

Peace Drum Project

The Elder's Stories

2009

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Introduction

This year, as we wrap-up our ninth year of *The Peace Drum Project*, there is much to celebrate. A very high percentage 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 partner's progress in school and afterwards. The project was in created in part to address the fear that local elders experienced when encountering groups of youth on the street or on the subway. So one important project goal was to alleviate the fear of teens among elders. From that original goal, we have created a powerful model for engaging young people with elders in a positive and 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. In evaluations each year, the youth themselves rank their time with the elders as one of their favorite activities of the project.

Today's young people look forward to the future, but they also feel great anxiety about their ability to succeed in such difficult economic times. The lessons they have learned from the lives of this year's elders contain a great deal of wisdom about succeeding in tough times. Virtually every one of this year's elders grew up in difficult circumstances, but they have endured. They continue to find happiness in their families, their friends, and their activities in the community. Many had hoped to go to college themselves, but were unable to because of economic constraints. For most, family came first, but neither responsibility nor hardship kept them from seeking their dreams. This is a powerful message to our youth today who face unprecedented costs for getting an education—life is never easy, yet there are abundant rewards for hard work and sticking to your goals.

We are inspired by the lives of the elders we have worked with this year, and in recent years. Many of them have come from early lives of poverty and racial discrimination and have experienced multiple hardships. They have raised families under difficult circumstances and have lost children before their time. Yet, they are full of 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 know that we have 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.

We are most appreciative to 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, Nanci Cardona, Katherine Colon, Rogenzo Cruickshank, Miranda Desir, Jasmine Dozier, Abdiel Fonseca, Jessica Harris, Shannon Hills, Farah Jeune, Marjourie Jimenez, Emilio Lajara, Ivan Richiez, Kristie Simono, Johniesha Smith, and Erys Valdez. We thank them for their respectful manner, lively energy, and curious questioning.

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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 teens, elders, and artists who knew and worked with him over the years.

Susan E. Porter, Director
Cooperative Artists Institute

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Bernell Stuart

Interviewed by Abdiel Fonseca, Ivan Richiez Emilio Lajara
& Livymer Caceres

My name is Bernell Margaret Stuart. I was born in Norfolk, Virginia on July 23, 1945. I was raised by my grandmother, Minnie Winder, and by my mother, Elizabeth Moore Eggleston. We all lived together in one house with my aunts. My grandmother had 7 children of her own, and my mother had 2. I have one brother. His name is Clyde. He's 3 years older than me. I'm 63, so he's 66.

The place where I grew up was very nice. We had lawyers and teachers and doctors and we also had the postal clerk living there. They all lived in the block I lived in. We lived in a small town and everybody was nice. It was sort of half country and half city. We had a little field with a cow and chickens that laid eggs. In certain parts we could go get our corn and fresh made butter. We had wood and coal stoves back then, and we had a nice sized house with a pantry and big kitchen. There were a lot of us kids and we always played in the hall and enjoyed different games. We didn't have TV, so we listened to the radio, and we had a right nice time.

My grandmother was a wonderful lady. She was always taking people in if there happened to be anybody who needed help. I learned that from her. She always provided for us whatever we needed: food, heat, and work. Everything that a person could do, she did it for us, and even for the people on the outside. Momma did housekeeping. What do you all call it now? She went into people's homes and cleaned and took care of the kids. You know, stuff like that.

Mostly I played with the neighbors and my own relatives, because there was a bunch of us — at least 10 of us kids. I didn't have a best friend until I got into junior high school because we were all just right there together. We belonged to each other! We went to school and then we came right back home together, so I didn't know anything about other friends. We never said, "*Okay, you're my friend and you come over and we'll do things together and go out on the weekends and stuff.*" We didn't do that. They always came to the house everyday. So we'd play games and enjoy each other until our parents came home.

One game we liked to play was the one with the dice — *Seven Eleven*. No, we didn't play for money. We weren't allowed. We had to sneak to get the dice to play. The big kids would teach us how to do that. The older ones had the dice. They taught us how to shake the dice and throw them down on the floor. Whatever it was, they could have been cheating. I don't know, but I went for it. They said this number, whatever the number was, "*Oh, you won*" or "*You didn't win.*" So that's the way it was.

Momma let us play with the cards like *Old Maid*. I remember the lady on the card! We played different card games and we played with our doll babies. We cut out the dolls. The school I went to was Mary Titus Elementary School. It was a block from the house. That was good for me. It was close and nice. I had a few nice teachers at the time. When I finished at Mary Titus, I went to junior high. I did my years there, then I went to Booker T. Washington High School. I graduated from high school, then I lived there until I was in my late 20s when I got married and later, came to Boston.

I loved school, grade school, middle school and high school. I liked it all. I got good grades. I call them good grades. I got C's and B's. I didn't get no higher. I

didn't have a favorite teacher in school. They all treated me the same. I went in there and did what I was supposed to do and came out. "Good Morning" and "Good-bye" that was all I had to do. You didn't communicate with teachers like you do now. You'd go in, sit down, do your work and come on out of there, that's all. If you had a question, you asked them, and that was the end of it.

When I was a teenager we mostly played games and listened to the radio. And, we learned how to make things from wood for everyday living. We didn't buy things like we do now. We were able to go out and chop the trees, then we would take the wood and we carved different things out of it. We made chairs for the porch, and stools for sitting around for a picnic table? We made things or for the kitchen like the shaped things that you put salt and pepper in— things like that. We did a lot of woodwork and lot of work with our hands at that time. And, yes, I love cooking, too.

Being a teenager, my life was pretty quiet. I'm a Tomboy, so I used to love climb trees, or I'd find me all these bugs. I just loved to dig things up. And, I used to make things like little houses, or a shoe shine box for the kids — stuff like that. Then, when I was your age, around 15, we could go to dances. They had good dances at the church. In the afternoon we could sing and do different activities there, and in the evening we could practice playing drums. They had that from Monday 'til Saturday for us kids after school. So, we just enjoyed ourselves, we met different people who came in there, and we kept ourselves busy. We were like our parents asked us to be. We went there on Saturday, we stayed inside the building, and did whatever they said to do. We left there at 7:00 o'clock and we had to be in our house by 7:30 or 8:00 o'clock. So, that's what we did for most of our Saturdays.

My parents had a rule that we had to be in by 7:00. If it was summertime, she would sit out on the porch and let us stay out until 9:00, because she was sitting there. There was always an adult there with us. But in the wintertime we had to be in the house before dark and that was 6:00 o'clock. It would get dark at 6:30 or 7:00. You had to be in the home by that time until you got grown.

Sure I got in trouble with my parents when I did bad things. If I would sneak out, or, if you were told not to play with this toy and you played with it anyway— I got in trouble doing dumb stuff like that. Once, I got caught sneaking out of the house. I snuck out to go to a dance hall. I crawled out the window, but I wasn't even thinking about getting back in! The window was as tall as this from the ground. So, I jumped out the window, and Momma was sitting right there in the chair with her belt waiting for me to come back in. When the older ones did that, she'd wait till you'd put your night clothes on, then she'd pull the covers back. So, you didn't get a chance to double up clothes.

The scariest thing that ever happened to me was when I was young and there was an alligator that had washed up under the house. We had a great big hole under the house, you know. He came in as a baby, evidently, and got underneath the house. The tides used to come in, or they came up through the sewer and get up under the house like that. And, that's what happened. Well, he must have got hungry down there 'cause he made some crying noise. And me, I loved crawling under the porch so I went down to find out what's there, and *this thing*— he had this long mouth. That scared me! But see, I was smart. I went and got some food and I fed it. If you feed 'em and don't be mean to 'em, they won't attack you. He was just a baby when he started. So I fed him 'til the people came and got him. That thing was half big as this room! He had grown under there, and he was huge.

My first date was in high school. We went to a movie. Then, we went to an arcade where all the machines are. I didn't like movies because there were too many rats in there for me. They were running all around on the floor. That's the only thing, you see, boys-was-boys back then. You could trust them, because they knew that if you didn't trust them, your parents would totally know. And then your parents went to their parents' house. So you didn't get away with anything! But he was a nice boy, so Momma, she let me go to the movies. And we had a good time.

Did I ever have a conflict? Well, once I got to be a big girl, I had my first child, I got pregnant at 17 and a half. And my aunt, she was very mean to me. But back then you didn't talk back to adults. Whatever they said to do, you did it, and like that. It was different than today. Back then, you didn't have no power like you do today. And she just got mad one time and just told me to get out, so I left. I went to my cousin's house and stayed there.

The only adventure I had was when I was a grown girl. I was maybe 21. Some friends took me out in a car to New York! I didn't know I was going to New York. They just said, "*Oh, come on, let's take a ride.*" I took this ride and ended up in New York. They may have done it on purpose, but it was a mistake for me, because I had to call Momma in Virginia and tell her where I was. I said, "*Mom, I'm in New York. They say I'm in New York. And, they say I won't be home until about 4 o'clock in the morning.*" She just said, "*Okay, I'll be right here.*" I didn't get no beating, but she gave me a good scolding. She said that was dangerous. But she knew I was going with them; she just didn't realize they were going that far. They'd been drinking and all. Everybody was drunk, but I didn't drink, so I had to drive all the way back. I didn't have fun; I was too scared. I had never left

home before with nobody! I went to the movies and stuff — you know, you go with your girlfriends — but you don't go out of town in a car. That wasn't allowed.

The person that I most admired was my grandmother, because she *was* the family. Everything was her. Even though our parents were there, she was head of household. Anything you wanted to do, anything you didn't understand, anything you'd like to know about, we went to her. She played the role of our parents and a grandparent. She was just wonderful. We looked up to her, because she was always there for us and with us. My mother was there in the same house, but we all went to Grandma. She knew how to keep people comfortable, so we always went to her for everything.

I didn't have to work to help support the family. But when I got older, I helped my grandmother and understood what it was all about. I used to get the wood and the coal, cut it up, and put it in the house. You know things like that to help her. I learned how to cook from her, so I could help her out. When we were younger, she didn't get home until 7 o'clock at night, then she would have to cook for us after she had worked all day. So I felt that I was a lot of help to her.

When I got out of high school, I took up hairdressing, then I went to school for cooking. I met a Mexican lady who taught me how to do Mexican food from scratch for her restaurant, so I worked there for 7 years. Then I did short order cooking and I did that for 7 years. And from there, I just did taking care of people. I liked to help different people who needed me. I like being helpful, so I just liked doing that and I always did it. I worked all my life.

I would love to have been a nurse, a full-fledged nurse. I since didn't pick it up like I would have liked to I just went into cooking. I could do that better. There

were a lot of things that I just couldn't hold in my brain like I should have. But with cooking, I just picked it up, because my Momma taught me how to cook. And different people that liked different things, they would just tell me what they wanted in it and I could fix it. I didn't mind doing that at all.

The best job I ever had was working at Blue Cross & Blue Shield here in Massachusetts. I was a machine operator. I worked down there repairing machines. I've done a little bit of everything. They said they'd send me to school for it, and I said, "*Yeah, I'll go for it.*"

My best friend when I was young was named Lana Turner. We came out of school together, and we moved across the street from each other. I had 5 kids and she had 5 kids. So, we raised our kids together. My kids are Wayne, James, Stephanie, Theresa, and Norman. I worked most of the time after I started having kids and got married. My husband Eugene was in the service, and when he retired, he moved up to Boston to find his mother. And when he decided to stay here, I moved up to Boston with the children, too.

How was my life during the 1940s? Well, I was born in 1945. In that time, if you were black, you lived in a black neighborhood, and if you were white, you lived in a white neighborhood. And mostly, if a white person came to your neighborhood, it was because you worked for them, and vice versa.

During the 1950s, I was having a good time. I was a little girl. I didn't know about life. When you are home like that, you don't know what's going on more than what you see. It was a good life. But, like I say, your parents didn't let you out. You didn't get to go out like you all do today, because, if you did you could have died. It was nothing for them to kill you, to catch you and kill you. Especially, girls,

they'd rape you and they'd kill you. So you didn't want to go nowhere. You didn't want to be with nobody. You wanted to stay home with your parents, you know, within your block, where you lived at. You'd stay outside in front of the house and play. But you didn't wander off like these kids today. If you did, you might not come back.

So, the big event we had in the 1960's was this strike for Black people to be able to go into restaurants and stores. If you were Black, it was terrible. If you were Black back then, you had to go in the back door. They had signs up "White Only" or "Black Bathroom." That's the only way you could go. You couldn't go into White neighborhoods. You couldn't go in a White man's store unless he gave you permission to go in through the back door. If you did go in without permission, you got whipped like you were a dog, so you didn't bother.

In restaurants you weren't allowed in. Then later on, they started having a little table to the side for Black people. So the White people sat over there and the Blacks sat over here. Then, it changed when I was in my 20's. Woolworth's had those 'Black only' and 'White only' tables. So the Black kids went in there and sat in the White man's section and refused to move. And that's when it started breaking up some, you know, and they started letting us go places. It's better now, but before it was terrible.

No family member was seriously ill in my time. Some people had TB (tuberculosis) in my family, but that was before my time. That's a disease that makes you weak. There was a very little girl in our house, and I remember her laying around a lot. And another one had Cerebral Palsy. I remember her because my aunt dropped her. She was doing something and the baby fell out of her lap

and hit her head. She never walked or talked again. So those were the only two I remember in my family that was sickly. My second child had spinal meningitis, and those are the only sicknesses I remember.

Yes, I used to drive a car. I'd drive now if I had one. I was 22 years old when I first got a license to drive. I drove when I was a young kid, because we had fields, and I used to drive the tractor out in back plowing up the yard and stuff. That's how I learned how to drive. But I got my license to drive a regular car later.

My big adventure was having kids and coming up here to Massachusetts, because I had never left home before. The transition from Virginia was good and it was bad in one sense, because it was scary. I liked it at home, but I needed to get away from home cause I had never left Virginia before. I thought it would be a good experience for me and my children, so, they got me the place that I live in now. And I have been there ever since, which is 38 years.

The thing that gives me the most happiness in my life is to be the age of 63 years old, to live in my apartment for 38 years, and to be (hopefully) going into a senior building soon. Then I will be on my own. I don't got nobody to worry about anymore. I go to church. I try to live happily. I try to anticipate with the kids if anyone needs my assistance, then I do it. I love crocheting and knitting, and I love crafts. I do all kinds of craft stuff.

My kids all did very well for me. They all finished school, they are all grown and they have their own children. Praise the Lord, this year my 10th great grandchild was born. It makes me feel good. I see all my beautiful flowers everywhere I go. They are just a blessing. I am babysitting for one of them now. I love them all. My granddaughter she had twins, and my grandson has twins. They are about 3 or

4 months apart. And, another one just had a baby. No, I'm not going to have a party. I don't believe in parties. They can party, but not me.

I never cared for parties when I was younger. I have seen too many bad things happen, so I kind of stay away from parties. And now that I've gotten older, I really stay away from parties. I don't tell the young ones, oh, don't have no parties. I just pray for them cause you can't stop nobody's life. Whatever is meant to happen is going to happen. But I don't have to do it

The only hard part I had in my life was losing my older son. He was just in his 40's and he passed away. He's been gone a year. In fact, it doesn't seem like a year, but it was a year. My husband died first. So that's been kind of hard, losing one right behind the other like that. My close ones were my husband and my son. I'm trying to hold the fort with my other kids. You know they miss him too, and they need to talk about different things we did together. Other than that I'm holding up.

My favorite kind of music is Gospel. I like Aretha and Mahalia Jackson. *Precious Lord* is my favorite song. It's a spiritual. It tells you about being a Christian and what you should do when you are depressed and really listen to it. It calms you down. I started in school with the clarinet, but I don't play an instrument any more. I liked it, but I couldn't keep it up because we couldn't afford it. It just was the money back then. So I let it go. See it wasn't like now. The school gives you the instrument now. Back then, your parents had to buy it and my parents couldn't afford it. But I used to listen to my cousin and them play. We had a piano in the house. And they used to sing there. So that's where I got into music.

I really like purple, but my main favorite color is blue. I love blue, I really do. I like the blue that is in between a baby blue and a dark blue. All shades are nice. It depends what you're using it for. I like that color because it seems to blend very

well with everything. I would love to have my light blue curtains and do 3 or 4 shades of blue in my crocheting for my bedspread to match it with the pillows and stuff. You can put the white with it to make it look nice, and use different colors for the roses, and it brings the blue out. It makes it beautiful.

I don't have a favorite TV show, because I am not a TV person. Unless you come in and say, "Oh, Mom. Oh, Auntie, this or that is on...." And I say, "*Okay*" and I'll sit down and look at it with them. But that's the end of it. I am not a TV person. I don't like nothing that is on TV. Those game shows? I don't call them nothing! Sometimes my children look at them. And movies, I've seen them but I couldn't name them. I liked Cicely Tyson in that movie she played in? Don't ask me the name, because I don't remember. I liked that one. And I tell you another one that I liked. What's her name? She's got that matted hair? She's got a movie. Yes — Whoopi Goldberg — I like her movies. *The Color Purple*, that was a good one. She's very talented, and she's both a comedian and an actress.

My favorite season? I like June— spring, summer. I love the spring because it isn't too hot. Summer is a little bit too hot. I'd rather have it be spring because it usually doesn't go above 70. As long as it doesn't go above 70, I've got it made. You can enjoy yourself better. I hate being hot

Anything else? The only thing I know is that I worked from the age of 14. I love working with my hands. All my life I've used my hands. I love making stuff: sewing, cooking, woodworking. You name it, I can do it. I just enjoy doing it. It's good to have more than one trade in your life always. And for God's sake, learn more than one language other than English and Spanish. You don't know now where you are going to end up or what kind of job you'll have. Don't just say,

“Well I know Spanish or I learned English.” Go to school and get at least a couple more languages. You never know when you will use them or need them the most.

I wish today I had learned Spanish. I can understand some things, but I won't say anything. I cannot say a whole conversation in it and that's not good. Family members and others that I worked with try to get me to talk. Everyone in my building is Spanish. The young kids come over my house, and they try to get me to talk and they teach me. But I won't do it. I'm not scared, but to me I don't sound right. Maybe I'm afraid it won't come out right, and somebody can get mad because they think you are saying something else. Sometimes one word means two or three things. So you have to be careful in what you are saying, what the conversation is on, and who you are talking to. But there were certain jobs I couldn't have because I wouldn't speak Spanish. I wish I had learned it when I was a young lady. I'm too old now, and I'm retired.

What wisdom do I want to pass on to you all? Always be good to yourself and then you can be good to others. Stop and think before you say things to others.

That means get your education. And, the best foundation is to listen to your parents. I don't care how bad it sounds, listen to them. When you get older, it'll pay off. I am sure glad Momma told me that. But if you get your education like you're supposed to, that trash can won't be empty so it won't rattle. Did you know an empty trash can makes the most noise? That means you're never going to listen and do the right thing because you never picked up the right things or listened to them as a child coming up.