

Peace Drum Project
The Elder's Stories
2009

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Introduction

This year, as we wrap-up our ninth year of *The Peace Drum Project*, there is much to celebrate. A very high percentage 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 partner's progress in school and afterwards. The project was in created in part to address the fear that local elders experienced when encountering groups of youth on the street or on the subway. So one important project goal was to alleviate the fear of teens among elders. From that original goal, we have created a powerful model for engaging young people with elders in a positive and meaningful way. *The Peace Drum Project* helps to deepen the connections between youth and elders, and 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.

Today's young people look forward to the future, but they also feel great anxiety about their ability to succeed in such difficult economic times. The lessons they have learned from the lives of this year's elders contain a great deal of wisdom about succeeding in tough times. Virtually every one of this year's elders grew up in difficult circumstances, but they have endured. They continue to find happiness in their families, their friends, and their activities in the community. Many had hoped to go to college themselves, but were unable to because of economic constraints. For most, family came first, but neither responsibility nor hardship kept them from seeking their dreams. This is a powerful message to our youth today who face unprecedented costs for getting an education—life is never easy, yet there are abundant rewards for hard work and sticking to your goals.

We are inspired by the lives of the elders we have worked with this year, and in recent years. Many of them have come from early lives of poverty and racial discrimination and have experienced multiple hardships. They have raised families under difficult circumstances and have lost children before their time. Yet, they are full of 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 know that we have only scratched the surface of their stories in our interviews, but we hope that you, too, will be inspired by the stories of these wonderful members of our community.

We are most appreciative to 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, Nanci Cardona, Katherine Colon, Rogenzo Cruickshank, Miranda Desir, Jasmine Dozier, Abdiel Fonseca, Jessica Harris, Shannon Hills, Farah Jeune, Marjourie Jimenez, Emilio Lajara, Ivan Richiez, Kristie Simono, Johniesha Smith, and Erys Valdez. We thank them for their respectful manner, lively energy, and curious questioning.

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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 teens, elders, and artists who knew and worked with him over the years.

Susan E. Porter, Director
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Jean A. Alexander

Interviews by: Emilio Lajara and Abdiel Fonseca

My name is Jean A. Alexander. The “A” is for my maiden name, which was Allen. In my family, they didn't believe that girls should have middle names, only the boys got middle names. Isn't that something?

I was born in Boston on May 2, 1929 – so I just turned 80 years old! As a child, I lived on Bower Street which was close to Franklin Park. I lived with my mother and father, Agnes and William Allen, and with my older brother James. My father still had his job as a cotton inspector during the depression, so my grandmother and uncle came live with us. Jobs and money were scarce, so we all lived in the same apartment.

My mother had to stay in the hospital after I was born, so I lived with my aunt and uncle as a baby. My brother stayed with my father. Then, when I was about a year old, my mother came back home and we were all together again. Today, you young people want to know everything! But back then, we weren't allowed to ask questions, so there were a lot of things that we didn't know. I'm not sure if my mother actually stayed in the hospital for a whole year, or whether she came home before then, but still wasn't well enough to take care of me as a baby. I lived in the era when *children were seen but not heard*.

When I was about two years old we moved to Harrishof Street in Roxbury. My brother James was the oldest and I was next, then my sisters Barbara and Gwendolyn were born. I remember we would go as a family to the Franklin Park

Zoo, but it was a lot different back then. There were animals all the way from Seaver Street down to Blue Hill Avenue— all kinds of animals! Now they don't have that many animals. We also use to go tobogganing and ice skating in the winter, and we played tennis in the spring and summer. In winter, when we went ice-skating, our rink was just a dirt lot that would flood and freeze. It was a lot different in those days because there weren't as many houses or cars, and the area was more open. There was more land.

We didn't have oil or gas furnaces like we do now, we had coal furnaces. So you'd have to go downstairs to shovel the coal into the burner, and then you had to take out the ashes. In the kitchen we had either oil or wood stoves. To iron clothes, you had to put the iron on the stove burner to get it hot. Then you could iron with it, but you had to keep putting it back on the stove to make it hot again. For a washing machine, we had a tub with a wringer on top to wring-out the clothes. And, before those machines, we had to use the washboard.

There wasn't a lot of money around to buy toys, so we mostly had home made toys. But we did have little tea sets; we played tea party and things like that. Even the boys did it because they wanted to do what we did.

Then every Sunday we would take what they called "a Sunday drive." We'd go visit a relative, or we would just take a drive in the car, then come back and have dinner. On Monday, my father and my uncle would go back to work, so my grandmother would take care of us. My mother didn't work until later on when she worked in a factory folding things.

When I was three, I started taking piano lessons. My cousin taught piano, so they had me go and take lessons. I just remember that after a while I was really sick of it. If you played an instrument, don't let anybody come by the house, or you had to

get out of bed and go downstairs and play for them! I played that piano so many times. In those days, every house had a piano, one of those big upright pianos. It was just one of those things.

Did anyone ever explain to you what we had to do during World War II? We use to have black curtains so that nobody could see into our house in case the enemy came. And of course you weren't suppose to have lights on if there was an air-raid. We also had wardens — people who would walk the street to check and make sure the lights were out. There were also Victory Gardens during the war, where people grew their own food. I remember there were Italian prisoners-of-war who were kept in barracks in the middle of Franklin Park. They were kept behind the fences, but they had gardens, too. Sometimes Italian people from the North End would come to see if any of them were their relatives from overseas.

I was the oldest girl, and when my sisters were small, I had to be a 'nice little lady' so they would know how to act. We were about 8, 10, and 12, and I was responsible to see that they got to school all right. If anything happened to them at school, it was on me! My youngest sister would always start trouble with anyone. Since I was supposed to take care of them, I had to stick up for her and tell them to leave her alone. I'm telling you, she had me fighting so much, and she got me in more trouble than you would believe! I use to worry when I came out of school, who I would have to fight next?

There's nothing worse than becoming "the bully," because then everyone wants to fight you. I couldn't stand it, so I said, "*I'm not doing it anymore.*" I said to her "*If you start trouble with someone, you're going to have to fight 'em on your own.*" Then, when I got home, I got a spanking you wouldn't believe! Oh yes. I got punished. In those days if you were going to get punished, you just wanted to get it

over with. Then the tongue-lashing lasted for weeks. It was hard.

School was important in my family, and you'd better be good. I came home with a C one time, and I couldn't go out until my next report card! I was so mad. My brother could come home with D's and not be punished, but I had to stay in after school and couldn't play with the other kids. I hated that.

When my youngest sister was born, we moved to another area because my father was always one to better himself. So he wanted to move to a neighborhood that was a little better. As children we were always told, “*don't ever think down, think up.*” Be proud of yourself—and show respect. If you didn't do that, shame on you.

My mother wanted us to be able to walk to school, and not take the bus, so we went to a lot of schools. I went to the David A. Ellis School, the Henry Higginson School, and the Lewis School down near Dale Street. I went to what is now Latin Academy— it used to be Roxbury Memorial High School. When I went there, we were on separate sides of the building. One side was for the boys, and the other side was for the girls. We always had 30 or more children in our classroom.

When we were growing up we really didn't do too much bad because if you did, you knew it would get back to your mother right away — then, wham. So we didn't do too much bad. But when I did, I never got caught doing it. You know how a store has all the fruit and vegetables outside it? Well, we'd see the apples and oranges, so we'd run by and snatch one. That was a big deal.

When I was a child, neighbors were neighbors. If you did something wrong, they'd say “*your mother wouldn't want you to do that.*” Somebody was always watching over you. You knew when you came home, even if no one was home, the neighbors would know you were there. When I was in school, we went home for

lunch. My grandmother was at home, so we would have lunch waiting for us. And sometimes we would bring someone with us for lunch, and that was OK too.

I was a Tomboy, and I used to climb trees and all that. I used to always play with the boys. Then one day a boy said to me, "*We can't play with you any more.*" I said "*Why?*" And he said it, "*Because you're beginning to look like a girl.*" I thought I always looked like a girl! So that was one of the funniest things that ever happened to me, but they were nice about it. Our mother didn't do too much talking to us about boy/girl stuff, so we had to learn what there was to learn from our friends' mothers or their older sisters. We had a fear of boys that was something terrible.

Yes, I liked school. My favorite teachers were the ones that were hard, the ones that everybody thought were mean. I loved them because you'd really learn, and I always remembered what they taught me. They were strict, they gave you the hard stuff, and the homework, but they knew you could do the work. I didn't care for the easy ones — my best teachers were the serious ones. I loved geography, and the nicest thing was that some teachers would go and visit these other countries, then they'd come back and tell you what it was like. They'd bring back pictures.

I loved to be active, so I was a busy young lady when I was growing up. We had to go to church, so I was into a lot of different activities. I was very athletic, and when I was your age I was on the basketball team. You would have died laughing at our uniforms — they had bloomers! They're not like they are now. We even raised money for that team so they could get better uniforms. We belonged to the St. Mark's Church community center where they had a bowling alley, ping-pong tables, and a pool table, so we had a lot of indoor activities.

Did we have a curfew? Oh yes, we had to be home by 9 o'clock. When they said 9

o'clock, they meant it. You could get home a minute before 9 and it would be no problem, but one minute after nine and you'd be docked so long you'd wish you never did it. One time I came home from a party— it's funny they let us go to parties but they didn't let us go out with fellas. Anyway, a fellow was walking me home when my mother came down the street and said, "*Didn't I tell you to be home by 9 o'clock?*" And there she was spanking me right in front of him. Oh, I didn't ever want to go out of the house again. It was terrible! Later when I would see the boys that I went to school with, I would have to listen to them and laugh it off. See my daddy wasn't alive to let me know about boys, so I didn't know what to expect. And my uncles were doing their own thing, so they were no help.

I couldn't have a boyfriend. It wasn't like it is for you kids do now. We couldn't even have a boy come by the house to sit and talk— not until we graduated from high school. When we graduated from high school, they would give us a big sweet sixteen party to introduce us to the world. There were many fellows that I liked, but they couldn't come see us until we got out of school. That's the way we did it back then. Parents were very strict with young ladies, but some still got in trouble!

When it came time to go to the prom, World War II was happening. So I ended up going with one of the fellows who was home from the Service. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gone because all of the young men were taken or in the service. When I was 18, I was already out of school and working. I graduated from high school when I had just turned 17. When we became seniors, if your grades were good, and you had all the requirements you needed, you could leave high school early to go to work. You had to have a letter from the company that hired you.

When I graduated, the only jobs the counselor offered us Black students were jobs to clean houses. Well, my mother said “No, no.” But, I was fortunate because my

girlfriend's sister worked at the State House. She told us that they needed people to work, and she gave us the papers to fill out, so we got it. But to let us leave school early, our parents had to come up to *prove* that we really had gotten jobs at the State House. So finally, I worked there, then graduated.

If they'd had scholarships like they do now when I was growing up, I probably would have gone to college, but we couldn't afford to pay for it. So I went to work. Everybody worked! I went to work at the John Hancock Insurance Company. I had heard they were hiring Blacks, so I went right in and applied for a job. The State House was just temporary work. Every thirty days they either had to renew you or you were let go. I wanted a more permanent job so I went to John Hancock and I got a good job. I worked there for four years, stopped, got married, had my kids, then went back to work for 23 more years until I retired from there.

Working was good. I happened to be placed in a department where everybody was much older than me. I was just hoping to find some young person that I could relate to, but you know, I learned a lot. They were willing to teach me. I had already lost both of my parents; my father died when I was thirteen years old and my mother died when I was twenty. So after that it was hard because I didn't have anyone to ask for advice. But it was like that at work back then, you got close to people, so they looked out for me and helped me grow up. It was nice.

While I was there, the employees had an association where they would organize trips. You could go camping, or go to amusement parks like Six Flags. I was on that committee, and as a member of that group you got to travel. So that's how I got to go places. My favorite place was probably Canada. I liked Montreal, Toronto, and went all over the East Coast down to Washington DC. Now that's an interesting place, Washington DC, and everybody's so friendly.

So, I always had a secretarial job— that was my profession. I worked at it. I felt that I should learn what the department was all about, and eventually I worked my way up to a Vice President. But, by the time I got to be VP's secretary, I was getting too old to go any further. Also, when you get that high up, you're really separated from your friends because you're with a different group of people. So you're only with the secretaries up there.

The best job I ever had was when I was both the VP's secretary *and* the receptionist for the whole floor. I like that because I had a big, big desk, and I made sure the flowers were there every day. It was really nice. I liked it. I would get there early so I could get everything together. Once a couple of people got off the elevator on the wrong floor, then they got off every morning after that just to say good morning!

Now that I'm older, I've been through everything. I married my first husband, Edward, when I was about 20 years old. We had three children, Edward, Deborah, and Valerie. We were married for about 7 years. My husband was in the service and he was away a lot. Then, I finally decided to travel with him. He was stationed at Guantanamo in Cuba so we lived on the base. While I was there, I got a new sewing machine in the commissary. There was a woman who worked there who could sew anything, and she taught me how to sew. That machine could do anything. I could use a blouse pattern to make all kinds of jackets and blouses. I made curtains; I made everything. Well, then my husband became an alcoholic, and he was getting mean, so we made an agreement just to part. Unfortunately, he left me with nothing.

Since my parents died when I was young, I always looked to older people to help me figure out the right thing to do. I felt that they must know more because they

had been in this world longer than I was, and people my age just wanted to party. When I became a single parent, I didn't have much help, so it was tough. I had a fear of people knowing we were poor. I wanted the kids to look neat. When I would go shopping, I would talk to people and learn how to stretch the food to make meals. So, I could turn a pound of hamburger into anything! I went downtown to Singer Sewing Machine Company and asked if they had an old machine I could buy. They said yes, so I got one for a few dollars. Then I sewed all the time so I wore that machine out!

Then my neighbor told me to go buy material (fabric) down on Kneeland Street. So I did, and after a while, the man who owned the store asked me who I was sewing for. When I told him I had four girls (I was sewing for my niece too,) he started giving me fabric. He said that Jewish people help one another, and I'm adopting you as my Jewish daughter. He let me come in there anytime to get my material, so I learned how to make coats. I let my mind design clothes and before long I could make any style out of one pattern. So that sewing machine really paid for itself.

My second husband, Conrad Alexander, was from Canada. I think the name *Alexander* is English. I met him through my insurance man when I was working at the Navy Yard over in South Boston. We had two daughters — Evon and Diane — so I had five children altogether.

We lived in Canada which is a really nice place. It's like here, but more organized. I was sorry we had to move back here because the schools up there were way ahead of the schools here. When we came back, my kids could really do the work. It was wonderful. Up there they cook, they bake, the neighbors are together. And where I was, it was all homes, not apartment buildings. They showed me a lot

because I was young when I lived up there. The women were organized, so everybody had their day for washing, the day for canning, etc. We all talked, so the conversation was good. Then when I came back here, people didn't converse as much, and I missed that.

My three youngest girls went to Catholic School, and they learned. They learned about life. One time I said, "*You know I think we should sit down and talk. It's time for us to have a girl talk.*" They said, "*We don't need to sit down and talk with you because the nuns tell us everything in health classes!*"

I use to sell Avon cosmetics— that was twenty years ago! That's how I got my first car. I started doing it at work, and then people wanted more. Then their mother or sister or cousins wanted to get some too, so I started getting more and more business. But then, when you have a car, everybody wants you to drive them here or drive them there. And when I didn't have a car, do you think anyone would ask me if I needed a ride somewhere – No! So I learned a lesson there.

Yes, I had some conflicts with people. Of course you get mad at people for things, but not that you want to kill them! Today, with all these guns, it's just too easy for people to kill each other. Sometimes, if I see young girls swearing on the train, I'll say something. People will say, "*you talk to them?*" Well, you know, I just can't take it. Even if adults are carrying on like that, I'll say something to them too. Because, you know they'd be the first person to turn around and say: "*Gee, I can't understand why kids are like they are today!*" Why are they like that? Look at yourself! They don't know, they're just talking and acting the way you are! They're copying the way you are. A lot of people don't like me saying these things, but I don't care.

The person I most admired was Marion Anderson. She was a famous soprano. I thought I was going to be like her. Then, Sarah Vaughn came along, and I wanted to be like her. I was always interested in music and the arts. I wanted to sing or act or be in the arts in some way. My favorite songs are all love songs.

My favorite colors are blue and earth colors. I like blue because my mother use to dress me in blue. My one sister was dressed in red, and the other one was dressed in green. We were color-coded! We had a lot of the same clothes, but in different colors because my mother was a seamstress.

My favorite TV show? Well, I like *Dancing with the Stars* right now. That brings me back to when I was dancing when I was young. I also like *The View* and *Oprah*. I like to watch CNN, too, so I'll know what's happening in the world.

All of the seasons are my favorites, because each one had something fun in it. Winter had skating, spring had the boys, summer had camp, so we were always doing something. And back then, the seasons were really THE SEASONS. In the winter when it started snowing, we didn't see the sidewalk until April.