

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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Joy Fisher

Interviewed by Kristie Simono, Katherine Colon and Miranda Desir

My name is Joyce Fisher. My nickname is Joy. I was born in Jamaica Plain, MA in August of 1939. My mother wanted to name me Dean, but my grandmother said if she named me Dean she would have nothing to do with me. Later, I found out why. A friend of my grandparents told me that there was a man who lived in Mansfield where my grandmother lived — we're talking back in the 1800's now — and his name was Dean. Evidently, he had a cart and two horses, and he would get stone-drunk and ride through town shouting at everyone! And my grandmother — being very much against drinking — didn't want anything associated with him connected to her granddaughter. So my mother decided to call me Joyce.

I lived with my parents when I was a child. My mother's name was Nora Katherine Bang. When she was young, she dated a fellow who called her 'BingBang.' When she got married, everyone referred to her as 'Bing,' so she kept that nickname. My father's name was Dana Walker Fisher Jr. At that time, there was a cartoonist named Bud Fisher, so people used to call my father Bud.

I live in the same house now as I did when I was born. The house was built by my mother and father. It was a 6 room house with a fenced in back yard. It was nice. They used to have things called sandboxes. So you could go out there and wet the sand and form it into things. My mother would put me out in the back yard in the sandbox and know that I'd be safe. It was also nice because we had a dog, and my mother didn't have to take the dog for a walk because he could just run around in the back yard.

I grew up in a very small family. I was an only child and my mother was an only child. My father only had one brother, and *he* never had any children, so I have no cousins or brothers and sisters! What did I learn from my family? I learned self-esteem. You know it's funny, but sometimes you look back at things and see them differently. I was a good girl, and I was never slapped or hit. But there was always a fear that I would disappoint my mother, so that kept me from doing things that I knew I shouldn't be doing.

I got a dog when I was five or six years old, and even though I was an only child, it was like having a brother! He was so wonderful. He'd let me dress him up, and I'd put bows on his ears and all sorts of things. I loved playing with dolls, and I can remember having wooden blocks. Not like Legos®, but these were just wooden blocks that you would stack up and try to create something.

I had a dollhouse and I loved my dollhouse. When I was growing up during World War II they didn't have great dollhouse furniture like they do now. My grandfather who was an artist made me all kinds of furniture. He made a couch, a stove, a sink, and all of these wonderful things for my dollhouse. It was just great, and I think I still have them somewhere. The war was over when I was about six years old, and I remember they started manufacturing much better toys from Japan. The war didn't affect me too much, although I do remember a blackout. That was kind of scary — a siren would sound and we'd have to turn off all the lights and stay in the house.

My mother was a wonderful mother. She was very patient. She was strict, but she was also very loving and fair. My father was very intelligent, but he didn't know

how to act with children so he was afraid of me. My mother told me about a time when he was going to take me somewhere. I was probably around 4 years old, and

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he's walking along, and I'm racing behind him to try to keep up with him. He didn't have any sisters, so he didn't know how to act with little girls, so instead of reaching out and taking my hand, he would just kind of glance over his shoulder to be sure I was still there. But I knew that he loved me. That was the nice thing.

My mother didn't work. Before she got married, she had been working for a car dealer. Then, when she got married she stopped working. My father worked for the Telephone Company; he was an instructor for one of the classes. When my father got sick, my mother had to go to work, but she had very limited experience. So she started off working at the Telephone Company. First she worked in the cafeteria, and then she got a job as a switchboard operator. Later, she learned office techniques, so she worked in offices until she retired.

When she worked for the car dealer I think she just did office work, but she didn't talk about it that much, so I'm not really sure what she did. My mother was born in 1903, and when she finished high school, she went to art school for four years. You know back in those days, it was unusual for women to go on to further education, and she graduated from art school. But, as she always used to say, "*to be an artist you had to be exceptional, you couldn't just be ordinary.*" She didn't have the talent to be exceptional, so that's why she went into a clerical position.

But I think that the creativity she had from art school was special. Now remember there was no television when I was growing up. One time in the summer, my friends were all busy and I said "*I'm bored.*" So, she went and she got a newspaper, traced one of the women in the advertisement, and she put it onto

cardboard. Then she drew a face and a bathing suit, and she cut it out. She gave it to me and she said, "*OK, you design clothes for it!*" So I took that and made ball gowns, and play suits, and slacks, and all kinds of things. It kept me busy and even

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though she didn't have extraordinary talent for art, she did have that creative sense to help me envision things.

My mother was the person that I most admired in my life. In those days women didn't go out and work, they were brought up to raise a family. But when my father got sick, she had to go out and work, and she had to find a way to support us on \$35 a week. She even saw that I got to college. My father had been a gambler, and he had gambled away all of his savings and there was nothing left. So the way she turned her life around to be both a mother and a provider, and to keep our home together— and do it with good cheer —was just really impressive.

Jamaica Plain was an interesting place when I was a child. It wasn't as diverse as it is now. It was mostly White, and mostly Irish Catholic. I happened to be Protestant, so I always felt a little like a minority. My neighborhood was a nice mix. It was good. There were a lot of children. We had about 36 kids in our neighborhood so there were always people to play with and do things with. When I was about 8 years old there were children all the way from 2 up to 14 years old. Our mothers would sit on the front porch and watch out for us. If your mother wasn't around, somebody else's mother could scold you or reprimand you! It was nice because we got to know all of the families. Everyone knew everybody, and you felt like part of a community. Today, you go out into the street and you look around and you don't know your neighbors, and they don't know you.

I went to the Mary E. Curley School. I went to the old Agassiz School, but then I went back to the Mary Curley, and finally I went to the old Jamaica Plain High

School. My high school friends were Jean, Janet, Diane, Nancy, and Joan. But, my best friend was Jean. She lived two streets over and we were inseparable. We were best friends from Kindergarten through high school. She was just beautiful.

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She was actually in the Miss Massachusetts contest after we graduated from high school, and in high school she was voted 'most beautiful.' I was voted 'best behaved!' But, sadly, Jean died four years ago.

Yes, my parents had rules about when I had to be home. Yes, I got in trouble with my parents, but I forget the details. I guess if it were really bad I would remember. Yes, I had chores. I was responsible for keeping my room clean, and the bathroom clean, and helping with the dishes after dinner. I did anything that needed to be done. And dusting— I remember dusting! My mother worked very hard so I didn't have to work while I was in school. I think that she felt that part of your life doesn't last that long, so it was important to enjoy while you could. I did work summers, though, saving money for school and books and things like that.

When I was in high school my hobby was reading! When I got home from school I would change, and then I would do the other things that teenagers do! I think my favorite thing to do when I wasn't in school was just to be with friends. When I was your age I used to like to talk with friends, participate in school activities, giggle about boys, think about clothes, and all of that.

The first television we got when I was fourteen. TV was OK, but remember we had been going to the movies for our whole lives, so it was just a matter of having it at home instead of in the theater. The first trip I took was when I was thirteen. Some friends of my parents came up to visit from Washington, DC. Then when they drove back home, I went with them because they had a daughter who was my age. It was summertime, so I stayed down there with them and we had a wonderful

time sightseeing. Then, I flew home by myself. Air travel at that time was still very rare, so at thirteen that was a very exciting thing to do.

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The scariest thing that ever happened to me? Well, I guess it would have been when my father died. He had been sick for a long time, but I didn't really know he was going to die until just before he died. I think that facing that reality was very scary for me. My father had a disease called Huntington's Chorea. It's similar to Parkinson's Disease in that it affects people's equilibrium and how they move. So he had to retire from the Telephone Company and stay at home. My mother knew that it would be difficult during his illness, so she spoke to the minister at the church to see if they could help me get a scholarship to go away to a boarding school. I can remember going out in the back yard and crying until I thought my heart would break because I didn't want to be sent away. Even now, I start to feel tears. But finally, I persevered and I didn't get sent away.

My father died when I was 14, so I started taking on more responsibility. My grandmother, who lived next door, wasn't well, so after school I would have to help take care of her. I think it was good taking on more responsibility at a young age because it definitely made me appreciate things more. We had very little money, so my mother used to enjoy shopping for bargains, and I think that stuck with me. I remember having this one dress for a dance. It was gray, it came down to the waist and had a flared skirt. We got the dress for \$3 in Filene's— no Jordan's Basement! But then we had to find a strapless bra, and it had to come down to the waist. Then we had to find a crinoline underskirt to go under the dress. Those two things cost \$20, so they cost far more than the dress itself! It was always a joke that we laughed about.

I couldn't go out with my friends after dark when I was in high school, but we used to enjoy ice-skating. So we would take our skates up to Lars Anderson Estate on the Jamaica Plain Brookline line. One side was for hockey, and the other side was

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just for free skating. I couldn't stand up straight on skates, but it was a wonderful opportunity to watch the boys play hockey, and afterwards they would all walk down the hill together. That was fun.

You know it's funny, but I don't remember my first date. I think it's because the church had a group they called the Christian Endeavor Group, and it was made up of girls and boys. We use to have a meeting every Sunday night, and then we'd come back to my house. My mother would always have Coke on hand, and we would roll the rugs back and dance. So I started dating one of the boys but I didn't think of it as a date as such because we were a part of the group. Oh yes, his name was Dickey Mosher.

My life in the 1940's was good because my father was still well so it was a nice family unit. And, my grandmother lived next door so she would come over for Sunday dinner. And my father's mother lived in Mansfield, and we'd go visit her, so it was a very happy time. In the 1950's I was a teenager so there were dances and boys, clothes, college, all of that. I can remember that going from a very small high school to a big college made you feel like a small fish. So that was a time of adjustment, but it also brought the opportunity to meet people from other parts of the country and different parts of the world. That was exciting.

Yes, I liked school. I enjoyed it. One time my mother told me she thought she had brainwashed me, because I was always very well behaved, and I didn't really have any problems with teachers. I wasn't brilliant, but I was smart enough to absorb information so I always had good grades. My favorite teacher was Miss Roman. I

had her when I was in college. She took a personal interest in all of the students, so it made us all feel very welcome. She was very outgoing and she was a wonderful

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role model. After I had her I decided that I wanted to be a teacher because I could see the impact that she had on me and the other students.

The funniest thing that happened to me? I can think of one thing. I was a little older than you are. I was in college and I'd been invited to a fraternity dance at MIT. The fellow who asked me was a grad student, and he had a Corvette convertible. He picked me up, and I looked perfectly lovely in my gown, so off we went. The top was down and we drove to the fraternity house. But, he had been cramming for finals the entire week and he was just exhausted, so we had dinner, then he fell asleep. I never got to the dance, and I had to go over to a friend's house because we had to get a float ready for the next day. But it was really funny. Sad, but funny.

During the 1960's I was starting to work. Suddenly, I had my own money, and I could travel and go places. So it was a time of expanding knowledge. I finished 16 years of school, and then I taught school, I worked in a psychiatric hospital, and then I worked in a financial institution. When I got out of high school I went to Boston University. And when I got out of college, things weren't that different except I was more responsible and was holding down a job. I had to think about where my money went, how I wanted to spend it, and how to save it. My dreams were probably to get married and have children. The best job I ever had? Well, they've all been good for different reasons. I guess teaching was my favorite.

Yes, I have a car. My very first car was a red Volkswagen Bug. And I decided it was the most wonderful car in the world. I called it the Rubinrot Dorf, which meant Ruby Red Village, or something like that. I learned to drive when I graduated from college because I had accepted a teaching job in Hull, MA. And

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Hull isn't a place you can get to on public transportation! I tried to get my license when I first graduated, but the teacher was horrible. So, I went away for the summer, and when I came back I was lucky enough to find a driving school where one of the instructors was a fellow I had gone to high school with, so he made me feel very comfortable.

Have you ever heard of the Concorde? It doesn't exist any more, but it was a plane that flew faster than the speed of sound. If you flew from New York to London on a regular plane it would take 7 hours, but if you flew on the Concorde it would only take 3 hours and 10 minutes! It was called an SST or supersonic transport. One time I received an advertisement saying that if you sailed on a particular ship across the Atlantic, that you could fly the Concorde for \$199. It was cheaper than a regular ticket, so we took advantage of it. It only held 92 passengers. It left New York at 9 o'clock in the morning, and they start would start serving food and appetizers. Then, the next thing you knew you were in London and it was 5 o'clock in the afternoon their time! That was my most exciting transportation experience.

My favorite kind of music was rock n roll. I tried to play the ukulele unsuccessfully. My favorite color is yellow because it's the color of hope. It's the color of daffodils and forsythia, and it dominates the month of April where everything is just this wonderful intense yellow! My favorite season is spring. It

just makes you smile. It's a time of color. Even the bare branches are starting to come alive, there's so much more color than in the winter.

Yes, I love *Dancing with The Stars*. I like to see how people are willing to put in long hours and work hard to achieve something. And just the beauty of the movement and the costumes.

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I look forward to seeing my dog, I look forward to that first cup of coffee and thinking about the things I have planned for the day whether it be teaching a class, or meeting friends for lunch, or knitting. And I love seeing the crocuses and the forsythia!

I think that my biggest adventure was going around the world by myself. And knowing that I could be someplace and no one else would know where I was. It was being completely responsible for taking care of myself, and making judgments about people that I met. That was a great experience.

Later, I met Bobby Greene, and we traveled together for 26 years. I met Bobby in a roundabout way. I used to drive my mother and two neighbors to Forest Hills Station where they would catch the train to work. Then I would drive to Wellesley, where I was working at that time. One morning I noticed a man that I seemed to be driving past every morning at the same time — 7:10 AM. After a few days, I just waved to him. Why not? Soon, we started waving to each other. Then one time, he waved me over and I stopped. We talked, then we started seeing each other, and the next thing we were together for 26 years.

Bobby was living in Roslindale, but he grew up in Hyde Park. He was also an only child. He was a gardener for the City of Boston, and took care of plants and flowers in the Boston Public Gardens, and later, in the Fenway Rose Garden. He was meticulous in his care of the gardens, and really took great pride in his work. I had a nickname for him in his more boyish moments. I would call him LBG or Little

Bobby Greene!

We both loved to travel, so we went all over Europe and the Caribbean. We took cruises and flew places. It was such a wonderful time. We were very different from each other and had different interests, but we got along great. He could spend hours looking at exhibits in The British Museum, while I could spend hours just talking

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with people! It was very exciting for me to see him in places he had never been before. I had traveled more than he had, so it was a great adventure for us to do it together. He was so much fun to be with, I was very lucky to have that time with him.

The hardest thing that I ever had to do in my life was say good-bye to Bobby. When he had cancer, he was in the hospital in a coma. Just being with him and trying to tell him what a role model he had been for me— and that it was OK to let go— That was very hard.

I can't answer with one thing that was the happiest moment of my life. I've had a wonderful life so far, and to try to put one thing above the others I can't do. What makes me happy now is teaching. I teach computer and I have very small classes, so I can give attention to individual students, and that's very rewarding. My greatest accomplishment is probably being true to my family and friends.

My advice to you is to enjoy every day and do the best you can - which you're already doing. I think that when something happens, and bad things will happen in life, you can't get through those bad things unless you can find something positive in every experience. So I would say, stay positive, and it will help you be happy.