

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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Rose May Whigham

Interviewed by Nanci Cardona, Jasmine Dozier and Miranda Desir

My name is Rose May Whigham. I was born in Waynesboro, Georgia on June 6, 1937. I was named after my mother's mother- she was Rose May, too. Her maiden name was Lewis. My mother was Louise Lewis Drayton, and my father was Sidney Drayton. My mother and father just died two years ago. My mother was 86 and my father was 90.

I lived in Georgia until I was three years old, then I came here to Boston. So, I was born in the South, but I really grew up in Boston. I lived on Hubert Street in Roxbury. We lived there for my whole childhood. It was a lot of fun when I grew up. I went to the Asa Grey School in Roxbury through the 5th grade, then I think I went to the Jefferson School. I went to the Timilty School for high school, and graduated from there. Yes, the Timilty use to be a high school.

Life was beautiful then. We could leave our doors open. We could go out to play and nobody would bother you. There wasn't any violence in those days. We use to play in Madison Park. We played hopscotch and double-dutch. If it rained we would stay in and just talk. Yes, we played cards, too

When I was a child I grew up with both of my parents in a large family. My mother worked in the shipyard, and my father worked for— oh, I can't remember the name of the company. He worked for an industrial company, and for a while he was the iceman on our street, too. That was back in the days of the icebox before refrigerators! Yes, I remember that we had rationing and coupon books. We had to stand in line to get rice and butter like everyone else. Yes, meat was scarce

during World War II, so whenever we got fried chicken, it was really a treat!

There were seven of us kids, four boys and three girls. My brothers' names are Sidney, Wheeler, John, and Larry Drayton. My sisters are Annie Lou and Geneva Drayton, and I'm the baby! No I didn't have grandparents up here. They were down South. But my aunts lived here. They were my mother's sisters, and they lived on the same street as we did. The most important thing I learned from my family growing up was respect. We learned to respect each other.

Who was my best friend? Well, I had about eight good friends. We all grew up together and we use to do a little bit of everything together. Four of them are still around here, and we're all still best friends today. They are Gloria Lewis, Dorothea Morgan, Gloria Scales, and Pauline Christie.

I loved school. I had very good teachers. I had a teacher when I was in eighth grade, Mr. Hart, and I fell in love with him! I don't know, he was just a nice person and a nice looking man. He was my favorite teacher. I always liked Math. That was my favorite subject, but I didn't like Science.

When we weren't in school we use to hang out in the park, and listen to a tape and dance. Back then, everyone in our neighborhood stuck together and looked out for each other. We use to go to different houses to eat, you know. Different mothers would cook. Yes, there were conflicts and disagreements among people sometimes, but people talked about it and the next day they were friends again. No, there wasn't a church that everyone went to, but we had the Cooper Community Center. That was our community center when we were growing up.

Yes, I had to do chores when I was coming up. I had to clean, then on Sundays when my mother went to church, she gave us all chores. "*Geneva, you fry the*

chicken today, Rosie, you cook the greens," or whatever. And if I said, *I don't know how to cook the greens!* She'd say, *"Oh yes you do, and when I come home they better be ready!"* So we did.

When I got home from school I did my homework, cleaned my room, helped my mother cook because I had to. Then, I hit the streets. When I was younger we used to play hopscotch, double-dutch, and things like that. Or, we would go to the park and play baseball or basketball...or try to play, anyway. When I was your age my favorite thing to do was to party! Just like you kids now. And later, we would sneak and see our boyfriends. That's about it, what else could you do?

Oh yes, I got in trouble with my parents many times. We had a curfew and in the summer we had to be in by 9 o'clock, and in winter we had to be in by 4 o'clock because it got dark. My curfew was later when I got older. What kind of trouble did I get in? Well, sometimes I might have gotten caught smoking. Then I would have to be on punishment. Maybe have to stay in the house for a week!

My parents weren't too strict. When I was a teenager, my curfew to come in was 12 o'clock! We would go to plenty of dances, roller skating, all that, or the amusement park. Back then it was the Rollerway. I think it was in Revere. My favorite was the roller coaster, I guess. Yes, sometimes I got in trouble if I stayed out too late. Then I would have to stay in the house for a week! Plus, once I got in trouble with my parents when I got caught drinking. I think I was about 18. Then I got grounded and got *more* chores.

Oh, my first date? My first date was with Robert Bryant. Yes it was good. I had a crush on him. I was probably about 19. I don't remember where we went. I think we just walked around and talked, then we had some lunch.

One time we went to a dance, and this guy gave us a ride. Then he left us all the way out there in Weymouth or someplace! So we had to hitch a ride back to Boston. We got a ride with some guy who was at the party.

After I finished school I got a job and I worked for a while, then in the 1950's I got married and started having my kids. I was about 25. Back then we didn't go to college because we didn't have any money. What were my dreams for when I got older? Well, I wanted to grow up to be a nice intelligent young lady, and have children — but not seven children! And, I wanted to be a good mother, and I was. I dedicated my life to my kids, and now that they're grown, I just want to do what I want to do, go where I want to go, and enjoy myself!

That's right, when I got married I moved here, and I've been living here ever since. My husband was George Whigham. We went together for about a year before we got married, then we were married for about 10 years before my husband died. My first daughter was born in 1955, then I had six more children. My kids are Laverne, Lovette, Annette, Linda, Michael, Marvin, and Kenneth. So I had four girls and three boys. I don't know how I coped with losing my husband. I just did with the help of my family. Everybody helped out.

Oh yes, my kids tried to get away with everything. Laverne was the most into mischief. One time, they were upstairs at a party, and somebody came downstairs and said, "*Do you know Laverne's pregnant?*" I said "*What?*" So I called her down and said "*Laverne, are you pregnant?*" She said, "*No Ma.*" Then, her stomach started getting BIG, and I said, "*Laverne, are you pregnant?*" She said, "*No Ma.*" Then she had the baby, I said, "*Laverne, are you pregnant?*" And she said, "*No Ma.*" So that was quite an experience.

No, none of my kids ever had a health problem but my granddaughter was outside

wrestling one day and she broke her leg. That's right, seven kids, and no broken bones! Then I took kids into my house for ten more years. But the kids I took care of weren't from the neighborhood, they were from Mission Hill and other places. Then I was a lunch mother at the Hennigan for about 10 years, but my kids were already grown by then.

Yes, my friends still live right around me here. One lives in Roxbury, and the rest are right here in the neighborhood. Yes, we were all raising our kids at the same time.

No, I never drove. My biggest transportation adventure was when I was flying to Alabama with my boyfriend on a plane. He was playing with me and he said "*hey, Rosie, look the engine's on fire,*" and I screamed. And everybody jumped up. Yes, he was a practical joker, but I said, "*don't you ever do that again!*"

My biggest adventure was probably when we went to Bermuda. Yes, that was beautiful. It was with a group of friends — no, not my best friends. It was a Mothers Club sponsored by *The Home for Little Wanderers*. We would get together every week and we collected dues so we could go on trips. That's how we got together.

The best job I ever had was probably daycare. I took care of kids for 12 years because I loved it. I wish I could have taken up a nice trade, like computers or something like that. I can't do it now because my brain isn't that smart! I tried, though. They have computers over at *The Cave*, and they have classes. I tried once, but my brain just couldn't get a hold of it. But I'll probably try again because I'd really like to learn to use a computer.

Having my children and enjoying my children has been the happiest part of my

life. I think that raising my children has been my biggest accomplishment. What else am I happy about? Well, when I get up in the morning, I thank God that I have another day. The hardest thing I've ever had to deal with was losing my mother. That was really hard.

What advice would I give you as a teenager? Well, Number 1 — stay in school; Number 2, do NOT smoke; Number 3, do NOT drink or take drugs. If you feel stress, go and talk to somebody. That's the best thing to do.