

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

Susan Annette Gilliam Thompson

Interviewed by Jasmine Dozier

Susan Annette Gilliam was my maiden name. My parents gave me that name. Then, when I got married, it became Thompson, which is my name now. My nickname is Shining Star. I taught at this summer program — summer art camp one time, and there were two Susans. Every time somebody said ‘Susan,’ we were both responding, so I said, ‘*I’m going to change my name.*’ The very next day, I came into the camp and told everybody that they could call me Shining Star. So the kids all started calling me Shining Star. The parents coming in the next day were asking, ‘*Who is Shining Star?*’ And I said, ‘*I’m Shining Star.*’ So, I just kept it as a teaching name. It’s too personal sometimes with little kids to call me Susan. But I don’t want them to say Ms. Thompson either, so Shining Star is perfect.

I was born August 25th 1945 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Cincinnati is in the Midwest. I lived there until I was 15-years-old. I lived with my mother, Mary Etta, and father Orville Gilliam. My oldest brother was Orville Eugene. He hated that name! So we called him Sonny, that was his nickname. My younger brother was named Donald, but when he got older, he changed his name to Latif, so everyone called him Latif —he’s not Donald anymore.

All my family and friends were there in Cincinnati, Ohio. My memory of the place was special. My mother had a business. She was a beautician. And my father worked a long ways away. But it was fun. Sometimes my cousin lived with us and my grandmother lived with us. When I was a small child, as soon as it got dark outside, we had to come in the house. We would be out playing,

and as soon as it got dark, we would have to go in. Then when I got to be a teenager, if I was out somewhere, usually I had to be in the house by ten.

My brothers and I used to act up in church. We'd go to church and the choir would be singing, and these ladies would be hitting the high notes. To us, they didn't sound that good. Sometimes, we couldn't help it. My brothers and I would look at each other and we would just *fall out*. It wasn't funny -- it was silly. We did silly things as kids.

My brothers and I, we had a sibling rivalry going on. I was the girl, so I tended to get special treatment, which they didn't like — it caused friction. My brothers would raise a stink, "*Susan got so-and-so and we didn't get anything.*" Or something like that. I'm going through that now with my grandchildren. Everything you do with one you have to do with the others.

My mother had a business when I was young. She was a beautician, and had a beauty shop. When I was a little girl, I was around the beauty shop a lot. My mother gave me little jobs. She started me out sweeping up hair and washing combs and brushes. Then, as I got older, I had more chores to do in the beauty shop. By the time I was 13 or 14, I was the shampoo girl. That's how I made money when I was a teenager—working in my mother's beauty shop, working hard.

I still work hard! I learned to work hard when I was a child. I had chores at home too, because my mother worked, so I did a lot of housework. On Saturdays, there was a lot of dusting, and cleaning the kitchen, and washing dishes. The bathrooms had to be cleaned spotless. My brothers had to do the floors. In the summertime, my brothers had to help my father outside. I mean,

we did chores! Kids don't have many chores now, but we did *a lot*.

My mother always told me this: *'If you get 10 dollars, save a dollar, put a dollar under your mattress. Every time you get money, save a little bit, and then when hard times come or time comes when there is no money, you have a little stash.'* That has helped me out so much. Just having \$25 would make me feel like I wasn't broke. You know what I mean? To have five dollars in your pocket, even one dollar, you're not broke. But if you have nothing, you feel broke. You can feel down and out without any money, so it's important to have something so you can say, *'I'm not broke, I've got this in my pocket.'*

I had a best friend when I was a child and her name was Harriet. I really liked Harriet. It was fun going over to her house, because she had brothers and sisters. No— she didn't have any brothers, just sisters. But it was just a lot of fun. Her mother and her father were fun. They would dance with us when we were dancing. We loved to dance. We loved to dance when we were teenagers, too. Harriet would know all the latest steps, and she would show me how to do them. It was just nice being with her.

When I was a child, I had dreams of being a model. I thought I was cute, so I wanted to be a model. My parents wanted me to teach, which I wound up doing anyway. But I wanted to do something that was glamorous and fun and interesting. I didn't want a dull life. I wanted an interesting life, a fun life, a glamorous life.

One of the things I had always wanted to do, since I was little was, was to drive. Where I came from in Ohio you could get your junior license at 15, and you could get a license at 16. My dad really didn't want me to have that kind

of freedom, to be driving around places. So, you know, there was this guy, who was kind of like my boyfriend. He had a car and he let me drive, and that was such a thrill.

My favorite thing to do at sixteen was probably hanging out with my friends, listening to music, looking in the mirror at myself. Homework—we had so much of it. So that was the first thing I did when I got home—homework. I went to a Latin high school, which was a lot of hard work. It was a large school, and it was more suburban, I would say. It was a very good school. Most of the kids who graduated from that school went on to college, so you were expected to go to college. My parents were really, really pleased that I went to Walnut Hills, that was the name of the school. At that time, there weren't a whole lot of Black children who went to that school.

One of my favorite teachers was my Latin teacher because she was very patient with me. Latin was something I didn't have the faintest idea what was going on with that language. It was not like Spanish, or French, or English because people didn't even speak it. So she helped me through it, and was very patient, and understood what I was going through.

Oh yes, 'the sixties' were exciting. There were all kinds of things going on socially and politically. Like the civil rights movement — but I didn't go down south, and I didn't go to any marches. I was really aware of what was going with civil rights and I did go to hear Malcolm X one time when he was at an event in Harlem. I was young, and I was kind of like a hippie flower child. I don't know, I was kind of this free spirit and liked the music, and going to concerts, and that kind of thing.

I got married right out of high school. I always knew that I was going to marry a tall man. I just knew it. Even on a date, if a guy wasn't tall, I just wasn't that interested, because he wasn't the one I was looking for. I was looking for someone who was really tall. So, I saw this really tall guy, and he took really long steps. I had seen him walking down the hall one day, and I said, "Wow. Who is he?" And my friend said, "*Oh that's Bill Thompson. He's really nice.*" I said, "*Okay, would you introduce me?*" So, she introduced me. Then one day in our Latin club, we were celebrating the Ides of March—which was when Julius Caesar was killed—and our whole Latin class went to this Italian restaurant. We had made togas to wear for the Ides of March. So, I was coming home from school when it was all over, and he saw me walking down the street with my toga on. He said, "*Why have you got a sheet wrapped around you?*" I said, "*This is not a sheet, this is a toga. It's the Ides of March!*" So we started talking, and I gave him my telephone number, and he called me.

My husband and I were very young, like 18, when we got married. And we decided that *he* would go to college first, and *then I* would go. But it took him a really long time— like 10 years— to get through college, because he was working and going to school part-time. Then it was my turn to go. I think I was around 30. My first college was Hunter College in New York City. That was a big deal for me. It was a long time since high school, and then you jump into college and you have to do math all over again, college math. It had been a long time since I had done writing and stuff, but I did well, and that was very empowering for me.

Then I went to Mass College of Art here in Boston. I also went to MIT in the

Community Fellows Program. And, I would say that I'm *still* going to school, because learning is an on-going project for me. I'm always reading books. And now I get all these learning videos that teach you how to do things in art. I love that! In my job at the Museum of Fine Arts, up until last year, they used to let us take courses at the Museum School, so I was always taking courses there, too. I'm always learning.

I had my children early— when I was 18— so I was working and raising three children and trying to figure out what kind of life I was going to have. I had two boys and a girl: Donald, Jacqueline Faye, and William. I think one of my sons should have been an artist. He was very good with art in high school, and I encouraged him with all my might, '*You should go to art school, you should major in art!*' So when he went to college, he majored in business. "*Business? You should be an artist.*" But he said, '*Mom, I see your struggle, and right now I just want material things. I want to make money first.*' So that's what he's doing now, he's in business. My other son was more into music and doing productions, but it took capital to do that, and he didn't have a lot of money, so that didn't work out. I think maybe it could have if he didn't give up on it. Now he is a diesel mechanic. My daughter Jacqueline likes flower arranging, and making these beautiful elaborate arrangements. She went to school and took courses in flower arranging. So, they all have their abilities.

I would say that the happiest moment in my life would be getting married, or meeting my husband, and having children. My husband is 'Bill' to our friends, but at home we call him 'Big Bear.' I must say that our children turned out good. When your children turn out good, you've done okay. I

think that's what most people want — they want their children to be achievers, to be able to support themselves, and to be happy individuals able to realize their life's purpose. So, if my children are doing all that, I feel like I did good.

I think my biggest adventure was going to China. I went to China twice, but the last time I went to exhibit my artwork. The trip was set up with six African-American artists who were in that exhibit. We traveled all through China and went to all kinds of different places. And everywhere we went, we met Chinese artists and met with art associations. They would talk about their art; they liked our art and were interested in our art. So, it was a big honor to go there and have our work exhibited.

I have admired a lot of people—my mother being one of them, because she was a business woman. And she had a wonderful, even temper. She never really got that upset with people. We could always bring our friends home and she would be, *'Hi, come on in. Do you want something to eat?'* And then she'd start talking to them like they were her friends or something. So that was a model for me.

But in more recent times the person that I admired was a man named Allan Rohan Crite. He was an artist. I met him in the 1970's at an art exhibit and he invited me to come see his work— his "etchings," as he called them. So I went to his house, and it just blew my mind. From the bottom floor up to the fourth floor, there was nothing but art. The art covered every inch of the wall. Everywhere was art. And I couldn't believe one person had created all that art. It was just so much.

So we developed a friendship, and once a week, I used to cook and take it over to him. He was an old man, so I would take him some dinner, and we would talk about art. So it was about a year or two that I had known him before I told him that I liked to do art too, and that I was an artist. How could I tell this man that I'm an artist when he has *all this*, and I've got a few pieces? I had to know what he thought about it though. So, I showed him a couple of pieces I had done. And he said, '*Do you have more of these?*' And I said, '*Yeah.*' He said, '*I want to see everything.*' So he came to my house in Cambridge, and he looked at everything I had done, and he decided I was an artist.

Then he said, '*Well, you know what. I have some space up on the third floor, and you could come there and do your art.*' So he gave me kind of a studio space, and that was the first studio I ever had. He made it a goal that he wanted to be the launching pad for my art career, and that's what he did. He told everybody that I was this fabulous artist, when really I just had a few pieces. But he told everybody that, and introduced me as this fabulous artist. And because he was so well known, of course, everybody believed him. And that's how it started.

Getting studio space was an exhilarating moment. I've had a lot of good moments—especially when you're an artist, there are a lot of opportunities. So when Allan Crite was honored at Harvard's 350th anniversary, he invited me to be his guest at this big celebration. And at this celebration dinner, Prince Charles was there, and a lot of famous people were there. I just couldn't believe that I was there too with all these famous people that you hear about in the news. So things like that have been exciting. Also, when

Maya Angelou bought a piece of my work—that was an exhilarating moment.

I don't draw well. I didn't really pursue it until I met Allan Crite, but he kind of pushed me out there. So I just started doing more and more. And the more I did, the better I became. And that's all you have to do—is to do it.

But the best job I ever had was teaching at the Children's Art Center in the South End. I think I really liked it because it was such a pretty place to be. The building was recessed and had a courtyard. And straight across the building, it was glass. The whole building was glass. It was just really pretty in the wintertime. You would see it snowing, and you were in this glass house. It was like Cinderella or something. It was really fun there. The little kids came to the art center to do art.

What was the hardest thing I ever did? Quitting smoking! When a person is addicted to a habit, any kind of habit, and you've done it day after day for years, it's very, very hard to stop. It could be alcohol, or drugs, or cigarettes, and cigarettes are especially treacherous because you can just go to the store and get them. They're so accessible. From what I've been reading, they put ingredients in cigarettes to keep you addicted, that's why you can't stop. It's not the tobacco, it's what's in it that keeps it addictive. So it took all of my will power to just not do it for one day, and I said, '*If I can stop for one day, I'll stop.*' So it was, one day. And then I said, '*Well, maybe I can do it for a second day.*' And it went like that until I stopped. That was very hard for me, and it was a personal challenge.

When I get up in the morning, I look forward to a day of teaching or a day of

doing art. I always have an agenda that I want to work on or I am working on one of the goals I have set. Always, the night before, I usually figure it out in my mind what's going to happen the next day so that the day won't go past and be wasted, or I really haven't done anything. Sometimes people stick stuff in your agenda that you didn't really want to do it, but you didn't have anything planned.

Right now in my studio I have at least fifty unfinished projects that I would like to finish at some point, but one of my problems has been not managing time. Because I work, have a family, *and* I'm involved in community stuff, juggling all that and making time to do art is sometimes difficult. I'll put something away and I won't see it again for weeks, months, or years. Then, it's like, '*Oh, I remember this.*' And a year's passed since I stuck it somewhere. So, I just want to tie up loose ends — there's a lot more art to do.

What advice do I have for you? Thinking about your life, thinking about what you do, everything you do has a consequence. There were a lot of consequences in my life that I see—looking back—I wasn't really thinking. I had children young because I wasn't thinking. Maybe you should go to school first, and see what your options are? Are children what you really want to do now? If you learn to think that way, you'll say, '*No, I'm not ready for that now, or I really want to travel a bit before I have responsibilities.*' So that is what I'd like you do, consider your options: Think about — *Is this the best thing for me to do right now? Should I go to college or, maybe I don't want to go to college? Maybe I want to work for a while to see what is out there for me to do.*' Or, maybe you'd like to travel— travel is a growth experience. '*Maybe I'd like to see some of the world.*'

Also, I would say, keeping your mind and your body pure is another thing. Don't do things that will harm your body, or are just not good for you like drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and things that will eventually pull you down. Don't do it! Respect your body. Love yourself to the tenth degree, to the ultimate degree. And keep your mind pure. Don't let in negative thoughts. Because we operate off our thoughts, when we're *thinking about* negative things, we're *going to do* negative things. You know, if your mind tells you, Let me go in a store and steal this, you might do it because you were thinking it, you've got to watch what happens in your mind and keep it righteous.

Also, mentoring. If you can help someone, it's really important to do that. If you know something that will help somebody else grow and develop, it's really important that you share what you do know. Share your knowledge. If you have brothers, younger brothers or sisters, cousins, anybody that you can help, you should.