

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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Josephine Albertha Harrison Gaines

Interviewed by Michael Myers and Jenny Nguyen

My name is Josephine Albertha Harrison Gaines. My nicknames are Jo or Josie. I was named after my mother's aunt. I don't know why, because if my mother was angry she would say I was just like her aunt. I was born on April 29, 1931 in Boston, Massachusetts.

My mother's name was Elvira Johanna Huggins Bristol. My father's name was Jose Pires and my stepfather was Azariah Bristol. I never met my grandparents. They lived in the West Indies. My mother was from St. Kitts & Nevis, and my father was from Cuba. My stepfather was from Antigua. I had two sisters and three brothers. My older sister Ruth died three years ago. My brother, Kingsley, who is seven years younger than me, lives in Randolph, MA. My middle brother, Lauriston, is also deceased. I have a younger brother Edward, who lives in Dorchester, MA, and a younger sister Mary who lives in Lynn, MA — she is the baby of the family.

I'm a widow. My husband's name was William T. Gaines. I had ten biological children and four adopted children. My biological children are Muriel, William, Daryl, Leland, Ronald, Kevin, John, David, Yvonne, and Gina. My adopted children are Shakora, Isaac, Tiffany and Shante. My best friends are Lula Anderson, Carla Smith, Julia Martin and Cynthia Jimenez.

I grew up on Bower Street near Humboldt Avenue. There were two farms on that street and even a judge lived on our street. It was mostly a Jewish neighborhood at that time. On weekends we had to observe the Jewish customs because stores weren't open on Saturdays. A lot of my friends lived there. It was a nice part of the city. I grew up with my mother, stepfather, one older sister, three younger brothers, and one

younger sister. We also lived with an old man who boarded with us. We called him grandfather. We loved him! He had introduced my mother and my father.

As a child, I walked to school. I went to the Julia Ward Howe Elementary School. My favorite teacher was Miss Barletto, my first grade teacher. It was funny because I loved first grade and I loved this teacher. I always remembered her name. Years later, I found her through a friend and I went to visit her. I was thirty years old when I finally found her!

When I was in elementary school, I would go to the store after school sometimes. I would do different things on different days. I would go to the library to do homework almost every day, and then I'd pick my clothes out for school on another day. I liked to play games outside like jump rope, and I also liked to roller skate and play Jacks. For fun we would ride our bikes or go to the Franklin Park. I remember the elephants.

My best friends were Doris Heggie, who is deceased now, and Gloria Fitzpatrick, who lived next door to me growing up. We would go onto our back porches and pass things over on a wooden plank to make plans. Gloria and I still keep in contact now. She lives on Martha's Vineyard. We call, write back and forth, and visit each other twice a year. Gloria is a widow now. She had three children and raised her sister's children too after her sister passed away. Gloria's sister was also my friend. The children have all moved to different places, but she visits them and they all visit her as well.

The main chore I had at home when I was growing up was doing the dishes. We had a big family, so there were a lot of chores. The girls had to wash their own underwear and hang them on the pipes behind the stove. We had laundry service for everything else and the things that had to be ironed came back ready to iron. The boys didn't

have to do their laundry at all. Everyone in our neighborhood thought we were rich because we had a laundry man. We had one of the first washing machines called a wringer washing machine.

After elementary school, I went to the Lewis Junior High and Boston Memorial for high school. Now it's called Boston Latin Academy. I remember liking high school. The kids were all from my neighborhood. My favorite subjects were geography and reading. I always won the spelling bees — I did that all throughout high school. The schools were different then, though. There was not as much of a focus on homework, but more of a focus on the substance.

During World War II, I remember that we would have to block out our shades at night. Someone would ring the doorbell or knock on the door, and say, "Lights out!" They did this because they were afraid that there might be bombers. Everyone had to be prepared. It was really scary for me. During that time my father worked on the boats; he was a merchant seaman. Even though there was rationing at that time, he used to bring us butter and cheese.

We didn't have the same financial problems then as people do today. There were farms all over Jamaica Plain and Roxbury. There were teams of horses pulling men in wagons selling fish, vegetables, wood, coal, and ice. We had "ice boxes" instead of refrigerators back then. There was no Stop & Shop! We stood inside of the store as the workers packed bags and boxes, and then you paid.

My favorite things to do as a teenager were to go to the movies and go bowling. We couldn't go out or have company if we didn't go to church, and there were no movies allowed on Sunday. My mother never went but she didn't stop us from going out to the movies. There was a bowling alley in St. Mark's Church on Townsend Street and another one in Grove Hall.

As a teenager, I wanted to travel, but I did not travel too much. My parents were not very social and never drove. But I had many adventures in my teenage years. I lived just across the street from Franklin Park. We were there almost every day because the city had people come and do arts & crafts in the summer. There were block parties outside where they blocked off the streets and they set up outdoor movies for free. At the neighborhood block parties everyone got together for picnics and fish fries.

It was very different in Boston then — everyone corrected everyone else's children on buses, on the street, or even in stores. There were many people whom I knew that did nice things, like the lady who taught us to knit and took us to the beaches.

After high school, everyone usually went to a school called Boston Clerical on Warren Street; it was free. I wanted to get married and my parents really tried to talk me into being a teacher or a hairdresser, but I was not interested! So I went to Fisher Junior College where I studied business.

I already knew my husband when I was at Fisher. We met through a neighbor. We wanted to get married, but my mother said, "Marry in haste and you will have many years to repent at your leisure." I was only twenty-one years old. I asked my parents to sign my marriage license and they said no. So I said, "Oh well, I'll just sign your names," which I did. There were no arguments about it. We eloped to New Hampshire because someone, whose husband worked with my husband, told us about their experience eloping there. So, we went there too.

While I was gone, my mother took my bank book and refused to give it back to me. She said to me, "He married you, so he supports you now." I had money in my bank account and I wasn't working at the time. This was money they had set up for me. There was about \$2,000 in the account, and they didn't give it to me until I had a

child. In the 1970s I had my first baby. My kids were all one year apart, and I had a total of five kids in the seventies.

But my mother was also always helping people, and sometimes I would get jealous about it. Now I've been told that I turned out to be like her! For example, instead of going to my granddaughter's wedding in Spain, I sent four of my grandchildren and they had a ball! My mother was a great cook and the whole neighborhood would ask her for her food. She had an open door, and food went out all the time. She was always feeding people. Even today people say, "We wish she was around. We loved her cooking!" My mom let one of her tenants live for free for six months because the man lost his job. Nobody does that today.

I used to like traveling, but I don't like to travel as much as before. I could have gone to the Caribbean to meet family members, but I chose Hawaii. I went on a tour with the Jehovah's Witnesses, because I am a Jehovah's Witness myself. At the Kingdom Hall, my church, we have a lot of professional people and several of them have been trustees at the Conservatory of Music and Boston University for forty years. The music at Kingdom Hall is different from the usual Black church music. It is more devotional.

When we went to Hawaii, we toured the Japan section there. I visited a girl that I knew when we were in high school. She lived up in the Japanese village with her family. Her husband was in the (military) service and he was stationed there. After he got out, they stayed and raised their children there.

One of my daughters lives in Finland. Her husband is a chef and one time he got a job at the new Regent's Hotels in Fiji, so they sent for me to come visit. It took twenty-two hours and four flight changes to get there, but it was fabulous. I was able to stay for a while. In the Fiji Islands, the native people would come and ask to wash your

clothes for you. They would take the clothes to the lake, and they would beat them on the rocks and then dry them there. My daughter and I went to visit a family of Jehovah's Witnesses up in the mountains and there were people walking with no streetlights — only using their eyes for guidance. People walk from one village to the other and the ladies never go out by themselves, only in groups.

At the stores in Fiji, they make the clothes right there. We were able to pick out materials and patterns, and they sewed it up for you immediately. It was really a fun time. My daughter also wanted to go to Tobago and New Zealand, so her husband said if I went, she could go too; but I didn't want to add that much more time to my return trip.

My children and grandchildren live all over the world. Another one of my daughters ended up living in St. John's in the Virgin Islands for five years. She bought land somewhere in the British West Indies from one of the wealthy families there. And one of my granddaughters, who lives in Finland, went to Cuba for her honeymoon — and now she has dual citizenship

For most of my life, my job was babysitting which I did even after I had children of my own. In fact, I watched other people's children until two years ago. I had ten children of my own, and I also adopted a boy and three girls. I adopted one of my daughters because both of her parents died on the boat from Haiti. Truly, my biggest adventure in life has been watching all of my kids grow up, get married, and have kids of their own. In May I'm getting a new baby to watch, my grandson. I already bought him a crib, and a stroller.

One of the hardest things was losing both of my parents in the same month. My stepfather died and then before you knew it, my mother did too. She said, "When he dies, I'm dying too," and she did. The mailman came to the funeral all dressed up; we

didn't even recognize him. He said, "I'm the mailman," and then he said, "We see this all the time when they are so close. One dies, then the other one does too." It was hard for my kids, too, because they were so close to my parents.

When we got together — even at the memorial service for my son, Ronald — we all sang, ate, and had good memories. We had fun. My brother came over and he said, "How can you not be sad? You lost your son and you people are happy." But my son never said, "I don't want to die," he said, "Hang in there. I'll see you later." We know we will in the resurrection. There were three hundred people at my son's memorial and it was like a party. So my brother said, "I guess I'm okay with it."

When I sold my big house up in Jamaica Plain I thought I would never like living in any other place. I lived in my house for forty-four years. But within two months at the Julia Martin House, I'd fallen in love with this place and my little apartment. And now I've been here for one whole year.

The most important thing that I've learned in life is that family is the most important thing. My words of wisdom to you are 'Be kind.'

