

Peace Drum Project
The Elder's Stories
2014

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Introduction

As we conclude our fourteenth year of *The Peace Drum Project* with these stories, it is always useful to remember why Cooperative Artists Institute (CAI) started this project back in 2000. It was created, in part, to address the fears that local elders had when encountering groups of young people on the streets or on the subway. Even though many elders have grandchildren and connect well with them, an encounter between elders and unfamiliar youth can sometimes be quite stressful for them. With their boisterous energy, baggy pants, hoodies, and penchant for moving in groups, teens can often feel quite intimidating to our older community members. CAI already worked with both teens and elders, and we believed that the power of the Arts combined with personal stories could bridge this divide between these two generations, so *The Peace Drum Project* was born.

Over the years, we have been truly gratified by how well this intergenerational conversation has worked. Hundreds of youth and elders 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 the elders they interviewed, just as the elders have followed up on their teen partner's progress in school and in life. 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 uncertain economic times. The whole landscape of jobs and meaningful work is in flux, so the career opportunities for young people today may be very different from what the elders

experienced in their early years. But, despite these changes, the lessons learned from the elder's experiences contain substantial wisdom, inspiration, and encouragement for having a happy, fulfilling life *even in difficult or uncertain times*. Some of the elders came from early lives of poverty and racial or other forms of discrimination, and 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.

The teens have learned, that nowadays these elders find happiness and security through ties to their families, friends, and — in some cases — their jobs and other activities in the community. This is a powerful message to young people who face unprecedented costs for getting an education today as well as the shifting sands of the meaningful work in the global marketplace. Life is never easy, but there are abundant rewards for hard work, civic engagement, caring relationships, flexibility, continuing education, and moving steadily forward towards your goals.

The resilience of the elders offers a road map for our teens who have this unique opportunity to connect with them, learn from their experiences, and honor their wisdom. In the words of Reginald L. Jackson, artist emeritus at AAMARP, *“My words of wisdom that I want to share with you are this: think about creating work that you truly love rather than looking for somebody else to provide it for you. Make a job rather than look for a job. That way you can get satisfaction, joy, and the resources you will need to survive.”* Charlene Badgett advises the teens to *“try to be as truthful as you can in everything you say and do.”* These words of wisdom and the elder's stories help the teens gain valuable insights that will serve them well all throughout their lives. Josephine Gaines has shown the teens by her example, what it means to live a truly generous life. And, every one of this year's stories will inspire all of us

with their spirit of adventure, their hard work and sacrifice, and their persistence in the face of great obstacles.

Sadly, we know that we have really only scratched the surface of each of these elder's stories in our interviews. But we are happy to have had the chance to meet them and learn about their lives. We hope that you, too, will be inspired by their stories. We are most appreciative to each of the elders who shared their experiences and knowledge with our teens this year. These 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: Rafael Baez, Laura Duran, Alizé Gilmore, Adrian Lombert, Tonicia Malley, Manuel Martinez, Michael Myers, Jenny Nguyen, Kimberly Romero, Nyah Romulus, and Marlisha Syverian. We thank them all for their respectful manner, lively energy, and curious questioning.

Special thanks to: Julia Martin and Cynthia Jimenez at Julia Martin House, and Aiesha Washington at ABCD for their help in recruiting wonderful elders. Thanks also to the Dudley Branch Library (BPL) for welcoming our exhibit of drums and circulating the stories in the community this year. Our special appreciation goes to Curtis Jones, CAI Director, and to Morgan Smith-Jones and Sierra Oliver for their volunteer support to make this year's project a success. And finally, a huge thank you to Gloretta Baynes of AAMARP Studios for her tremendous advocacy, time, and energy spent in support 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 & Prema Bangera

Co-Directors of The Peace Drum Project

Cooperative Artists Institute

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Charlene Badgett

Interviewed by **Laura Duran, Nyah Romulus, and Alize Gilmore**

My name is Charlene Louise Badgett. Growing up my name was “Troublemaker” — that is what my sisters called me. I was the baby of the family. I was born on May 9th 1940 in Boston, Massachusetts and I grew up in Roxbury. Back then it was nice. I lived around a lot of White people. But where I grew up, it was mostly just Black people and White people, and not many Spanish people. There were a couple of West Indian people. When we were kids, we played a lot of games. It was alright. We were “outside” children. We liked to be outside, you know? It was not like sitting in the house watching T.V. It was nice.

I lived in a big family. I lived with my mother, Louise Badgett Myers, and my father, William Badgett, and all of my siblings. My father’s parents were William R. and Alice Badgett. My mother’s father’s name was Forest. I forget my grandmother because she had passed away before I was born and nobody talked much about her. My husband was named Raymond Burston. I had eight children. My children are Raymond, Sharlene, Stacy, Steven, Rodney, and Ronard. My daughter Stephanie died. My daughter Sharalie was killed.

My mother had fifteen children, ten boys and five girls. When you have a big family, the elder siblings usually got married and moved out before the younger ones grew up. I was the youngest of the first group of siblings, then there’s eight years between me and my next sister. My mother had a rest for eight years! My siblings’ names are Barbara, Dortha, Alberta, Billy, Dolores, Ronnie, Steven, Kenny, Linda, and Diane. These are the ones who survived, and not the ones who passed away. Two of the children died in childbirth, and one of them died when she was seven months old. She had diarrhea and she couldn’t hold anything down. Back then, they didn’t have the

things that they could give you nowadays. They put her on water, salt, and sugar, but she didn't survive.

From kindergarten to the fourth grade, I went to William Bacon School on Auburn Street. After that I went to James Timilty School. From there I moved to Jamaica Plain, so then I went Mary E. Curly School, and from there I went to Jamaica Plain High School. Most of the schools I could walk to. If I had some change and didn't mind spending it on the bus, I'd take the bus up Centre Street. But most of the times, we would walk and save the money for candy or something.

After school, I would go outside to play. I don't remember doing homework — I really don't. I don't think we had homework back then. I remember coming home from school, having a snack, and then we would go outside and play until supper-time. We would play Kick the Can, Ring Around the Rosie, Old Lady Witch—Are You Ready, and How Many Fingers Do I Have Up, and all of the games like that. Kick the Can was my main game. We would jump on each other's back and play Billy Billy Buck Buck, and How Many Fingers Do I Have Up? You'd have to hold your fingers up. Somebody would be standing and you'd have to jump on their back. We also played Hopscotch, and If You Can Catch Me, You Can Kiss Me. I think I had a nice childhood.

We would also go swimming over at the Cabot House. They had this place on Cabot Street and it was just a nickel to get in. We could stay just about all day swimming. It was indoors.

But every other Saturday we had to wash the windows and the walls, and scrub the floors. We had a lot of work to do. We couldn't go out until we completed our chores. I had to do laundry because my mother had a whole lot of children and we had to help out. I got a job when I was sixteen and I gave almost all of my money to my family.

At the time, I thought that it was the right thing to do. I had no problem with it because that was just what we did. My father didn't make much money. My mother and father had fifteen children, so we all contributed to the household.

The school that I went to wasn't multicultural. There were just Blacks and Whites. I grew up with Black and White people and most of my teachers were White. We didn't have a whole bunch of Black teachers back then in the late '40s and early '50s. My favorite teacher was Ms. Hart. She was an English teacher and she was real nice. Another one was Ms. Russell — she was a Black gym teacher and she was very nice. That was at the James P. Timilty School.

We used to go up what we called “rocky mountain.” It was just a bunch of rocks and woods up behind the Timilty School. But we were young, and it looked real high at the time. That's why we called it rocky mountain. It was dense. We would climb up that rocky mountain and that was an adventure for us. One time we went up there, my cousin fell and broke her ankle. My brother had to run home to let her mother and her father know. Her father came and brought her to the hospital. But that didn't stop us from still wanting to go up there. It was like we were exploring all the time. It was a good time.

High school was okay. I didn't have a lot of friends back then, but it was fine. I can't complain about it. It was nice. I made a couple of friends, but not a whole bunch. I liked gym and I liked practical arts. That was my favorite subject, practical arts — knowing how to sew and cook. I also liked history.

I had one girlfriend, Marie Marshall, and she was my best, best friend. She died young though at about the age of thirty-three. I had another girlfriend named Yvonne Anderson; she was also a good friend. She lives out in Worcester now. My sisters are also my best friends. I come from a family full of girls, and my mother brought us up

to be close to each other. I had quite a few friends growing up, but not now because they're all gone, you know? The majority of them are gone, but I've still got my sisters. I have six living sisters, and we are all very, very close.

My parents had rules for me when I was a teenager. I had to be home at 9:00 PM. My father said, "Not one past nine, not two past nine — nine o'clock!" And, we were. We made sure we were in the house a little bit before nine. Otherwise our father would beat us. You know, back then it wasn't child abuse if you were disobedient. At suppertime, everybody is in the house at five. I don't think they were strict —they were just looking out for us. I never thought them to be cruel or anything, you know? I don't look back on it and think "they abused me" because they didn't abuse me. They were all right. My father would say, "When I come outside you better hear me, because you shouldn't be no further than where my voice can reach you."

I lived in Roxbury. I didn't know nothing about going up in Dorchester or Mattapan. Uh-uh, we stayed in Roxbury right in our own neighborhood. You couldn't just go trotting off anywhere. You know how things are so bad now? When I was growing up as a child, I never heard of anyone getting killed except one time. A man in my neighborhood got murdered and we were really shocked. I was about nine years old then, and it was so shocking. It was even in the newspaper. I knew him because he lived in my neighborhood. This guy was stabbed to death and robbed; it was so terrible to hear something like that. Nowadays you hear it every day, but wasn't like that then. That was the only time that I remember of someone getting killed. The police caught the guy who did it, and he was a neighbor of ours, too — he was my friend Yvonne's brother. He went to jail for a long time. But I was never afraid. We were always out and about.

My favorite place to go was the movies. We would go to the Timilty School, for

movie night and dances. They had different kinds of things at the school. After turning about sixteen years old, my father would, you know, let us go to a dance or something. If the dance let out at twelve o'clock, we had to be home by at least one. He was lenient in a way, but he still kept a tight rein on us. He tried to, anyhow.

I wasn't scared of nothing. But this one night something happened when I was fourteen and I had just moved over here to the projects in Jamaica Plain. I was coming from my girlfriend's house about 8:30 because I knew I had to be home at 9:00. I was passing by a nightclub on Bickford Street and there were a lot of guys outside of this late night tavern. They were probably in there drinking and stuff. So when I walked by the bar, this guy came up to me and said, "Hey you!" I looked at him and he said, "Come here!" So I started walking faster. Then he started after me, and so I started running. My family was one of the first Black families here in this project. I lived over in the small buildings in the Heath Street part of the project, so I ran through there, and cut through the path. Luckily my mother had the door open because he was right behind me! I ran in and my father said, "What's the matter?" I said, "This guy is chasing me!" So my father came right behind me, but the guy had taken off. That was the scariest thing that ever happened to me. After that I was sort of afraid to be out. It was wintertime, so it was dark.

Back then, when we first moved over here, they didn't like the Black people. It was mostly Irish people here and they didn't get along with Black people. They would call us names — all kinds of N words and stuff. But see, I grew up on Oakburn Avenue, and we weren't afraid of nothing. When a girl would call me names, I would beat her up. I wasn't going to have them call me names! I couldn't believe it. My mother told me, "I don't want you fighting," but that was the way that it was. I taught my kids the same thing. If anybody bothers you, don't be afraid of them — just put them in their

place and you'll never have any problems. I don't want them being afraid of anything.

We did a lot of funny things when we were growing up; we were really something else. When I sit and think about the things we did. Mmm-mm-mm! We would find kids to beat up. You know, stuff like that. We were fresh, not bad. We wouldn't go out and steal. We were just fresh and always getting into stuff. I remember this one time I beat a girl up and I took her shoes because she had some pretty shoes. Yeah, I remember that. I never got caught and I would keep the stuff at Marie's house. I could go over there to get the shoes.

What were my dreams as a teenager? I wanted to get married and have children, and I did. I have four boys and four girls. Before I finished high school I got married. I was eighteen years old, and my husband was twenty-one years old. We were married at my mother's house in Jamaica Plain. It was a small wedding with family. The Justice of the Peace married us.

I learned a lot from my mother. She was the type who just stayed home. She had children, and she would sit and talk to us about her childhood growing up. It was tough, you know? But there was a lot of love there. That's why she brought us up to love one another. She would always say, "Look out for your sister." I miss my mother so much. She died young. She was only sixty-two when she passed. I learned a lot of important life lessons from her. How to not hold a grudge against someone. She would say, "If you're mad at someone, don't keep that anger in you—let it go because it destroys you, but it doesn't destroy the other person." The person doesn't even know that you're mad at them half the time, and you're walking around mad thinking I can't stand them. No, let it go. Do not go to bed mad, because it destroys you. And I learned a lot from my dad too. He brought us up to respect one

another and respect one's self. That was the main thing.

Wherever I am at, that is my home. Whenever I am with my children I feel at home. When I go to their house, I feel very much at home too. It is not like I am just going to my kids' house — I'm going home. They make me feel welcome at their home. So even though I do not live there, I can go there, kick off my shoes, and get the remote. I feel at home there, with my children.

In my spare time I like to hang out at the mall with my sisters. We like to go to the Chinese all-you-can-eat restaurants. I love Chinese food. My favorite meal is Shrimp Fried Rice. In my spare time I am just hanging out with my sisters. On birthdays, whoever the "birthday girl" is will get whatever she wants at dinner for free. All six of us will split the bill to whatever it comes to, so that she does not have to pay for it. We have always done this. We do not fight. I do not play the fighting and arguing stuff. We get along good.

The best job I've had outside of the home was when I worked at the Armenian Nursing Home. I liked working with old people. I was working as a dietary aid, preparing meals and serving them in the dining room. I also worked at Veteran's Hospital in West Roxbury. I liked that job too. It was dietary work.

In the 1960s I was having children. I was being a housewife. I had four children in the 1960s. My mother had a lot of children, so I was used to it. I just thought that was what you did. You would get married and have a lot of children. Back then things were much cheaper too. I could get five pounds of potatoes for a quarter. I didn't have too many hardships. The people that I lived around were all going through the same kinds of things, so we were all in the same boat. I didn't feel like I was missing out on anything.

I loved the music in the '70s and '80s. That was the best thing at that time. The way of life was different than it is now. I thought it was better. There were psychedelic lights when I would go to a club. The music was wonderful! The environment was better then. You could go anywhere. You didn't have to worry about going into different neighborhoods. You could go anywhere and be safe. People weren't out there hurting one another like they do now.

I didn't really have any heroes. Or at least, I don't call these guys heroes — they were more like idols. James Brown was my man! I liked him and Clyde McPhatter, The Drifters, and Chubby Checker. I loved Rhythm & Blues and I liked them slow jams.

The biggest adventure I have had so far was going on fishing trips in Kingston, Canada. I was living in Michigan at the time and we would go on these trips. I liked the excitement of getting there. We would pack everything up and cross the bridge. It was between America and Canada.

The hardest thing that I ever had to face was losing my children. One of my children was murdered. Another one died at thirty-nine of cancer. My grandson was also murdered. I overcame this through Jesus Christ. I was saved. God gave me the peace that grants understanding. If I hadn't known Him, I would probably be in an insane asylum. It hurts when you lose your children. God gave me peace.

The happiest moments in my life were having my children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. The births of my children were happy. Now, I am happy going to family gatherings like cookouts and Thanksgiving dinners. The things that I look forward to in the morning are getting calls from my children and from my sisters. I look forward to phone calls from my family. We talk a lot!

My greatest accomplishments in life were giving birth to my children and giving my life to the Lord. The most important lessons that I learned from my family while growing up were to love each other and be there for one another. And, the words of wisdom that I would pass on are to try to be truthful. Try to be truthful in what you say and do. I learned this through reading God's words.