

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.

Thanks to Julia Martin for her ongoing support of the project and for her help in providing space for activities. Thanks to AAMARP Studios for hosting the teens

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

Bob Walthall

Interview By Livymer Caceres and Prema Bangerera

(Poetry excerpts courtesy of Bob Walthall)

My name is Bob Walthall. I was born in Buffalo, New York in 1934. When I was a child I lived with my mother, Roberta ‘Ruby’ Walthall—no brothers, no sisters, just my mother. It was my grandfather who told my mother to name me after her, because he had named *her* after him! His name was Robert Williams. So really, I’m named after my grandfather.

My mother was born in Georgia. I knew my grandfather when I was a kid. And I went to Georgia when my grandmother died. She was an Indian. I always tell Black people “don’t forget the Indian” in us.

Yes, I got into trouble when I was young —of course! What was of worst thing I’ve done? Well, steal cars, maybe. Why did I stop? I didn’t want to go to jail! You know you have to stop being bad and grow up! No, I never got into high school, but I’ve taught in college. I’m still teaching in college, because I’m a brain. When you’re a genius, you just figure it out. I told you it took me 33 years to figure things out. You can think you’re smart, but one day you realize that you have to be intelligent.

No, I had no idea that I would write, because I had dyslexia. Like I said, when I came here, I learned how to learn. I never learned very much that I could remember from when I was young. When I came to Boston, I was exposed to many things. For the first thing, I wound up at Harvard right away. I’m in honors there in Communications, and I’m the only Black person in the United States honored by the students at Harvard.

Yes, everything about me is interesting. But, I'm only going to tell you so much anyway because I'm working on a book. I have quite a few young people who are working towards just understanding my book. They are my proofreaders, and everything I write, they read out loud to me. So, this is what I'm working on right now. I don't normally show this to outsiders, but you're in my 'headquarters.' So, I'll put it to you like this — I'll put it in a poem:

*'It took me 33 years to wake up.
And when it dawned on me
it was like being in a bad dream
which could only mean
I'd gone to such bad extremes
I didn't have any ways or means.
But now that I can see
The dawn is all around me
And the pen don't make no blisters
And I can behold the beauty of
The sane solar system
Then it should be apparent to you
What I can do and what's left up to you to do too.
Now I do care about what people think about me
And I do care about my public image
But, you know, I do care less.
You know, Superman could be the average man
In a sane society.
To clarify that matter*

*Which is to get to the meat of the matter
So that we will know just what is the matter,
I will emphasize the disguise
That lets dummies seem so wise.
And lets fools feel free to mess with the flies.
Like if I were Superman
And a member of a Sane Society Clan,
Yeah, I'd be there in the sky
And folks would be standing by
rapping "It's a bird! It's a plane!"
Say, "No, no man. That's Bob Walthall up there
With a pilot and a steel frame.
And he's in a plane called Sane.
And can explain in plain English.'*

I don't think I have too much to say about when I was young. See I don't think a lot about how my young life contributed when I do right now. You'll see that too when you get older. A lot of the things that you do today – will become insignificant later. But, since you want to know, when I was a teenager, music was my favorite thing to do. I played saxophone and guitar. I wrote music and had my own band. When I was young I was a musician and I was in the union. I was the youngest guy in the jazz band in Buffalo, NY. We had a band leader named Jimmy Cheadle. I think he's still alive. He was the band leader, and his wife, Jean, played piano. In fact she played some of every instrument. So, that's where I learned about perfect pitch.

You know I wouldn't be like I am if I hadn't gotten married. I wouldn't have studied worth of nothing! The only thing I wanted to study was music—and to practice it.

My experiences really began when I got married, because that changed everything! For men, anyway, that's a turning point in your life. My wife, Joan, is also from Buffalo. Her name is Joan Wofford Walthall. We got married in 1960 when I was 25, and Joan was 19.

I met Joan in a taxi cab. You know I had a regular taxi that would drive me places all the time when I was a musician. So, I called for the taxi, but he said, '*I can't come right now, I have to be someplace else.*' So I said, '*I need you because I've got to get someplace.*' So he said OK, but when he came to my house and I opened the car door I saw her inside. I said '*Oh my God, I'm going to marry you!*' And then, seven months later we got married!

See, in my mind I *had* to do this because I tried some of everything, and it seems like nothing was working. But here was someone I could pursue. She was young, and she was a woman of the world, and all that. I had made my mind up that I was going to do this, so I caused her mother to love me dearly. The whole family loved me, — and so *it was*

How did my life change after I got married? Well, that's when I began to take a lot of things seriously. Before that, like most young people, you just do whatever you think you can do until you realize there's something you can do better than anything else.

You know, marriage is not really getting married, it's learning how to live together — that's what marriage is. Papers or no papers, there are benefits to being together. And, I'll tell you, just being married was nothing funny. It was work. I had never been married before, you know. I'm shocked that I'm here married 50 years to the same woman! I've only lived with two women in my life, my mother and my wife.

I can't say anything different about it except that I wouldn't be the person I am if I hadn't gotten married. That's all. I mean, when you get married, in a way, you're living with a perfect stranger. Love — who the hell knows what love is? But we had four children together: Robert Tracy Walthall, Lathan Kimbro Walthall, Trevor Lovone Walthall, and Cynnamon Darcell Walthall. And I've got a bunch of grandchildren!

No, I don't have a nickname, but I have characters. Like 'Uncle-Used-To-Remind-Us.' Have you heard of Uncle Remus? No? OK, well, then I have 'Boston Blackie,' 'Whale Hawk Man-Cat' — that's because my symbol at Harvard is the whale. This is what it means:

*'The whale is a big old Black mammal
He goes deeper down into the sea
than anybody in humanity.
When he comes up he swallows schools
And when he surfaces, he breaches and teaches,
And that means he's spouting off.'*

See I'm jazzy! I began in the jazz department. What made it so significant to me was that the Jazz Department was struggling to exist itself. The radio station was originally just classical music. But I produced the first jazz program at Dunster House Library, which only had classical music for all the years before me. So I did the first jazz program there. I called it "*Verbal Jazz Speakeasy*." The guys that I had been practicing with to do the music didn't believe it was going to be jazz, so they quit. You have to look at the coincidence...when I went on Harvard Radio, the first thing I did was re-baptize the call letters to "Wisdom" "Harmony" "Reality" and "Beauty."

(WHRB)

The first people to ever come on the radio with me, they didn't know what they were doing but I knew what they were doing! I retired from the radio show because I went to Buffalo for over a year while my mother was sick, so that kind of separated me from here. Then when she died and I came back, I didn't do it again.

This a concentrated process. No, I don't write novels and things like that, I write about reality. You would need a dictionary to understand what I'm talking about in the first place. I'm talking very normal now, but in my professional capacity, I'm worse than a Chinese Rabbi in a Catholic seminary.

You know, I spent twenty years going into the prisons — talking to young men at Deer Island and South Bay. In fact, I've been to all of the prisons in the State, teaching. I always tell the guys, if you got married, it's just going from one institution to another. But in this one, they let you have a lady in the cell!

In reality, today, as I look at the situation, guys are being bad because there's no other way. I have a way of speaking about myself and saying I'm an unconditional victim of circumstances. You are too, of course, but you won't realize that until later on in life. Like they say, things happen, and when they happen you will have to *socially adjust to negotiate in this environment*. Does that make sense? So you have to be sane. Did you hear that in there? Socially Aadjust to Negotiate in this Environment - S-A-N-E. If you listen to learn you'll learn to listen, and you won't be missing the point. Your questions will never bring me to the point, because that's how you do it in Education. I'm not educated like other people, I'm a self-educated educator so that our youth will observe and understand.

What I learned after I came to Boston about 50 years ago, it just turned me around! Boston was about the most prejudiced city in the United States. And, that's a portion of what I do. See my company is called SBC Network: Sane Black Communications. Now you heard SANE, right? *Well, everything I say like this has more than one meaning.* So, Black has two connotations: Bestowed Lexicology Assimilated from Community Kinetics. See? Also, Beautiful Linguistic Acrostic Code of Knowledge. See, I speak in acrostics all the time, so I'm always saying two things at one time, but if you learn to listen, it's something you never heard before. And if you hear me say things over and over, it won't be repetitious in a sense where you get bored with it because it always has another context involved.

*'I'm not like other people— I want to use my imagination!
I had to get it into my mind
I've picked and raked the minds of every person I've met.
I've even contemplated the minds of folks I ain't even met yet.
So you can see the thought that I put into debate
would make a thinking man sweat.
My mind was working good,
I knew I understood,
I need not think of failure or regret.
So I stepped out of the limelight
knowing I had to put up a good fight
But I write on the rites right.'*

See, I'm so sharp I nick myself, that's why I don't shave!

Like I said, I was an unconditional victim of circumstances. And circumstances cause me to write. I wrote about what was going on, and what's happening, how it's

happening. I worked for the federal government, the state, and the City of Boston. I resigned everything so I could start — I started out as a social scientist. Then, once you began to understand the social mechanism, it's easy to write if you know what you're doing — if you have a point. Even Black people haven't heard of that point. But now I'm bringing it out. Now, at first, what was called *Prologue to Wisdom*, that's the book that's out there now. It's all over the world. Now I'm working on *Home Made Wisdom from Boston*.

The scariest thing that ever happened to me? Well, I fell off the auditorium at the Prudential Center one time, and I've fallen off towers. I was a professional steeplejack. I used to go up on tall buildings, bridges, and towers, things like that. I became a foreman in the building trades. Then I became the project director for apprenticeship and training for all minority people in the State of Massachusetts. I put the first Black people to work at Harvard University in their building and grounds. So I've done a lot of things. It would take too long for me to tell you about all of it!

I enjoyed my work while I was in the building trades, I mean I enjoyed being a musician too, of course, but I spent more time in the building trades. No, I don't play now. Playing music is like riding a bicycle. You never forget that. But, I couldn't play like I used to play because I don't have the armature. You need the teeth, the dexterity, and the energy to do all of that when you get older. I know musicians who were musicians when I was younger, and they're still playing. But I didn't want to play music anymore *when I could BE the instrument*. If you're playing a saxophone, you've tied up your instrument that you speak with, and that is my main instrument. So I just put the horn away.

I never had any role models, but I *appreciated* people like Emerson, Ruskin, Francis Bacon, these are White guys that I'm talking about. There are quite a few of them

actually. And, post-modern in fact, there's Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, all these guys. But I'm different. I was talking about that on the radio before all of them.

My biggest adventure in life has been doing what I'm doing now — chewing the fat to get to the lean. Does that make sense? Well, yes, I've traveled all around the country, but I don't want to leave the country because I can't imagine any country like this. How would I describe what I'm doing? It's communications. Here's what it means: common order to motivate men (women & children) to understand their nature intellectually, and to communicate acrostically and transmit intelligence orderly, naturally and spiritually.

Yes, I have lots of technology here to help me archive my work, but who plays tapes these days? To collect music and stuff, they don't use this anymore. I am too busy going over the old stuff. I have the machine to make CD's into DVD's right there. But it takes a lot of time to go through all of my stuff.

Oh yes, we have a dog. You see my dog out there. His name is *Pharaoh*. I had my first dog when I got married. I gave my dog to my wife as a wedding gift. Her name was *Sheba*. She was a great Dane /boxer. She was just a beautiful dog, and easy to train. I've always had dogs all my life. I still go to the kennels every week, and look at the little dogs. The last time I went to the Animal Rescue League, I got a Rottweiler. She was about 7 years old, and about 200 pounds. She was just sitting there, and she looked at me. So I said, '*I want that dog.*' When I got home my wife looked at her and said, 'Why that dog?' It was BIG, and it took all my strength to hold this dog. But then, after a while she got used to me, but she died. She was only 7 years old, but Rottweilers don't live that long.

Oh yeah, I get attached to my dogs. When I was young, and my first dog died, I

thought I would die. I cried until I couldn't cry any more. But, you get over it, like anything else. It's heart-rending, though.