

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.

Thanks to Julia Martin for her ongoing support of the project and for her help in providing space for activities. Thanks to AAMARP Studios for hosting the teens

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

Anthony B. Williams

Interviewed by Marjourie Jimenez, Merilin Castillo, and Emily Cobb

My name is Anthony B. Williams, but my nickname is Tony. When we were kids, sometimes my friends would call me '*Tony Baloney*.'

I was born on June 11, 1946 in Naples, Italy. So, I was born in Italy, but I grew up at the Bromley Heath Housing Project, among other places. It had just been built in 1954, so we were one of the first families to live there. I liked it there because it had a new bathroom with a bathtub and a shower, and lots of heat! Another thing I liked about it was that it was seven stories high, and there were four apartments on each floor, so there were 28 families in my building. That meant there were *lots* of friends right in the building. There were a lot of people from different backgrounds. So, it was a nice place to live at that time.

I liked being in Jamaica Plain because there were a lot of trees. You could go right up to Jamaica Pond and take sailing lessons. You could go over to Curtis Hall and learn how to swim. But you couldn't go out in a sailboat unless you passed the swimming test at Curtis Hall first. I remember it was hard to tread water. You had to tread water for two or three minutes and swim three or four of laps to pass the swimming test. In the 1950's they would have these huge fireworks at Jamaica Pond every Fourth of July. Everyone would walk up from the projects so the whole street was swarming with people. Everyone had their blankets and their picnics laid out around the edge of the Pond, so you could hardly find a place to sit down!

When I was small I lived with my mother and father. My mother's name was Addolorata and my father's name was Edgar. His nickname was "Buddy"

because he was everybody's buddy! I was the oldest of nine kids — I had four sisters and four brothers: Frank, Mary, Richard, Anna, Edgar, Rita, Kenny, and Dolores was the youngest.

The most important thing I learned from my family growing up was that we looked out for each other and we took care of each other. We were very poor, so it was hard to feed us sometimes. That was before food stamps. My father was a cook. He cooked soul food and my mother cooked Italian food, so they knew how to make a lot of rice and potatoes and pasta. We ate simple food; we didn't have a lot of meat except maybe on Sundays.

So, being a kid was mostly about playing, and trying to get a job so we would have spending money to buy snacks. I worked at Stop & Shop, but it was the *old* Stop & Shop. It was up where Bank of America is now. So, I used to work there on Saturdays. All the boys would wait outside of the front door; and we would have a wagon, like a red wagon. When people would come out with their bags, they'd say, "*Would you take these over to my house.*" So, we just followed them down Amory Street or Centre Street and took the groceries home for them. This was before most people had cars, so they lived within walking distance. We could make a quarter per trip, or sometimes we'd even get fifty cents. That was a lot of money back then. So, that was my first job. We were all entrepreneurs — we worked for ourselves!

I went to Boston Public Schools. First, I went to the Phillip Brooks School in Roxbury, and then when we moved to Jamaica Plain, I went to the Wyman School. Then I went to the Kennedy School. It used to be the Lowell School, but they tore it down and built a newer school. That was right down beside Mozart Park on Centre St. near the new Stop and Shop. Anyway, then I went to

the Curley Middle School on Centre St. I have a big photo of my class from when we were in eighth grade. That was the Class of '61. Back then, you got a diploma for graduating from 8th grade. Then, I went to Roslindale High School, but it's not there any more either. Now it's Rogerson House, an elderly residence. After high school, I got right into dance.

My friend Earl Elsey was my first friend when I moved into the projects. He just passed away recently. I liked Earl because his father looked like my father. He was a biracial kid like me, and he was a nice guy. We were two of the first families who moved in to 275 Centre St. There were only four other families living there when we moved there in October of 1954. There was the Thompson family, the Murphy family, the Pierce family, us, and a few others.

Every one of those families had a lot of kids, so we had a little gang. We all played football and baseball, and we mostly made fun of each other. It was our little group from the neighborhood. We use to have fights sometimes. When somebody said something you didn't like, you might say, '*You better take that back.*' But that didn't happen that often, and within our little group, it was more like joking, or what we called "ranking."

After school, we used to come home from school, have a snack, and watch TV. Back then we didn't have the kind of homework that kids have now even in elementary school. For us that didn't start until we got to junior high. We just had fun all the time. I loved my childhood. It was fun to just get up and do stuff. We always used to go on adventures. Oh, we used to love going to the beach. We used to go to the amusement park at Revere Beach; you could take the train out there. That was fun to be able to have a little money to go on the rides. We'd have to earn the money, but we really loved that.

So mostly, it was a pretty normal, safe childhood. We had two parents who loved us and looked after us; and, we had lots of aunts and uncles, so we were protected. We went to Blessed Sacrament Church on Centre Street; I got confirmed there. So the church would look after us, and the parents of other kids in the building would look after us, so there were always eyes on us, and we knew if we did something wrong, they would tell our parents about it. But they were really just looking out for us.

Well, one exciting thing I remember when I lived down by Jackson Square — I think this was about 1955. Way before they put in this new Orange line, there were tracks up above the street up on an embankment. Instead of the trains being underground like they are now, there was a bridge over Centre St. and the street dipped down under the bridge. So, this one time there was a flood on the street. I guess it was the worst flood since this last big rain we just had — I think it was a hurricane or something. The water was so deep on the street under the bridge that we went swimming in it.. We didn't even think about it being polluted or anything, because we were just kids! But, back at that same time, there was a polio epidemic. There were some kids who couldn't walk because they got polio. So we all got vaccinated at school. We didn't think about it at that time, but I suppose we could have gotten polio from swimming in that water!

There was one sort of scary thing that I remember when I was about 8 or 9 years old. There was a gang war outside of my windows down at the project. We had heard that the older guys were going to have a fight, so we were told to stay in and not go outside. I remember seeing these boys being chased, they may have had knives, but there were no guns back then. It was a little scary

though because they were right outside. And another scary thing I remember from childhood. There was a young guy who lived on the seventh floor where we lived. He was around 20, and he kind of went berserk, and threatened that he was going to jump off the roof of the building. His parents and the police were trying to talk him down. There was a huge crowd of people gathered, and there were some stupid kids yelling “*jump, jump!*” I felt bad for the guy because he was having some issues.

Yes, my parents were very strict about when we had to be home. At a certain age, we had to be in at 9 o’clock or when it got dark. If the adults were sitting outside on the bench, then we could stay out later. My mother would wait up, and if you were late, you caught hell from her. But I actually left home when I was a senior in high school — I guess I was seventeen. So, I was out on my own and supported myself because it was too crowded at home. I’d come back from time to time if I didn’t have a place to stay or I didn’t have any money, I’d come back and ‘crash’ in the apartment.

I didn’t get in trouble with my parents that often. My brother Frank and I would do something bad once in a while — I can’t even remember what it was. We didn’t hurt anybody or anything, but we knew we were going to catch it when my father came home. We got ‘strapped’ and I could tell my father hated to do it, but that’s what parents did in those days for punishment. Whereas if I really ticked off my Mom, she would come after me with the broom and I’d try to hide under the bed. She had that Italian temper. But they loved us, so we knew that. I didn’t get into too much trouble with them, but I did get into trouble with the law. I was a delinquent going to court and things like that.

Well, before I got into ballet — which is the best job I've ever had — when I was a kid, I worked at Fenway Park. I was part of the cleaning crew that cleaned up the stands at the end of the game, so we could get in and watch the game for free after the 7th inning. That's when I was going to high school in the early 60's, and I liked that a lot. I had very few jobs until I got into dancing, but I would say that job at Fenway Park was probably my favorite job when I was young.

I think my first date was when I was 17. I was a late bloomer! Back then it was rare for kids to 'go together.' It was more like you'd go someplace together, but you were more like friends. You might hold hands or kiss a little bit, but I didn't even do that because I was so shy. But dancing did a lot to improve my self-esteem, so then I started to develop confidence.

When I was your age I was already dancing. I started dancing ballet, which was kind of a weird thing for a kid from the projects, especially a boy. Because most people don't know anything about ballet. I was obsessed with ballet. So, that's all I thought about was dancing. I just trained and danced every day for four or five hours a day. I started late, so I had to catch up with everyone else because most of them started dancing when they were younger. So, that's what I did.

I studied ballet at the Boston Ballet School. I studied with the founder. Her name was E. Virginia Williams. She's passed away now, but she started with a dance school, then she had a small dance company for kids. Then it grew into what it is today — one of the world's best ballet companies!

How I got interested in dance was that I was doing gymnastics. I was only about 15 at this time. Some of the older guys who were doing gymnastics with me at the gym —they were talking about doing ballet. They had heard that the Russian gymnasts were doing ballet to help their gymnastics. So one of those guys went to take some ballet classes and I went along. Then, when I saw what they were doing, I thought it looked pretty interesting, so that was it! That's how I got into dance.

When I was your age I dreamed of having independence and a job— and of being able to buy nice clothes, go to college, or travel. I was searching for something, which I found when I got into ballet. That became my passion then, and that's still with me today! Now I teach and I choreograph, and I still have a passion for dance. Dance is a great thing for kids to do because it gives them discipline. We have some kids here at my dance school that started when they were just 4 years old. Then they might stay until they're 12 or 13 and they've grown up! They look just like miniature adults wearing bras and make-up, but I remember them when they were just little 'rug rats.'

The hardest thing I had to learn? Well, because I started ballet so late, I had to learn all of the steps – you know, what was what! It all came pretty easily to me because I was been an athlete so I could do it well. But I had private lessons, and I had to work on pirouettes and other turns, and things like that. I think working on my confidence was important too, because I was young and I was very shy. Being in ballet, you're exposed to other people who watch you. That was something that I struggled with a bit. When you're in the studio you are more conscious of people watching you, but when I was on stage I couldn't see people in front of me, so I was fine with that. Sometimes, if you're doing a

solo, there might be 3000 people out there. So in your head, you know that if you trip or stumble, they're all going to see that. It puts pressure on you. But you get used to that and it didn't really scare me. I was very expressive; I had to act, and be in character, and I had no problem with that! But, I think it's hard to prepare yourself to go on stage. In general, I don't know if there is a happiest moment for me, but just being on stage performing — which I don't really do any more — makes me happy. It's a real natural 'high' being on stage.

When I started my dance school I had to learn about a lot of stuff. You have to have a lease with the place you rent. You have to know how to market your school so you can get people to come to take the classes. Then you have to have a computer and special software to keep your accounts. We have a special software called *DanceWorks* that helps us manage everything. Then you have to find folks who can teach the classes because I couldn't teach them all. Like I don't do Hip Hop or Tap, so I have to find people to do that. I taught all of the Ballet classes.

I thought about starting the school about 25 years ago, but I didn't think it was a good time to do it then. So finally, in 2000, I did it; I started the school in Jamaica Plain. The main thing with a dance school or any type of business, you have to know how to deal with people! The most important thing is to help the kids who come to the school gain confidence and feel good about themselves. Then, if the kids are happy with what they're doing, the parents are happy, too. So that's also a part of doing business! You not only have to have good classes, but you need space, faculty, administrative support, and things like that.

Looking back, one thing that I didn't do that I wish I had done was go to college. That was always a dream of mine. I went to dance school instead, but it wasn't like an academy. If I had been young now, I probably would have gone to the Boston Arts Academy and then on to the Boston Conservatory. But I didn't know about those kinds of things back then. Also, when I was a kid, if you got into a dance career, you had to make a choice. You either had a dance career where you danced professionally, or you would go to college and do something else. I just got into dance around the time I would have gone to college, and I was so passionate about what I was doing, it was like God saying, *'Do this and I'm going to save your soul!'* Also, at that time being a biracial kid from the projects, either thing would have been unlikely for me to do— a dance career or college! So I was lucky because I liked it and I had talent, so I was very fortunate.

Yes, I've done a lot of traveling through dance. I traveled to Israel, and I liked that a lot. We danced in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and in a city called Caesarea. I also danced in Austria, Portugal and Norway. And, besides going there, I went on tour to South America, and I went to Brazil and Cuba. Cuba was one of the most exciting places I went to! I danced in Havana and all throughout South America and Mexico.

My greatest accomplishment? Well, I have three sons and I'm very proud of them. Even though I don't agree with all the things they do, I love them anyway. I'm happy that my kids still talk to me! I have a son Alexander, who is 22; and I have twin boys, Jeremy, and Spencer, who are 18, they'll be 19 in August. We have a good relationship now, so I'm proud of that. But it wasn't always easy to raise them because I was separated from their mother, Julie. I

always worked with their Mom to provide for them, but I think they're closer to her because she's their Mom! I was always out doing this stuff and trying to make an income to help pay for them.

So, one son is in college on an ROTC scholarship. Another son is in the Navy, he worked on an aircraft carrier — and he just came back from 8 months in the Gulf. He works in intelligence, so I don't know exactly what he does. My third son doesn't quite know what he wants to do yet. So he's going to travel for a while to find out what he wants to do.

I guess the biggest adventure I've ever had was seeing the birth of my first son, and not knowing what he was going to look like. I remember the nurse saying to his mom, '*push hadda*'...she had a real Boston accent, '*push hadda.*' Then I saw his head pop out and I saw his face and I thought, '*Oh my God, that's my son!*'

Outside of my kids, I'm most proud of the fact that —you know, I might not be rich —but most people who know me respect what I've done with the school. I've just tried to pass on a good opportunity to any kid who comes along by setting an example for them. In my school, and in the dance company, I have to deal with a lot of kids. And I think that's what keeps me young — working with the kids.

To me, it's important to remember that I started the school, and why I started the Urban Nutcracker, was to have a safe, creative place where kids and their families can come. The families that come here are from all walks of life, all backgrounds, and races, all economic groups. We have parents who are poor, ones who are professionals, we have gay and straight parents, foster parents and

birth parents, and they all work together for a common goal. So that's what I want to leave behind. I think if the world were more like this place, we'd have a happier, safer world. We need to talk to each other about these things and see what we all have in common. We're all really the same. So, my hope is that we can all live in peace.

Kids who come into this atmosphere feel safe. They have all their friends who are interested in the same thing, and it creates a place for them to express themselves. If they work very hard, they can see how they can grow and succeed as a dancer. So, it's not just the dance class, it's the kid behind the dance class that makes this work rewarding. We want to make sure that a kid has learned how to live independently. At some point, you have to be on your own when you grow up. It's important to have the tools to take care of yourself, to not be exploited or taken advantage of, and to know how to pick and choose the people you want to be with.

I have a lot to be happy about, but I think that probably the hardest thing I've had to face was seeing my mother die. You know I spent close to sixty years having my mother with me, so that's always hard for anyone who loses a parent. Also, we had a boy who danced in the Nutcracker who died of the flu last year. He was from here in Jamaica Plain. That was very hard on all of the kids who knew him, and they all took on his last name on FaceBook as a tribute to him. Then, in the same month Dr. Michael Shannon, who danced in the Nutcracker, died of a stroke. He was in great shape, too, but he had been on a long plane trip with his wife after a vacation in Argentina. He had developed a blood clot on the flight and when he got back, he died very suddenly. So that

was hard, because he was a close friend of mine. It's harder when you get older because people start to pass.

I am grateful for all the good friends I've had. Stephen and Earl were close friends, and both of them have passed away. Then there's Bill and Illanga, we've been friends for a long time! And, I heard that an *old friend* who I've known since third grade — Hakim— is also being interviewed for the Peace Drum Project this year, so I look forward to seeing him again.

People I admire? Well, Nelson Mandela is one, although I've never met him. He sacrificed his life for a cause to fight for equality for all people no matter what their race. It's like being a saint, almost— making a sacrifice for others.

What advice would I leave you with? Well, my father had his troubles. He was an alcoholic. He had been in World War II *and* he raised nine kids, so he did the best he could. When we were growing up, if we ever said a bad word about someone, he would get so upset. He would always have a smile for someone when he met them. We was very caring and a friendly person, very sociable, and he set a good example for us that way. That's really important in life. So, don't hold grudges, or hold onto feelings like: '*Oh, I don't like that person or this person.*' It's not good to hold stuff inside. So, I think that's good advice to remember.