

**Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Project****Interviewer: Michelle Black Smith****Interviewee: Teddy Daniel Gardner****Date: July 14, 2016**

**Q:** My name is Michelle Black Smith and I'm conducting an oral history for the Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center project. Interviewee, would you please state your name and age.

**Gardner:** Teddy Daniel Gardner. Age: 53.

**Q:** Your address, please.

**Gardner:** 1494 Capital Avenue, Bridgeport, CT.

**Q:** Today's date?

**Gardner:** July 14, 2016.

**Q:** And where is this interview taking place?

**Gardner:** The Bridgeport Public Library in downtown Bridgeport.

**Q:** So, Teddy or Dan--which do you prefer?

**Gardner:** I prefer Dan.

**Q:** How did you hear about the Arts Center?

**Gardner:** It was actually--the building that the Arts Center--no, let me digress: it was part of a school field trip downtown on Main Street, across the street I think from Kay's (Kay's Home Furnishings). That was back in the early seventies. We had gone down there for a day trip and we were introduced to people in the Arts Center there.

**Q:** Okay. And what did you do at the Arts Center?

**Gardner:** Crafts. It was basically like an art program. Crafts. There were some other things that they did. I really wasn't aware that other things that were happening but I was learning things that I hadn't actually known before--some things about history and about my culture that were there and--I learned it there.

**Q:** Now, you mention that it was a school field trip. What school?

**Gardner:** Longfellow. (Black Rock/West End neighborhoods, near P.T. Barnum Apartments)

**Q:** Longfellow. Okay. Do you happen to know how many years Longfellow did school trip to the Arts Center?

**Gardner:** I'm not positive but I attended Longfellow from kindergarten through the seventh grade and that was the first time that I had gone to the Arts Center, and that was the middle seventies.

**Q:** Okay. And you talked about things that you learned about arts and crafts and also our culture. Would you please elaborate?

**Gardner:** They were dressed differently from a lot of people I'd seen. The clothing that some of the teachers were wearing was different--I guess now you would call them prints, or something like that, they were a lot of natural stuff-- I guess like they were homemade.

**Q:** Okay. And when you think about the Arts Center, what are some of your memories of the downtown location? You mentioned the studio that was on Main Street.

**Gardner:** That one was cramped. That was a cramped location. We had to go upstairs to get to it. We took a bus down. We had to park in the back of the building. The bus let us off at the back of the building. I guess that would be Middle Street, I think. We had to walk around to the front and up some stairs into a very, very small area.

**Q:** And did you attend the Arts Center when it moved to the Gary Crooks Memorial Center (community center in city's West End/Black Rock)?

**Gardner:** Yes, I did.

**Q:** Okay. So, tell me about that.

**Gardner:** Oh, that was really interesting because I could look out my back window of my apartment building, of our apartment, and the building that it was housed in was only thirty feet away. So it was right there in my back yard.

**Q:** Do you remember any history of the Gary Crooks Center and how the Gary Crooks Center came about?

**Gardner:** The Crooks Center? Oh, wow, you're taking me back a long ways. Gary Crooks--we were friends. I remember when the building was built and I don't think it was ever occupied. The only time it was occupied was when the Cultural Arts Center had moved in. And I think around the same time--I'm not sure if it was named Gary Crooks when it was opened or shortly after. And Gary Crooks, he was a childhood friend of mine that died maybe five hundred feet away from that building in the sewer treatment plant, back in 1969.

**Q:** Who do you remember at the Arts Center?

**Gardner:** Oh, I remember everybody: Rich, Ralph, Ben, Aaron, Bill, Julius.

**Q:** So they were all instructors?

**Gardner:** They were instructors, yes.

**Q:** And what students do you remember--or friends--do you remember going to the Arts Center?

**Gardner:** Oh, a plethora--all my childhood friends went to the Arts Center. The ones that I was close to were closely attached to the Arts Center. And some are still close friends today.

**Q:** The Gary Crooks Center--and therefore the Arts Center at that time--was located in the P.T. Barnum Housing Projects. So what do you think the impact was on the people in P.T.?

**Gardner:** The access. It was really accessible to the people who lived in the area, to the kids who lived-- you didn't need transportation. You'd just walk a few hundred feet--and for some maybe a thousand feet, the ones who lived on the far side of the project--but you were there.

**Q:** And was there a lot of activity?

**Gardner:** Yes, most days there was a lot of activity because it was something to do even during--not only during the summertime but during the winter months also--it was someplace to go. It was a release for a lot of kids to go and learning things and meeting people. You would meet a lot of people there. And you would get to do things that were interesting with the things that you were being taught. And it wasn't just finger painting or color paints. You had the ability--you had the access to put something on canvas if you wanted to. They were actually stretching canvas and giving you the paints to express if you wanted to do--whatever you thought you wanted to do.

**Q:** What were some of your favorite art expressions, things that you liked to do?

**Gardner:** Photography--

**Q:** I know for some people there was music, there was photography, there was painting. What were some of the things that you liked to do?

**Gardner:** Photography and pottery, but photography was probably the biggest draw for me. I enjoyed doing it. And I learned an extreme amount from Rich and from Ben and Bill. And we'd go out on excursions from time to time on the weekends. He'd get a bunch of us together in the car and we'd go to, like, Beardsley Park. We'd take pictures of nature, something that you would never see a kid from P.T. going out and taking pictures of butterflies and taking pictures of plant life, and just the water, just scenery. The quietness of the morning.

**Q:** And as an adult, do you photograph today?

**Gardner:** Yes.

**Q:** Or do you do any other type of artistic expression?

**Gardner:** No. Photograph--is probably my biggest--the biggest thing that I do. I wouldn't call it artistic expression, but it's something that I enjoy doing.

**Q:** Now, what impact did the Arts Center have on you?

**Gardner:** I would say it had a large impact because I'm thinking now, when I think in retrospect about my life growing up in P.T., even though I had a family, a large family with mother and father there, I had a lot of spare time. I had a lot of spare time when school was out, during the summertime, it was someplace to go and it was something to do and not--and enjoying doing it and being intrigued by what I was doing and not getting involved in some of the other things that kids were doing that didn't have an outlet or use what was there.

**Q:** And what impact do you think the Arts Center had on the community?

**Gardner:** Everybody knew it was there. They knew the people that worked there. They knew they were working with their children. It was definitely welcoming; it was definitely welcoming to all people. And one strange thing—people thought it was strange to see Richard Stamats or Bill Collins--these are, you know, Caucasian men, going into a housing project and working in a housing project with predominantly black and Hispanic people and being welcomed. They were welcomed. It was strange for people from the outside to look at and see, but the truth is there really was no difference. People were people and if you're doing something to help me and it

was seen that they were there for a positive and a good reason, they were welcomed.

**Q:** Do you know why the Arts Center closed and do you remember it closing?

**Gardner:** I remember some things about funding, hearing things about funding going on, lack of funding, funds being cut off; it definitely wasn't about interest or the need. The need was there and the need was being met you had people who were participating in all the things that were being offered there. I would say probably funding was the thing that closed it.

**Q:** How did Bridgeport benefit from a reopening or a recreation of the Arts Center today?

**Gardner:** An arts center--I think it would have to be different, even though being artistic would still be-- But art has changed in a way. And I don't know if society has kept up--if people are being taught, if our kids are being taught the importance of art, the importance of that type of expression. I think it would be different. I don't know--I'd probably have to get my head together with other people and discuss it because I don't know what kids are doing now. I know what *my* kids are doing; I know what they're like. I don't know if it would deal with painting and sculptures--photography, yes, it would; some other things it would. Music, definitely it would in that aspect; music would definitely be an artistic expression that a lot of our kids--it's an outlet for them.

But they may--if they learned a lot more about their history--when I say "our kids", I guess we're talking about Bridgeport, we're talking about P.T., and we're talking about African American and Hispanic or Latino population--learning more about their own culture, a culture that I know now was stolen. It's a horrible thing because some of the things that I believe that we're dealing with today is because there's a lack of identity, being able to identify with something that's positive. All the things that they get now are not positive, they're actually negative. The inference or the feeling that I think they're being sent is that you're not really important, because there's nothing-- History in this country started at slavery. There's nothing spoken in this country about the rich history of Africa prior to that first slave ship leaving the shores of West Africa. I believe that it has sorely hurt our culture because there's a hole there and there's a need to have that hole filled. And at this point, there's an attempt to fill it with culture, customs that are foreign to us, you know, the rhythm that's in our bones. And it's difficult--it's difficult to teach somebody Mozart when you have drums beating--drums beating with the rhythm of your heart. And it doesn't make sense. And there's something being lost. Some people see it--more people are seeing it and understanding it, but the vast population, they're not seeing it.

**Q:** So I'd like to go back a little bit on this conversation about culture, identity and the richness of culture and the importance of filling a void. You mentioned that the Arts Center--you learned

some things about your culture. Do you remember what kinds of things were taught or how they were taught in terms of culture, or history?

**Gardner:** History. Music was one of the things that I learned a lot about--what the drums were used for in our culture, in Africa. And it meant something because it made sense, it made total sense, to be able to communicate by drumbeat telling somebody to come home to dinner, it was time to do something. It was an interesting form of communication to me, to see Ralph and I think somebody else--they did an exhibition in that room. They were talking to each other. One was telling the other a story with the rhythm of the drums. And I don't remember exactly what the story was, but they got it. They got it. I said: *How can they do that? They're talking with drums!*

**Q:** So when you think about the Arts Center and not just art but --visual arts but music and, as you say, there was culture, history taught, do we have a need for a center like that today?

**Gardner:** Yes--unequivocally yes--because the public schools, they aren't teaching a lot of the things that need to be taught. When you miss a teaching opportunity sometimes it's gone for such a period of time and it's not learned until a person is put in a position that they have to learn it, a difficult position that their eyes are opened and they realize that they were done wrong and something was left out--And then to find out that it was left out on purpose, it creates a lot animosity. And I think a lot of the animosity between blacks and whites in this country today is because blacks are realizing that something was not stolen, it was taken away; and not being given the opportunity to regain it, to continue to tell all those stories from a Eurocentric viewpoint which doesn't make sense-- It doesn't make sense at all. It's all broken up. You hear these great stories about ancient history, about the pyramids, about the sphinxes, and then you hear --all of a sudden, I mean, it stops right there. Then the next thing is North Africa. And then the next thing you hear about Africa is about slavery. There's nothing about culture. There's nothing at all about the people who lived there during those times. There's a big hole in the middle. And the hole in the middle--you can't hide the pyramids. There are other things that are smaller that can be hidden and they have been hidden and not taught and taught from a Eurocentric viewpoint. Because I can imagine me being in those same places with those writers of history and seeing it through my eyes and my perspective, the story would be written very, very differently. Even the stuff that they're taught now, the things that they're taught about Christopher Columbus from a Eurocentric viewpoint; if I was writing a history that I'm going to tell my children, the story would include not the lie that it was a wonderful thing. It was a wonderful thing for Europeans; it was hell for Africans. That's the truth.

**Q:** And you alluded to earlier the times in which we live--and certainly we are having this interview on July 14, 2016 and recent events have been the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, the deaths of Dallas police officers--not to be conflated with those two murders

but happening at the same time--and the visibility and vocal ability of the Black Lives Matter movement and other movements coming to the fore. And so consider all that's happening now, do you see the absence of culture and art that's specific to African and Latino American populations---is the absence of that related at all in your mind to the civil unrest and uprising that's happening now?

**Gardner:** Yes, yes, we have to look at this thing from a historic perspective starting from the day that the first ship landed here and what the people were forced to do, and moving through that period of time when people were subjugated, they were sold, they were mistreated, to more modern times when some of the more severe stuff had stopped but subjugation and discrimination still continued. And there was no reason for it. There were stories that were told--in a way the people that perpetrated these things, it seems like that they assumed that what some people believed is true: that we are stupid, that we're not intelligent, that we can't put one and one together and get two. But the truth is we can think, we can see, we hear and we feel very deeply. With that being said, it's only natural that a human being would feel that way. If these things were done to a white person, they would feel that too.

And you have to look at in a way that--the empathy part--you have to deal and understand that we are human, too. If you cut me, I will bleed. If you yell at me, you're going to hurt my feelings, maybe. But it gets to the point where you've been yelled at --the pain is so intense there's nothing but pain so anything different would be strange. So it's easy, you know, you're going to put me in jail, so why shouldn't I bust you upside the head or do harm to you? You're doing it to me--why shouldn't I fight back? In some ways I think that's where a lot of our people are now because the pain is so real that a lot of our people are--and the only way is--what do they call it fight or flight? And you can't run; you can't go anyplace. You're stuck in this socio-economic position, the only thing you can do is to act out and fight. They give you--there are no tools to remove yourself from the place that you are so that-- What they teach in psychology about fight or flight--so yeah, I'm being threatened, I can't go any place, I'm going to fight. That's what's happening. It's a natural human reaction--to react angrily--especially when you don't know love, you don't know the power of the human touch, of someone that actually cares about you. And so many of our people have been conditioned to act that way just to survive. You got to be hard to survive. I can remember a story my uncle told me. He grew up in Florida and they were neighbors to a white family. Florida--1920s and 1930s--it was just as bad as Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama. And his father beat him because he was playing with this little white girl and that was something that he could not do. And it's so crazy. And you grow up. It doesn't stop in childhood. It continues on into adolescence, it continues into young adulthood, it continues into middle age, and even in old age these things are still there.

**Q:** So is there anything that you would like to say about the Arts Center that hasn't already been

asked?

**Gardner:** No, I would just have to repeat: it's just the connection, the education, the camaraderie, the fellowship, all these things that humans need. Some people think that all you need is, you know, food and shelter. But that is a fallacy; you need more than food and shelter. You need nurturing. You need education. You need hope. And without those things, you end up in places like we are now in some of our communities, in those places where large numbers of people of African descent, African Americans, black American--whatever you want to call yourself or not call yourself--we're there and there's no way out. There's no way out. And it seems that if the laws, --politics of this country is hell bent on keeping those people in those places because when you think of--even white people are getting screwed up--they can't figure out that ninety-nine percent of the wealth of this country is tied up in one percent of its population. Which is twisted. I mean, they've even bamboozled their own people into being sharecroppers, into working for them. And just because they own the land--let me take that back--they don't own the land--the land, it was stolen--just because of that fact, they have the right to misuses, to victimize, take more than their fair share of what really doesn't even belong to them. And until something is done with that mindset--that just because you own something that you should get that much of the profit--it's morally wrong.

And even the ones who call themselves Christians--you just can't understand what Jesus Christ was talking about if all you do is go to church on Sunday and hear a sermon or story for twenty minutes. You have to open the book and realize--and connect the things that are being said by someone that you say that you serve and He's your Savior are true and connect them with other books. The Bible is not the only book that we live by on earth. It's a guidebook that connects to faith that we feel strongly in, but other things in society in the world that were happening at the same time--what was happening in the world and you connect it with what was happening in the Bible and why this man named Jesus came and said the things he did and did the things he did is the same things that's happening now. It's thousands of years later and people are expecting people to be tolerant of it and want them to obey and follow their lead and it doesn't work that way because people are thinking and people have feelings and they see the wrong.

And when you see the wrong and you can't do anything about it, it's a horrible feeling--it's a horrible feeling. Or to see somebody suffer and not being able to help them, it's a horrible feeling. It's natural for people to act out, act up, and even hurt other people--they don't mean to but they know no other way. If you've never--like I said earlier--felt the human touch, felt the soul of another human being, not in an erotic way, in a godly type way, your fellow man, and knowing that somebody else cares about you-- If you've never felt that, you don't know what the heck it is. It's foreign. I mean, how could somebody come up to me and treat me that way--it's foreign. If nobody's ever done that--I'm a grown man--to feel somebody that doesn't look like me and subjugated and hurt me all my life, to act like they like me now--am I supposed to



believe that? I don't believe it. They don't believe it. It's going to take time. It's going to take time. And I truly don't believe it's going to happen in my lifetime or maybe not in my children's lifetime, but I do believe that a change is coming because people are realizing that these wrongs need to be righted--by hook or by crook my mother would say--it's going to happen, it's going to happen--with their permission coming along, or they're just going to get drug along with us.

**Q:** Your final thoughts on the Arts Center.

**Gardner:** The Arts Center was a very--I wouldn't call it pivotal part of our life, but it was extremely important--maybe I would--an important time in my life that I had things to do that wouldn't get me in trouble because so many things around me were happening. And the Arts Center wasn't the cure-all for everything; there were other things that some kids were able to get involved in, that they enjoyed. But the interesting part was that it had a dual purpose; it kept me off the streets and it taught me something that I found that I enjoyed. And with those two together, it was definitely a rudder in the water of my life, it gave me some direction that otherwise wouldn't have been there. I wouldn't have known that I enjoyed photograph --that I could do so much with it. And a lot of things--that I could do things with my hands, that I could do things on my own that I probably never would have known unless this opportunity was afforded to me. And it just happened to be there like a lot of things that other people get involved in. It may not--in the long run it may not have made them a million dollars but it'll keep the out of jail. And that says a lot.

**Q:** Thank you for our time.

**END OF INTERVIEW**