

*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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# Reginald L. Jackson

**Interviewed by Jenny Nguyen and Sierra Oliver**

My name is Reginald Jackson. Sometimes people call me Reggie or Reg. I was born in Springfield, MA on January 10, 1945. My mother and father were Leo Jackson and Katherine McCray. I'm the oldest child, then came my brother Lionel, and then my sisters — Margo, Chirlane, Cynthia, and Cheryl— Cheryl is the youngest, and she's around 54 or 55 now. When I was growing up in the 1950s and '60s, Springfield was a pretty homogeneous place. It was a very family and community oriented place. We lived in different parts of Springfield, and eventually moved out of Springfield.

We grew up in a community with a lot of relatives around, so we were well looked after. You couldn't get into too much trouble. At first I lived with my mother. When my mother went to hairdressing school in Baltimore, Maryland, I lived with my aunt and uncle. Then my mother remarried and my three sisters were born. So I guess we were a small unit at first, and then it got larger. But by that time I was on my way to college.

As a child, I went to a neighborhood school — the William N. DeBerry Elementary School in Springfield. After school, getting home usually took a while because we would hang out and walk through the neighborhood, and try to find things to get into. When I finally got home, there were always chores and homework to do.

When I was a child, my best friends were extended family members, so we did everything together. We swam, fished, played baseball, and went to Boy Scouts. We played around the neighborhood, and we liked playing games like cards and Parcheesi. When we were teenagers, we liked to go to the movies. Westerns were my favorite; I liked movies like *Shane*. My parents did have rules about when you had to

be home, and if you weren't, you'd get grounded. But, I never really had any problem with that.

At home, I had to wash dishes – that was one of my chores. I also had a dog, so I had to keep up with the dog. My room had to be cleaned. I had to shovel when it snowed. My stepfather refurbished homes, so we did the landscaping for him. I remember doing labor on Labor Day! I knew hard work!

In high school I had a fun time. I explored a lot. I had a wide network of friends. I went to a great school where most people got along. I took the bus in the mornings, did extra curricular activities, and got home late. Did I ever have a conflict or disagreement in those years? Sure I did, but nothing really stands out. Those years were pretty smooth sailing.

Some of the adventures that stood out to me during my teenage years were what we would often do on Saturday mornings. We would grab our fishing poles and bikes, and just take off. We were always going on those kinds of adventures. I also visited Indiana University, Ohio State University, and Atlantic City by train. These experiences prepared me for a lot of travelling later on in life.

My favorite teacher in high school was Mr. Robinson who ran the machine shop. I learned a lot from him because I worked for him in the woodworking and metal shop after school and at his house during the summers. I always thought I was going to be a printer because I was into graphic arts. In high school I enjoyed working in a print shop making cards and posters — things like that. I was also in Junior Achievement and we had one of the best companies in the state, so I thought I was going to be a businessman and have my own business.

In my senior year of high school, I was having trouble with algebra. My guidance

counselor just about told me I wasn't going to graduate and would have to repeat the year. That snapped me into reality, and I made up my mind to work really hard and finish on time. I did it with good grades and went to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). One of the most important lessons that I learned from my family was patience and perseverance, and they taught me to set goals. So, I got my Associate's Degree. After that, I went to art school in New Haven and later got both a BA and an MA in Graphic Design, Film, and Photography.

After I finished graduate school I went off to work in New York at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook on Long Island. I was working in Health Sciences Communications where I got to know a number of social workers (in the school of Social Work). Then, before I knew it, I was working on a Master's degree in Social Work!

I found that as an artist, this was the content that I needed to communicate. I wanted to be able to be on top of my game, in terms of the craft of my profession, which at that point was film, photography, and graphics. My art and design skills were the vehicle and social work provided the content. Social work gave me the framework for all of that. I hadn't really considered it in a formal way before, but I think I would have gone in that direction anyhow.

For my fieldwork, I developed a program on Long Island to help young kids understand about their African heritage. We were actually able to raise money and go to Ghana with a group of young people, so this led me in a new direction that I hadn't really considered as an artist. You just never know where that path will take you.

In 1974, I came to Boston to teach at Simmons College. So I completed my MSW long distance, then I applied to Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio and completed my

PhD there. I did my fieldwork in Kenya and Brazil, and also did an internship with Allan Rohan Crite here in Boston's South End.

When I came to Simmons, Dana Chandler was a faculty member in the Department of Art. He went away one weekend and while he was gone someone trashed his studio. When he came back he was furious, so he decided to go over to Northeastern to see if there was studio space there that he could use. The Chair of the Department of African-American Studies, Ramona Edelin, thought that they could find a space. They gave him the whole second floor of 11 Leon Street across from the African American Institute. It was a huge space, so Dana immediately said, "*Maybe we can get some other artists to use the rest of this space.*" So it was subdivided into 12 studios, and I was one of the first artists to be part of AAMARP (African American Master Artists-in-Residency Program).

When I got married I was fifty years old and my wife, Christle, was thirty-five! I met my wife Christle because she's the niece of Betty Rawlins, one of my colleagues at Simmons College. We were married at the Museum of the National Center of African American Artists in Roxbury, and everybody was welcome to come. We had the ceremony outside.

I've never really had a burning desire to go way back to trace my family genealogy, but my wife does. And now, I want to know too. I haven't really spent much time on it, but it's important. Do you know about The Church of the Latter Day Saints? They're based in Salt Lake City, Utah. As part of their religion, everyone has to know who they are and where their people are from. So the church has invested a lot in research tools. Many of them are online these days and they're available to everyone! There are marriage certificates, death certificates, and birth certificates. There are records of when you get a pension from a job, or if you're fighting a war and when

you're discharged. They have records of all of these things. The Church has made a business of acquiring all of this information and storing it at their center in Salt Lake City. So, if you're really curious about your background, you can use their database to search online.

We haven't researched back that far yet — maybe three or four generations. We've been able to trace my grandmother, whose last name was Quashie. Because of the way it's spelled, we've been able to find it through the Church database all the way to Ghana, West Africa. We've been there a couple of times and we actually found the Quashie household. They have a story that's been published about how there were Quashies who were performers for the royalty in the area. They went out to perform for these folks on a big boat. Then when the boat was gone, no one ever heard from them again.

We know there are also Quashies in the Caribbean, and all along the coast of West Africa. There are also some in Brooklyn, New York where my sister lives, and there are Quashies all over the United States. This particular spelling separates this group of Quashies (our relatives) from the rest of them. At some point, I believe I will get to find out exactly where those folks are and who they are. As you get older, tracking down your family will probably mean more to you.

The resources online today are just amazing. There is so much information you can get. Sometimes it can be kind of dry unless you find out some great detail that fills in the picture. Even though it was expensive to travel back in the old days, people just went. They went for all kinds of reasons. They went for work or to find a better place to live, and they went great distances.

One of my wife's relatives fought for the British in the War of Independence, so he was a Black Loyalist. Some of them were probably slaves at one time. The British

promised them land in Nova Scotia for fighting on their side. The British lost, so her relatives went up to Nova Scotia afterwards. They weren't given the land they were promised, but they stayed and they are still there in Nova Scotia. It's fascinating stuff. You can find out a lot about people and how they connect with one another in ways that you really couldn't even dream up.

When I think back to the 1950s and 1960s, I remember the first black and white television. I remember Sputnik, the first Russian satellite. President Kennedy was assassinated, and then so were Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. I was drafted into the army, but I was exempt because I had a form of flat feet. I was against the war anyhow. I was in graduate school then, and I was a part of a demonstration at Yale University. A group of us founded a group called The Black Workshop. We were arrested for doing vernacular art and trying to set up a school within the school. We made a film called One Way documenting the formation and activities of the group. This was one of the first community development centers in the country, so I was very engaged.

One of the biggest adventures I had during that time period — in 1968 — was a collision between members of The Black Workshop, the Provost of Yale, and the Dean of Art and Architecture School. We even met with the President of Yale. One of the group members pinned down one of the officials to try to get them to really listen.

The hardest things that I've had to face is actually the daily reality of racism. Particularly, institutional racism which really affects the way we behave. It is so much a part of who we are in this country. It's been going on for close to four hundred years and it just doesn't evaporate.

The best job that I have ever had is the job I do now. I work for myself. I started a non-profit called Olaleye Communications, Inc. in 1986, and after thirty years of

teaching, I retired. Now I am a visual artist and a community worker. I help artists, historians, and scholars do cultural and visual research. I exhibit public art, design websites, and work on projects involving international relations.

The happiest moments of my life are when I get up every morning. I am able to be alive and to be on the planet. That alone says there is hope and opportunity to make a difference. 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.

To learn more about Reggie and his work, go to: <http://www.olaleye.org/>

