

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

John Curtis Jones

Interviewed by Ivan Richiez, Chris Watson, & Erys Valdez

My name is John Curtis Jones, but I like to be called J. Curtis or Curtis Jones.

I was named after my father, John Jones. My mother gave me the name Curtis because she liked it, and I'm glad she did. I don't mind John, but it's more common than Curtis, which is just a little different.

I was born at Boston City Hospital on May 5th 1943. It was called City Hospital in those days, now it's Boston Medical Center! I think I spent the first eleven years of my life in Roxbury. I lived in the Orchard Park Projects; they were different back then. They were those big brick buildings. Now they kind of fixed them up a little bit and made them different. They had a whole series of housing projects that were built around here, probably after the depression, or after World War II. The government built housing projects to give people work.

I grew up in a small family. It was my dad, my mom, my sister, and me —, so there were four of us. My father was John, my mother's name was Virginia Hargrove. My sister's name was Betty, but now her name is Hargrove Jones. My grandmother's name was Matilda Hargrove. So, I was the oldest, and Betty was my younger sister.

Well, I learned so much from my family when I was growing up. There were so many things. I learned kindness from my father, he was a real kind man. From my mother I learned how to be middle class. Very few Black people were middle class in those days. During part of her life, she grew up in Wellesley, and that was unusual in those days. I don't think most people would

realize it, but if you were walking down the street in Wellesley in the past, the police would follow you. So from my Mom I think I learned the things that made it possible for me to be a professional. All those things like honesty, respecting other people — all that I learned from her. Because my father worked, and then they were later divorced, I lived with my mom most of the time during my formative years. And my grandmother lived with us too. Even though she died when I was young, I remember her. I think she gave me my self-esteem, because there was nothing that I could do wrong in her eyes! It was just enough that it had a great impact on my self-esteem without going overboard. I loved her very much.

Yes, both of my parents worked. My father was a factory worker. He was also a cook. He was working class. My mother, actually she did a lot of cleaning or housework; I guess back then you might call it a maid. Then, later, she worked for the State of Massachusetts, and for Social Security. She became a Social Security clerk. She climbed up the ladder there —the professional government worker—what do you call that? A bureaucrat? Anyway, She had a lot of responsibilities by the time she retired.

Well, I went to the Boston Public Schools — urban schools— because we lived in Boston. My first school, the Aaron Davis, was an *old* school, and small; I think it was probably built around the time of the Civil War. It had all wooden floors, because I remember the floor boards would squeak when you walked on them. That schools were mostly run by Irish people, then. It was during the time when the Irish ran the city. So they had all the teaching jobs and the police jobs, and the Italians had all the public works jobs. You know, the whole city was split up like that, and there wasn't much for Black people.

So I went to a lot of Boston Schools— besides the Aaron Davis, I went to the Henry Higginson, the David A. Ellis, and, the Patrick T. Campbell. For high school, I went to Brighton High for three years until we moved to Malden, then I graduated from Malden High School.

After I graduated high school, I worked for a while, and then I went to college. I went to two colleges for undergraduate work — Eastern Nazarene, and then I graduated from Salem State College. Later on, I went to Goddard College and got a Master's degree, so I had maybe 18 or 19 years of school!

Growing up in the projects, I had lots of friends. I remember one was Rejino — I think he was Phillippino. Then, Johnny Child was probably my best friend when I was really young. There were some twins, Donald and Ronald, and there were the Saunders brothers. They were like the dominant sports guys, you know? They could hit the ball or throw the football farther, and run faster than everyone else. So, they were the leaders from the neighborhood, and they would compete against each other, kind of younger brother against older brother. There was Janet Gains and her little sister, Donna Sommer, who became a pop diva of sorts. She got quite a few hit records. I don't know if you remember that song, *Love to Love You Baby?* That was one of her songs. She was the younger sister, and she used to always tag along. So, we used to say, '*Go away, go away.*' Then she ended up way up there!

I also remember George Thacker; he lived in my apartment building. He was a real good friend of mine. I had *a lot* of friends—that was the beauty of living in the projects, it was great for kids! There were a lot of people, so if you fell out with one group, there was always another group!

When I was your age probably my two favorite things were track and field and singing. I was pretty good at track — pretty fast. And we used to sing Doo Wop on the street corner. We were really good! I mean in the neighborhood, we were about one of the best. We had good voices. Well, a lot of people couldn't do it, because you know, some people didn't have good voices, good tone. But we had good voices *and* good tone, so we could sound a lot like the record. It was cool! So, I used to play, I used to sing some lead, but mostly I sang the bass even though I didn't have a bass voice. I was really a baritone. But I could go lower than anybody else, so I sang a lot of the bass parts anyhow.

Oh yeah. Most definitely, my parents had rules! I mean there were rules and rules on top of rules. Like any young person, I felt like I was trying to bust out. You know, I wanted to go out and do what I wanted to do, and to stay out until all hours of the night. But, my mother was pretty good. As I got older she let me wander the streets. I think she thought I was trustworthy and I wouldn't do too many crazy things. Plus, she had the sense that I was getting older and my father wasn't in the home. You know, we males get pushy — we push back, so, she just let the rope out! So, yeah, there were rules, and my mother ran the house. We respected her, I respected my father when he was in the house too. It wasn't like a wild place where you could do anything you wanted. Part of me, even when I was younger — you know, sometimes I'd get pissed off —but I knew deep down inside that it was good that somebody cared enough about you to look out for you.

Oh yeah, I got in trouble with my parents. When we were small my mother would spank us. I got a spanking from my father one time that I will never

forget, because he hit harder. My mother would reprimand us with her tone of voice. I don't remember being punished that much because I didn't get in trouble with my parents that often. But the big thing that really would set my Mom off was if you lied. Actually, most of the spankings I got were when I lied. It really threatened her if I did something wrong and she wasn't home. It would be OK if I did something and I told the truth about it. I guess she felt like it was somehow more under control; she wanted to know what was happening. But if you lied, and she knew you were home by yourself and *anything* could happen— you could burn down the house or something—then she would go off. I look back on it now, and I understand it, because a lot of it was probably out of fear. She wanted make sure that we'd tell the truth, because she needed to know what was really happening, and that we were safe.

There were a lot of scary things that happened when I was younger. One time, I was in Franklin Park over by Scarborough Pond. Have you ever been back to the pond by the golf course? Well, there are three sections, and last section of the pond that's closest to Morton Street has a large rock face, like a cliff. So one time I climbed up there, and I got hung up. I didn't know where to go because I ran out of places to hold onto. I had gone too far because I wasn't paying attention. Then, I saw a way out, or, what turned out to be a way out. Then I realized that it's much harder going backwards, than to go forwards, and I panicked. So I froze up because I looked down and said. '*S___, if I fall down this rock, I'll either be dead, or wish I was dead.*' So I really was scared, that time. It was a sense of being out-of-control scared. But obviously I got down because I'm here telling you about it!

You know, I've been scared a lot. One time I got jumped by the *Band of Angels*. At the time, they were the 'baddest gang' in the city. They were known to have a shotgun in their car; and that kind of stuff was unheard of then. There are a lot of guns now, but we didn't have guns back then. It was mostly knives or the fist. The White boys, especially the Irish boys were into clubs and baseball bats, like that. I think it's in their heritage. When you look back to medieval times, you see that they all have clubs. It's amazing how people take those cultural things right into modern times. But anyway, there were no guns, so these guys were the only ones that had a gun. And, I think they were the only ones who shot anybody and that was big, you know. So, I was really scared.

But I didn't get beat up bad, and I was able to fight my way out and get away because I'm smart. I was pretty athletic; I was a fast runner and I could handle myself pretty well. So I was able to get away— to split scene—because they drank too much wine and they couldn't catch me!

I think that the funniest thing that ever happened to me was when I got tickled so much that I passed out. I laughed so hard I actually passed out! I think that happened to me three times in my life.

Dreams? Well, I think I can speak for a lot of kids of color, we really didn't have *dreams* like that, because society really didn't allow us to have them. The only reason I went to college was because of the Vietnam war. Sometimes, you think about how you didn't have any role models. You didn't see anybody that looked like you in professions. I mean, Sydney Portier was really big because there was a Black man on television who didn't look like a fool — that was really big.

When I saw my first Black teacher, it was a really amazing thing. And when I saw a first Black cop — you know all the policemen were White, all the insurance company employees were White — everyone wearing a suit and tie was White! There were no Black professionals before civil rights movement. The only Black people I saw were people who had mops, or were driving the elevator up and down; they were doormen, cab drivers, factory workers, and maybe working in the garage. But, that was really it. So, you have dreams based on role models. Now *you* young people see people of color who have businesses, and being in other professions, but we didn't have that. So, those changes came with the civil rights and the Black power movement. It didn't come from dreams, it was from the struggle. We got inspired by Malcolm X, Stokley Carmichael, and H. Rap Brown— those brothers inspired us. Actually, at that time, they were closer to me than Martin Luther King, Jr. I was more into the Black power movement. So, when I was your age, I didn't have any real dreams, because I didn't see myself like that. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I figured I'd get a job in a factory somewhere.

This job at Cooperative Artists is the best job I've ever had, because number one, I made it! I created it, and there's nothing like creating your own business. But when I was young, I had another job that was the best job that I was *hired to do*. I was around your age, and it was summer. I was looking for a job, but it was very difficult for a Black boy to get a job. So, I went to Kasanofs Bakery on Blue Hill Ave. It turned out that one of their workers had fallen ill. So, just as I walked in the door and they said to me, '*We need somebody right away, can you come in tomorrow?*' I said, '*Yeah, sure.*' I was big, like you, so they probably figured I could handle it. That was a real great job—I was making

adult wages cleaning pots and pans. These pots were about as big as this table, they were *huge* pots. So they dressed me up in this rubber suit. I had this huge power hose, and my job was to clean these pots with the power hose that shot water out like a cannon. They needed somebody big. I mean, that hose was so powerful you had to hold on to it with both hands; it was like shooting a gun full of scalding hot water, and it would explode against the wall. Man, I loved that job. I could make the pot spin around and go on the side, then straighten up and move along the wall. It was fun!

I had a good time at that job, and I made so much money that I couldn't spend it. I never even cashed a lot of my checks. I cashed one check and I still had half of it, when they called me down to the office. He said, '*What are you doing with those checks?*' I said, '*Well I didn't cash them yet.*' So, he said, '*Would you please cash those checks?*' I was messing up their books, so, they wanted me to cash my checks. That's how much money I was making. When my mother found out I was making all that money, she said, '*You better give me some of that!*'

Well, if I had to choose someone I've admired most in my life, the person that comes to mind would probably be Nelson Mandela. He never wavered from his cause, and he didn't use gratuitous violence. I mean he was ready to commit violence to end apartheid, but mostly the ANC (African National Congress) only attacked economic targets. They would blow up power stations and bridges, but they avoided killing innocent people. There's no point in doing that, you know. He went to jail for 22 years, and it was hard time, breaking rocks and all that, then he survived and went on to be President. Malcolm X, is another person I admired. Seeing where he came from— he was a street

hustler—then he became an honorable man, a real honorable man. In some ways, that's what impressed me more than Martin Luther King, Jr., because he was always middle class. Actually, in a way I suppose Malcolm was middle class, too, but he, he *fell off the wagon*. He got in to all kinds of crime and stuff like that. Then, he came around. So those are some of the people that I really admire.

Well, I think my biggest adventure is what I'm going through right now. I'm doing the leadership role, and we are undertaking this transformation of school culture. We want to get to people utilize the concept of *changing school culture* to help Americans become successful. That means being *humanely* successful in the global marketplace, because we're in the whole new world now. I have a housemate who is on a graduate fellowship in public health. He's from Ghana. I come in it's two o'clock in the morning, and he's still on the computer studying. He's been there *all day*. That's our competition! He's with it. I see young people like Tina —who's working with me this year. She's here from China, studying, and she works *so hard*. These foreign students are relentless — they work very hard! They're engaged in the peaceful acquisition of the goodies of life. We need to change our institutions so we can motivate *our* young people to learn like that. We need to do it while the United States is still rich, because we could lose it really fast. In fact, you can see it slipping away now. We could become a third world country, just like that. China's going up, India's going up, and we're kind of treading water. If we don't do the right things in the next 15 – 20 years, you're going to see it really fall down badly. So, basically, that's my adventure. The adventure is to turn that around and to really create the type of institutions, or renew our institutions, so that our

children will be able to become citizens who know how to keep our country strong and they'll have a good life.

Oh, the happiest moment of my life? Well, meeting Sara, that's pretty high up there. Sara Freed is my girlfriend, and she makes me really happy. Also, one time I went to Vancouver, British Columbia with this music group I was in. That's a beautiful city. It was in the 1970's, and we were invited to the United Nations Habitat there. We were going to be the star group to bring everybody together, and we did it! We were chosen because our band was spiritual. There were a lot of Sufis in the band, a lot of peace workers.

So, they put us in an airport hanger that they refurbished to hang blimps, so it was huge. Then they put these chairs around for people to sit in. There were all of these nations that were fighting each other, especially the Israelis and Palestinians. They were back and forth, you know, like: '*they're beasts,*' '*they're evil,*' '*they're crazy,*' '*they're cruel.*' But, you know, in the end we got everybody in that place holding hands and singing peace songs. That was pretty amazing, so that was probably another one of the happiest moments of my life. It was a beautiful time. The whole trip was beautiful, but that kind of felt like the cherry on the cake. I think we all felt like we were part of *the world*. You know, when you do something global, suddenly you feel like you are more than citizen of a country, you have this feeling that you're doing just a little small thing for everybody on the planet. So, it was a good feeling, and I was very happy.

Well, my primary art form is music —percussion. I play hand drums and mallet instruments like marimba and vibraphone, but I also love singing. So, back in the sixties, we started Black Music Inc. We started it because we saw

music as a way to help artists advance, and also help to create economic and social development in the Black community. That was our vision. To use the creative energy of the Black community to bring money back in to the community. You know, music is obviously African American's leading sector. Literally billions of dollars are made off of Black music of all kinds. Yet, Black people are poor. So we figured that the reason is because the club owners, record producers and distributors all take the cream, and none of the proceeds ever filter back down to the people.

For example, they'll take a Black artist, who will make millions of dollars for RCA, and they'll pay him a big salary. But all the rest goes to the corporation, including all the jobs —recording engineers, cutting the records, the packaging, the wardrobe, all the people that have those jobs. To be an actor or musician is an entire industry, and we only see the person on top. You have managers, bookkeepers, lawyers, business people, administrators, secretaries, so we figured if Black people had *those* jobs, then that would help unemployment and help the community. That's what Black Music, Inc. was about—trying to spread the jobs from that industry throughout this community. So instead of using that rare talent to create a few very rich people and a whole bunch of poor people, what you want is a more horizontal structure, with more people living decently, instead of one person living like a king, and everybody else scrambling around. So that was the idea.

Cooperative Artist Institute grew out of Black Music Inc, so it was like a transition. Our goals shifted because we realized we couldn't get the cooperation we needed. We were ahead of our time, and we needed more community support to make Black Music happen. We wanted more Black

people to support the cause, because we couldn't do it alone. So, Cooperative Artists Institute has a broader focus. With CAI, we've taken then 'artist focus' and utilizing the arts to solve problems. We had already started using the arts for social change when we were organizing the community. So it was a retreat from the grand vision of Black Music that we had in the past. You know, this came up because we came out of the Black power movement. So we saw it as not just political— the whole thing was really economic.

The main person I worked with creating both Black Music and Cooperative Artists Institute was Charles Holley, Susan's husband. It was Charley and I who were the main parties then, and there were others who worked to make it happen, too. But, Charley and I stuck it out, while other people worked for a while and then moved on. The idea is to create something where you control the economics. Black people need to control the wealth that we produce. You know our leading sector was the entertainment sector, at the time, and it still is in many ways — sports and entertainment. That's a leading sector, and in a way we should be moving to be in control of things.

Like heavy weight boxing, Muhammad Ali was the one who really did that through the Black Muslims. They pretty much put boxing on the map, and got a lot of money from that. You know, the Italian mob would have shot him. But, the *Fruit of Islam* protected him. So Muhammad Ali was able to be his own person. He could open up his mouth and talk all he wanted to and no one could fire him. That was just a taste of what you could do, because he was the money maker. The same thing should go for all these basketball teams and the football teams, you know, we should be running those teams. But the only person who did that was Don King. People always make fun of him because he

was the ex-con all that stuff, but he was the one who backed them, and he was the promoter. I think he got closer than anybody else at controlling a lot of the Muhammad Ali fights.

So that is what we were trying to do with music. You start a corporation, then you have all of this music and then the music becomes music that people listen to and live by. You hear it in elevators, and you hear Miles Davis on the radio. Every time they play a Miles Davis tune on public radio, his estate gets money. So, what happens with the corporation, is you issue stock, and stockholders own shares of the corporation. It's like a nation, in a way, and stock is your money. If your stock is in high regard, you have money. So, we actually wanted to give millions of shares to people— just give it to them. We were going to incorporate, then give millions of shares to everybody in Roxbury, and then suddenly they'd belong to something with value. You know, *'I've got shares, I hold, you know 50 shares of Black Music Inc, that's a good price.'* It brings people together and creates a piece of unity, it makes you belong. So, after shares started really being worth something, and then when you call a meeting, people show up. So then you have unity, and when you say something like, *'according to our community corporation, it would be best if you all registered to vote,'* everybody turns out. So, real community starts out with shared good. Communities don't last if they are built around suffering, because what happens is as soon as the suffering is over, the community disappears. It implodes because it reminds them of the bad times. I think, too often oppressed people tend build communities around how bad things have happened to them. That's why things don't last. Psychologically, it's not a good way to build something.

Culture is built on the mother's breast, the reward is the milk and the warmth of the mother. The reward of that is what builds the family and the institutions. It's not because mother pushed your ass. Sure, people will obey you if beat them. You've got a lot of power and you push them around, but as soon as they can get away, they run. What draws people is a good heart and others who are capable of love. So, you know, we're all drawn to the good, and that's where I'm coming from.

Right now my favorite thing to do in my free time is to work. I like to write. I like to do my projects because, I think as you get older— I'm 67 now—you know you're not going to be here long. And there's a deliciousness about work. It's like, I don't mind partying a little bit, dancing a little bit, fooling around a little bit, then I want to go to work. That's because it's such a beautiful thing *to create*. That's what I mean by work, to create, to do something creative so you leave behind a better world. You want to leave behind a better world, you want to contribute. You know where it's at, you know the beauty of contributing, it's not about getting more and more. Often, when you're younger, you just want stuff, and you don't give a damn. You just want it. But after a while, it gets boring and empty. It doesn't do a thing for your soul. So then you change. I think most people change when they get older.

Well, my words of wisdom would probably be what my mother used to say all the time. She used to say, '*I don't see any servants around here.*' Those were words her of wisdom. She was basically saying learn how to do things for yourself. And I used to get pissed off, but they were words of wisdom. You see a lot of people getting hurt and if you really look at what's behind it, there's a lot of people that don't want to work. So, they might get a big gun and stick it

against somebody's head, and have *them* do the work for you. It shows that people are not raised right —they don't know how to talk care of themselves. And those can be the most violent people, because if you don't know how to take care of yourself, all you can do is mooch off of other people and *take*. And if that's all you know how to do, nobody wants you around.

Advice? It's hard to say. You know, I'm not too much for giving advice. I might say something if someone messes with me, that's tough, you know. I believe you've got to live through something to really learn and understand it. A lot of adults forgot that they were young once. When I was young it was all about me myself and I, and only living taught me something different. Everything went in one ear and out the other. If I have any advice, it's not by saying anything. Just walk the walk, and live your life, that's probably the best advice I could give you.