

# *The Peace Drum Project*

## *Elder's Stories - 2007*

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## Introduction

Each year we look forward to our meetings and activities with the elders who share their stories, thoughts, humor, wisdom, understanding, and encouragement with the *Peace Drum Project's* teen participants. The experience of getting to know these wonderful elders and hearing their stories has been truly rewarding. We know that we have only scratched the surface of their stories in this process, but we hope that introducing them to you will enrich your lives as it has ours. These stories are filled with wisdom and life experience that young people today can learn from and honor. In spite of the differences between eras, the teens learn that many hopes, dreams, *and* obstacles remain constant across generations. Learning first hand that others have faced similar challenges — and have overcome them — gives power to their own hopes and dreams.

We are delighted with the respectful way in which the teens conducted their interviews, and by how the elders were willing to share their very personal experiences and knowledge with our young people. This bridge across the generations reduces isolation and builds new connections between youth, families, and elders that strengthen our whole community. We look forward to continuing this process for many more years.

This year we offer special thanks to Lucia Rodriguez-Sweeney for transcribing and translating the stories of the Spanish-speaking elders. We also thank Cynthia Jimenez, Resident Services Coordinator at Julia Martin House, Nancy Escoto, Resident Services Coordinator at Nate Smith House, and Julia Martin of Bromley Heath, Community Activist and grandmother, for their help in locating elders who wanted to take part in the project this year.

We dedicate these stories to the memory of Charles M. Holley (1937-2006,) CAI co-founder, and inspiration behind The Peace Drum Project. He is greatly missed by all the teens and graduates, elders, artists, and others who knew and worked with him over the years

Susan E. Porter, Director  
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## **Rita Rogers**

*Interviewed by Julia McDougall and Marjourie Jimenez*

My name is Rita Pauline Rogers. That's my married name. My maiden name was Rita Davis. I was born in Boston, MA on July 10, 1928. I grew up in Roxbury, first on Hubert St., then on Lovell St. It was nice. I lived with my mother and father. We had a large family. I had one sister, Mary, and four brothers: Milford, Barney (William,) Leonard, Clarence, and Allen— Allen was the youngest. What did we learn as a family? We learned how to take care of each and look out for each other. Sometimes we fought, but mostly we were good.

I spent Kindergarten to fourth grade at the Lafayette School on Ruggles St. And, fifth through eighth grades at the Hyde School on Hammond St.. I went to Girls Trade High School which was on Hunneman St. in Boston over near Church Park. After I finished high school I worked, and then I got married.

When I was young, I use to go to the Robert Gould Shaw House after school. We played games, did arts & crafts and played basketball. Yes, I was kind of short for basketball, but I tried anyway. When there was snow on the ground we'd play with snowballs and went sledding, and we'd try to make skis. There was a street with a big hill, and we couldn't afford skis, so we would make our own out of a corrugated box or barrel staves (boards) or something like that. Then we'd tie our feet onto them and slide down the hill.

Before there was TV, we use to go to the movies on Saturdays, and they'd show two movies at once *and* a serial. A serial was like *The Lone Ranger* or something that had episodes, so it would stop right at an exciting place, and you'd want to go back to see the next one. And, you could stay at the theater all day. You didn't have to leave after the movie was over like you do today. We could watch the same movie over and over if we wanted to. For kids, it cost 10 cents, and for grown-ups it was 25 cents.

Yes, my parents had rules about when we had to be home. When my father said to be home at 5 o'clock, it didn't mean one minute after five! So if I came in one minute late I would get in trouble. He wouldn't hit me or anything, but he would give us a look and we knew we were in trouble. He also had a habit of **not** answering you when you asked him if you could go someplace. He'd wait and see how you behaved during the week, and when you got ready to go out, if you hadn't been good, that's when he'd lower the boom. That's what I called it! He would even let you go as far as getting dressed, then he'd say "*Where do you think you're going?*" And I'd tell him I was going over to my girl friend's house or some place, and he'd say "*No you're not!*" And that was that.

When I was little, we played with the other kids in the neighborhood. I had a couple of best friends, Colleen and Phyllis. We all grew up together. One of them is dead now, but the other one is still alive. Another friend I had when I was young was Alberta, and my best friend was Mimi. Sarah White was one of my high school friends. Some I remember well, but others I don't remember at all. I know their faces, but I don't always remember their names. There are a couple of girls that I knew from a very young age—Isabel Lownes and Mary White (Sarah's sister.) I remember them because I would see them once in a while after we grew up. We'd run into each other and we'd go out to dinner or something. My grandchildren were always surprised when I would see people on the street that I knew from childhood and we would remember each other. It's funny, too, when we would get together, it felt like I had just seen them yesterday!

The scariest thing that happened to me when I was young was that I almost fell off the roof. We lived in a three story brick building and sometimes, when it was a hot summer day, we'd go up on the roof to sleep because it was cool. Well, one time I fell asleep right on the edge of the roof, and when I woke up I realized that I was just about hanging over the edge. That was very scary!

My favorite subject in school was History. I had a lot of favorite teachers like Ms. Small, Ms. Flaherty, Ms. Little, Ms. White, Ms. Hall and Ms. Helpin. We had one teacher who was rich. Her chauffeur drove her to school. I can see her face but I can't remember her name. She must have liked what she was doing, because she stayed there for quite a while. She was very quiet and serene.

One time when I was in the fourth grade, I got in a confrontation with a girl named Thomasina. The kids set us up to have a fight. I didn't want to fight. In those days, they'd tell you to put a stick on your shoulder, and the other person would try to knock it off. But most of the kids there were friends of hers, so I told them I wasn't going to fight. Then I pushed the stick off of my shoulder and I grabbed her by her hair, knocked her down on the ground and bumped her head. Then I let her get up. Her friends who put her up to it said, "*...don't cry, we'll go get your cousins, and they'll take care of Rita.*" So I jumped up looked at both of them and said "*Oh no they won't! I'm not afraid of them.*" So they just grabbed her and took her home. They were bullies because they were bigger than everybody else, but they didn't really want to fight, either.

When I was growing up there were just some things you didn't do— things our parents taught us not to do. When I beat up Thomasina, her mother came over to my house to tell my mother. My mother believed that **I** had picked on **her** so she said "*When your father comes home...*" But I knew my father would listen to my side of

the story, my mother never did. She always took it for granted that *we* were wrong. When my father asked me what happened, I told him and he believed me. Then he told me not to get into any more fights if I could avoid it.

All my life, I never fought much with people. Unless you really bothered me, I wouldn't bother you. If I thought someone was wrong about something, I would *tell* them, but I wouldn't get physical. The only thing that could get me to fight is if you would hit me first, then I would hit you back. I was small, but that didn't stop me from defending myself.

My responsibilities at home when I was a teenager were to wash the dishes, and mind my brothers because they were the youngest. We all had to clean our rooms and empty the trash. I didn't mind my sister because she was the bossy one! She had a habit of telling me how to do things, so I would ignore her and do it my own way anyhow. We shared a room, and sometimes when I was working and bought my own clothes, she would "borrow" them and then put them back like she hadn't worn them. But I always knew she'd worn them, and she'd deny it, so we got into arguments about that!

My sister didn't work much before she got married, but she and a girl friend of hers did 'day work.' Do you know what that is? That was when you went to Brookline or Newton on the bus or the train, and you worked for mostly Jewish families. It was cleaning or cooking, and she use to make about \$6. a day, plus they paid your carfare.

No, I didn't have any hobbies. I sewed, but that wasn't a hobby. We made our own clothes. When I started working we would get paid, then we'd buy clothes, and sometimes go to parties, or dances. They use to have these dance places you could go to. We went to dance, and would follow some of the popular jazz bands.

When I was married, I washed clothes all day long. First of all we didn't have washing machines. We had those round machines with the wringer on top. You'd wash the clothes, then you had to squeeze the water out with the wringer. Then you'd fill the tub with clean water and rinse them all and run them through the wringer again. And finally, you'd hang them on the clothesline outside to dry. We didn't have clothes dryers, then either. It was all a lot of work!

Who did I admire? I admired both of my grandmothers because they worked hard, and they were good to me. They taught me how to do things like knitting and crocheting. One of them tried to teach me how to iron, but I never got good, and I hate to iron. She ironed beautifully. Back then, they use to starch the collars and cuffs of men's shirts...or curtains. You've heard of starch haven't you? They would

starch those to make them look nice, but I always hated to iron, so when I got older and was married, my aunt use to come over and iron for me.

Music? I like almost all music except for heavy rock music and I'm not crazy about rap. My favorite song is *As Time Goes By* from the movie *Casablanca*. That's an old movie starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. Ever heard of them? And there was a Black guy in the movie named Dewey Wilson. He played the piano and did the singing. Back in those days when Black people were in movies, they usually just called them by their first name. They didn't really have a lot of respect for Black folks so they just called them by their first names.

My mother worked before she got married. But after she got married, she stayed home. My father did a lot of things. He worked at whatever he could to make a living for his family. He never went in the service because he had just been called up when World War I ended, so he didn't have to go. He was an unusual person because he use to mind the kids sometimes when my mother and his mother went out to dances. My father wasn't much for socializing, so he would baby-sit so my mother could go out once in a while. It had to be something special to get him out in a social situation. I think it was because he couldn't dance.

My two oldest brothers were in the service during World War II, but my younger brothers weren't. Now I only have one brother living, all the others have passed. My mother died when she was in her 60's, but my father lived a long time. He lived to be 97. He was blessed.

When World War II started, I left school and I started working, and I worked until I got married in 1946. So in the 1950's I was taking care of my children. In the 1960's I have memories of raising my kids, listening to different kinds of music. Television came in and we finally got a TV. So I was just trying to raise my kids up and send them to school in the 50's and 60's.

We moved a couple of times, but I remember I had three little kids and was pregnant with another one and we had a fire in our apartment, so we had to get out. It was in the wintertime, February, I think, and it was tough having to move then. I remember a few days later when we went back to see if we could salvage anything from the apartment, the stairs we a complete sheet of ice so we couldn't get in. Then we moved in with my mother and father for a little while, until we found a place of our own again.

I don't have a favorite season. I like all the seasons. I like summer even though I don't like when it's hot, you just go to the beach or someplace to cool off. I appreciate every season because each one has something good about it. Of course, as

kids, we liked summer because we didn't have to go to school. I liked to learn, but I didn't particularly like going to school. I'm still learning, too. My father use to say, "*What I know you could put on the head of a pin.*" And actually, that's about the truth, because every time you think you know something, there's always more to learn.

Biggest adventure? I've had a lot of adventures in my life. A few years ago I went on a boat to Alaska. I really enjoyed that, because I always wanted to see Alaska. But I have to go back again because I didn't get to see it all!

What do I look forward to in the morning? I'm just glad to wake up. I think my happiness now comes from being still here, and being able to participate in things going on around me, and going to church every Sunday. That's something I've been doing just about all of my life.