

The Peace Drum Project

Elder's Stories - 2007

This year's project was funded by the: Alice Willard Dorr Foundation, Clipper Ship Charitable Foundation, Janey Fund, Stride Rite Foundation, and Linda F. Zuker Memorial Youth Fund, and by the contributions of many generous individuals and businesses. CAI is also supported in part by CommunityWorks and the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a State Agency.

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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Juanita Brown

Interviews with by Katherine Colon and Susan Porter

My name is Juanita Brown and I was born in Huntsville, Alabama in 1933. But I didn't grow up in Huntsville, I grew up in Brockton, MA. It was urban, but like a small town. I lived with my mother and father. My mother's name was Ora Lockhart and my father was Oscar Johnson. I went to school there, graduated from Brockton High School, and got married there.

There was also a Catholic High School in Brockton. When I was in grade school I'd walk by the convent, and the nuns would be out front waiting for me. I use to go to the store for them and do errands. And when I would bring the things back from the store, we would go out in their garden and have tea. They gave me a beautiful cross as a gift, so I took it to school with me, and someone stole it. That was sad.

I was the oldest child in my family. It was seven years before my next brother was born. I had five brothers altogether. Two are dead now, but yes, I did do a lot of baby-sitting. I loved my brothers, but I had a lot of responsibility. My mother and father both had to work, so being the oldest — and the only girl — a lot fell on me! My baby brother is now 52. I was 21 years old when he was born. My brothers were Lawrence, John, Richard, Wayne and Thomas.

During the Second World War my father was in the service, and we worried about him a lot. That kept us all very close as a family. Everyone shared things during the war. We lived with my aunt and her husband, and we had ration stamps for everything. I think they were blue for canned goods, red for meat, and another color for clothing and shoes.

My father was stationed in Italy and he was gone almost from the start of the war. They use to let us send V-letters, so one day I went out to mail a letter to my father, and when I came home he was sitting in his chair. I couldn't believe it, I was so happy!

When I was your age we use to like to have fun! We would go to the movies, to dances, ice skating and roller skating. I also had a bicycle, but I really liked ice skating. I had good friends when I was young and some of them are still my friends. My best friend was May Pearl. We grew up together, and we even had our tonsils out together, God rest her soul, I lost her at a very early age because she had heart problems. I have been blessed all my life with very good friends. You get out of your friendships what you put into them, and I have always valued my friends.

I met my husband Harold R. Brown when I was sixteen. We've been married 54 years. He was from Boston and Cambridge, and he use to come to Brockton to take me out. Back then, a boy had to be carefully looked over by the girl's father before they could go out! Even though we would go out on what you might call a "group date" with a lot of other couples, my father made sure the boy came in the house to meet him. He would ask where we were going, then tell us the time that we had to be back. He'd say *"and I don't want to hear about any flat tires, running out of gas, or other excuses."* My dad knew how it worked!

I liked all my subjects during school. Back in my day we went to school to learn so there was no question as to what we were doing there. After I finished high school, I went into nurses training. At first, I wanted to be a doctor, then I went into nursing. It was the best job I ever had because you were helping people. I got my license to practice, then I got married, so I didn't work full time until later. I went back to work during the polio epidemic in the 1950's because they needed more nurses. I worked at Brockton Hospital then, and it was very hard seeing young children die.

Yes, I did get in trouble with my parents a few times. There was a woman in our neighborhood, Mrs. Humphrey, who watched out for all of the kids. If we were doing something wrong, she would let us know, but in those days there was a lot of that — it's like that expression "it takes a village to raise a child." The neighborhood was the village.

Anyhow, one day my friend Tina and I were sitting on the stoop smoking a cigarette. Tina's brother came along and said we looked like bad girls! So he went home and told his mother and she called my mother. The next thing I knew my mother said she would *"sit me on the steps all summer if I did that again."*

The scariest thing that ever happened to me? Well, I guess that would have to be losing people that I cared about. The funniest thing? One time I was going out to a party and when I got there I realized I had put my dress on inside out. That was funny.

There have been quite a few people that I have admired, or who have been important to me. They were people who cared, who took time with me, and who showed me the right and wrong things of life. Some were people in my family, and some were others. I remember there was a family in Brockton when I was growing up —the Baker family —they had 12 children. Every one of those boys would tip their hat when they saw you. They went to Lincoln Congregational Church where my aunt's husband was a minister. You know that when all of those kids got through with school, the father went back and finished high school too. They were really very inspiring.

I like all kinds of music except rap. My favorite song would probably be Gladys Knight's *You're the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me*. No, I don't play music myself, but I love music. My favorite TV shows would probably be things on PBS — public television. I like those because you learn a lot. I love documentaries and mysteries, and also love the shows about animals.

I like all colors, but my favorite would probably be turquoise. My favorite season is Spring because everything is blooming and it's so pretty.