

Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Project
Interviewer: Yohuru Williams
Interviewee: Lucinda “Cindy” Anderson
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Q: And Cindy do I have your permission to quote or cite this interview in our research study?

Anderson: Yes, you have.

Q: Great we are going to go ahead and get started then. I wanted to ask you before I ask you the very specific questions that we have about the Arts Center, if you can just tell me a little bit about your background. Where you were born? Where you grew up and how you came to reside in the city of Bridgeport.

Anderson: I was born in South Carolina in 1947 and I came to Connecticut in 1961 and I moved to New York and I was there ‘til 1968 and then I got married and I came here to Connecticut and I’ve been here ever since.

Q: What were you doing in New York?

Anderson: In New York I went through high school, I went to a business school and I worked at a place called Stat Builders which was a temporary agency and I was the assistant accountant.

Q: And when you came back to Connecticut in ’68, how is it that you became to be familiar with the Arts Center and how did you come to work for the Arts Center?

Anderson: I applied, it was through ABCD (Action for Bridgeport Community Development), I applied because I was kind of familiar, I got familiar with ABCD through a lot of programs that they had and it became, I saw the ad in the paper, well I saw the ad and they, and I applied for the position.

Q: And this was ‘68/’69?

Anderson: This was ’71.

Q: And you said you were familiar with their programs, what programs in particular?

Anderson: Well they had programs for --like to go to school because my sister was looking into their schools so I looked into it. She wanted to go to school so I checked into it and that’s how I

found out about the Arts Center. They had programs for schooling, programs for camps for kids because I had an older son in which I was then interested in him to go to camp, they had a lot of programs at that time because, you know, money was pretty good at that time.

Q: And by money you mean the anti-poverty money that was flowing in through?

Anderson: Through faculty and grants and all of that stuff.

Q: So you go to work for the Arts Center in '71 and you were hired by Ben Johnson?

Anderson: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about meeting him for the first time and about what your duties were at the Arts Center?

Anderson: My meeting Ben for the first time was a little bit scary just because, you know, like -- Ben wasn't the typical person you would meet. He was like kind of, I don't know, I never was into art before. I never dealt with people like that in the arts, in that field and it was kind of strange for me. But we got to know each other and we talked and we, you know, got an understanding and my credentials were what he was looking for because he didn't want anybody that was really straight-laced kind of a thing. I was a secretary but I was more than a secretary, I can interact with people and I'll always interact with people, especially kids. He liked me so he hired me.

Q: And he was looking specifically for someone who would be able to work with the kids too?

Anderson: Yes. And a secretary, part of the set-up.

Q: And what were your specific duties at the Arts Center?

Anderson: Well it was always --I had to make sure that the books were done and all the appeals were done for orders, make sure all the prices orders were done, book trips, all letters, just one second. My specific duties, ok, I did all the accounting there because we had to make sure our budgets were right and we had to go into our parent company so we, I did all the accounting to make sure that our prices orders were done, the equipment that we needed was ordered, not only equipment, but any supplies were ordered and made sure they were there. All letters, all correspondences and I worked with the kids when I had spare time.

Q: When you were, when you first were there you were on, you were downtown at first right?

Anderson: Yes, 1188 Main St.

Q: And when did you move to P.T. Barnum (low income housing complex in West End/Black Rock neighborhoods)?

Anderson: I don't remember the year. I really don't.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about what the 1188 Main St. was like, your memories of that facility?

Anderson: It was, really, it was like a small, it was like an office like you go to an office with a small spot. It wasn't like open like P.T. Barnum; it was like a little suite I would say. It was, there wasn't as many kids but we still had kids coming in from the public school and they would give them an art class and send them back but it wasn't the same as the Gary Crooks (community center in West End/Black Rock neighborhoods). It was a much smaller scale.

Q: And when you moved to Gary Crooks, what input did the staff at the Arts Center have in thinking about that facility and what it should look like?

Anderson: Well, we had a big input because the Gary Crooks was --they had to completely remodel the building--and we would all go over there and give them our input on how we wanted our space to be remodeled and what we need in that space to make our program work. So the program, it was really designed for the Arts Center from the beginning, the spot, the space that we had.

Q: And some people, Cindy, are very--it's funny how they describe the Arts Center--some people call it the Arts Center, some people call it the Gary Crooks Center. Can you tell me about Gary Crooks and what you remember about that particular case and how the Center came to take on his name?

Anderson: He was a young boy that lived in P.T. in a private residence. We were right in the back of P.T. and he drowned in the cesspool (city sewage facility). They had a cesspool over there. They still have a cesspool over there and he drowned in the cesspool over there and that's how the Center got the name Gary Crooks, because they named the Center after him. Well they named the building after him.

Q: And in terms of your employment at the Arts Center, how long were you there? What were your --you started in '71, when did you leave?

Anderson: When they closed and I think it was like '88.

Q: And when you left the Arts Center where did you go from there?

Anderson: I left the Arts Center and I went to special needs. I was the secretary for the director of the adult special Ed. Not Special Ed, but they were special needs adults.

Q: And what are some of your memories of the Arts Center? What are some of the things that stand out in your mind about working there?

Anderson: Just the fun, I mean we really had a good time, we really--and the kids and even up till today they remember. We really interacted really well with the kids and, you know, the kids back in that time they were looking for something and we gave them what they were looking for. They would come every day, they would do their art and it was just the joy of seeing kids happy and like now you don't see the kids happy you just see the sadness in their face but not back then. Back then they were happy and they were doing what they liked to be doing and they got along and it wasn't always, it was always a pleasant day when you went to work at the Arts Center, always a pleasant day. And that's what I really, really enjoyed and I wish that kids had that today.

Q: What personalities stick out for you? Who were some of the people that you worked with and were there any memorable students that stuck out in your mind?

Anderson: Well, like Leonardo Drew and this other guy his name was James Bell, I don't know James always stuck out in my mind. He was always a good kid, but he went to school in Westport someplace, with that program they have. Because back then they had money so they shipped him to Westport for school and they thought they were doing the right thing and he got messed up in the kids and got in some kind of drugs or something and his mind really wasn't good after that, but James Bell was such a really, really good kid and who else did we have? There was so many of them and nowadays my mind doesn't work so well.

Q: Didn't James come back at some point and vandalize the Arts Center? Was that James?

Anderson: I'm not sure, I'm not sure. But I know he had gotten, he was different after a while, he was really, truly different and that really, really hurts.

Q: Well let's talk about your co-workers a little bit. When you first arrived it was you, Ben Johnson and who else was there on the staff?

Anderson: Wendy (Bridgeforth), Bill (Collins) and Pat (Patricia Melvin Carey).

Q: What were they like, what was Wendy like? Bill like? Pat like? What are your memories of them?

Anderson: Wendy was young and fun. She was always big fun and was always really, really into her arts. She was really into her art; she was going to school during that time. I think she was part time and going to a school in New Canaan. Silvermine, I think it was. She was, it was like she was a little girl compared to us, because we were much older than her, at least I was older than she was. And Pat was the serious one. Especially when it came to the girls, she would always talk to the girls and tell them how to make sure to maintain their grooming and that. All of this was done and then the boys and she, --that's the kind of person that she was. The Arts Center was a part of mentoring all of those young kids back then. And Ben was--I don't know how to talk about Ben--he was, to me he was a guy that I'd never met before. He was a good person.

Q: When you say "never met before" he was unique? And in what ways?

Anderson: Yes, it was the way that he would do things, like the way he would talk to you and I don't know. I can't describe it right now.

Q: How about Rich (Stamats)?

Anderson: Well, Rich came afterwards. Rich wasn't on Main Street. He came to Gary Crooks. And I think Ralph (Williams) was at Main Street. I think I'm pretty sure, but Rich came afterwards.

Q: Now you talked about Ralph Williams who was percussion. Before him, was Ben Johnson's brother Jami (Ayinde) the percussion teacher?

Anderson: Well, yes and no, he was there, but I don't remember. To say the truth about it the only person in my mind that I remember as the percussion teacher was Ralph. Maybe he was.

Q: What was Ralph like? What was his role with the music? I know it was the Arts Center and then music became a part of that, what was that like in terms of the program there?

Anderson: Well, Ralph was, his music, he was really serious about his music and his kids came in there and they really, really, really learned. Their hands were hurting because they were doing the drums but they weren't doing it correctly so their hands hurt but they still came in every day to practice and he really was good with those kids. And even today, kids are still playing music because of Ralph. I remember Brian, a couple of weeks ago was telling me about his Jazz band that he plays in and, you know, these kids are still doing stuff because of Ralph and he was the one that started them up and got them interested in that.

Q: And Brian's last name? Do you remember?

Anderson: Yeah, Ben's son, Brian Johnson.

Q: Now, Cindy how about--there are a couple of people whose names came up--Bill? What do you remember about him?

Anderson: Bill--Bill was--you had to get to know Bill. Bill was not--he had to become a member of the Arts Center, if you know what I mean, because he was in an environment that he never, ever had been in before with black kids and that sort of thing, but he did well. He came and after a while he got to know the kids and he really, really--they started to relate to him and he was good there--he was good for the Arts Center. The kids needed to know about everybody and the different races and start to deal with different people and Bill was one of those that they had to learn to deal with.

Q: I'm going to ask you about two people who weren't directly connected but who obviously were important. One is Reverend Johnson and the other is--well, let me ask you about Reverend Johnson first.

Anderson: Reverend Johnson, he was there, he was really a big part of it--but not a big part. He let Ben take care of the Arts Center. He would come and check things out and in the evenings we would meet with him and talk with him and he'd try to find out what was going on but he would never interfere. Ben had full control of whatever went on in the Arts Center.

Q: And how about Charles Tisdale?

Anderson: I don't know too much about him coming to the Arts Center and I don't think he was there during the Arts Center time.

Q: Ok, and um when you, what would you say was the greatest impact of the Arts Center on you?

Anderson: It helped me to deal with and see kids differently like seeing the sparkle in the kids eyes because before you know you have your own kids. But it wasn't the same as seeing all the other kids and they were there and living in a lot of conditions that weren't good. But when they came to the Arts Center they were really, like their eyes would light up, and they were happy and that is the part of the Arts Center that will always be a part of me. I won't ever forget the things that I've learned and dealt with at the Arts Center. I mean it was a job but it was a fun job; it was really fun. That was the best job I've ever had and I'm 69 years old right now and that one was my best job. I really, really loved that job.

Q: And Cindy, what impact would you say it had on the community as whole?

Anderson: You know, it really, really, as far as P.T., you see P.T. had nothing, they didn't have anything and can you imagine living and all you had was cement, some brick buildings and that's it. They didn't have a community center. They didn't have anything, that's all they had. All they had was the Arts Center. These kids, they get--they do something--they get in trouble and they couldn't come for a day and they would cry and the parents looked forward to them coming because they knew that it was a good place for them. It was a really good place and they knew that the kids were being looked after and doing great things and you know, if you think about it now as I'm talking to you, there has never been a place like the Arts Center and where money is now; there will never ever be a place like the Arts Center. And even with the kids now they are growing up and have kids of their own and they still talk to you about the Arts Center so it had a great impact. Even some of the older mothers that you see, some of the older people that we have met--they were raising their kids back then at that time and they still talk about the Arts Center and they always remember your name, always.

Q: Now Cindy, to your recollection, why did the Arts Center close?

Anderson: Well, because of the money. Every year, well in the last 5 years it was always a fight for money because we had to go to Hartford every year during the time of the end of the budget--so early June to July 1st--for the beginning of a new year and a new budget and they would--always cutting, cutting budgets, cutting, cutting, fighting for money every year and after a while, Block Grant just shaved us right out.

Q: What year was that Cindy? Do you remember?

Anderson: I really don't, it had to be like '87 because it had to be like '87.

Q: Do you remember Joe Kelly?

Anderson: Not really, not to speak on no.

Q: And do you remember other programs? Rich talked about the Kwanza programs and the fact that they had night programs for adults and things like that. Do you remember any other programs that the Arts Center was involved in that benefited the P.T. community?

Anderson: Well, I know they had the Kwanza program. No, I don't want to speak on it because I don't really remember.

Q: Last two questions Cindy--you were great by the way thank you: How would Bridgeport benefit from a reopening or re-creation of the Arts Center today? You kind of spoke to that but I'd love to hear your answer to that.

Anderson: Yeah, that would be a great, great thing if Bridgeport can open up another 'cause you know, these kids need something to look forward too at all times and the Arts Center was something that when they got out of school they'd say "ok I go do my homework and then I can come to the Arts Center and they know too that if they did their homework and there was something they didn't understand and sometimes the parents didn't or weren't there to show them, they'd bring their homework and you would help them with their homework but that's what they need again.

Q: You know, that was my memory of the Arts Center, believe it or not, with regards to you, I always remember you helping students with Math. Do you remember that?

Anderson: Yes, yes!

Q: You were always in that kitchen there and they'd have their books out and you'd be explaining the math problem or breaking it down and I used to say what a great resource that was.

Anderson: Yes, it was. And that was one of my great subjects: math. They need that and I look at these kids around here now and I say "God, they would benefit so much from that, so much from some place to go and to be happy." I think because all kids love music, all kids like it and now I do part time in a company that's a daycare and they love music. Kids love music and I, you know, all you have to do is show them and they will definitely be there.

Q: And my final question for you, Cindy: what would you like to say about the Arts Center that hasn't already been asked? Is there anything that I missed or anything that you want to share that you think we haven't talked about?

Anderson: The Arts Center was a very, very special program and I don't know who started it but everybody has something in them and art is very, very special. So for instance, I have a painting on my wall that's been on my wall for let's say 30 years. Wendy was at my house 4th of July weekend and she saw it and she said "Oh, that's my painting!" so you see that's her painting but she just realized it and she took it and now she wants to start back doing art again, you know, doing that kind of a painting again, that kind of painting. But, you know, art is something special. I never was an artist. I love it, I can tell you what I like and what I don't like, but I never was an artist. But I had other things that I do that really was important to the Arts Center. But they need to bring it back. They really, truly need to bring it back, bring some form of it back anyways. I

think they should 'cause these kids need something more than a basketball. They need more than that. They need something that they can sit down and have their mind really focus on something --and to stop focusing on negative stuff-- something positive. I don't care if it's coloring or whatever, get some cups of paint, not paint but even crayons, whatever they need to learn how to sit there and concentrate on something, because these kids are not focusing on anything positive right now and they need something positive in their lives. And the Arts Center was truly a positive program. And did you talk to Bill?

Q: I didn't, I talked to Rich. I think I might have said Bill earlier but I meant Rich who talked about the Kwanza program. Do you have Bill's contact information, are you?

Anderson: Yes, I have his number.

Q: Could you share that with me?

Anderson: Sure!

Q: Let me close this interview out first. Cindy, it's been great talking to you. Thank you so much and if I didn't get a chance to tell you, but I think the Arts Center, you talking to Jr. and then Lamont and some of the other kids that went, you all had a huge impact on us. I don't think anyone realized it at the time, but I think when you engage with people who had an opportunity to go--and this probably never gets shared with you in this way--but that collective group of people there really had a great impact on that community and the kids that benefited from it so thank you!

Anderson: Thank you for that interview!

END OF INTERVIEW