of having that family interaction as a child, because I missed it, and I longed for family relationships.

I went to high school at Cambridge High and Latin, and by the time I was about fifteen or sixteen I was teaching dance at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts. I was hardly allowed to do anything, but I was allowed to go from the house in Cambridge to Roxbury on the bus. That was considered a wild neighborhood when I was a kid. After high school, I went to Emerson College for three years, then I finished my degree at night.

I started Grad school, but I didn't finish, because I became very active as an artist. That was always pulling me. I realized I had a gift to teach. When I got out of college, I was dancing a lot, and for the most part I was in the theater and plays. I was dating a little bit; I didn't really date a lot until I got way into my late twenties. I was kind of a late bloomer.

I always wanted to be an actress, I wanted to be in theatre, I wanted to paint. It was always the arts, no matter what. Being a dancer and a dance teacher was the best job I ever had. Performing and doing theatre —when I first started getting paid for it— oh my God, that was exciting! And, sometimes on the weekends I would go to the projects, and would give free dancing classes to the

kids. When I was sixteen, I became like a volunteer teacher at the Cambridge Community Center. And, I'm still that same person, because I know how important it is to give something back. So that's what I did and I still do it.

My inspiration is when I see people in groups. Visually I get stimulated by what people say and how they are. Because I didn't have family around me day-to-day, I've always created what I didn't have! So I began to create life sized doll-like soft sculptures, and they surround me where I live. They have a presence, so having them in my space, makes me *feel* like I have people here sitting with me. And my soft sculptures are another way I make a living. My first commission was from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. A teacher saw my work at the Museum of Fine Arts back in 1987, and she said "*Have you ever thought about taking your soft sculptures and put them on exhibition?*" I said 'no' because I didn't see them that way, but eventually I did exhibit them.

I love the color red. If you look at my house, I have all of this stuff: it's Indian, African, Guatemalan, because that's what I grew up with. My grandmother had all of this stuff and I would wonder, *where did Nana get this stuff?* She would never reveal where it came from, but I found out when I was in my forties or fifties. I said to her, "*Nana, how come you can have silky straight hair, and you look like a Black woman?*" So she explained that her father was half Native American from the South and he had the straight hair too. A lot of Blacks and Native Americans inter-mingled in the 1800's. But because of the racism, it was hard for them to legalize their marriages. So, that's what the mix was, and it's also why I love red, because I grew up with all those different cultures.

I've had an amazing, very interesting kind of international life. I've traveled

everywhere. My favorite place to travel is Nigeria both musically and culturally. I guess you could say I like West Africa, in general. The Harvard students that used to teach at the Cambridge Community Center said I was (in their words) *'the unique little Black girl.'* I learned some languages from them, and I started wearing my head wrapped up like the African women. I was always imitating things I was attracted to but didn't understand why.

My first husband was Lowell Davidson. I met him in Harvard Yard. He just walked up to me and started talking. I guess I attract people like that! I think there's something in my energy that says it's OK to say 'hello.' He was cute, too. He was third year student at Harvard Medical School, but he was also a jazz pianist. So that was our commonality — music and art were our common thread. We became engaged, and we lived together, then we were married for a while, but the marriage didn't work out

I met my second husband, Howard 'Pache' Armstrong at the Berklee Performance Center. He was on stage, and the next day he had been invited to teach a class in the same studio building at Northeastern where I was teaching. He played 'string music.' A lot of musicians all over the world were fascinated by him because he spoke seven languages fluently, and he could translate five. He used to teach at Wayne State University; he was a brilliant guy.

My husband 'Pache' had a lot of names! He was born William Howard Taft Armstrong, named after President Taft. Then, his stage name was *'Louie Bluie,'* and I called him 'Pache' — it's a Native American name. His father was half Native American too.

I began to travel with 'Pache' musically when he realized that I could play

drums. He didn't know that before. So every year we went on a band tour to Holland, Germany, Italy, then later we did the Sweden trip. These were all the yearly jazz tours. Then I started meeting artists in Europe, and they found out that I could make dolls, so I started getting grants for doll-making at the festivals in Europe, too. It all comes back to the same thing — how you take your talent, develop it and market it. That's the key. The thing is, how are you going to make a living at it!

Meeting Howard 'Pache' Armstrong was definitely my biggest adventure because I never imagined that somebody that old could be so exciting! Meeting him and being with him were the happiest moments of my life. All the travels that we had together, and the fact that he has left me with so much, I'm incredibly blessed. When you know somebody has been there for you for years and loved you so much, for me to give up would be like throwing away all that he invested in me. If I give up on my life, if I stop giving to kids, and don't take some time to share my experiences, what else have I got?

I didn't have any children, but my husband did from his first marriage. My husband was 30 years older than I was, so I have stepsons. There's William, Tommy, Robert, and Ralph Armstrong. I had one stepson who was older than me— he would be 74! But I don't let them call me 'Mother' in public!

Howard was just an exciting man. I had met someone who was a lover, he was passionate, naughty, wild, brilliant, intellectual, and, he had compassion. He was even fun to fuss with. I remember one time— when was 94 years old— I put my hands on my hips, and I said, "*You don't get it. If you would just let me have my way, we'd have a perfect marriage.*" And he said, "*What did you say?*" Then all of a sudden he started crying. I didn't understand, so I said,

“*What’s the matter?*” And he said, “*The truth of the matter is you’ve never asked me for anything in all of these years except what was best for me. And, I thank you for loving me, Barbara. I’m so sorry that I met you so late in my life.*” I think he knew that he was dying, but I didn’t know.

One project I have planned is taking ‘Pache’s’ clothes and creating a gallery of life-sized soft sculptures representing the two of us to celebrate our love relationship. This is also the beginning of me realizing that I have to let him go; I have to. If I don’t, I will be celebrating him forever. There’s always going to be another museum or somebody who wants to do something about my husband. There are people calling me now about his clothes. The Museum of Fine Arts has been asking for a collection of his clothes. In other words, once there’s a legacy, it doesn’t die. But there’s a point where I have to stop or I won’t be able to continue living myself. So I consider this body of work the beginning my new life.

In June, 2010, there will be a celebration of the William Howard Taft Armstrong memorial bridge in LaFollette, Tennessee, his hometown. And I will be there to place the plaque for the dedication. Every year there’s a *Louie Bluié Festival* in June. I go, and I sit in to play drums and tambourine; and I sing. It’s an organized group of musicians and artists who go to Tennessee every summer to play and celebrate his music. That I can deal with, but after a while, I have to figure out a way to start do my own work again, to balance it, you know? Once I get the love letters published, and I publish my book, at least I’ll have some money coming in. Because at this point, everything I’m doing — I’m paying money to get the work out there. That’s the other piece about being an artist. It’s great, but it’s not easy!

What it all adds up to in life is the lessons. You think you know it all? You don't, because until you die, there's always a lesson in life. If you don't take time to learn those things, pretty soon, you'll turn around and you'll be 70! So I'm happy I've been able to share my story and my experiences with you. Hopefully, you've learned something new that you didn't know before.