

Norma Cartwright (Nate Smith House)

Interviewed by Jean Cadet and Shaunté Smith (2005)

My name is Norma Carol Cartwright. I was born in Boston, MA in the Roxbury area on October 6, 1936. I lived with my parents, four brothers and two sisters. My mother's name was Fanny Walden. We had a big family. I'm the second youngest. We had a dog named Billy. We lived on Hazelwood Street, and my grandparents lived on Munroe Street in Roxbury. In our neighborhood there were all kinds of people. Many of the people were of the Jewish faith, and we all got along fine.

I went to the Boston schools. I graduated from high school then I went to a couple of colleges — I went to Roxbury Community College, and I went to that business school on Commonwealth Ave. I think it was Newbury College.

I love the springtime because everything starts waking up ... the trees, the flowers, it's lovely. I love Oldies but Goodies, and Rhythms & Blues, but I don't like that Hip Hop stuff! My favorite song? The Great Pretender. I tried to play piano when I was younger, but it didn't work out.

Yes, I like sports. My favorite sport is basketball. I played with my sisters and brothers, and we had a lot of fun. We all played basketball out in the street when we were young. And we played jump rope and Hopscotch, too. The part of the neighborhood that we lived in was called "the hill." We use to get together and hang out in front of the drugstore on the corner of Humboldt Ave. We had good clean fun. We use to love to tell jokes!

When we were little we all played together, boys and girls. As I got older, I liked the boys, of course. I use to go to school right across the street from my house. It was called the Boardman School. Now it's the Martin Luther King Towers! When I was young, I loved to read — that was my hobby. After school I'd have to baby sit, but I liked that because I love children. I also worked at the hospital. I still have one friend that I grew up with. She still comes by to visit me here. Her name is Betty Ann Govan. We've been friends for seventy-something years!

We use to go to Martha's Vineyard on Cape Cod every summer when we were kids. We went to Oak Bluffs. I remember that kids would jump off the pier and dive for coins, but I couldn't do it because I couldn't swim.

During the Depression, you needed red tokens to get food like sugar and flour. I remember, my mother had to go up to get them. And, we had so many kids in our family, we could get more "tokens," so she would give some to our neighbors. That's where the expression "You're not worth a red nickel" came from.

When I was your age, I went to dances for entertainment. Back then we called them "socials." That's how we talked back then. Oh yes, we had a curfew. We had to be in

by midnight. Did I get in trouble because of that curfew? All the time! But, most of my trouble was from talking back.

What was life like when I was a teenager? Well, as soon as I turned 15, I got sick, and I was sick for about four years. I had to drop out of school, so I didn't really have any kind of teenage life, but I made up for it later. I was in Boston City Hospital, and they saved my life twice. I had a kidney infection, and I lost all my hair the second time I went in. The infection went all the way up to my head.

Later, I went back to school. I went to Roxbury Memorial High School for Girls. I think it's Boston Latin Academy now. It's on the corner of Townsend and Warren Streets. I loved high school even though I was older than the other kids. I was voted Most School Spirit! I remember the class play and Class Night. I didn't graduate until 1959, but I didn't care, though, because I wanted the high school diploma.

When I was nineteen, we went to Washington DC, and it was a beautiful trip! I saw everything there was to see—the White House, the Treasury, I even went to a session of Congress. That was when John F. Kennedy was still alive.

In our neighborhood during World War II, we use to have blackouts. You had to put the lights out, and they had air raid wardens walking up and down the street. If they saw a light, they'd yell "Put that light out," because we were at war.

One of the biggest events I remember from the 1960's was when Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. The people just went crazy. I remember people lit fires all up and down Blue Hill Ave They tore up the avenue lighting fires and burning all the businesses. A lot of the businesses were owned by Jewish families, and many of them moved out after that.

I remember a dance from the 1960's that was called The Bump. I loved to dance, but now I can't even walk.

I didn't drive until I was in my twenties. This bus driver named Bill taught me how to drive. I was afraid at first, going up and down Blue Hill Ave. But I did it! I had my oldest daughter then, Sandy. She's in Atlanta, now, going to school. The farthest I've ever driven was to Alabama. I've also been to New York City, and Buffalo, NY.

The biggest adventure I ever had was the birth of my twins. That was a trip! I have three daughters, their names are Sandy, Charlotte and Charlene. The last two were twins. My husband is Lester Cartwright.

Yes, I wish I had finished college. I went to Newbury College. I left because I had a family and I was going to school part time. It was too much. And the hardest thing I've ever had to face was my stroke. I lost my independence, and that was really hard.

What makes me happy? My twin grandchildren, all of my grandchildren!

My advice to you is to stay in school and watch your health. That's most important, because when you lose your abilities like hearing, sight, or the use of your hands, when you can't function and take care of yourself, it's an awful thing. And thank God for every day he gives you because life is so precious.