

Peace Drum Project
The Elders' Stories
2010

This year's Peace Drum Project was funded by: The Janey Fund, and by many generous individual donors. Cooperative Artists Institute is also supported in part by CommunityWorks, and by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a State Agency.

Copyright © 2010, Cooperative Artists Institute

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

Gary Ames Rickson

Interviewed by Eric Robinson & Alex Menjivar

My name is Gary A. Rickson. I was born at Boston City Hospital in 1942, and I grew up in Roxbury in the Lenox Street Projects. We lived on Trotter Court and then on Lenox Street. I grew up with my mother, Rosalind Raynor, and my twin sisters, Pat and Paula. My father, George Rickson, Jr., ran away somewhere, you know. My sisters were fifteen months older than me, and they looked a lot like me. They were the Gemini twins — we all had the blue eyes and blonde hair. When I was growing up, we put on plays, played marbles, Meet the Pig, and Hopscotch, and had little track runs. We had the jungle gym to swing on and all, but they don't have that here now. On Saturdays, we could ride bikes — rented bikes — for a quarter a day. Yes, you could rent bikes in those days! We would ride all around, and you could walk anywhere. You could leave your house — kids can't do that today.

When my mother came home, I'd better have book in my hand — something like the dictionary or an encyclopedia. So, I'm just letting you know, life wasn't like all you heard was hip-hop and swears. I mean there was a time when people went to church, and we went to church every Sunday. My mother was a beautiful educator. So we had a colorful foundation, even in those days — and the radio was 'kickin.' There were radio plays, and jazz on the radio— people like Billy Eckstein and Ella Fitzgerald.

Me and my sisters would make up stuff. We went to the Elma Lewis School, and we were in her first recital. I was there, staring on stage. Elma Lewis

taught ballet, tap, cha-cha, more pop-type of dance, so I did all of that. This was better than walking around with my pants hanging down, you know what I'm saying? We were educated! In school we had penmanship, and if you got caught acting up you would get *the rattan*. So, there was a lot more discipline and a more cultural atmosphere when I was coming up.

When I was a kid, the brothers would call me either Red or Rick. We had regular fights because I looked like a little white boy, and a little skinny thing at that. So, when I hit the age of nine, that's when no one could whup me no more. I was a little light-weight guy, but I got tired of being picked on. I could deal with left hand, or the right hand by then. I mean, we all got along, but I had my ups-and-downs. I think I had a little bit more trouble than most because there weren't that many light skinned gents or Puerto Ricans around that time. So, that was one of the things I remember, coming up—I always had to look out. You know, even a brother that I knew randomly might have an attitude and want to pick on me.

But like I said, by the time I hit nine years old, it was a done deal. I had beat the bully in private! Back then, you could go to the movies for eleven cents. They had two movies, you had cartoons, and you had the regular movie. So, on this one particular day, I knew he was waiting outside to get my money so *he* could go to the movies. It was a western and good Tarzan movie, so I said, '*He ain't getting my money!*' I remember cutting through the milk truck. Yes, they delivered milk in those days—milk and bread, and other stuff like that. So, I cut through the milk truck and grabbed a bottle of chocolate milk. I came out on the other side and ran into the movies! Then another time, I beat up the dude on the first floor, and he was *twice as big as me*. I took him out just because I

knew no one would bother me after that. I was naïve then. But you know, it wasn't that easy up to that point.

The really good thing about Lenox Street was that there were a lot of us. So we never had problems outside. All you had to say is: "*I'm Lenox Street,*" and you were in. We never had problems with the Black police officers with raids or stuff like that. There were no guns and no drugs. I mean, you knew the 'dopers' were around because when I was really young, the cats would shoot up outside, then run inside to sleep up next to the radiators in the front hall. Sometimes they would be asleep, sometimes they would just be, and, sometimes they weren't alive. So, when I was young I could tell the difference.

I'm telling you all of this because we were really *together*. Everybody knew everybody, and we all played together! We had a little sprinkler system outside in the summer time. The women would come out with their babies around the sprinkler pool, and they would breast-feed their babies, so we grew up around that. We didn't think anything of it. It was just normal. You breast-feed your babies. Then, later on, some of the girls wouldn't breast-feed their kids. It wasn't about the babies — it was about their attitude. So, I grew up in a very tribal kind of atmosphere—that's the correct word to use — tribal.

You know, when I was little, my mother could turn her head, and, BOOM— I'd be gone. I knew how to get on the subway, and there were all of these places to see! I was fast, and I didn't fear anything, so, a lot of times, I'd get on the subway and end up in Revere or Somerville. Then the police would bring me back because I just liked to explore. I remember the cops would bring me home, and they'd say, "*Here he is.*" My mother would always think something bad had happened, but I was just that kind of kid — I liked to explore.

When I was about thirteen, I worked at the Forest Hills Stables. It was right down the street here. My sister Paula loved horses; she could ride them, and she could draw them. So we would clean out the stalls, brush down the horses. Then one weekend there was a fire, and all sixteen horses died. That's one thing I remember.

One of the places I liked to go as a kid was *Wally's*. It's a music club on Mass Ave., and all the musicians from out of town used to go there. I played at *Wally's* when I was just eleven because I could play by ear, and my grandpa was right there. You know that song, *Summertime*? My grandpa wrote that song. He wrote most of the songs from *Porgy and Bess*. Did you ever hear of *Porgy and Bess*? It was a famous play, and you could compare to maybe Queen Latifah's movies now or something like that. It was about slaves and life coming up in the South.

My grandfather ran away from the plantation, and he came up here and met my grandmother. I never knew her because she died before I was born. But, my grandfather was an ex-slave and an army-man. He was very intelligent, and was a captain in the Army. He went to all the army camps, and my mother went with him. So, she was like him, and we were raised by army clocks. She was strict, but she was a beautiful educator

I went to the Boston Public Schools growing up. I went to the Asa Gray, the Sherwin, the Farragut, then back to Sherwin. I went to the Robert Treat Paine because we moved from Lenox St. to the Franklin Hill Ave. Project. Then after that I went to the Solomon Lewenburg, then to English High. I started the first race riot there because there was too much "*nigger, nigger, nigger.*" Once I

was so mad that I slapped the vice principal and that got me expelled. I was good guy but I would fight back, I wouldn't take that.

You know, when I was a teenager, it was the White guys that had their pants all baggy and hanging down. I never thought brothers would dress like those White boys did! I can't figure that out to this day. When we went out, we were sharp. We dressed up. I don't know what's wrong with these kids today, I'm sorry, but the brothers ain't got no class today. Kids look like jailbirds to me. They can't dress, can't talk, and don't know nothing! Now, I don't mean to make it general, but you know what I'm saying?

When you have to go out in the street, you have to get through all these people. Today, if they don't like you, they might kill you. In my day, you might have a fight, but then it would be done and over with. You know the White boys who lived in Roxbury— they didn't want us to move up on the hill, so we had a lot of fights. In those days we had *the color line*, you have to remember that. You couldn't even walk in South Boston. I had three of my friends that got killed over there. But back then there were no guns. Now there are so many guns you can't walk away because someone might kill you. There's something wrong with our people...they've lost their spirit. If you lose your spirit, you're dead already.

So, anyhow, I finished high school at Jamaica Plain High. I was a pole vaulter, and in my senior year, I broke the pole vault record and I was accepted at Virginia State College on May 15. But, on May 26th I got sick and blood shot up in my mouth, then I ended up in the hospital —the TB sanitarium with tuberculosis. I laid there for a year and a half, and they took out half of my lung, so I never did get to college. That was quite an experience.

Oh yeah, my mother had rules! When I was a teenager, I had to iron my shirts, we had to keep clean, there was no swearing or anything like that, and no loud music. But my mother also put us on stage, so we could dance and put on shows. As we got older, it got more serious, because Black culture was emerging into its own. We had gone with the Euro-American thing, you know, tap and ballet and all that stuff. But now, you had cats like the Nicholas Brothers, the Wallace Brothers, and Sammy Davis, Jr. So a Black culture reflected that Black people were in the cities, and we had our own jazz and bebop. I started getting into that perspective when Miles Davis and John Coltrane came along — it was the “bohemian era.” That’s when everybody started getting ‘cool.’ So, you know, we started dressing in turtlenecks with necklaces and all that. And this is when the “Negro” started becoming ‘Black.’ We went from Negro to Colored to Black to African American, and now that’s changed, too. Those are all the phases that we had to go through, and I went through those because I came up in that time.

So, while I was in the hospital, I met a man who got me into meditation, and I studied basic religions. He also tutored Malcom X, so I had started running into people who had The Word! I always studied. That’s the way I was raised — to always keep learning. You don’t have to go to school for it, just keep learning. When I got out of the hospital, I was getting near my twenties, so I just went to work. I started writing again, then I got into painting. In my teenage years I had done a lot of writing, painting, and communicating. And, I played piano; that was my favorite thing to do. So around 1962, when I came out of the hospital, I became a co-founder of the *African American Artists Association*. At first, it was the *Boston Negro Artists Association*, then it evolved to the *Boston*

Black Artists Association, and finally it became the *African American Artists Association*.

I was in the hospital from ages 17-19 with tuberculosis. But I had to convalesce for another year, so I had to go back with my Mom until I got better. That's when I hung out with Winston Alves. We would work with charcoals and acrylics, and listen to heavy jazz, you know, Miles and Coltrane. Then we would go down to the clubs and hang out with them because they would come here to Boston. Even Tony Williams — who came from here—he became a really famous drummer. When he was only 13 we took him down to hear Miles play. So Tony said to Miles, “I want to play with you!” Miles said come back and see me when you're 16, so he did, and he played with Miles for years. His mother and my mother were friends, and he was drumming when he was four or five years old. So I've got a lot of cultural history here and connections with artists in Boston.

So, by the time I was 22, I was writing, painting, lecturing, and organizing exhibits of Black artist's work, and by the time I was 25, I toured the Soviet Union. We were the first group of Black artists to tour the Soviet Union. Then we went to Paris, Prague, Czechoslovakia, Moscow, Azerbaijan, and everywhere we went we were rapping! I could play piano, and I could rap, and stuff like that.

What's the funniest thing that ever happened to me? Wow, that's a hell of a question! I guess that would be that I came out like a light-skinned Black man. I mean it *is* funny, because I've seen people look at me. You know you meet people and you start talking to them— even *our* people don't know. I see them wondering ‘*what is this guy?*’ So it was the kind of the environment— it don't

matter what color you are, you're going to run into something, being Black. And, I was raised Black; so you can't call me anything else! So I think the funniest thing that ever happened to me is that I don't look like who I really am.

But mostly, growing up, I was always an artist. Back then they had teen centers at the churches, so I'd go play there on Wednesday or Thursday nights. No, I wasn't the cat on the corner! I was always pointed out as the artist, so even though I'd go and start trouble, basically everybody knew I was an artist, or was going to be some kind of artist. So, for thirty years, I've been a Boston jazz poet. I started poetry here in the 50's; my poet name is *BlackLight* — I'm too light to be Black, and too Black to be White, so I might as well be 'Light' because there's something wrong with Black and White. Did you get that?

At that time in the sixties, there were riots, and Black people were starting to come on out and say what they wanted. They were looking for opportunities, and to break through some of the barriers. So I was coming up in a period of time when there was a lot of emotion, and anybody who was into anything — they planted that root. So now 30, 40, or 50 years later you can see the fruits of all that. Do you know that mural on the YMCA in Roxbury? That was one of mine. There were all those old murals: one on the Trotter School, one at Lenox St. and at the Columbia Point projects. They're not there anymore, except for the one at the Y. I'd have to say painting murals was one of my favorite jobs. I liked putting up the scaffolding, priming the wall, painting the wall, and looking down 6 or 7 stories. I'm afraid of heights, but I got over that because I liked the work.

After that mural, we got more Black artists out into the suburbs. Every year we'd have a different show. You know they'd have community centers in

churches, or we'd have them at community centers that weren't connected to the churches. I would hook up with them and take art into all of these places, so I met a lot of people!

The hardest thing I ever had to do was having treatment for throat cancer. I had radiation and chemotherapy. I'm claustrophobic, so they had to screw my face to the board to go in the radiation machine every day for 25 minutes, and twice on Fridays. When I was young, they took out half of my lung, but that was nothing compared to this. Also, getting in shape through martial arts when I was young was really hard. Then, I spent ten years on Harvard radio. That wasn't hard, but it was just grueling, because you had to come up with new material— as a poet —every Sunday! That was hard. But, paying rent is hard. There are a lot of things that have been hard.

When I get up in the morning, I look forward to new inspiration. I'm never sitting still. I live off inspiration. I work for me, and I work when I work. I'm always doing something —playing piano, writing, landscaping. I'm never just sitting around, and if I'm watching TV, it's because I'm resting. But as soon as I'm rested, I'm back to working on something. And, I'm connected to my God, so, whatever comes, I'll write it down, or paint it, or play it, or do it, whatever the message is, I'm in harmony with the universe.

Well, yeah, I would like to have gone to college. I also would like to have gone in the military, but after I had TB, I wasn't able to go in the service. So I missed all of the great things that happen when you go to college or in the service — the groups and the camaraderie that you find there. But, I'm very blessed as an artist. I know a lot of artists who just create, but I've ended up going around the world, meeting all kinds of people: presidents, kings and

queens. Being an artist is a really good thing. There are a lot of geniuses in the art world, and that makes for some very interesting conversations.

Sure there are new things I'd like to try in the future! I'd like to ride around on a moped. And, there are a few places that I'd like to go. I'm not one of those people who needs to travel every year, but I'd like to go to some other places. I have four daughters, six grandchildren, and three great grandchildren, and I wish them all well. I know what it's like to *not* be healthy, so I hope that they will all be healthy throughout their lives. And, I'd like to know what it's like to have money! Money is just a thing. You can be happy without money. Most people— if they have it, they find that as soon as they solve one set of problems, there's another one waiting for them. So, it's not the money, but it's good to have it.

Words of Wisdom: I've got a quick one. "*Love all, raise yourself, then go raise a few. After all, someone raised you.*" You need somebody to help you. Usually, what happens is that it ends up that it's *more* than one person who helps you. You can't figure out anything alone. You're not here long enough to figure everything out. But, if you have manners, you're polite, and you're a good person, people will help you. People will come out of nowhere to help you! But, if you're not open, not communicative, you're not looking or reaching out, you're not seeking or searching, not being a good spirit, then no one will do anything for you. If you're looking out, and you want to do right, the angels will come.

My advice is to work your butt off, and don't give up, don't despair. You have to learn to express yourself. You've got to write to give it to yourself. There's

more about you than meets the eye, and there's more about you than you realize. To me, life is learning to express all of that.

You know, my grandfather was very powerful. He raised cats like William Monroe Trotter, Ralph Bunche, and Edward Brooke. Ralph Bunche was an American Ambassador; he got the Nobel Peace Prize. At that time in the Middle East, they didn't want to deal with a White man, but they would deal with Ralph Bunche, because he was straight up. I can remember my grandfather tutoring him. So I was around a lot of information that the average cat wouldn't know about.

And what you find out is that it ain't really like you think it is! It ain't never like you think it is. What you think is what it is TO YOU, but it ain't like that. And as you grow up you learn — *'Oh man, I don't know enough.'* Mastering your language is really important. We grow up in darkness, and we're confused, but we grow into more light. So, even when you start thinking that you know, I'll never know everything that I want to know, and I know a lot, but that ain't nothing!

My dream is really just to communicate to the world, to relate, to inspire. All of this ain't worth nothing if I can't inspire someone else to be themselves. My mother always said, *'Don't look down at anybody and don't look up at anybody. Look straight ahead, because everybody's the same.'* So, live your life, and love people, regardless —that's important. You know a lot of times, I thought my mother tricked me because she really made us grow up loving people. And, there are a lot of times when you can love the wrong person and get hurt. But without the pain, there's no gain. The pain can drive you insane, but then you have to come back around. Don't feel like you're to blame, don't

feel ashamed, because of the pain, because you went insane — just get sane. That's where poetry comes in!

I haven't admired any one person. I admired a lot of people. Me and Malcolm used to rap. We'd be in the barber shop, and Malcolm and we would be getting our shoes shined. Farrakhan, at that time, was learning. So he'd be sitting on the bottom stoop. One of the funniest things in the world was me and Malcolm talking back and forth. We'd be "brrrrrrrrrrrrr..." just rapping fast back and forth, then we'd look down and we'd just start laughing, because Farrakhan was so eager to learn his ears would be perked up. He was just beautiful. So, one of the funniest things was that Malcolm became an intellectual, and Farrakhan became one too. They weren't originally that, but they *became* that.

Every man has that power in him to change himself. So what I'm really asking is '*How much power do you want to tap inside yourself to be who you really are? And are you willing to express yourself with that power?*' It's going to take a verbal translation because you have to master your feelings and master the English language. So, you have to get out the dictionary, and you've got to listen and study. You have to get the right books and learn from them, then you can learn to master yourself. Because everyone who wrote a book, you can see yourself in it! You see yourself in a different light through books. So, whatever you want to be, you have to know where you're going and respect and honor yourself. Then things will come to you, but you have to get into a spiritual way.

You know everyone I've ever met has inspired me in some way. Even the man picking up bottles on the street could say something to you and change your life, make you rise to a higher place! There's nobody so low that they can't give you some truth that you need to hear. Sometimes you'll hear something at

just the right time, and it clicks. So, don't overlook any of the possible sources of inspiration or places to learn about life.

What makes me happy? Well, being cancer-free twice, that makes me happy. So, little things do. I composed three songs this year, *that* made me happy. My best friend and soul mate, Nina, makes me happy. You can't beat that. And, I'm starting to put myself together for the public because I've been studying all of these years. You know, I never wanted to sell you incense or essential oils, or a painting, I want to present the whole package. So, that's the *Black Artist's Bible*, and it's what I've been working on my whole life

So why not leave some footprints up the path? But you need to know *where* you're going, then you can read and see ahead of yourself and get there.