

## **Rupert Austin Leonard, Jr.**

*Interviewed by Rafael Baez, Joel Martinez, & Joseph Ruiz*

My name is Rupert Austin Leonard, Jr. My nickname is Omar after my favorite poet Omar Khayyam. My grandfather on my father's side came from the Dominican Republic and that's a common name there, but I really have that name because of Omar Khayyam. There's also a province in Canada called King Rupert's Province, so I'm named after a King! I am also a retired Boston Police Officer.

I was born on January 6, 1947 at the old Boston Lying In Hospital. Being the oldest male child, I was named after my father who was born in the West End of Boston. I have a sister, Faith, and three brothers: Donald, Gregory, and Douglas. My mother's name is Maxine Eleanor Reed. She was born and raised in Cambridge. Growing up, I mostly lived with my Mom because my father was in the Army for twenty years. He was a buffalo soldier in Italy during World War II and he also fought in Korea. But when he'd come home on leave, we'd all be together.

I grew up in different places. I spent my early life down in the South End on Lenox Street. That was great because in the late fifties they would have parades down Tremont St.— the Mason's and Shriner's parades. I started off school at the Hyde School in the South End. It's not there any more. One of the greatest experiences I remember from that time was that at Christmas time they would put on little plays in Filene's Department Store windows, and I was chosen one year to be a wise man in the nativity story.

When we were kids we played mostly board games like checkers, things like that. My uncle was one of the Tuskegee Airmen, and he taught me how to play chess. We played a lot of Monopoly and we would make up our own games sometimes. There was a TV program called Sky King that we really liked — he was an airplane pilot. We were little kids and we all slept in the same bed, so we would take my youngest brother Dougie and we'd fold the mattress back and put him on top, then we'd pull it back and let it go. He'd go flying, and we'd say "Sky King!"

Then we moved to the Jamaica Plain projects and lived 24 Heath Street. I went to the Bulfinch School on Parker Hill, then to the Jefferson (further down Heath Street) and after that I went to the Mary E. Curley School. Finally, I went to English High School.

What did we do after school? Well, when Pops wasn't home, we could pretty much do what we wanted which most of the time was playing all kinds of sports. But when he WAS home, it was just like being in the Army. He had jobs for everybody! My father was a Master Sargent, and when he retired he was promoted to Captain. He was a tough guy because he was in charge of training men for war. When he was home on leave, we had to make sure the beds were made and the floors were clean. We would each have a specific chore to do, and this was rotated. When it came time to eat, he'd be the cook. Then one of us would peel the potatoes, one would set the table, and one would do the dishes. I would get to take out the trash. So we always had chores. When we finished our chores, we could go out to play.

I started working when I was about 11 years old. We called it ‘a job.’ I was minding this guy’s television repair store. But I also sold newspapers, shined shoes, and collected bottles. We always had a little hustle to make some money so you could get some sweets for your “sweetie.”

When I was in middle school, one time we were messing around coming home from school and we were hopping on the sides of the bus. I couldn’t get my fingers all the way in to grab the pole, and the ledge I was standing on was small. I didn’t have a good hold when bus started to go down the hill by the Stop & Shop, so I fell off, flew through the air, slid under a car, and bumped my head. People were screaming — they thought I was dead because I was bleeding. I got a good bump on my head that I needed stitches for. But the scariest part wasn’t how I hurt myself — it was the beating I was going to get when I got home! The first lesson my father taught us was this: “The first time you get in trouble, I’ll help you out, but the second time you get in trouble you’re on your own.” So, of course, we didn’t want to get in trouble the first time!

I had a tight knit group of friends in JP. We all played basketball together. We had a team called the Vikings and we went all over the place playing basketball. We were pretty good too! Oh yes, I had tons of friends in the JP projects. If you were not a teenager, they called you a “junior flip.” The “junior flips” had to stick together because if the “senior flips” grabbed you, they’d take your pants off and throw them up on the roof! Back then, if you weren’t in the house as soon as the street nights came on, your parents would let you know it was time to be home.

High School was great. I was going to go to Boston Trade High School but I found out that my father had gone to English High School. I'm a 'Junior,' Rupert Jr., so I said that I wanted to follow in Pops' footsteps. My father had graduated from English High in 1938, and then I graduated in 1965. We both ran track and both had outstanding track careers, and we both received the Grid Iron Club of Boston award for the most outstanding track athlete of the year. He got it in 1938. I got it in 1965. When I graduated, they inducted both of us into the high school Hall of Fame and their All Century Team, which was great!

I liked school, but the curriculum lacked some things. I liked Geography, and History. Back then they didn't have History courses that included contributions made by African-Americans to America. But my favorite part of going to school was running track!

At that time English High was hard to get to. The school was on Louis Pasteur Ave. over near Harvard Medical School. It was right across the street from our 'arch rival' Boston Latin School, in a long building, and it had a track up over the gym. To get there, we had to take the bus from Dudley. If you were an under-classman, you couldn't sit down. The Seniors would tighten you up a little bit. We had respect for each other, so we would do a little "dukin'," but we wouldn't hurt each other.

My brothers and sister were really my best friends. Then there was a guy named Sonny Younger and he was just a cool guy. He also played sports. We had different mentors in our community. When I started running track, a gentleman named Clyde Crawford had a team called the Boston Pioneers. We were some of the premier track runners in Boston. At track meets they

used to hate to see us coming because we would take home all of the trophies! We would arrive in an old rickety, broken down bus, but when we left the whole back window was full of all of the trophies.

In high school, my coach was Freddie Gillis. He was a great coach. Back before people had Adidas and Pumas and stuff like that, he would get a note from the Principal, and he'd take us downtown and we could get all of that top stuff. I also had a French teacher who liked to mess with me. He was going to flunk me, and if I flunked I couldn't run. So I told Freddie about the problems I was having, then one day I was in French class when Freddie came in and asked the teacher if he could have a word with him. When the French teacher came back in from the hallway, he was red as a beet. And I got a C instead of the D he was going to give me.

So I ran my event, which was a quarter mile. When I was a Junior and a Senior, I was New England Quarter Mile Champion. I also did High Jump and was anchor for the Relay Team. So a lot of times I'd get fifteen points myself because you'd get 5 points for first place, and fifteen points was more than a lot of teams got.

After high school I went to Newman Preparatory School, to make up for college courses I didn't take in high school. After that, I got a track scholarship to North Carolina College in Durham. I pulled a hamstring muscle that stopped me from going to the 1972 Olympics. There was a guy that I beat one time; he beat me most of the time, but it wasn't by that much. His name was Vince Matthews, and he came from Johnson C. Smith College in North Carolina. He won the Gold Medal for the 400 Meters in the 1972 Olympics. He won by about 15 yards. Since he never beat me by 15 yards, I

figured I would have been good for a silver medal if I could have run! So I enjoyed running when I was a little kid. I would always run against my father, and the fact that we were both inducted into the English High School Hall of Fame together at the oldest public high school in America was just as good as a gold medal.

How did I become a Boston Police Officer? Well, when I was younger and 'hanging out,' if I saw any kind of injustice in the neighborhood or in a bar, I would always try to be a peacemaker. Usually if there was a fight I would try to break it up and often I would get a couple of nitches taken out of me.

At that time I was going to Boston State College majoring in Afro-American Studies. The funny thing about that was when I was younger I wasn't a great student because I wasn't interested in a lot of what was in the regular curriculum. But when I got into African American Studies, I learned things that I wish I had known growing up. It would have given me a better perspective on life. Anyhow, a lot of guys I was going to school with had family members who were police officers. At the time there weren't many minority police officers on the department, and I thought, I'd make a pretty good police officer. After all, having been a track star it was an advantage that no one could outrun me!

So, I became a police officer in 1977. I had taken the police exam, but about 1000 other people had taken the same test. Back then you could take it for free, but now it costs. The year before that I had gone to Trinidad for a vacation with friends. While I was there, as a cultural experience, I went with them to see a person that was called an obeah woman. She asked me what I wanted, and I said world peace. She said well what about something

for yourself? I said, *'I don't have a job right now, so I'd like a job that would give me a good pension so I could come down here whenever I feel like it.'* When I got back to Boston I had a nice letter from the City of Boston saying that I had been accepted as a recruit for the Boston Police Department.

When I first became a police officer I worked in several different districts. The districts were places where I had lived and grown up. I worked in District 4 on Warren Ave. in the South End. From there we went to Jamaica Plain to the station on Seaverns Ave. Finally I moved to Area C11 in Dorchester, and that's where I spent the rest of my career — 34 years.

I first started off as part of a team police in the Columbia Point Projects. Nobody wanted to work there because it was a dangerous place. I ended up having some good arrests, so I was offered a Gold Shield (a promotion to detective), but I turned it down because I wanted to be out in the street where the action was. Then Commissioner Bratton started the Community Policing Program, and I was on the ground floor and helped to design and implement that. I ended up in the roughest part of Dorchester at Bowdoin St. and Geneva Ave., and I worked there for almost thirty years.

At a point, the Community Policing Program was a model for the nation. The police department in Glasgow Scotland was putting in place a program similar to ours, so they sent a constable over here to work with me for a week and the BBC filmed it for a Scottish Frontline program. As a result of that, I got a free trip to Scotland. I was treated like a celebrity and there was a big write-up in the newspaper. That program got one of the highest

ratings for viewer participation. Of course, when I came back here everything was back to regular — no more rock star status.

Unfortunately, we've had a lot of deaths out there. Not too long ago the Globe did a four-day article on the area I worked. In it, they had a map with red dots for homicides that happened over the last several years and I remember almost all of them. A lot of good kids that made bad choices and it cost them their lives. If you looked at the news or read a newspaper in the last thirty years, you probably saw me. I've been on the front page of the Globe doing Community Policing, and I've been on COPS, on the front page of the Boston Herald meeting President Bush, and a 'photo op' with President Clinton. Never a dull moment!

My personal motto is, *'Be someone so that whoever raised you will say they're proud of the person you have become.'* That's what I have on a baseball card that we started as a public relations program. Often after you arrest a knucklehead— as soon as they get down to the station and they get to make their phone call. They'd call their mother saying, *'Mom, I'm down at the station again.'* I'd tell some of those mothers, just like my father said to me — *'One time, I'll help you, but the second time you're on your own.'* I'd tell them that if they kept bailing them out of trouble, eventually they're going to do something that you can't bail them out of. Some times tough love is the best cure.

My father was my #1 hero, and Malcolm X was one too. I met Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X) in the JP projects when I was about 11 years old. He was such a great speaker. I was so impressed that he was so intelligent, and



even without a college degree, he could go over to Harvard and debate anyone. He was articulate. This was when the Black Pride movement was blossoming and it was amazing just to see a man of color stand up and be proud of who he was. Then there was another Brother named Stokley Carmichael. It was at that time that Civil Rights became Human Rights.

My most vivid memories of the Civil Rights Era were the protests. Black people were more together then than they are now. They weren't like these kids running around shooting each other. They had more respect for one another, and when you talked to a Sister, you'd speak with respect. When I was growing up we had three television stations and they went off at midnight. The heroes in the TV shows we would watch — like The Lone Ranger — would shoot the gun out of the guy's hand. They didn't shoot him in the head. We didn't have these games where you're supposed to chop somebody's head off. What that does is desensitize you to violence. And when you make heroes out of criminals, it's not good. Each one of you has the potential to do or be anything that you want to be. All you need is correct thinking, correct action, and correct results.

The best job I've had was being a police officer because you're helping people. When you first get on the force, they asked us to write a paragraph about why we wanted to become police officer and *everyone writes the same thing*. They say they like people or they want to help people. Then, after working for a few years, you see the dark side of humanity. If you internalize the negativity it can change you. It can make you negative. I've met guys that I thought were prejudiced, but I found out it wasn't me they didn't like, they didn't like themselves.

Because of the stress you are under as an officer, without the support of family, friends, and community you could end up in an early grave. I've found that in life, what goes around comes around. Whatever you do comes back to you. There's no escaping it. As a training officer, I've always told my students to treat other people the way you want to be treated yourself. I don't care if they have a thousand dollar suit on or whatever, it doesn't matter. It's not how you look or what you say, it's what you do. I've met some wonderful people who were illiterate, but they had common sense. As the expression goes, *'common sense isn't all that common!'*

Well, I think that one of my greatest accomplishments might be that I have a bunch of young ex-knuckleheads on Bowdoin Street who listen to me, and they're still

alive today. A lot of them have done time, you know, but they have love and respect for me. They call me '00G.' And they say, *'Hey Man, do you remember me? It's good to see you.'* Some will come up to me and say, *'Hey man, I remember you.'* I'll look at them and I say, *'Well, I know I never locked you up, because I remember everyone I locked up.'* And they'll say, *'No, but you kicked me off the corner when I was hanging out, so I went in the military...or got married, or went to school... or, bought a house. So thanks for kicking me off the corner.'* That's what makes me feel like I've made a difference for the better in a few lives.

My family now includes my wife, Eleanor Silva Leonard, and my children, now grown, are Jafar, Jasmine, and Jihan. My wife is Cape Verdean and our son married a sweet young lady who is a Boricua from Puerto Rico. My

grandson who is four was named after both grandfather — me Omar, and in Puerto Rico, Ramon. I pray the world will be a better place for him.

I love to travel, but my mother's 93, so I'm taking care of her right now. I do get around though. I have a Godson in Honduras, friends in Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia. I saved a guy's life in Colombia, so his family adopted me into their family. I've been to Africa— to Cote d'Ivoire and Gambia, Senegal, and Egypt. In Europe I've been to Scotland, England, and France, so I have friends everywhere.

My favorite adventure so far has been going to Egypt — down the Nile with a smile! Seeing those antiquities is amazing. When you're standing in front of the Great Pyramid it's truly amazing— remember this was the tallest building in the world until they built the Eiffel tower. Some people think we came from cavemen and ended up modern like we are today. But there have been times in human history when people had to develop science and technology to do things that we can't do today. A lot of technologies we have today are built on those discoveries made by the ancient Egyptians. When it comes down to it, we are one people, the human race.

In my family we all get along; we didn't really have any conflicts. I'm the oldest male; my brothers and I might have squabbled a little when we were kids, but it was nothing big. Once you're grown, everybody has a right to voice their own opinion. If we have a discussion about something and we don't agree about, I start off by saying "*Look, I love you but....*" We have plenty of love in our family.

My grandfather was Edward Henry Leonard, and my grandmother was Ora Beatrice Shepherd. She was a descendent of African-Americans that fought for the British during the Revolutionary war. Her maiden name was Shepherd, and she always used to say *'I'd rather be a shepherd than a sheep, because you know what happens to the sheep!'*

A lot of people don't know this part of our history, but there were African Americans who fought for the British during the Revolutionary War. Several thousand were promised their freedom and land in Nova Scotia after the war ended if they fought for the crown. When they lost, they retreated to New York. They were afraid they would have to go back to their former owners; but a couple of British generals (Birch and Carlton) said they would honor their commitment to them for their service, so they took them to Nova Scotia in 1783. Then there was a famine in 1793, so many of them ended up going back to West Africa where they helped establish Freetown in Sierra Leone.

When they vacated New York to go to Nova Scotia, the generals recorded a book called Carlton's Book of Negros. That was in case they had to pay the slave owners for taking their former property away from them. And through that book, I was able to find my five-times-great grandfather. He was fourteen years old when he ran away from a plantation in Nansemond, Virginia.

One year I took a trip up to Nova Scotia, and I hadn't told anyone that I was going. I wanted to check out the things that I had heard about from my elders. We had family land up there with a quarry on it that an unscrupulous guy stole from my great grandfather, Austin Shepherd. The

land had black granite on it that was used to make gravestones. So while there, I took a couple of pieces of the granite and brought it back to Boston. When I returned home, I went to my father and I said '*Pops, hold your hand out.*' I put the piece of stone in his hand and I said, '*Do you know what that is?*'" He looked at the stone then he looked at me — I hurried up and told him that it was stone from our land in Nova Scotia because he looked like he was getting ready to hit me in the head with it.

My other grandfather was born in Puerto Plata in the Dominican Republic. We think that his father came from the British West Indies. He could have been a sailor from Jamaica, Barbados, or any one of the British colonies. His wife's name was Ana Batista. There was a lot of mystery and intrigue about my grandfather. He was just a cool, quiet person that everyone respected. He could speak and write several different languages. While living in the West End of Boston one way he made money was writing letters for newly arrived immigrants who could not write.

I am a spiritual being having a human experience, and realizing that everything that comes into this world goes through changes. For us to exist in this dimension we use— earth, air, fire and water to make matter. And what comes from Nature returns to Nature. We exist beyond our physical body. My belief is that this life isn't our first time and it won't be our last. This thing we call life is only a small part of who we are. We are spirit, and that part of us is immortal because love makes it that way. To love and be loved and respected should be our goal in life. When the Chinese talk about '*becoming one with the universe,*' it just means that life is cyclical. We are like a drop of water. We come from the ocean (god) and we return

to the ocean. In life the people you love and who loved you will always be with you. They will always exist in your mind and heart, and this is what makes life worth living and so very beautiful.