

Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center - Bridgeport History Center**Interviewer: Michelle Black Smith****Interviewee: Patricia S. Cary****Date: June 2016**

Q: Good morning. This oral history interview is taking place at the Bridgeport Public Library for the Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center project. Interviewee, would you please state your name.

Cary: Hi. My name is Patricia S. Cary. I am sixty-six years old. I live at 55 Underwood Court in Stratford, Connecticut, 06614.

Q: Thank you. And where are you located right now as this interview is taking place?

Cary: I'm at the Bridgeport Public Library.

Q: And do you prefer Patty or Patricia for the purpose of this interview?

Cary: I use Patty.

Q: Patty, where did you grow up?

Cary: Actually, I grew up at the same address that I just before mentioned.

Q: And where were you educated?

Cary: In the Stratford school system: Stonybrook Grammar School, Wooster Junior High School and Bunnell High School.

Q: Thank you. Are there any other places of education that you'd like to mention?

Cary: I've done some workshops, art workshops, here and there, and did some classes at Housatonic Community College.

Q: And I'm wondering: how did you hear about the Arts Center? How did you first hear about the Arts Center?

Cary: You know, I really don't know. I was looking to do something in the arts, I hadn't had any serious jobs, and I think I was strolling downtown and came upon it quite by chance.

Q: So could you tell me a little bit more about how you were hired by the Arts Center?

Cary: Yes, I was interviewed by the director at the time, who was Mr. Benjamin Johnson. We sat and chatted for a while and then I brought him some of my works, and was soon hired.

Q: Do you remember the year or the approximate year?

Cary: The approximate year would be—I guess around 1970.

Q: And where did you receive your art training?

Cary: I've had no real--no professional art training. I've learned most of what I know from other artists.

Q: How long did you work at the Arts Center?

Cary: About five years--still the best five years of my life.

Q: Okay. So we're going to talk about some of your memories of the Arts Center. When you began at the Arts Center was it downtown or was it already at Gary Crooks (Gary Crooks Community Center)?

Cary: No, it was downtown, on Middle Street--sorry--at the corner of Middle and Golden Hill. We were in a building. We had a couple of rooms. But it wasn't really the right space for the arts. It was just the space that we could find at the time.

Q: So how did you all transform it or configure it so that it would be a useful art space?

Cary: Well, we took out whatever furniture might be in there and put in lots of easels and tables and made it more of a homey feel, warm feel, rather than industrial.

Q: What kind of art did you teach?

Cary: Anything that happened to cross our minds, anything that happened--it might be comic books one day, it might be dimensional drawings another day. It was really--kind of really went on whatever we were feeling at the time. One of things that I do remember--and we stuck to this throughout the years--the children that did come in--if you had homework, you needed to do your homework first while you were there, and you needed to read some comic books. It was a big time with cartooning and comic book stuff--so you could use the drawings out of the comic books *if* you read the comic book.

Q: Okay. So there was a literacy component or a learning component at the Arts Center.

Cary: Yes, there was. Yes, there was. That's one of the places where I met--my first time knowing a storyteller who I thought, *Okay, this guy's a liar. No, he was a storyteller.* And he was wonderful--Amir, Amir Rashid.

Q: So I'm interested in some more memories of the Arts Center. I have the feeling you've got quite a few. What kinds of art did you teach in particular? And then I also want to know--beyond visual arts, were there other kinds of arts that were taught at the Arts Center?

Cary: Okay. I especially liked abstract art at the time. That was kind of my main focus. I wanted to paint what I felt. I for myself--I would always say that if I could write what I'm feeling, it would be so much easier and take less time. But I didn't have the words. But if I had a paint brush I could paint what I was feeling and get what I had to say out there in that form.

Q: How would you describe your art in terms of media? Large canvas? Small canvas? Oil? Acrylic? Oil? Tell me about that--

Cary: I started out small. And with the other artists that I was working with--Ben Johnson, Bill Collins, Richard Stamats, Wendy Bridgeforth and so on – they impressed upon me to get bigger and bigger, to go mural size, to just expand. That was very difficult for me but it was very good. I can remember laying sheets out, outside, and just throwing paint on them from coffee cans. That kind of opened me up to going larger--and crazier.

And I kept learning that I didn't feel like I was a good illustrator, that if someone would say something like, "Oh, draw me that horse" or "Draw me," I couldn't really do that. I'm not an illustrator. So if that's what you wanted, then you needed to tell me to take a picture. But I could paint the energy and the aura, whatever I was feeling coming from you, and I would hope that you would like it or I could apologize if you didn't think that that was you.

Q: What were some of the other kinds of arts that were taught at the Arts Center, even besides visual arts?

Cary: Oh, yes. We did do black and white photography and developing. We had several musicians that worked there, so there was a huge music component going on and Jamie(sp?)--excuse me, first Jerry Johnson, he became Jamie--and he was an excellent writer. So we would have music going on all the time and/or people playing music as well as doing arts--and we started introducing when we moved and ended up at Gary Crooks--then we ended up doing

cooking and various other things.

Q: So let's talk a little bit about how Gary Crooks and the move to Gary Crooks impacted the Arts Center. I would like if you would talk about the circumstances that brought about the Gary Crooks Center as you recall them, and then talk about the Gary Crooks Arts Center in contrast to the Arts Center when it was downtown. So let's start first with Gary Crooks and the history of Gary Crooks and how the Arts Center got to Gary Crooks Center.

Cary: You know, I don't remember a lot about that--Gary Crooks, I know he had died in the Lake--Waterview, and this was in honor of him that the Gary Crooks Center-- ABCD (Action for Bridgeport Community Development) was who we worked for and they were able to acquire parts of this building that was going to be the Gary Crooks Center. And for us it became a home. It was in the middle of P.T Barnum Housing Projects. So we are one of the things was our hours were nine to five, Mondays through Fridays. It became--as long as somebody was in the building, some kids would come in at any time of the day afterschool, and we were often there on weekends. My baby and I practically lived at the Arts Center. I brought his playpen with me. And whoever wasn't teaching a class would help with my son. The place--it was conducive to the arts because we did have--we had space now and we could--we could do clay. We got a kiln and we got clay so we could do pottery now, and we had a music room so there was a music room to go to do music. We had a kitchen where we started the beginnings of teaching of healthy eating and cooking in addition to how to set a perfect table.

Q: I'm curious about the capacity of Gary Crooks versus the Arts Center downtown. Once you got to Gary Crooks, did you see more people? Did the flow of people increase or decrease or stay the same?

Cary: Oh the flow increased incredibly. And the age--and young children because they lived right there in the projects and we were right there, it became like a home away from home. They knew they would be safe and spending their time in a meaningful way so it opened up quite a bit.

Also, during that time was a period time when Bridgeport school system was not funding arts and music and the Arts Center became a haven for the schools. We started going to some schools and teaching in the schools and the more that we would--we were heard about, the schools started asking could they have the children bussed to us. So that became very different. We met children throughout the whole city. We went to the schools and that was a different environment, teaching in a somewhat structured environment, and bringing out craziness to that, and then having to calm it down a little bit. And then these same children finding out where the Arts Center was and coming to the Arts Center.

Q: Do you remember some of the schools that you visited?

Cary: Yes, we taught at Samuel Johnson. We taught at Columbus School. There's a school that's Six-to-Six Magnet now but it was--

Q: Was that the--the East--it was on the East-

Cary: East Side Middle School, yes.

Q: East Side Middle School. I got stumped there. (LAUGHTER) East Side Middle School.

Cary: Which brought a whole other level because this was middle school and this was teenagers, so that brought a different aspect on what we were teaching, how we were going to talk and put more responsibility on us to interact with these almost-adults. That was a very important part. Some other schools: we did Waltersville, and right off the cuff I don't remember too many more, but we did this for a while. Samuel Johnson, which was in the North End, so we got to see and interact with very, very varied kinds of children, different personalities and age groups. And the teenage age group, that brought a real dynamic to the place. They really got into the music and they were finding out that *I may have some artistic talent*. You could just see their minds opening up and their personalities blossoming. It was a real good thing.

Q: Now, I've seen some photographs of adults who were at the Arts Center, at least the Arts Center that was at Gary Crooks. Can you talk about adult populations coming through?

Cary: Yes, it would start with parents coming to see: *Why are my children here every day?* And they would start looking around and--everybody was welcomed. We'll give you a paintbrush and a canvas, or a paper and pencil for you to write, or you can go into the music room and go sing something. So the parents started coming as well. One of--we did have a class--it's funny--this sticks with me all the time: I do still have an LP of the music from a belly dancing class that we decided to teach. And one of our best students was Mrs. Johnson, who is now deceased, and that was Ben Johnson's mother. And we would have--as we were doing our class, we would have to help her down to the floor so she could do our wiggling and twisting down there and then have to lift her back up so she can wiggle and jiggle while standing up. And she made our class a hoot and she inspired us all the time.

Q: You've told me about a number of people you remember from the Arts Center days. Do you remember any of the students in particular?

Cary: I do. I do remember many of the students. I'm not good with names but I'm very good with faces and I do see some of my students on the regular, which is a blessing to me. It can be in the pharmacy, in the grocery store, or just walking down the street and somebody will say: "You

used to be my teacher.” And they look like they’re forty so I don’t know what *I* look like, but that happens very often and it’s always a positive thing.

Q: What impact would you say the Arts Center had on you?

Cary: Oh, the Arts Center change my life. I’m not painting right now just ‘cause I’m in a block of some sort, but that will change. The Arts Center is where I met my best friends, my most treasured friends, the people I can go to at a moment’s notice. I very rarely speak to any of them, and some of us are right in the area, but we have that camaraderie of something special--that something special happened to us, something special happened to Bridgeport, and the friendships that were made there were everlasting. We were never *not* on the job. When we left the job we also spent time together.

Q: That brings me to another question, a similar question but with regards to the community. What impact do you think the Arts Center had on the community?

Cary: Oh, we need an art center now. We need plenty of art centers now. It kept the children off the streets--for a cliché--but it kept the children off the streets. They had some place to go. We talk about the arts--and yes, there was music and there was dance and there was art, but it also was a safe place to fl. You could just come in there after school and just sit and have somebody to talk to. You might come there because you didn’t go to school, and --for whatever reason--we would maybe find out after a while that you didn’t go to school. And we might say, “Why don’t you go to school?” And you could talk to us and maybe, perhaps, tell us something deep that you couldn’t say to your mom or your dad or the principal--and you could sit there and talk with us; and if you needed one of us to we would go to the school with you and perhaps talk to a teacher or talk to the principal. We were always the children’s advocates. And mainly it was their--it was a safe place. And people--to this day--people that I meet or see, often talk about “Remember the Arts Center days?” And we end up talking about: “Yeah, we need to bring that back.” And it needs to come back--something like that and it would be bigger and better and just--just because we’re older, we could bring even more to the table this time around.

Q: Why did the Arts Center close?

Cary: You know, unfortunately, I was one of the first ones to leave--due to a personal situation. As far as I know, it came down to funding, which usually happens in the arts, which is just so wrong. Of course, we have to have science and math--of course, of course, of course! But you also have to have music in your soul and art in your soul and storytelling in your soul. We need it

Q: What did you do for employment after the Arts Center?

Cary: That's funny, because I had moved away. I was unemployed for a few years had another child, and I still found a group of people--I guess we just kind of find each other--so I found other friends in New Haven, New Haven, Connecticut, that we connected. There were some dancers, some musicians, some painters, and that's when we started something called CABHVA--the Connecticut Alliance of Black and Hispanic Visual Artists. And we had our first meeting in my apartment. So I was doing some things then, a little bit in the arts. And then as my friends say, I sold out to "the Man."

Q: And please tell me how you sold out to "the Man."

Cary: Because quite by chance, I took the postal test and passed and I got work at the Bridgeport Post Office. So I sold out to "the Man" rather than do my art. But I had two children to feed and we needed a roof over our head, and that Post Office gives me a pension every month. So I did what I had to do to survive and it's all good.

Q: How creative were you able to be during those years when you were working at the Post Office?

Cary: Not very, not very. That "selling out to the Man", although it sounds funny--but we also know the word somebody "going postal" --so your mindset has to really change. It's really structured, it's real--it's very tough to walk your creative side or to get--to leave the job, to leave that nine-to-five where you're in a uniform every single day, where you're saying the same things every single day, where you're punching a clock and you can't be a minute late or you're getting docked. It was very, very hard to find your creative juices because you had to bury them while you were at work. I even--I met with several people who said that the first thing that they did when they left work--not that I didn't appreciate my job; it supported me very well--but I met people who told me that "as soon as you leave work, take off your uniform. Period. Don't walk around with your uniform on doing this or that. You've got to get you that mindset away from you. That will help you do your art." So I did talk to other--one of the most important people that I spoke to on the job, that I spoke to on the job, often, was somebody who has recently passed, Richard Fewell, who is a very good artist and he's a playwright. I'm sorry, he *was* a playwright. We will miss him and his art dearly. [Richard Fewell, a Bridgeport resident, had a career at the Post Office, but a second career as a writing instructor, poet and playwright. Researchers may access an interview with Richard Fewell in the Bridgeport History Center's Oral History Collection and online on the Bridgeport History Center web page.]

Q: Now that you've retired from the Post Office, how often do you get to exercise your creativity?

Cary: I think I use it on the daily. I don't paint as much as I'd like to and I had mentioned in the

beginning when we first started talking that I was in the middle of a block, but I'll take out my brushes and get my brushes washed and get things ready. And now that the weather's warming up--hopefully, I'll get back into it. I do have a flower garden that I use my creativity there. I am taking care of my mom now who has severe Alzheimer's. So I use creativity in my cooking. I kind of cook by color, like: *This needs something red or this needs something green, or making a beautiful salad.* And just in talking with people--because I'm able to have relationships where I have more time to chat with someone--so I can be creative in how I talk to them, how they respond to me, how I can respond to them differently, or bring something to the table more creative by saying--perhaps rather than have an argument with someone--I could now perhaps go to a girlfriend or whatever and say: "I would just like you to ponder this thought for a while." That's new. To me that's using words creatively. And I do read a lot.

Q: You talked earlier about a son who was small when you were at the Arts Center, and in fact you have two sons, both of whom have artistic talent, so would I you talk for a little bit about them and artistic talent and even what your opinion might be on inherited talent or the legacy of talent.

Cary: Oh, that's funny. Actually, I have three sons. My youngest son, he likes farm life. And I have two sons who are still here in the area and they both remember the Arts Center very well. They remember growing up in the Arts Center. The oldest one, as I said, I used to bring him with his playpen to the Arts Center--he's a wonderful writer and an actor and he loves music. And I think that he got most-- a lot of that by being there--and also being around people who were in the arts all the time, and I think some of that is inherited because their mother was an artist. And my younger son, the middle one, he is phenomenal. His paintings have --I've just watched him blossom over the years. His paintings are marvelous. Marvelous. And it's funny--one of the things that I like to impress upon people now is: do not limit your children. Sometimes they feel like, *Okay, because the art area's already gone so I need to do something else, so I'll just write.* And I think that's how my oldest son is a writer. Because he wrote, so the next son said: *Now that writing's closed up, I'll start doing art.* But one of the things I think we can impress is: all those doors are all open, you can do all of them. And oftentimes you do do all of them.

And I do remember one funny story--my middle child, Courtney, him saying to me as young person: "Mom, remember when you worked at the Arts Center and we had fun?" And that's because by then I was at the Post Office being a little bit institutionalized. (LAUGHTER)

Q: You've talked about this already before being asked the question, but I would really like to revisit it and explore how you think Bridgeport would benefit from a reopening or recreation of the Arts Center.

Cary: Oh, I think it would open up--(tape, side 2)

Q: And, again, I'm re-asking the question: how would Bridgeport benefit by a reopening of the Arts Center?

Cary: Oh, it would be really beneficial to have a place to go for all ages, but children especially. These times are so miserable and they would--they would learn--- what comes to my mind is: one of the things that was important in the Arts Center is that the children, especially in the teenage years, they learned to respect each other's work, to respect each other's writings or paintings or see what kind of photography they had done, or whatever. And they learned to respect each other, which we have gotten so far away from, because now they just kill each other. We would have disagreements--it wasn't always a wonderful, wonderful thing--we would have disagreements the teenagers would have disagreements with each other--but somehow it was a place to talk, perhaps to write about it, perhaps to rap about it, anything but shoot about it. And we could certainly use that again.

Q: Okay. And we are close to the end of this oral history interview, but I would like to take a moment for you to talk about the Arts Center in terms of anything I haven't asked.

Cary: I think just the general idea that it came about and that there was an ABCD Cultural Arts Center--it was a gift. And it so needs to get off the ground again! We so need to start doing things like that more. And you know how important it was because it's still talked about like it was yesterday. "Oh, remember at the Arts Center--" when this or that--Or like I said, meeting people on the street: "Oh, I remember when you were my teacher." It was such a positive place that needs to be revisited and brought back--and get the schools involved. Monies can--are there--we can find monies. I was one of the first to leave--and I regret that in some way--just because I had to leave and raise a family; but some of the people who were there, who are some of the most fantastic and creative people I know, would still be interested, We might have to come in walkers but we would be there. It was a wonderful, wonderful place--a special place in my heart, in my spirit. And I think chatting with you, I may go home and paint today.

END OF INTERVIEW