

Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Oral History Project - Bridgeport History Center**Interviewer: Yohuru Williams****Interviewee: Michelle Black-Smith Tompkins****Date: July 18, 2016**

Q: Today is July 18, 2016. I'm sitting with Michelle Black-Smith. Michelle, can you state your name for the record please?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Sure, Michelle Black-Smith Thompkins.

Q: This is for the Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Project. Michelle, I'm conducting an oral history with you today. Do we have permission to cite from this interview for our project?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Yes, you have my permission.

Q: Great. Let's go ahead and get started then. Michelle, before I get into the formal questions, I wanted to ask if you could tell us a little bit about your background -- Where you grew up, how you came to reside in the city of Bridgeport, how you come, came to know about the Cultural Arts Center.

Black-Smith Tompkins: I was born and raised in the city of Bridgeport, as was my mother, and my father, who was born in Rhode Island, but came to Connecticut as a young adult. My parents were Marilyn Smith Williams and Manuel Smith. My mother eventually remarried and became Williams, but she was also Smith as her maiden name because my grandparents on my maternal side were Edna and Herman Smith.

We lived, for the most part, between the East End and the East Side of Bridgeport. I was born at Saint Vincent's Hospital, came home to 609 Newfield Avenue, and I lived there until 6 years old when my mother remarried and we moved to Pearl Harbor Street, which is considered the East Side of Bridgeport. But my grandmother was still in the Newfield Avenue home, and most weekends I spent on Newfield Avenue with my grandmother. The Newfield Public Library was a regular visiting place for me. I remember that one of the proudest days in my life was the moment that my grandmother said that she did not have to walk me to the library. She could watch me walk down the street and trust me to make that reverse "L." (laughs) So walk down Revere Street and take that left at the corner and there would be the library -- and the library was a -- just a place of wonderment. I wouldn't say refuge because I, I didn't feel like I needed a refuge in my childhood, but it was a place that fed me intellectually.

The librarians were terrific there. I remember especially Bernadette (Baldino) and Marcia. They really made an impression. I was very interested in Black History at a young age, primarily because my grandmother, who did not have the opportunity to finish high school because she had

to help raise her brothers and sisters after her mother's passing -- but my grandmother was a brilliant woman who read all the time right up until her death. And she would tell me great historical facts. Like I learned about Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie (tape: 3:04), you know, those characters, --Father Devine from my grandmother! So, you know, I was always hungry for Black History, and there weren't very many books at the Newfield Public Library at the time -- and we're talking about mid to late sixties. But there were some and the librarians were very good about helping me find those books that I could bring home.

Q: Now, what year were you born Michelle?

Black-Smith Tompkins: 1961

Q: And how did you come to hear about the Arts Center?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Ah, I came to hear about the Arts Center through one of its instructors. Her name is now Patricia Carey, but when she first was hired by the Arts Center, she was Patty Grant. And during her time with the Arts Center she -- became married, and at one point was Patty Melvin. But this must have been -- as I think about how old her oldest son Ryan was at the time -- probably around 1970. Of all things I have memories of Sesame Street being on in the morning while we were all getting ready to go to the Arts Center with Patty. She would be getting Ryan dressed, and I would be getting ready and she would bring me to work with her, just as she was bringing her son to work with her. The Arts Center was a very family oriented place, a very family friendly place. And so while I wouldn't say that I initially had any particular strong suit in terms of art, the ability just to have artistic expression whether or not you were a so-called "good artist" or you had the capability to become a commercial artist, or just a very adept amateur artist, wasn't the goal of the Arts Center. It really was creative and artistic expression. It felt. The nice thing though was that the instructors were so dynamic, so well prepared, that if there was someone who wanted to pursue the arts professionally, there was certainly Grade A level training to be had at the Arts Center, for someone who was looking for that pursuit.

Q: Now, Patty was your neighbor...

Black-Smith Tompkins: Patty is my cousin.

Q: Is your cousin--

Black-Smith Tompkins: Patty is my cousin. Patty's mother, Laura, and my grandmother, Edna, were sisters -- and our family had a policy for many years because we lived so close to one another in Bridgeport, Stratford, Milford, generally the towns that we were in. I lived in

Bridgeport, Patty lived in Stratford at the time. But every summer, my mother and grandmother would send me to my aunt's in Stratford. It was like our version of the "fresh-air" fund. "Oh you gotta get out of the city," so they sent me to Stratford. (laughs) Go figure. But you know, I had more allergies there but my grandmother swore that the, that the, the air was better there and so there I went. That was our family "fresh air fund." And for years, I spent summers in Stratford and then maybe a week or two at my other aunt's -- my grandmother's one older sister's in Milford. So, Patty, as well as my other cousins -- were always used to me being around in the summer. I'm an only child, but it was as if I was the fifth sister in this group because I had another aunt who -- and uncle -- who had two daughters who lived right down the path from Patty and her younger sister, Diane. So, it was the four of them and then there was me -- and they took me everywhere. So taking me to the Arts Center was just a, a natural extension of what they did with me every summer. I went to the roller skating rink with my cousin Diane. She was very "cool," you know, she was five years older than me so I really looked up to her. Everywhere that she let me go with her was a "cool" experience.

Q: When you first started to go to the Arts Center with Patty, where was it located?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Downtown. Downtown Bridgeport in an office building.

Q: Can you tell me a little more about that?

Black-Smith Tompkins: I don't remember the exact address. I can tell you that it was, downtown Bridgeport in an office building. So from the outside, you would never guess that there was an art studio going on. I've heard some of the instructors now describe it as cramped. Um, I didn't experience it like that and I don't know whether part of it is being a young person because I must've been eight or nine at the time. Or -- So I'm not sure whether the bigness of it to me was about spatial relationship or just that it was vast in terms of what it had to offer. There was music, there was photography, there was painting, there were people around, there were movie screenings, there were field trips. There was just so much to do that it -- it seemed like an expansive place. Even though, from all accounts that I hear now, it was quite small, and when the Arts Center moved to the Gary Cook Center (Gary Crooks Community Center in West End/Black Rock neighborhood near P.T. Barnum Apartments), the art instructors have relayed that they were especially excited about that because of the kind of space that it allotted them for teaching.

Q: How often did you attend? I know you said you went in the summer, but did you also go to programs during the school year?

Black-Smith Tompkins: I don't remember going much during the school year because during the school year, my life for the most part was school, home and activities that my mother had me

involved in. But during the summer, when Patty and the other cousins were looking out for me, the Arts Center was my place go.

Q: Tell me about a typical day at the Arts Center, as you recall.

Black-Smith Tompkins: I don't think there was a typical day, but I'll tell you about some of my favorite days. One day, Ben Johnson, who was the Director, screened a movie. It was an all black and white movie: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915 film by D.W. Griffith). Now, I couldn't have been more than ten. Certainly, because of the conversations that were happening in my household, and in my family and in my neighborhood -- civil rights, black power -- those things were being discussed, so I had a rudimentary understanding. I'm not sure that when I saw *Birth of the Nation* the first time, that I absorbed it all -- perhaps not on its highest level of what it was that the movie was saying. But I certainly understood -- I understood the, the discrimination. I understood the derogatory way in which black people were presented. It really hit home. And years later, when I was much older in college, I would watch *Birth of a Nation* again and fully understand it. But I had already experienced it as an elementary school kid. And I think that that's pretty remarkable.

As a graduate student, I wrote my thesis on costumes and textiles during slavery. And not just what people wore, but why they wore them -- and in many instances why they were forced to wear them -- what were the circumstances. And I'm proud to say that it's a seminal work because it took a look at how African Americans felt about the clothing themselves, rather than relying on primarily secondary sources to talk about clothing. But rather, to make their emancipatory narratives the primary sources for what we know about clothing during that time period. *Birth of a Nation* was crucial to that paper. But my introduction to *Birth of a Nation* was at the Arts Center.

Q: What umm... How, well... you answered this a little bit. But how long did you attend the Arts Center? Did you continue to go after Patty left? Or did you... Can you bracket for me, the years you went?

Black-Smith Tompkins: I don't, it's hard for me to bracket the, the years that I was there. I'm fuzzy about that. I do know that, I remember attending at the Gary Cook Center. I remember seeing Reverend Johnson, [unclear] Johnson. (tape: 12:22) My guess is that when Patty stopped working there, that I stopped attending. You know that would seem like the natural flow of things. But that part of my memory is very fuzzy.

Q: What are some of your other memories at the Arts Center? You talked about Ben Johnson and *Birth of a Nation* and Reverend Johnson -- what... Patty (Patricia Melvin Carey) of course -- What are some of your other memories? Some things that stick out.

Black-Smith Tompkins: Sure -- I remember that one of our field trips was to the Peabody museum and I was so excited. That was such a cool fieldtrip. Let's see, what else... There were so many things that we were exposed to and that we did. I remember the, I remember the music. The drums, the congas. You know, just the excitement of the rhythm of it and how it made your heart and your stomach feel when you, when you listen to them. I remember seeing some students who were really gifted in the arts, and that was an amazing thing, too, because one had an expectation of that from the instructors. But when you saw a student that was eleven, twelve or maybe fifteen years old, creating something really wonderful on canvas or drawing, I mean that was, that was impressive, too. That really sticks out in my mind.

Q: Let's talk about some, some personalities and some students. Who sticks out in your mind at the Arts Center?

Black-Smith Tompkins: A number of people -- Patty of course. It wasn't until I began talking to her about this project that I knew that Patty was largely a self-taught artist. You know, I know that she liked art in high school, and she attended Housatonic (Housatonic Community College). I had always assumed that she was a Fine Arts major. At the very least that she was taking a lot of courses in art. But she revealed to me that the Arts Center was where she really opened up as an artist, and started to work on large scale canvas. And one of the things -- one of the ways in which she works that I love so much, is her paintings on large scale canvas. That's something that she said she wasn't doing before the Arts Center. She's got some great pieces that she's hung on to. They're really wonderful. Some family members have pieces and they're just, they're just magnificent. And I've always admired her artistic ability. I remember one day when I needed something for show and tell. She drew me an illustration of Babar (the elephant created in children's books by French author Jean de Brunhoff), and I brought it to school and the teacher could hardly believe that someone I knew drew it; it was so wonderful. I think about Wendy Bridgeforth and Wendy was, well is creative, also very warm. And umm...

Q: I don't mean to interrupt you, but didn't those Babars circulate? I remember them being -- I remember being at the Arts Center, being a young person, and actually trying to draw that because they were there. I remember that distinctly -- one of my earliest memories at the Arts Center.

Black-Smith Tompkins: Really?

Q: Yes.

Black-Smith Tompkins: Isn't that something.

Q: Mhm, and we were coloring them and tried to, and we tried to copy them, right.

Black-Smith Tompkins: Hmm..Wonderful.

Q: I didn't mean to interrupt you, but when you said that. I'm sorry.

Black-Smith Tompkins: No, that's ok.

Q: So you were saying that Wendy's very creative.

Black-Smith Tompkins: Very creative, and absolutely at home, working with children. I think that's something that was true of all the instructors I remember. I remember Bill (Collins) who did the large faces that looked so imposing, and shades of blues and purples. And Ben Johnson, of course, and his brother Jami (Ayinde). And all of them -- I cannot think of an instructor who was not welcoming. That was the feeling that just permeated throughout. When you went into the Arts Center, you knew that you were welcomed there. It seemed as if somebody was waiting just for you to come.

Q: And what impact would you say, the Arts Center had on you?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Oh, I think the Arts Center had a tremendous impact on me on a lot of levels. I'd say one was umm..I'll say social/political in that it was active during the time of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. And although the Arts Center might not have made those issues central to its mission, organically it was -- so as a young black girl, a sense of affirmation. You know, a sense of belonging, a sense of pride. All of those things, umm all of those things came through at the center. And, and it happened intentionally and organically.

Another way in which the Arts Center had an impact on me was artistically. I was never someone who drew well, or painted well -- I've since taken illustration classes -- I had to work really hard so it doesn't, it doesn't come naturally, but I am artistic in other ways. And the Arts Center was a place where your creative expression was nurtured, honored, promoted -- so you did not have to have one of the strict visual arts or musical arts abilities in order to come and enjoy yourself and find the artist in you.

As someone who sometimes creates exhibitions as part of what I do for a living, it can be very technical, but it also has to have a creative side. If people aren't aesthetically drawn to it -- if they're not pleased, if they're not invited into a space -- not just because of what you're telling, but how you're telling it, even visually, you have failed. So, the Arts Center, I look at it as one of those ways that helped me to develop a sense of the importance of artistry in a work.

And the other way that I would say in which it influenced me because I would spend a considerable time working with museums. The fact that, the fact that I got to the Peabody museum, early on, and looked around and was captivated -- and I'm a firm believer that children get imprinted early -- at least I know I did. And museums were something that I gravitated to, then, as a child. I was so excited because the Peabody is the first museum that I remember going to outside of Bridgeport. There was the Discovery Museum, and there was the P.T. Barnum Museum. And I used to have my dad take me to the Barnum Museum, usually twice a month -- I know he had to be so tired of the Fiji Mermaid. (laughs) One of my favorite exhibits to this day. I love the Fiji Mermaid, oh my goodness. But -- umm as on the side, my father worked on the construction company that laid the foundation and built the Discovery Museum. So you know, I always feel like I've been imprinted in a lot of ways, but the Peabody Museum was my first out of town museum experience, and it definitely had an impact.

Q: What impact did the Arts Center have on the community?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Oh, the impact that the Arts Center had on the community is immeasurable. I would think -- I'd say some of the ways in which the Arts Center had an impact was that it brought art to public school students at a time when funds were starting to dwindle for the education of the arts. Sometimes we think about the absence of the arts as a fairly new phenomenon, but actually if we would take a look at school boards, and districts, and especially look at the public school systems for poor and -- minority for a lack of a better word -- students, students in urban areas will see the funding for those areas dwindling far, far earlier. So that was one way because the Arts Center not only invited children in, it also went to schools. It went to schools to teach and it also invited classrooms, so it had relationships with schools. Roosevelt students talk about walking when the Arts Center was downtown. When the Arts Center moved to Gary Cook's, there was Longfellow right there.

Q: Mmhm.

Black-Smith Tompkins: So those were relationships. Another way in which the Arts Center had an impact was that it was a safe and nurturing place for people to send their children. And someone could call the Arts Center and talk to an instructor about what was happening with their child or what they were doing. And some of the instructors tell me that they met a lot of parents early on who wanted to know: "What is this and what are you doing?" And the Arts Center was always inviting of parents. Subsequently, it became multigenerational -- so while it was primarily of use of people of the student age, certainly there were middle age and seniors who attended the center, who either taught class or participated in class. So that's another way. I also think that the Arts Center, like a couple -- and there were some other programs that were happening in Bridgeport -- Youth Bridge (theater program with actors June Havoc and Paul

Newman) is one that comes to mind -- a little bit later on but in the same vein. Real and Uddy Backs (sp?), uh Drama Club.

That was part of -- It was part of a movement in which our community was sustained by really a combination of love and a structured environment, you know. And leadership in so many areas -- these organizations were formed and operated by people who took it upon themselves to start something -- who saw that there was a need and said "Let's create this for our community." Real and Uddy Back is one, Charles Tisdale is another. Jetty Tisdale is another -- those are some of the names that -- and I apologize if I'm leaving anybody out, but I just want to raise them up as examples of people looking at particular needs in our community -- and rather than saying, "Oh there's a need," and the conversation ends there -- they were very successful, insightful at securing funds, finding facilities, building reputations and making sure that those organizations worked. You'll find people who are in their late forties to probably early sixties now who can talk to you about the benefit of any one of those or all of those institutions. Youth Bridge -- Youth Bridge turned out professional dancers and choreographers, and it turned out people who -- like my cousin, who when she just gets on the dance floor she's just really good. But she didn't become a dancer, but those years were vitally important to her.

Q: Who was the actress who started that? I can't think of her name from Monroe -- very famous actress.?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Oh, it might have been Olivia de Havilland (*sic* actress June Havoc) I don't want to -- I don't want to be wrong about that. I do know of whom you speak. And I'll be sure to look that up.

Q: It's just interesting to hear you -- very few people talk about that, but you're right it was, a lot of that going on. Last question -- How would Bridgeport benefit from the reopening or re-creation of the Arts Center?

Black-Smith Tompkins: Well, first of all it would it absolutely benefit from the re-creation of the Arts Center. And I think given breath for things that students might be interested in today, or technologies that are available today that weren't during the sixties and seventies -- that it would be important to incorporate those things -- but you know, art and culture is so vital to who we are as human beings -- it never goes out of style. Bridgeport is a place that has had a tough history.

In the sixties and seventies when I grew up, I guess, now I learned that I was poor. I didn't feel it then. I lived on the East End. I was very well protected. The neighbors knew me -- they knew my parents, they knew my grandparents -- they watched out for me. No harm came to me. I know that that might not be everybody's story, but it was very much a neighborhood. The factories were here. My grandmother and grandfather, who did not finish high school, they had salaries

that came from -- my grandfather was a tractor trailer driver and then he was a truck driver for the city of Bridgeport -- and my grandmother went to GE during World War II, and retired with 30+ years of service. They were able to send a daughter to nursing school, and a granddaughter to Princeton. So this idea of upward mobility, this, you know, American dream that we have of pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps -- which you know I wanna say for the record, I think that that part is a lot of bologna. You pull, you know, you pull your bootstraps up, but someone else might have to give you boots. And I know for sure, I got boots. I got boots. But so, that's the story of a lot of my friends -- whether they went to college or technical school after high school or you -- but you know what, my friends all finished high school. I can't think of one of them at least in my close circle who lived in that neighborhood on the East End who hasn't gone on to lead a productive life, and largely built on the lives that their parents were able to provide them because there was AVCO (tape: 7:32), there was Sikorsky, and there was Remington Steel, and you know, I can, I can go on and on.

But the generation that we have now doesn't know that Bridgeport. So it doesn't know the balance of, you know, a working environment where infrastructure is working, where social services are working. And where the idea of upward mobility doesn't seem like an upward battle at best -- hopeless -- you know, to some. I think our children really need and deserve to have hopes and dreams. And a place like the Arts Center could do that. A place like the Arts Center could expose them to so much more than what is beyond our Bridgeport borders. I know that if I were a child living here now, it would seem like a very depressing place. And I know there are areas where there is, you know, this, this "come back," but for whom? As I look at a place like the Bass Pro Shop -- for whom? (Bass Pro: sporting goods store that is part of an East Side harbor front development project) For whom is this city being reformed, renovated -- for what group of people? For the people who have lived here and have struggled here and stayed here -- working and hoping and -- for a better Bridgeport? -- And have been relying on that and have talked to their children about how it once was.

You know, when I talk to children who are -- especially teenagers now, and I tell them stories about how I grew up and how my husband grew up who also used to live on the East End. -- and how my mother grew up in, in Marina Village (low income housing complex on city's South End) when it first, when it was first erected -- they are in disbelief. But then the other question comes behind that, well what happened? And then there's a third question that maybe isn't asked -- but it might be unspoken, but I know that somewhere it's underneath there -- What did you let happen? How did it get this way? Why don't I have the childhood that, that you described? A lot of people come here now from a lot of places. They come from not just states, but now they come from other countries looking for opportunity in our city -- and some have been able to make good on that. They've made the decision that this is a good place for them to be for themselves and their children, but perhaps adults see it in a way that children do not -- and I think you'd be hard pressed as a child to understand why Bridgeport was a good move for you

and your family -- unless where you came from was markedly worse -- Unless your services were markedly worse -- Unless your school district was markedly worse. Otherwise, you're looking around like what -- Why, why are we here?

So, the Arts Center in terms of its ability to promote the aspiration of children, the ability to help boys and girls see that there is a world beyond Bridgeport and they are a part of it -- that it belongs to them and therefore they should take ownership of it -- Have a place for creative expression -- positive expression, rather than negative expression -- and get to know people from other parts of town and perhaps even other parts of the world. The Arts Center was also a very diverse place, but the one thing that all the people had in common was that they were all concerned that the mission of the Arts Center and what it was doing, and the children there. So, if there were ever an opportunity to get that back, I would do everything I could to be a part of it.

Q: Is there anything that you'd like to say about the Arts Center that hasn't already been asked?

Black-Smith Tompkins: I'm gonna pause for a moment and think about that. I do. I wanna talk just a little bit about why I wanted to do this project with the Bridgeport Public Library. I don't quite remember now what it was that got me thinking about my childhood, but I was thinking about my childhood in terms of all the things that were good about it. And the Arts Center was way up on the list, way up on the list. And I got the idea that that was a story that really needed to be told. That there were so many people that knew about the Arts Center, had participated in the Arts Center, had fond memories of it, but it isn't there anymore. And then this whole generation that had absolutely no idea about the Arts Center -- and they should know what had taken place in Bridgeport before. With the idea that if it had happened before, it could happen again. And so when I approached the Bridgeport Public Library with whom I had done some work with in the past -- umm Scott Hughes, the Director, thought it was a good idea and with the help of Elizabeth Van Tuyl who is the Director of the Bridgeport History Center within the Bridgeport Public Library -- we secured a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council that is allowing us to do, to do this project. I am very pleased that when asked who our scholar of record would be that Dr. Yohuru Williams said, "Yes" to the request to be a part of this project. And I'm really looking forward to sharing all the information that we've gathered with the people of Bridgeport -- those who were a part of the Arts Center, and those who will get to know about it. I think it's an important part of Bridgeport history and it needs and deserves to be documented. And beyond that, it's gonna be a lot of fun.

Q: Michelle, thank you so much for your time today, and that will conclude our interview.

END OF INTERVIEW