

The Peace Drum Project

Elder's Stories - 2007

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Introduction

Each year we look forward to our meetings and activities with the elders who share their stories, thoughts, humor, wisdom, understanding, and encouragement with the *Peace Drum Project's* teen participants. The experience of getting to know these wonderful elders and hearing their stories has been truly rewarding. We know that we have only scratched the surface of their stories in this process, but we hope that introducing them to you will enrich your lives as it has ours. These stories are filled with wisdom and life experience that young people today can learn from and honor. In spite of the differences between eras, the teens learn that many hopes, dreams, *and* obstacles remain constant across generations. Learning first hand that others have faced similar challenges — and have overcome them — gives power to their own hopes and dreams.

We are delighted with the respectful way in which the teens conducted their interviews, and by how the elders were willing to share their very personal experiences and knowledge with our young people. This bridge across the generations reduces isolation and builds new connections between youth, families, and elders that strengthen our whole community. We look forward to continuing this process for many more years.

This year we offer special thanks to Lucia Rodriguez-Sweeney for transcribing and translating the stories of the Spanish-speaking elders. We also thank Cynthia Jimenez, Resident Services Coordinator at Julia Martin House, Nancy Escoto, Resident Services Coordinator at Nate Smith House, and Julia Martin of Bromley Heath, Community Activist and grandmother, for their help in locating elders who wanted to take part in the project this year.

We dedicate these stories to the memory of Charles M. Holley (1937-2006,) CAI co-founder, and inspiration behind The Peace Drum Project. He is greatly missed by all the teens and graduates, elders, artists, and others who knew and worked with him over the years

Susan E. Porter, Director
Cooperative Artists Institute
www.tribal-rhythms.org

Edna Jackson

Interview by Shaniqua Osgood and Farah Jeune

My name is Edna Pearl Jackson. I was born in North Carolina on August 8, 1936. I grew up in Newton Grove — a small country town. I lived with my mother and father, but my mother passed when I was 8 years old, so my father raised us. My mother's name was Eliza Pearl Langston, and my father's name was Luther Langston. There were six of us children, four boys and two girls. My oldest brother was named Allen, then there was Walter, me, Grady Lee, Lovestine, and Jerry. My mother was very sick before she passed away. My baby brother was 3 years old when that happened.

We went to small schools down there. Our elementary school was a one-room school house. Then I went to high school at Johnson County Training School. I went to school for 12 years, then I graduated.

When I was your age, I learned to sew. I loved that. That's what I would do after school. But I stayed in school as long as possible because there was so much responsibility at home. As the oldest girl I had to cook and clean the house, take care of my younger brother *and* work in the fields. And if we didn't do what our parents wanted us to back then, you got a whipping. That was the only kind of punishment.

The one thing I really *did* like to do was cooking for my younger brothers and sister. My grandmother taught me how to take care of the younger kids, how to cook and wash my little brother and all of that. It was rough. I had the same jobs as a grown woman! Y'all have it easy now! I learned independence while I was growing up, and responsibility. It was a lot, but you learn from it.

My grandfather owned the farm...the land. We raised chickens and hogs. We grew vegetables like tomatoes, cucumbers, corn, white potatoes and sweet potatoes. And we had a peach orchard, and we grew strawberries. We also grew tobacco and cotton. The part of my responsibilities that I hated the most was working out in the field. It was hot and dusty, and I was afraid of the worms that would be on the tobacco.

When we were children we use to play hopscotch, jump rope, or softball after church on Sunday. When I went to high school, I played basketball. In school my favorite subject was English, and we also had home economics—I loved that. I loved to sew! I liked school, but because of my responsibilities at home, I would maybe only go three days of the week. I remember I would pray that it would rain so I could go to school. I still graduated with my class.

Yes, when I was growing up, we had a dog. But we didn't make pets out any of the farm animals, not even chickens, because we had to eat them. The way it was in the country. you had to wring a chicken's neck to have it for dinner!

We walked a lot, and my father had a car. We also had a mule and a wagon we rode around in on the farm. When I was little, I don't remember who I played with...but I remember my school friends. One friend was named Dora, she was my best friend. Another friend from high school was Louisa Williams. Our parents went to the same church, so we knew each other when we were kids. She was one of my best friends, and she's here now, so we're still in contact. We both married and we are still friends. Her name now is Louisa Byers. Her children are grown, too.

Did I have a favorite outfit? Well, I remember an outfit that I *didn't* like. My father use to buy our clothes because he raised us. And he bought my sister and I a satin dress that had a belt that tied in the back and it buttoned all the way down the front. I HATED that dress! Mine was silver satin and my sister's was like a dark gold color. Then there was another thing he use to buy us - black and white shoes. I HATED those shoes, too. Also, we had to wear those socks that would come all the way up over our knees. But when I got around the corner, I would roll them down.

My father was very strict. When I got older, about 16 or 17, the only way I could go out was with one of my brothers. And he would "protect" us from the other guys. And if I was talking with a boy, or if I went outside to talk to someone, he'd go home and tell my father.

I was eighteen years old and had just graduated from high school when I came to Boston. My oldest brother went in the Air Force, and when he got out, he got married and lived in Boston. I wanted to go visit him, so I asked my father if I could go to Boston, and he said no. I was the oldest girl, and I had to do all kinds of chores and take care of my baby brother, so my father didn't want me to leave. My older brother talked to him and told him he should let me come to Boston. My sister was in high school at that time, and my baby brother was about 16, so they were old enough to take care of themselves.

Finally, I moved in with my brother and his wife for a while, then I got my own room staying with an older lady. I stayed with her and took a secretarial course, because I always wanted to go to college. Boston was a whole different world! Then I got a job working at Brigham and Women's Hospital. I worked in the office, worked on the computer, and loved it.

Big events from my childhood would have been family reunions, things like that. I didn't have any major conflicts myself when I was young, but the racism was a

difficult part of life. I would see signs in restaurants that say Blacks Only and Whites Only. Blacks could only go in the back door, but the whites could go in the front.

People were very nice, polite, but the racial climate was different. People got along, but they stayed in their own place. We saw kids from different races when we walked to school. Well, we used to walk about 3 miles to school and, of course, the white kids would ride the bus. That was when it was still segregated. So one day they rode by us and they'd call us 'niggers' out the window. There were about six of us, and we all picked up a big handful of dirt and threw it at them right in the windows of the bus. Their mouths and their eyes got all full of dirt, and after that they never called us 'niggers' any more. They learned their lesson!

Do I have any scary memories? I can remember when I was young I saw a terrible motorcycle accident. It didn't happen to me, but it was very frightening because the fellow got thrown off the motorcycle. He got thrown into a deep ditch and his neck was broken. Also, in North Carolina we had BIG thunder storms and hurricanes. I remember when we would have those big storms, I would get into the closet. And I have seen those twisters that - whatever it hits, it tears it up. I've seen that! It's terrible.

My biggest adventure and the happiest moment of my life would have been when I got married. My husband's name was Tommy Jackson. I have three girls and one boy: Shauna, Gail, and Cynthia, and my son is Ronald. And now I'm a great grandmother! Also, singing with our group the Silver Lining Gospel Singers has been an adventure. I've enjoyed every minute of that, and we just celebrated our 26th anniversary last week. I think one of my best accomplishments is singing. I love to sing, and the singing we do in the group makes people happy.

There's a lot I wish I could have done when I was young, but I couldn't because I had a lot of responsibility. And, we were poor. There's only just so much you can do when there's not much money coming in. But growing up poor you learn to appreciate things more. There was times when we only had bread and water, so now I appreciate the things I'm blessed with. Yes, I appreciate every moment that I have now, and good health. That's the main thing.

My father and my brothers and sister sold the land in North Carolina about 30 years ago because my grandfather passed on, and none of the other family members wanted to help my father keep it. He still lived there but he couldn't take care of it himself. It's too bad we couldn't keep it in the family, though.

What do I look forward to when I get up in the morning. To be able to breathe, and walk around. I also like to making jewelry, then when I finish it and see how

beautiful it looks, that's a big accomplishment. And I love to sew, so whatever I make that's an accomplishment. Do things that make you happy, and regardless of what anybody else says, as long as you're happy with what you do, that's what counts.

Who do I admire? Well, I admire Dr. Martin Luther King and Oprah Winfrey, and Martin Mandela from South Africa. I admire them because they're fighting for our rights!

My advice to you is to be yourself and be a good person. And, all of us need God, because He will see you through in life.