

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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Tessie May Thompson

Interviewed by Jessica Harris & Susan Porter

My name is Tessie May Thompson. I was born on May 13, 1940 in Williams, South Carolina. I lived with my mother and father when I was young. My mother was Mamie Thompson and my father was Lawrence Bennett. My parents were both farmers, and we lived out in the country on a farm. It was fun, but it was hard work. We had a medium-sized family with six kids— 3 girls and 3 boys. My father had 3 outside kids too. All of us Black, and all of us sisters and brothers. We never said "halfs." All of us grew up together.

My oldest brother is Dan Bennett. My second sister is Gladys Warren. My other sisters are Carrie Washington and Luetta Davis. My twin sister is Jessie Jenkins. I'm not the youngest, my twin sister is. My other brothers are Lawrence, Wendell, and Johnny Bennett.

On the farm we had cows, hogs, and goats. All the kids— everybody— had to take care of them. We had to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to feed the hogs and milk all the cows and take them out to pasture. Then you had to take the milk into the house and help Mom and Dad. So we didn't go out into the fields 'til all that was done. It was a working childhood. My mother would cook, and after she was finished, she would come to the fields, too. It was tough.

We worked all year long *and* we went to school. But we didn't go to school every day, because we HAD to work. What made it so bad ultimately was that we were working on somebody else's land, we were share-croppers. We didn't get no

money, but, at least we ate well. We dug corn, cotton, peas, beans, and all kinds vegetables. Then we would gather all this stuff at the end of the year. We took

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cotton to the cotton gin. We'd share the corn, then took it to the mill to grind into corn meal. We made grits and scratch rice. My dad had to buy flour because we didn't grow wheat. My mother made bread every day. Oh, yeah, there were always seven or eight mouths to feed.

In the wintertime we slaughtered the hogs. We didn't do the cows, just the hogs. They were killed right there and hanging up in the slaughterhouse. We made sausages, pork chops and all that stuff. We had ducks and chickens too. Really, we never did have to buy food, we always had the corn meal to make grits.

So, that's the place where I grew up. I lived there all my life until I got married.

We went to public school in a one-room schoolhouse. It was the Williams School, and I went to 5th grade there. At school, each table was a separate classroom for a different grade. You got your shots there. The nurse came out and gave you your shots. Then we went to Rutland High School. That was a bigger school in another town, so we had to walk about 5 miles to get there everyday. We walked there and walked back EVERYDAY. We had a good time though. We had such a good time that we didn't even realize that we were going that far until we was home. Luckily, it never snowed in South Carolina, so our winters were milder there.

As I was growing up I played with the neighbors down the road. There were three sets of families that lived back there. We called it "*in the woods*." We lived about 5 or 6 miles back in off the road. I didn't have a best friend. We just all grew up friends with those who lived back in the woods with us. We didn't have no special friends, you know. All of us was close because we lived together, and we worked

on the farm together. If we finished picking our cotton first, we used to go over and have lunch, and help them pick theirs.

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When we played, we would jump rope or make seesaws, and sometimes we would jump on something called a "spring board." We made it ourselves. We could go pretty high on that thing! We used to climb in trees and swing on limbs. I was telling my grandkids, "*Now, you all go to school and you already have all this stuff! When we was coming up, we made our own things.*" We played something we called 'Jack Stones.' Here you call it 'Jacks'. You know those metal things? Well, we had to use peach kernels or rocks.

Yeah, when we were young kids sometimes we had conflicts with our friends because we had to walk a little piece go to school. Sometimes, we would get into fights, but it wasn't nothing major. We used to get in fights because we was kids! Most of our fights was with the White kids. They didn't bother us. They just poked, and then they got poked back. Poke, poke, poke. We were all in the same boat. We used to run all up into their house and beat them up. We never really became friends. Their mother used to tell them, "*Leave them Jack Benny' kids alone.*" They used to call us 'Jack Benny kids.'

I tell my kids sometimes, when we was coming up we knew our place. It was like there was this line. You knew you couldn't cross that line, and you didn't cross it. People out in the country, *we* didn't cross that line and *they* didn't cross that line. It wasn't like nowadays. Now everyone goes to school together, but back then you couldn't do that.

Our neighborhood was very safe. You could walk anyplace for anything. We used to walk to church for prayer meeting on Wednesday night, then walk to church again on Sunday. We went to church all the time. That might be why I don't go to

church now! We went to Sunday school, then prayer meeting and bible study; we went to night church, then we went to somebody else's church. Sunday School

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classes didn't last long, but you had to know your lessons. You had to learn from Sunday school books. It kept me busy.

But don't get me wrong, we got to play too. On Sundays after church sometimes we'd go out there in the field and play softball— stuff like that. Everybody got along with everybody pretty much. Yeah, when I was going to school all through high school everybody got along. There was no fighting or shooting like here.

I loved school. The only problem was we couldn't go that much, because we had to help my father on the farm. We might go to school in the morning, then he would come and get us at noon to go work in the fields. My home economics teacher was my favorite teacher — Miss Smith. She was a real nice person. Like I say, we were poor, so we didn't have a lot of clothes and stuff. She used to bring me clothes, and because she was a home economics teacher, she even made me little outfits and stuff. She was a real special person.

My favorite thing to do outside of school? Well, there was always something to do. You just never had nothing to do. Just because there was no school didn't mean you didn't have nothing to do. There was corn to bring in, cotton to pick, hogs to feed, cows to milk and feed, cows to take out in the morning. There was always something to do. This was South Carolina. We didn't get into trouble because there was no trouble to get into — we were too busy working. We were never bored.

The most important thing I learned from my family while I was growing up. How to sit back, how to behave, listen, follow rules and respect your parents/elders. It's

such an important thing. These kids now don't respect nobody. But you had to respect. When we got home from school, if we did anything, my mother knew it. She KNEW it. Everybody in the neighborhood watched the kids. If she wasn't

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around somebody would tell her. So you might as well get ready, because she just knew it. How? I don't know, but she did. There was a pipeline back there.

When I was a teenager, I didn't do nothing but just played stickball and baseball all the time. I didn't go to a dance 'til I was 18 or 19 years old. We didn't go anyplace. My sister and I would say "*Why can't we go someplace?*" On Saturday nights the other girls would go out, but we had to go to church the next day. They could go out with their little boyfriends, but we had to go to church. That probably helped us though, because a lot of them got in trouble. My parents had rules about when we had to be home, of course

We weren't allowed to go out with our friends to clubs and stuff like that—no nightclubs. And, we didn't have no boyfriends coming to the house either. Maybe we had boyfriends out there, but they weren't coming to the house. We didn't sneak out because the house we lived in didn't have a whole lot of room! My mother and father slept over on one side like this, and all 6 of us kids slept over on the other side, like that. So there wasn't no sneaking out. Believe me, they knew when we tried. If one of us was sneaking out at night and then came sneaking back in, they had to come through the window. And you know my father was sitting right there. Oh, no! We're in trouble now. Yup, he'd be sitting right there waiting for you, and it was too late to run away. My mother used to help us out a lot though, but it just wasn't worth it to sneak out. If I did, I was so nervous the whole time I was out that I didn't have any enjoyment. You keep thinking the whole time, "*I have got to back home.*"

After I graduated from high school, this boy came home. He had been living out here in the country but then he had moved away. He worked in cotton and tobacco fields as an itinerant farmer, but when he moved back down home, we got married.

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I was just 19 years old. We had three children, but I didn't stay married to him. We split when I was 28. Then, I got married again later in 1985 and had another daughter with my husband Shirley. Her name was Shirley, too. She was named after him.

Since I was born in 1940, I don't remember too much about World War II. I just remember a few things like the ration stamps that you had to use at the store to buy things like sugar, kerosene, and shoes. But we weren't affected that much.

In the 1950's, out in the country we had a lot of R&B that we used to listen to. It was when R&B was first coming along. We'd listen to Fats Domino and all those guys. Matter of fact, I still have some of those records at the house. I used to listen to them all the time. I used to like those guys. We didn't have no TV, but we had a radio, and it was on a lot.

When I came to Boston, I said, "*Oh, Lord. What have I gotten myself into? People can do that? I can't do that, so I'm going home.*" Nobody told me, so I thought it would be like South Carolina with a house. You have a house and you're in your house, not an apartment with somebody upstairs and somebody across the hall. The idea that people were living on top of one another? I didn't know people did that, and I didn't like it at all. So I told my Momma, "*I'm going to come home.*" No, it took me a long time, but I finally got used to it.

My husband was from South Carolina too. He had a brother up here. Sometimes I would see people that I knew from back home. One girl that lived next door, I knew her from when we went to school together. She was married and came up

here, too. I used to meet her outside at the corner and say, "*How do you folks live on top of one another like this?*" It was crazy!

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It took me a long time to find my way around here. I would go one block every day just to try to learn my way. Then one day, my friend sent me to the store. I had her daughter with me. She was just a little baby. And there was this lady — she come up on me and she started preaching and going on! She was preaching and she knocked someone on the head. It was frightening! She scared me so bad, I went home and I told Louise about it. She said, "*Go on back to the store and get me those things.*" I said, "*I'm not going back. Uh, uh, No, 'I'm not.'*"

Once I was here my best friend was Dorothy White. She and I became like sisters. I didn't have children during that time. I had my first child when I was 29. She's in Las Vegas now. I guess she likes it. She's been there for a long time. She's been there long enough to raise all her children. In fact her 'baby' is 16 now.

I do drive a car. It's out there in the parking lot. I have full coverage on it. I used to drive down home, but I didn't have my license. My father taught me how to drive. When I came up here I didn't bother with it too much. I was scared to drive here, because people drive so crazy. People would say, "*So when are you going to get a car?*" I'd say, "*I'll get around to it.*" They drive crazy here, so I won't go on the highway. I stay on the side streets.

I'm the baby girl. I have a sister, she lives in Charleston, South Carolina. She's 73. There's only 3 of us living now, 3 girls. Me and my twin sister Jesse— she never came up here. Well, she came up here a long time ago, but she never came back! When my granddaughter went in the Service, she was stationed down in Columbia, SC. Her name is Georgia. She wanted us to come down for her

graduation, so, my daughter, my husband, my grandson, and myself all drove down there for her graduation from the Army. She was so happy! I called her and told

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her we were coming. I said, "*Georgia, we'll be there tomorrow when you graduate.*" She could hardly believe it.

So far in my life, my biggest adventure was coming here to Boston. And, once I visited my brother-in-law— you had to cross a bridge — oh, it was Oakland, California. I had never been there, because I had never been out of Boston. But it was friendly. His friend took us to a 'Rent Party.' That's what we called it when you pay to get in to a house party. It's to help the people get the monthly rent together. It was fun.

The best job I ever had was when I worked in childcare. I really liked that. I worked with all ages from 2 months old on up and on down. I was there about 4 or 5 years, then it got very strict. When I first started working there, they gave you all kinds of courses and everything. Now they want a Masters degree. The cost of education has become so expensive. Kids today cannot even think about how to pay it.

So, when I look back on my life, the one thing I always wanted to do— but couldn't — was go to college. I got part of that through my work in childcare. I took a lot of courses that they paid for. But I would have liked to have actually gone to college. My mother and father didn't have enough money. And back then they didn't have Financial Aid. I don't think I could still do it now though. I'm tired. I do think about it sometimes, but I don't think I could stay focused.

I look at my granddaughter when she's doing her homework with this math, and MCAS, and all that. She passed everything except the math. Then another granddaughter— matter of fact she just turned 24 — she graduated from English High School, but it took her 2 years to pass that MCAS. She passed everything but the math. She got A's, but she was 2 points short. So, she went over to Latin

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School where they have adult classes to get her math. When she passed she said, "*Granddaddy, I passed! I passed! I told you I wasn't going to quit until I passed!*" She was so happy, and *he* was so happy, because she did it. She stuck with it, she went to school every afternoon. So she could get her high school diploma.

My granddaughter says, "*I'm going to go to college, I don't know how. But I am going.*" I told her she could go to City Year or other community service and alternative service. It should be that children can do these things if they want to. A lot of children want to do things, but they can't afford it and their parents can't afford it. You shouldn't have to go into the military, but that's what my granddaughter did. She went in the military.

I have to think about what was the happiest moment I ever had. I guess it was when my sisters and brothers and I all gave my mother and father a big anniversary party down South. We surprised them with this big party. I think my daughter was about two at the time, so that was a long time ago since she is 47 now. It was April 1965. We were so excited because we surprised them.

What really makes me happy now is to see these children grow up and go to school and get an education and not get into trouble. And, when I wake up every morning I look forward to make it through another day and stay strong.

The hardest thing I ever had to do in my life was two years ago when I had to bury my husband. His name was Shirley— Shirley Thomspen, just like the girl's name.

He died on my daughter's wedding day, so he never got to the wedding. He dropped dead right there in the car. He kept telling us he wasn't going make it to the wedding. He was sick. He had emphysema and a pacemaker put in, and he was more sick than we knew he was. He told my neighbor he was afraid he wasn't going to be able to walk our daughter down the aisle. Somehow, he just knew it. I

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was on way to the hall but I had to stop to pick up all this food. And he called and said, "*Where are you?*" I said, "*I'll be there in a little while.*" He said, "*Well, I want you to come on. I want to go home.*" So I said, "*Okay, when I get there we can go on home.*" I said it like that. When I got there I saw the ambulance and I knew it was too late. The pastor came outside to see Shirley.

We told my daughter to go ahead and have her wedding. That was a hard thing that she did, but she did it because we wanted her to go ahead and get married. He and I had one child together and she was the one that was getting married. Our sisters and brothers came up for the wedding, so all of them were there. One sister couldn't come because her daughter was going away that day and she had to put her on a plane. But the rest of them were here. That was a hard thing to get over. In fact, I'm still not over it.

It sure can be hard. His friend came to the house, and I told him, "*Take whatever you want.*" And my grandson, you know, I have a grandson who's skinny like my husband was. So I gave him a lot of his stuff. I still go in the house and see some of his things. I might go in a closet and I see a shirt or something that reminds me of him. It's very hard.

I think the greatest accomplishment in my life is to have raised my children and grandchildren. My kids are Pamela, Paula, Tanya, and Shirley. I've raised 5 kids besides mine. I didn't have to do it, you know, but they are my grandchildren. I

could have put them in a foster home, but I raised all 5 of them. The oldest is 27, and the others are 21, 19, 18 and 16. Their names are Laquetta Taylor, Jaleesa Haywood, Cinnamon, Jamal, and Benjamin Taylor.

The only words of wisdom I have for you — all I can say, honey, is “*stay strong.*” Do the right thing. Don’t let nobody throw you off track or put you on the wrong

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track. Don’t let them get you to do something that you know in your heart is not right. Stay on the right track and follow your mind. If you follow your mind— your first thought— you’ll be all right. Like I tell my children, don’t let nobody turn you around on what you want to do in your life. Just stay on track and do what you have to do for you. You come first, you know.