

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.

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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

Paul Medling

Interview by Johniesha Smith & Eric Robinson

My name is Paul Medling. I was born on May 12, 1940, in Memphis, Tennessee, so I'll be 70 years old this May. I was born an identical twin, and my twin brother's name was Edward. My younger brother was Robert, and my sister was Carol Ann. My parents, William and Louise, were pastors of a church in Slayton, Mississippi right across the border from Tennessee. When I was a year and a half old, my parents moved to Holly Springs, Mississippi. Then, when I was three and a half years old my father went into the Army to serve in World War II so we moved to Butler, Pennsylvania. We were there about six months when my Daddy was shipped off to Alaska, so we went to live in Rock Garden, Tennessee, near Knoxville.

Of course, I don't remember a lot of this because I was a baby, but we moved around a lot. I do have one memory from that time, though. It was a nightmare that I had for many years as a child. In this memory, I was standing next to black and white stripes and a big giant rooster came and pecked me in the forehead. I brought this up to my mother one time and she said, "*I can't believe you remember that! Those were the stairs, and the rooster seemed almost as big as you were.*" She said I was just a little baby, about 18 months old, when that happened.

Back in the 1940's when I was born, Mississippi was very segregated. It was very, very bad for African-Americans. My father was from West Tennessee, and his family was very prejudiced. Even when I knew them much later, I just had to keep my mouth shut down there, because I could get in a lot of trouble.

My mother was from East Tennessee, and East Tennessee sided with the Union during the Civil War when the rest of Tennessee fought for the South. So, my mother's family didn't have the same attitudes about African-Americans, and she certainly didn't. My mother was a minister's wife, and one time a woman told her that she "*shouldn't worry about slavery because 'those people' didn't have any souls anyway.*" So, that was the atmosphere that I grew up in. I grew up in the South in a Southern Baptist family, and I lived a very rigid kind of life as a child — a church life. We were good boys, Edward and I, but we were always getting in trouble. My mother always used to say she was glad she had us first because she wouldn't have had the energy later!

My grandfather was the first Paul Medling — I was named after him. My grandmother's name was Lenna. They went to Japan as missionaries in 1907. That was over 100 years ago, if you can imagine what that meant — it took them six weeks to cross the Pacific back then. Well, my granddaddy died of the Swine Flu while they were in Japan in 1919. He was just 39! After World War I there was a worldwide flu epidemic, and more people died in the epidemic than died in the war. So my grandmother brought the family — five children and herself — back to Jackson, Tennessee. That's where my father grew up. His older sister, Julia, died within the first year after they moved back from Japan because the Swine flu affected her heart.

At the age of nine, my Daddy decided that when he grew up he wanted to become a missionary and go back to Japan. So when I was six years old, my father came back after the war and my parents moved us to California to learn Japanese. That was our first grade year, and I think we went to three different schools. California was very crowded in 1946, so schools had both morning

and afternoon sessions. Most of the time I didn't know where I was when we lived in Oakland. But I remember one morning we left for school with a dime for milk money in our hands, but when we got to school, we didn't have it because some big sixth grade boys decided to take it. So the next day, my Dad walked with us. He took a baseball bat with him because it was a pretty bad neighborhood. After that, we moved to Berkeley.

When we got to Japan, we lived in Tokyo for two years so we could really learn the language. While we were there we lived in a old-fashioned Japanese house. It had a cast-iron bathtub that was set in the floor. There was a grate outside where you built a fire, and then you would heat up the water outside all day. At the end of the day it would be really hot and everyone would bathe. First the father would bathe, then the boys, oldest to youngest, then the girls oldest to youngest, then the mother, and last would be the maid. You didn't bathe *in* the tub. You'd wash yourself *outside of* the tub first, so when you get in the tub you're already clean. It was like a sauna. It would heat you up and relax all of your muscles because in Japanese houses they didn't have any heat.

I was about 7 years old when we were in that house. It had sliding walls and tatami mats on the floor. It was a wonderful house. So those are some of the things I remember about growing up in Japan. We were there in Tokyo for two years, then we moved to Kumamoto, and we were there until my brother and I were fourteen. Our house in Kumamoto was prefabricated in America and sent over to us. At that time there was nothing in Japan to build a house with because everything had been destroyed in the war. So the six of us were living in this very strange little American house in the middle of Japan.

Kumamoto was our neighborhood. It was a city of 360,000 people and we had a six-foot fence around our lot. Remember, this was after World War II, so General MacArthur was running the place at that time. Our fence was made out of pine boards, and the Japanese people would come along and push out the knots in the pine so they could look inside. We felt like we were living in a fish bowl!

We didn't really relate that well to the Japanese people at that time, because we were going to a military school and we didn't speak fluent Japanese. My younger sister spoke better Japanese than we did, and she got along well like many of the kids her age. She was ten years younger than me, so she played more with Japanese children. We didn't really have much to do with the military children either. We went to school with them, but then we came home. They lived at the military base, so they played together, but we lived with our family.

Japan is a very controlled society. People live very close together, so they have a very ordered society. They're very polite, and the schools are very orderly. Did you know that there's a Japanese school here in Jamaica Plain? It's called Showa. The girls come over here to learn about America. They come for about 6 months, then they go back. I think they're high school students. Anyhow, I was talking recently with a girl who goes there, and she said "*America is heaven...Japan is hell.*" I told her I really enjoyed living in Japan. But she was talking about how rigorous and competitive the school system is. It's very stressful and hard on them.

Oh, there were so many things that I learned when I was growing up. I think that the most important thing I learned was the importance of love. And, I also learned the importance of discipline.

Well, we went to a lot of schools. We went to first grade in Oakland; that was a very large school. But, when we moved to Japan we went to a military dependent school. After Japan surrendered at the end of the war the US Military moved in and the schools were on military bases. So most of the schools were pretty small. After we lived in Kumamoto, we were at a place called Camp Wood. They picked us up and took us to school in a military ambulance; it was like a $\frac{3}{4}$ ton truck. There were only a few kids in each grade at that school. I remember that there was one boy at that school who was a *real bully*. He was one angry boy. One time a teacher said something to him that made him mad, and he took a brick and hit her in the head! I was scared to death of him.

When you're a missionary, you work for five years abroad, then you came back to the States for a furlough. So we lived in Japan until sixth grade, then we came back and we lived in Knoxville, Tennessee for seventh grade. Then, after the furlough, we went back to Japan and after eighth grade, my brother and I went to high school at the Canadian Academy in Kobé. That was a boarding school; it was three hundred miles from home, so we had to ride the train to get there.

There were 70 students in our high school and they were from 27 different nationalities. It was very international. It was a wonderful experience, and I think it played a big part in making me who I am. I didn't realize it at the time, but I can see it now. We were a small school, very academically oriented, and

prejudice was not possible because there were so many different kinds of people!

But when my brother and I came back to the States to go to college, we went to Southern Baptist College — an all white college. Since my brother and I had come from this very international school, we had *these attitudes*. Remember, in 1954 there was Brown vs. the Board of Education that desegregated schools. Then in 1957, President Eisenhower send the National Guard into Little Rock Arkansas so seven Black students could go to Little Rock High School. Well, we came back from Japan in 1958! So all the Southern Whites were really, really mad, *and we didn't get it*. We had been at this wonderful school where everyone was accepted, and that's what we believed in. So, to get away from that, when I finished college I came up here to Boston and went four more years to seminary. Now there was prejudice in Boston then, and there still is. But it was very different cup of tea in the South. It's still there even today, but it's much better than it was then.

When I was your age, my favorite things to do were to read and to argue! My best friend growing up was my twin brother, of course, because we knew each other so well. We had moved around so much together, and we had all this common experience. But we argued all the time! We fought when we were in high school, but just verbally, never physically. At one point the upper classmen at our school decided to separate us and put us on different floors so they could get some sleep.

So, we argued, but when I ran into someone who was physically aggressive, I'd be scared to death of them. I didn't know how to handle physical aggression. I

was just never able to figure that out. I was a big and very tall, but even the little aggressive guys scared me.

Yes, I was very fond of school. I was a reader, and was reading all the time. I can remember reading *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens when I was 11 years old. There were parts that I didn't understand in it, but I loved it! My favorite teacher in high school was Mr. Johns. He was my 11th and 12th grade History and English teacher. He was a very good teacher— just excellent. He taught me how to write a sentence and write a paragraph. He taught me to express myself in English, so I look back on him now with real fondness.

My parents had very strict rules, but I left home to go away to boarding school when I was fourteen. The school had very strict rules, too, but there were ways of getting around them. The girls' dorm was down the hill and ours was up the hill. Behind the girls dorm there was a tennis court, and under that there was a storage area like a garage. One time when I was a sophomore, a boy and girl were found together in there with no clothes on and that was the big scandal of that year!

My father was very strict. If I got in trouble at home, my father whipped us. But that stopped when we were fourteen, and I have very few memories of that. One time when I was in 7th grade he said to me, “ *If they punish you in school, don't worry about it because that's not going to be anything compared to what I'm going to do to you!*” When my father married my mother, he weighed 145 lbs. — he was thin! But when he was stationed in Alaska, he had a lot of time on his hands, so he used to lift weights. By the time he got out of the military, he weighed 190 lbs. and he had big biceps. So if we were sitting at the table and one of us did something wrong, he would just go ‘whap.’

When I was a teenager I didn't like my father at all. He was very demanding. But later on I realized that I liked him. It wasn't until I came up here and got into the seminary, that I had a chance to get away. When my brothers and I would get out of control, my mother used to put on her hat and coat and say, "*I'm leaving!*" My father was gone a lot. Sometimes he would be gone before we got up for school, and lots of nights he'd be out doing missionary work and he'd get home very late. There were times when we wouldn't see him for weeks on end, so it was probably hard on my mother.

The scariest thing that ever happened to me — to us, my brother and I — was when we were about 14 and were freshmen in high school. We were going back to school, but we missed the train. It was an express train, so it was going to take us right to where we were going. But our tickets were good for a regular train too, so we got on a regular train. But it stopped at *every* station, so, we were in a foreign country alone, stuck on this slow train, and we weren't sure we had done the right thing.

Things I remember from the fifties? I remember at the military camp where we went to school, parents of a lot of our schoolmates went to Korea in 1950 and were killed there. So that was pretty big. And, when I was a teenager, there was a World's Fair in either Kyoto or Osaka, and we got involved in that, so that was big. Also, when I was a teenager, I remember Elvis Presley's first record: *Heartbreak Hotel*. The music changed very fast. We were listening to people like Patti Paige, Frank Sinatra and Perry Como, then it was Elvis and everything changed.

The first time I ever saw TV was in 1952 when we came back to America. When I was in high school there was a girl in my class who used to have people over to her house to watch *I Love Lucy*. I remember her talking about it! Also, back then the big deal for teenagers were the 45-rpm records. They were small records that you could buy with just two songs on them. So, in my lifetime, we've gone from 78's to 45's, from 8-track tapes, to small tapes, to CD's and DVD's, and now everyone has an Ipod!

When I graduated from high school, we came back to America. Then after I was in college for a year, my parents went back to live in Japan. I was working at a Southern Baptist camp for the summer, and my parents told us they were leaving. When our classmates left at the end of the school year, they could go live at home for the summer. But, my brother and I learned that *we had to have summer jobs that included room and board*. So the first year I tried selling Bibles, but that was a disaster. Then after that, I worked for three summers at Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone Park. That was for my last two years of college and my first year of seminary. That was a wonderful job. I was head washman at the laundry, and we did 13,000 pieces of laundry a day!

I was mature intellectually, but I was very immature when it came to getting along with girls or doing anything social. I had girls who were friends of mine, but in terms of dating or things like that, I was very immature. I think my first date was the Senior Prom. A bunch of girls from the girls dorm came up to me one day and said "*Paul, we want you to take this girl to the Senior Prom.*" Oh, the other part was that I was a Southern Baptist, so I couldn't dance. But they had me take this girl Karen to the prom. They said "*she's not going with you because it's a date.*" She had a boyfriend, but he was in the military, so we got

all dressed up and I took her to the prom. Then, I took her home and we shook hands!

The first real date that I can remember was when I was a freshman in college. Like I said, I was behind socially. But, looking back on it, Edward and I went to this camp when we were 19. It was a Southern Baptist Summer Camp, and Ed got active that summer with girls, and I ran around with a bunch of boys. I think we were all gay, but because we were Southern Baptists; we talked about it, but no one would do anything because it was taboo. So, I was very conflicted in my sexual identity, because I couldn't be what I wanted to be. Back then, in the fifties, I probably would have ended up in a psychiatric hospital.

I worked in Montana the next summer, then the following year I had my first church. I think the best job I ever had was my first church job — I was there for four years. I used to preach without notes. Some ministers read their sermons. My father told me years ago that it's a risk, because if you don't have notes you can wander off. Then people might lose interest or laugh at you. But, when you take the risk, you tell stories, and people listen to you. There's always a risk in every kind of relationship that you have with anybody else, I really believe that! Risk is very important, but you've got to be careful. You can't throw yourself away in things, and you have to be honest.

I learned to drive when I was twenty. I bought a car from a professor. I think I paid \$70 for it. It was a Chevy coupe. I didn't have a license or any insurance, and this guy from college was teaching me to drive. So I was coming down this hill into an intersection, and then I realized that I had no brakes, so Harold grabbed the wheel and swung it so we went into a parking lot at the Dairy

Queen. I had no business being on the road then! And later that summer, I wrecked that car anyhow.

When I was in the seminary I got a 1955 Buick. That was a beautiful old car—lots of chrome on it! Then I got a station wagon, when Marjie and I got married we got rid of both of our cars and her father got us a new Impala. So, by the time you're my age, you'll have had lots of cars.

I graduated from college in 1962. Then, in 1966 I graduated from the seminary and I got married. We had four children: Laura Lee, Scott, Leah, and Brad . We had our first child Laura Lee in 1968. Then, in 1970, I accidentally killed her when I backed over her with the car. That was really the crucible event of my life — her death. If you don't learn to deal with death, you can't really live. You can't let death conquer you, because you have to keep on living. The hardest thing I ever had to do in my life was to bury my daughter. That, and my sister's suicide happened in the same year, so that was a really difficult time for me. But, in 1971, our son Scott was born, then in 1973 Leah was born, and in 1975 Brad was born. Now they are 34, 36, and 38.

The most significant moment in my life was when I came out as a gay person in 1977. It was both happy and sad because I had to leave my family, but it was happy for me. I left home when came out as a gay person. Marjie and I got divorced, so she got all of the assets, and there weren't many; I got all the bills! So, my Daddy let me have his old Oldsmobile. It was 10 years old and only had 27,000 miles on it. What was a cream puff of a car! So when I came up here I had it undercoated because of the road salt. After all that, someone stole it *three times*, then they wrecked it. So that ended my driving career. It turned out that I have to take a lot of medicine and you're not supposed to drive when you're

taking this medicine. I kept my license for about ten years, then I just let it go. So I haven't really driven a lot in my life...not as much as most people.

The biggest adventure in my life was going to Japan. I went there when I was seven and came back when I was eighteen years old, except for a furlough in seventh grade. I was raised there, so I had a very interesting life. I didn't even realize it when it was happening, but I do now when I look back on it.

The things that make me happiest now are things like reading. When I get up in the morning, that's what I look forward to. You can see how many books I have here, and that's not all of them. I've read some of them many times, I even read Harry Potter two or three times. I love history and biography, so reading is one of those things that I really look forward to now. I also look forward to talking to my daughter on the telephone, and being involved in activities at my church. I have great friendships in this community.

I think my greatest accomplishment was coming out as a gay person. That might seem strange, but it took courage. I lost so much when that happened— I lost my family and I lost my career— but I just couldn't go on living a lie.

Would I change anything about my life if I could? Well, I'll tell you a story. The church I go to has a lot of gay members in it. I think it might have 30% gay and lesbian members. One fellow got a divinity degree, and he and his partner were offered a ministry in a church in another state. I came home and realized *how jealous I was*. I was so jealous of them but I was very happy for them too. I guess it made me realize how different things are now. That couldn't have happened 30 years ago when I was a minister. If I could have been myself and not hurt Marjie and the kids, I would have, but it just wasn't possible then.

Is there something new that I would like to try at this stage of my life?

Well, did you see the movie *Avatar*? Remember the guy in the wheel chair, and how at the end of the movie he was in that religious service? He got to “take on” the body of the Avatar? Well, if I could be young again and start over, I’d take on a new body. That’s something I’d like to change. Yes, it’s a fantasy! I’m not too much for trying new things, but that might be fun.

Do I have any words of wisdom? Well this is Dumbledore speaking, now. He was the head of the school where Harry Potter went. He was an old wizard, and very wise. And he says: “ *This is an explanation of an old man’s mistakes. For I see now that what I have done and not done with regard to you bears all the hallmarks of the failures of age. Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels, but old men are guilty if they forget what it is to be young.*” I think it’s very hard to give words of wisdom to a young person because you never *were* their age. I’ve never lived as a young person in the age that you are now. I never had an Ipod or things like that, and you didn’t experience the South back when I was young and the prejudice was beyond comprehension. So, the things that shaped me are different than the things that are shaping you. The most important advice I can give you is to try to find out who you are, and be true to who you are. Because you can’t live a lie, or be who other people want you to be, so be yourself.