

Melvin Roche (Farnsworth House)

Interviewed by André Hankerson , Shaniqua Osgood, and Zena Nieves (2001)

I was born in Boston on June 28, 1947, and grew up in the South End on Dover Street. I went to St. Rita's School on Shawmut Ave. I'm what they call a Creole — a person of mixed blood. My father, Marvin, was from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He came here to Boston when he was 13. My mother had 6 brothers and sisters, but none of them are living now. She met my father through a family friend. One grandfather was Irish, my grandmother was Indian, my other grandfather was Cherokee, so I'm mixed.

At my school, St. Rita's, we had all different kinds of people, from different cultures and different races in the South End. We had Chinese, Lebanese, Greek, Italian, French, Italian, African, and Portuguese kids — all in my class!

One of the happy times for me was the day I got confirmed at St. Paul's Church in Dorchester. It was kind of funny because we had long robes on, and it was hard to get up to the top of the stairs without tripping. So I had to pick up the robe with one hand to walk up the stairs. The Sister with me wasn't very understanding of the problem and kept hurrying me along.

Confirmation is when you become an adult in the Catholic church. So, once you're confirmed, you have adult responsibilities. You had to have an adult sponsor to be confirmed. My parents couldn't be there because my mother was sick (with diabetes) and my father had to work. My sister was suppose to come, but she never did until it was over, so someone else stood with me.

When I was a kid, there weren't gangs, so kids didn't get into much trouble. Maybe they did in the school yard when the sisters weren't watching. We had dances at school, and sometimes my family would have friends over and we'd have parties. Our family had a jukebox back then. You could put money in it, and play records, just like on Happy Days! I was also good at dancing when I was little. So even though I wasn't good at sports, I could dance. I hurt my back when I was young. One time when I was teasing my sister, my father got upset with me and pushed me up against the coal barrel, and I hurt my back.

I also liked to paint. Sister Claracita was one of the nuns who encouraged me to draw and do Art. This was between fourth and fifth grades when I was beginning to slide downhill in school. I didn't know what was wrong because they didn't know about dyslexia back then. I had a hard time with reading, but I could do music and art. I can't write what you say to me. I can dictate it, but I can't write it down. So I had to follow by sound, the books didn't help at all, they just frustrated me. If I couldn't really hear what the teacher was saying, I was completely lost.

I had a family friend who tutored me. But then, I went to another school in Dorchester because then they thought the reading problem was with my eyes. So they got me

some books with bigger print, but they didn't understand what was causing the reading problems. I think I was in the sixth grade three times. That's why I didn't go any further than eighth grade.

I left school when I was 15 1/2 because I was having trouble with one of the teachers who was threatening me. So, I started working at Boston City Hospital when I was 16. I made other friends there. Later on, I met Ms. Herrick. Before my father died, he and Ms. Herrick made a pact that she would look after me.

I've been beaten up and robbed once or twice when I was working at the hospital. They hit me in the eye, but I hit one of them with a mop ringer and threw one of them down the stairs, and the other one ran away. Another time I got punched in the eye. Once I got caught in the middle of a fight involving family members and some friends of the family. I went and got the twelve gauge shot gun my father had, but I was lucky because when I tried to pump it, it didn't work. My father got knocked down too. That was when I was about twenty years old.

This ring was my mothers. She gave it to me before she went to the hospital, then a few weeks later she passed away. I've had it ever since. I have a sister, a niece, a nephew, a grand niece, a grand nephew, and lots of cousins, but most of them have passed away, or live far away from here. So I don't see much of my relatives.

I like to cook. My favorite thing to cook that's called "drunken turkey," because it's basted with Jamaican Rum. I cook when I have company. I used to cook for Marion (Mrs. Herrick) when I was taking care of her. But I don't cook as much now. When I do, I like to cook red beans and rice with pork in it ... maybe with some cornbread.