

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.

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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

Khalid Kodi

Interview by Abdiel Fonseca, Erys Valdez, Merilin Castillo, & Ivan Richiez

My name is Khalid Ibrahim Kodi. I was born on June 7, 1961 in a place called Wad Madani. That's in Sudan which is the largest country in Africa. This city where I grew up is something between a contemporary city and a small city, so it has both feelings. It is a traditional big African city where there are roads and cars and everything. But, there's also a country feel to it because it has a very large agriculture project called *The Jazira Project*. It used to produce cotton, and now they produce everything—all different kinds of crops. It's a major economic project in the city, and that's what gives it the country feeling. You'll be driving for hours and hours, and you'll just see green and farms.

Also, the city, Wad Madani is on the Blue Nile. There is the White Nile and the Blue Nile, and they meet each other in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. The Nile is the longest river in the world. So my hometown is on the Blue Nile, which is deeper and faster. It comes from Ethiopia, from Tama Lake. The White Nile comes from Victoria Lake, then they meet each other in Sudan, and become the Nile, which goes up to Alexandria in Egypt.

There is no such thing as a small family in Africa. In most African families, the family includes you, your father, your mother, your aunt, your nieces, and uncles, and grandfathers, and often your neighbors. And often, there are relatives who come from the country to go to school. In Sudan, they allow you to go to school — to high school or college — but those are all in the big cities. So, if you live in the country, you will find an uncle or a relative to live with while you go to school. Like they'll call and say “*Well, you know, now my son is 18 and he wants to go to college.*” Then they'll say, “*Go find the Kodis, and you can stay with them.*” They would come, and we'd give them a bed in a room, and they'd stay there for four years! So they become part of the family, and everything just moves on.

And often, for example, if I stayed in Sudan, when I decided I wanted to get married, I might move somewhere else in my own house! So, traditionally, they would just build you two more rooms onto the house, you know? It's very much like having your own apartment within the big house or within the family house because they have huge houses. Then later, when you have your kids, you would just build them a little corner on the house — no problem! It's like that in the countryside. Of course it's changing now, but even in the 1980s, it still had that timeless feeling, and you still had people come from the country to stay with you. You don't move when you grow up, you just build something and stay.

Families in Sudan are really big. The father would be working, and the mother would take care of the kids. My mother's name is Fawzia Abbas. It's a very common Middle Eastern name. My father was Ibrahim Kodi. I have five brothers and one sister, so we are seven all together. My brothers names are: Adil, Fahmi, Abdulazim, Emad, and Mohammed. My sister is Entisir; she is in Sudan. But, Adil is in Germany now; he's an electronics technician. And Fahimi is a computer engineer and works in Saudi Arabia. Emad is in Saudi Arabia, too. Abdulazim and Mohamed are in Canada in college. So, we're all over the place!

We all speak Arabic, and yes, our names have meaning. My name Khalid means eternity. My brother's name Adil means justice. Entisir means victory. Fahimi—I don't even know what that means! I'm the oldest of all the brothers and sisters, so I'm in charge — for real! My father passed away, so now I am the one in charge. I can tell them what to do and what not to do. You don't abuse your power, but traditionally, when the father is not there, the oldest son takes on his responsibilities.

What did I learned from my family growing up? Oh, so many things — respect, of course. Well, for all of my family, it was very important to them to carry themselves with dignity, so that was also important to us. Then, things like helping others, being there for others, taking care of each other, and taking care of other people were all important. But respect and dignity, especially, were very important values to us.

When I was growing up, I can't remember a day when we sat at the table for dinner with just our family. There were always other people, who weren't related by blood, who were there with us. I don't remember a time when our house didn't have 'guests' or other people staying there who weren't blood relatives! Growing up, your friends are like your extended family because the neighborhood is like an extended family. Yes, I have all kinds of friends that I grew up within the neighborhood, and these will be your buddies. But there is no difference between your house and the neighbors house. Often, if something happens to a neighbor, like their father passed away, then everyone takes care of them. So my friends that I grew up with, we would stay over each other's house without having to ask because we were all like one family. I think of that expression — *'it takes a village to raise a child,'* — it's very true. We didn't have a culture of 'baby sitters' when we were growing up. If your mother wanted to do something, you just walked into the neighbor's house and you hang out there. Everybody shared everything.

So those were the people who were my friends as a child. And, I'm still in touch with friends I had through college. We communicate very well. Friends are very important to your upbringing in Africa in general, and in Sudan specifically. Also, anyone who is a neighbor, or your Dad's friend, or someone older, you call them 'Uncle' or 'Aunt'. If you called them by their first name, it wouldn't be so much disrespectful as much as it would be a little bit informal. But, once in a while there might be a 'cool' older person like a neighbor, or a teacher, that you might call by their first name. It's like removing barriers and being less formal.

When I was your age my favorite thing to do was playing ping pong. Yes, I was very good! I loved that game. And, of course, I had also been painting, so I was involved in cultural things. But, in terms of sports, I was very good at ping pong and I even competed nationally.

Yes, my parents had rules about when we had to be home — until now! When I was your age there were rules that you have to be home by a certain time. And, you didn't

break those rules. But when you grow up a little bit more, *there are unspoken rules*. There is a kind of pressure, but it's indirect. So, for example, you might know your Mom will stay awake until you come home. She won't tell you, but you know, so you come home on time because you don't want her to have to stay awake.

Did I get in trouble with my parents? Oh yes, you know the usual teenager stuff! Being late once in a while, or being naughty, but nothing major. In our culture, the big pressure is more about not going to law school or being a doctor, and deciding to be an artist instead! No, it's not that the arts aren't as respected. My grandfather was a musician, and I had two uncles, one who is a poet, and the other is a vocalist. So, we have some artists in our family. But in that culture, to be a doctor or a lawyer, is often perceived as getting people immediate help. It has a social status, you know— "*My son is a doctor*," that kind of thing.

Sudan is a former British colony, so it has the same British school system. So, I went to traditional western schools. I did the pre-school through secondary school, and then college. I did my undergraduate work in Sudan. So it was like traditional western schools. Before college we had all our subjects in Arabic, but English was one of our subjects. You get all the requirements together from high school, then you apply to the college, and they have their own exam. A few thousand students will sit for this exam, and they will only accept 55 students. It's not like other schools like law or even medicine. At the fine arts school, and the colleges of music and theater, you have to go through exams to get in. There are two drawing exams and a written one, too. I *worked really hard* with my high school teacher and I was very well prepared, so I came in as #7 on the exam. I went to the College of Fine Arts in Khartoum. That was important because to get into college in Sudan, it's not like here. It's really tough! There are thousands of students who apply to the fine arts college, and there is only one school in the whole country.

Of course growing up I always had very good relationships with my teachers from when I was in high school. In high school I had two art teachers who I got to be very good friends with, Fareed Khalifa and Bashir Zumba — those are the teachers I called

by their first names. You know, you feel like *we are both artists, so we are the same*. So, they were my closest mentors from high school. and they encouraged me until I got to college. One of them —Bashir —wasn't actually teaching in my school. He taught art at another school, but we used to hang out with him, and he became a friend even though he was a teacher. He helped all of us from my school, not just me. He gave us private lessons, he gave us books to look at, so he was like a mentor for us. We had an artistic relationship with him that was outside of the official student teacher relationship. Eventually he became a family friend too, and became friends with my uncle, who is more his age. So, we continue to be friends today!

Fareed Khalifa who has since passed away was also my teacher from high school. Usually because the 'artists' in the school 'speak the same language,' so it was kind of like a club to be one of the artists. He understood our craziness because he was an artist too! So, I had other teachers who I learned from, but I remained friends with these two after high school. I actually think that high school was a very important era in my life because it was where I formed my adult direction.

Do I remember something scary that happened in my life? Well, in Sudan, like in many African countries, there is a lot of political strife, and often there are dictatorships. So I have been very involved in the politics. Often as students — when we were in college —we would go on strike and demonstrate, or throw stones at the police. It's a struggle, like the kind that happened here in the 1960's. So there is a lot of that, and I, like many students have been a part of that. Often you will run into a situation where you get chased by the police; some of my friends have been caught by the secret service or the secret police, stuff like that. So these are some of the scary things that I remember. You know, you want to show that you are brave, or that you are a revolutionary; we fight for the people like Che Guevara did. So, yes, I did all of this. In January 1982 I lost one of dearest friends in one of these demonstrations and that was a significant event in my life. My friend's name was Taha Yousif Obaid

Often these things happened around events, for example, people in countries like Sudan are not rich. So when there are shortages of things like sugar or bread, and oil, you can

only buy them in a certain amounts. And sometimes the government will raise the price, so everyone starts to panic because they don't have a lot of money. So that's when the students will demonstrate and ask the government to keep it as it is, and not raise it.

The person that I've most admired so far in my life is my Dad. Also, I have an uncle who is a poet, and he has been important. Since I came here, there have been other people who have been good friends and they have been very important in my life. There was Edward Strickland, who passed away a few years ago. He was a mentor for me. And there is Barry Gaither, who has been very supportive of my work over the years, too.

My dream when I was young was always to be a very successful artist. It's not an easy thing, but if you are consistent, you can make it happen. You have to work at it. When I first came here, I went to Mass College of Art and I got my MFA. Then I started teaching at the Community Art Center in Cambridge. After that, I taught at Brown University, and now I teach at Boston College and Massachusetts College of Art and Design. And I have shows all over the place. So, I'm still not a very well-known artist, but I am very happy about where I'm at this point, and I think I've accomplished the things that I wanted.

Being an artist, just working alone in your studio it's very difficult to predict what you're going to come up with for your next project. Because you're always evolving —and, you're always growing and discovering, coming up with new challenges that you want to resolve. Often, you will run into something that you might never expect. Usually you can work around, let us say, methods, or you work with certain kinds of materials for an extended period of time. You let the materials *lead* you to new discoveries. Even though I do a lot of conceptual work where I know exactly what I want it to do. But then as soon as you get your hands on the materials, you don't know where the process might lead you. Creating art is very much about *the process*, and it's also about growing as you are dealing with the materials.

Like the work I'm doing now, I don't really know what I'm going to do with it. I have some ideas, and I might change some things. So, long story short, you always work around a theme or certain materials or a medium, and you let the process lead you. When I'm working in my studio, I'm always working with these parts of the process. If you try to control your creativity, you very much limit yourself. To be an artist is to break out of your own box!

I really love working with other artists because there's a part of it that is very lonely and individual and requires a lot of research. But because I grew up in a big family in a country where people do things in groups, I like to be around people. So, to work with other people is a very good opportunity to exchange ideas and learn from them. I've done lots of projects with my students and with other artists. I was part of a project called The Tile Project, that involved artists from all over the world. About 30 artists used coasters to create a piece of art, so each of us created 30 of each artwork, then everyone got everyone else's work. So we could see all of the artists' work exhibited together as one piece. And even though the individual work was very small, you got to see your work beside an artist from Spain, or South Africa, or France. Some people did really exciting work, so that project was a lot of fun.

I did another collaborative project in a place in New York called Art Omi, it's an international art colony. That was interesting because I used fire to make some drawings on grass. That's the social/cultural aspect of it because back home, and in many countries, if they want to fertilize the land, they don't use chemicals, they burn the old crops. Then the ashes go back into the soil and fertilize the land. So, usually, if I want to do my field, I would ask all the neighbors to come out to help control the fire. The women would bring food, so it's kind of a social event. It's called *nafir*, and everyone will come and contribute some part to the event. Then, the next day, you would go and help with another person's field, and so on. Sometimes you might stay up all night and dance, and have a good time. Also, while I was doing that project, I had a few assistants, and I really enjoyed working with them.

My biggest adventure has been coming to America. I had visited other countries before

I came here, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Dubai, and all those Gulf countries. But growing up in a third world country you know about the U.S. mainly through movies. And in some third world countries that are moving towards socialism, they hate the U.S. They see the stereotypes in the movies, but they don't learn about writers and poets and other people. So it was kind of a scary thing coming here because I didn't know what it would be like. It was a huge risk because I didn't speak the language very well, so I had to go to language school. It's such a different culture and different people, I had to start at the beginning and *learn everything*. People get scared by the unknown, especially when you don't know anybody, and you don't know what to expect. So coming to the U.S it was both my greatest adventure and the hardest thing I've had to do!

I think I'm happy where I am right now. I love teaching — that's a good job. You learn a lot from your students. You challenge them, and they challenge you. Sometimes a student might come up with an idea you don't know anything about, so then you have to do a little research to stay up on things!

My greatest accomplishment is my daughter. The happiest moments in my life so far have been getting married to my wife Nada Ali, and having our child. My daughter is only four years old now. She has two names — the first one is Nagwa, and her middle is Nowra. Nagwa means 'the mystical action of communicating with God,' and Nowra, means 'from light.' It's like a term of endearment or a spiritual term. Yes, her mother is African. They are both wonderful! I have many friends, but being here in the United States at this time, my best friends are my wife and my daughter! And, you know, my mother is also my best friend. I chat with her all the time, I tease her, and I drive her crazy, all kinds of stuff.

Words of wisdom? Well, I love the word dignity. It's a very good concept; and, this is what I've been taught by my family. It serves you well through good and bad. Things go up and down, but if you carry yourself with dignity, people will definitely respect you no matter what you do.