

Judith Olson

Interviewed by Jenny Nguyen & Rafael Baez

“My name is Judith Olson. Everyone calls me Judy. I was born on February 4, 1943. I grew up in a family of ten children. I was in the middle of four brothers and five sisters: Billy, Stephanie, Mary, Jane, me, Roberta, Barbara, Jerry, Dennis and Steven. My mother’s name was Mary; my father’s name was William. My grandparents were also Mary and Steven.

I was born in Readville. It’s part of Hyde Park. In fact, I was born just two or three streets over from where Mayor Menino lives. When I was little, it was like a small town, and then it slowly became more like a city? At first, in front of our house was all field, and it was the same way on the side of the house. It was like country. Then, little by little, we had an urban invasion. They started building homes, and then they built an elementary school, so there were a lot of kids. The snow back then was something else, too. The snow was so high that we’d get lost in it! It would come up over our waists. The snow we get now is nothing compared to what we had then— there’s a real big difference.

I went to the Hemingway School for Kindergarten, and then I went to Catholic schools from the 1st through the 12th grades. I went to St. Ann’s School from 1st through 8th grades, then I went to Nazareth High School in South Boston. It was over there near St. Brigit’s. It was OK. It was all girls, so I was in a group of fifty-one girls. The nuns were on you all the time! My older sisters were better in school and all that, so it was ‘*Why aren’t you like your sister?*’ I’m me, I’m not my sister! It always works that way. No, I didn’t have a favorite teacher in high school. But I remember that when I made my first communion and when I made my confirmation I had the same Godmother for the both of them. That was Mrs. Noonan, who had been my kindergarten teacher. She was one person who stayed in my life for a long time.

With all of my brothers and sisters, it was really a wild house. When I was little I was a tomboy, so my friends were mostly boys. I was up in the trees and climbing fences, anything that girls shouldn't be doing. So, since I was a tomboy, my Dad used to take me to work with him. He worked for the railroad, but he was also a carpenter and he used to fix things on weekends. He'd say to me, *'You're not helping mama, so you're going to help me.'* I used to go with him until I was about twelve or thirteen years old, then I became *'a little lady'* so I didn't go anymore.

My best friends when I was in Grammar School were Kathleen and Judy. Judy was deaf. We did the same things all kids did. We rode bikes, skated, played in the snow, play jacks, jumped rope, and played games out in the street. We could be out in the street because there weren't that many cars then! And we usually didn't go far from the house. When we were in the house, we mostly played board games with our brothers and sisters.

Oh, yes, we definitely had rules, and I always broke them. And if I broke them, I got a spanking! They don't do spankings now. Back then, Grandma would get us and spank us when we got in the house and then Mom would hit us when we got upstairs. My Gram would fight with Mom because she wasn't paying attention to the kids! So, it was messy.

When I was in third or fourth grade, I got a rash all over me like measles. Then, all of a sudden it disappeared and I had a lump in my groin. So the doctor said they had to take me into the hospital to find out what was going on. I had to stay about a month in the hospital having tests and everything. The doctors gave it some crazy name that I don't remember. They never really found out what it was, it just went away. They were using me like a guinea pig, so Mum got tired of it and said *'Forget it, I'm taking her home.'* I had missed a whole month of school! So, my teacher at that time had the class divided into different groups: the A's, B's, C's, and D's. She put me down in the Ds just because

I missed so much school, but I went back up again.

With six girls at home, we were fighting constantly. It was everyone for herself, sink or swim! There were good times too, because for Christmas and Easter, and during all of those vacation times, we really had a lot of fun. There were so many of us that in the summer Dad would only be able to take one group, maybe five or six of us, to the beach. If you were bad, you didn't get to go, that was your punishment. It went the same for going to the movies; only a few of us would get to go at one time. And it was a lot cheaper to go to the movies at that time. Still, with ten kids. It was hard to take all of us anywhere at the same time!

I really admired my Dad. He worked on the railroad but he was also a licensed carpenter, plumber and an electrician. So, he had a lot of other things he did besides just working on the railroad. He was certified in all those different jobs.

Dad had cancer when we were young — he had heart trouble *and* he had the cancer. There's also diabetes that runs in our family. When Dad got sick, it was really hard because there was no money. They wouldn't give us welfare even though we really needed it because they said that Dad was getting too much money for not working. But he wasn't getting that much when there were so many kids. So we were on a diet of cereal and spaghetti in all the forms, baked, boiled, fried— any way you could make it. Sometimes there was no meat and we could just have cheese. Dad was only forty years old, so, we were still really young. I was maybe fourth grade, something like that.

Yes, we had chores. My grandmother lived in the same house with us. Mum lived on the second floor and Grandma lived on the first floor. My chores usually ended up being to scrub the floor. We didn't just mop the floor, we got on our hands and knees and scrubbed the floor! So when I finished Mum's floor, I would go downstairs and do Grammy's floor. It was a constant battle because Grandma would want to take a swipe at us downstairs when we did something she didn't like, and then we'd get upstairs and

she's say, *'Aren't you going to punish them? Ma, if you punished them downstairs, how am I going to punish them again upstairs? You can't punish them twice for the same thing.'* Mom and Gram used to get into fights all the time, because if Grandma had hit us, Mom wasn't going to hit us again. You can't get hit for the same thing twice.

Our curfew was at 8 o'clock. We had to be in the house by then. I was the one that used to escape all the time and my sister would have to come and get me. So one day we were up in the woods where we used to play and there was a tree nobody could get up. I heard my sister coming and went whoosh— up the tree. When Mom sent my sister out to get me, I knew when I got home I would get hell.

My sister had a tumor in the optic nerve and one time she had an epileptic fit in the classroom. I was in the classroom with her, so instead of Mom saying, *'Stay there we're coming to take her to the hospital'* I had to take her to the hospital. I was just fifteen when that happened. My sister's type of epilepsy wasn't the hereditary kind. It was caused by the tumor. I used to sleep in the same bed with her and it was horrific because all of a sudden she'd just start shaking. If she'd moved, I'd wake up, so mom had to finally take me out of the bed because I wasn't getting any sleep. Thing was, my sister didn't want to take her medicine, and when she didn't, the attacks would happen more often.

One scary thing that happened when I was young was an accident. We used to have to walk across a big bridge in Hyde Park and when I was coming home from school one day a big trailer truck was coming and just before I got to where it was it went right over the side of the bridge, right in front of me. That was scary. I'll never forget it!

Oh, definitely, we used to sneak out. There was a small roof outside my window near where we slept. In the heat of the summer, we used to climb out and sit out there. But some lady would come over and say, *'Mrs. Olson, your kids are out on the roof again!'* There's always someone to tattle on you. With so many kids, there's ***always*** something

going on!

I don't remember World War II, I was too young to remember when it was really happening because I was born in 1943. So I don't remember rationing or any of the things people had to do.

I graduated from high school in 1961. I was going to school, working part time so then I'd get home real late and I'd have to do my homework. It was a lot of work. I never saw my paycheck either. I'd just give my check to my Mom, and whatever we needed she'd get it. She'd give me like five dollars to get something, so I'd just have pocket money. Mom did all of the buying. She bought all our clothes and everything. At that time none of us bought our own clothes, right up until the time I was eighteen. Mum bought everything because she used to get all the stuff from Sears Roebuck and Jordan Marsh. They used to have a salesman who would come to the house so she could just order everything from him.

I really can't say I had a bad life growing up, I had a good life because even though we were poor we never wanted for anything. We had Christmas presents, and we always had everything we needed for Easter and all the different holidays. We had everything, really.

When I got out of high school in 1961, I worked at a telephone company for a short time. That was interesting because I worked in *Information*. People would call you for a number, but once they got on the line, they would start talking about this, that and the other thing. Back in those days we had big books to look things up in because there were no computers then.

I was on my own, so I had to find an apartment because my mother had moved to a different city. I had a lot of problems at first and I was really wild. Mom and Dad were so strict with us that we were like when you let the dogs off the leash and they go wild? I always wanted to go take the college course, but where there so many kids in the

family it was out of the question. They didn't have the kinds of technical schools that they have now. Even though I always wanted to get more education it was impossible at that time.

So when I finished high school I went wild. That's what happened with the twins, I had them out of wedlock. Even though I made that mistake, you learn from your experiences. While I was pregnant with the twins, they put me in a home for unwed mothers in Tewksbury. Once the social worker found out I was having twins, she was on my back constantly, every day, because she was going to get \$300 a head. Later on there was another incident in our family that we found out about just a couple years ago. My aunt had a baby when she was 27 years old and they made her give it up for adoption. How could a grown woman give away her baby like that? But the baby found us— he did his homework, and he found us and he got in touch. Just before my uncle died they got in touch, it was really something. Also, my younger sister who died because of the tumor also had a baby we didn't know about. But we never found out where that baby ended up.

Anyhow, I got married in 1962 when I was 19. My husband is Puerto Rican — Oscar Talavera— I met him here in Boston at the Commons. He was very shy at first; I wish he had stayed that way! We had a good time, we lived here in Boston for six years and during that time we had four kids. The oldest one is Kenneth, then Theresa, Julie, and Charles —two girls and two boys. There were also the twins, so I had six children altogether. The twins are identical; they just turned forty-six. The others are forty-five, forty-three, forty-two, and the youngest is forty-one.

In the 1970s I was living in the South End. We lived there for about six years. We lived on West Newton St. first. I was living almost in front of the hospital (Boston Medical Center). We had family on Dedham Street and my husband had family in the South End, too. I still have friends who live there, but since my legs are bad, I can't get out as

much as I'd like to. When I had just one kid we were living near the Chinese restaurant on Tremont Street. We lived around the corner from my brother-in-law when somebody almost knifed him. He got into the house fast enough so they didn't stab him, but there were knife marks on the door. The police wouldn't believe us when we told them what happened.

Another time the baby was in the crib and somebody threw a rock through the window. We just had a small apartment, and the police acted like *'you did it yourself.'* Right, like I'm going to throw a rock through my window myself so that all glass gets in my baby's crib, — now that's really intelligent! And, they never did anything about it. A lot of that was because I was in a mixed marriage. I was a white woman, and they just didn't like that, so they just didn't believe anything we said. When we moved out of the South End, we lived in Mattapan. We lived there for two years before we moved to Puerto Rico.

Yes, racism was a big factor in our lives. I would go out to get an apartment and everything would be fine, but when I would come with my husband to sign papers, they'd say, *'I'm sorry, we already rented that apartment.'* At the time you couldn't do anything about it because the anti-discrimination laws hadn't been set up around housing. Now, you can't do that, someone can't deny you an apartment because of race, but at that time we had a hard time getting an apartment.

When I left for Puerto Rico in the 70s, things were still bad here. I didn't have to go through as much because in Puerto Rico they accepted us, but over here it was still bad. Once when I was pregnant and I had one baby holding onto me, I was walking down the street in the South End. A lady came up and said, *'You should be ashamed of yourself. What are you doing with that Black guy?'* I said, *'That Black guy is this one's daddy and this one's daddy.'* She walked away. People just don't stop and think. You can't come out and say something just because that's the way *you* feel about it. You can't tell

someone else how to live their life! Things have changed, and people accept it more now, but back then it was not acceptable.

So in Puerto Rico I was working as a teacher in the public schools. I was teaching English, but I learned more Spanish than they did English. It really was something, — and it took a while! I had not gone to college until I went to Puerto Rico. I got my Bachelors degree there, but it took me seven years because I was working and studying at the same time. Plus, I had four kids to raise and a husband who was a womanizer.

I don't drive now, but I used to drive. I learned to drive when I was in Puerto Rico. I was driving all over the place because I went all over the island, taking my kids to different places. I went to Puerto Rico when my youngest child was only about four months old. The kids were about two years apart, and I lost one between the boy and the girl.

Mummy raised the twins I had when I was young. I tried to get them back when they were about two years old, but she wouldn't let them go. They never did know who I was until a lot later in their lives, and then they didn't want anything to do with me. They were like *'You abandoned me and don't want anything to do with you.'* But it was not my fault, it was Grandma's fault, she wouldn't let me raise them. So, I don't talk to them, I don't communicate with them at all. But I follow what's going on with them through my sister who lives in California. She keeps in communication with them, and now with Facebook, you can get a lot of information even though nobody tells you about it. So we found out different things, and I know that I have three great-grandchildren. One of them had two babies, and the other had one. So now I know I have three great-grandchildren, and I have another one over here. So I have four great grand children and ten grandchildren.

My kids who grew up in Puerto Rico had never met my side of the family, so we had an incident when my oldest daughter and I went to California to be with my sister for my

mother's 80th birthday. One of the twins was there, so she met her brother who she had never seen before. When she saw him, it was very emotional for her. Even though he ignored me completely, because that's the way he felt, he accepted the fact. Maybe he was jealous of the fact that she was with her Mom growing up, and he never was. As I said, it really wasn't my fault but they don't believe it. Later, after they got married and Mom died, I tried to get them to understand. A lot of what happened was because Mom just didn't want tell them who their *real* mother was; then, they found out in a bad way. They heard people talking so they learned what happened before Mom told them. My mom was very strict in some ways, but in other ways she would just let someone else take the responsibility that she was supposed to be taking. My sister used to say, '*When mom was in a pickle, she'd give the responsibility to someone else.*'

Being so far away from my family in Puerto Rico, there were a lot of things that I missed. I didn't see Mom and Dad for a long time, so when Dad died, I didn't get to see him. When my brother was hurt in Vietnam, he stepped on a bomb and lost both his legs, and that was another big thing that I missed. Then, my younger sister died when I was in Puerto Rico, so there were a lot of things that happened, one right after the other during that time.. It was hard because I didn't have communication with my family then, so we're really not close right now. The only one I'm really close to is my oldest sister in California. I find out about the rest of the family through her.

My brother Steven just died about two months ago. Billy died about two years ago from lung cancer. Barbara just died last month. Two of them went from cancer. My sister had breast cancer that spread, and she had tumors all down her back. The rest of my brothers and sisters live all over in different states. My oldest sister is in California. My youngest brother who just died also lived in California. One sister lives in Kingston (MA). and another one lives in a town close by. One of my brothers also lives there too, and I have another brother in Lowell.

(Judy describing family members while showing photos for drums.) This is Kevin, this is Omar, that's Ashley. Ashley is 17 now, Kevin is 18, Jomar is 11, Omar is 16. That was my oldest grandchild when she was fifteen years. This was my Mom. 80th birthday. She was 94 when she died. These were my sisters, this is the one that died, this is the oldest one. That's Mom with my sister there, I think I'm the one that looks most like Mom. In this one I was fifth grade in about 1953 or 54. I also have pictures of when I made my confirmation and my first communion; I was in first grade, and I was the trainbearer.

My advice to a young person like you today is to put something in your head that you want to do, that you *really* want to do, and don't stop thinking about it and trying for it. I waited so long to get my education. I want my grandchildren to get that education, and I fight with my grandson about that constantly. He's 18, and he already has a baby. He never got his GED and never finished high school. So it's a struggle with him. You need to finish high school, and these days you need at least two years of college or a technical school. Without an education, there are no jobs. Even with an education there are so many people looking for jobs, that the less education you have, the less work you are going to get. Young people don't understand that we are not trying to push them, we just want them to have a better life than we did! You can say it, but it goes over their heads. But if we keep telling them and telling them, hopefully they'll understand.

I wish the young people would stop and listen more. Things in life happen for a reason. You might not know the reason now, but later in life you will understand. When you get older and start thinking about what they were saying, you will figure out just what they were trying to do for you. So many kids don't listen to what their parents are saying because they think they're just being mean. I wish they would stop and listen, and I wish more kids would stop and think about what their life is going to be *later*. Kids all want to have money, but they don't want to get an education. And all these technical jobs now, you need a BA plus to get them.”