

Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center, Bridgeport History Center**Interviewer: Professor Yohuru Williams****Interviewee: Cyril Lamont Williams**

Q: I am sitting with Lamont Williams from Bridgeport, Connecticut. I'm conducting this interview at Fairfield University for the Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center History Project. Lamont, would you please state your name for the record.

Williams: My name is Lamont Williams—born in Bridgeport, Connecticut-- age: forty-five.

Q: I got you by a year.

Williams: I got you by a year.

Q: So, Lamont, do I have permission to tape record you today?

Williams: Yes, you do.

Q: And do we have permission to quote from this interview? We will send you a copy.

Williams: You're more than welcome.

Q: So let's go ahead and get started, Lamont. Let me ask you first and foremost: can you tell me, where you were born, and where you grew up, how you came to live in the city of Bridgeport at the time that you attended the Cultural Arts Center?

Williams: I was born Bridgeport, Connecticut. It started for me early. I was born in P.T. Barnum (low income housing complex), which is actually one of the ways for the children in the community to kind of have different things to do. The Cultural Arts Center itself was definitely a place that was a --how can I say-- it was just space for children not to have to worry about doing a lot other things. Coming from a community where drugs and a lot of things that happened--and poverty was one of the biggest things--but we were all family there, in P.T. Barnum. And it was just that place for us at the Cultural Arts Center that allowed the community as far as children in the quote unquote ghetto to have something to do than the normal that was being done in our area. There was so much going on then. I can remember that as if it was yesterday.

Q: What did your parents do for a living?

Williams: Well, believe it or not, my dad was not there much. Coming from a black family, of course, a very big family of ten—my mom raised ten of us by herself. Dad would come in, he would pop out and then he would come in. But my dad himself, he was a train driver. He drove

trains for Amtrak. And my mom, of course, receiving social service assistance from the city of Bridgeport, she – taking care of ten kids, it was very hard with the job that she had. But she did that receiving the assistance as well. She was a school crossing guard. So she made sure she watched all of her kids go to school. So that was the coolest thing, knowing that your mom was a school crossing guard. Coming from P.T. to go to different schools –and it was one of the things outside of the Cultural Arts Center you actually had. We actually had schools in the area. We had Longfellow School and then you'd walk a mile up the road and you had Whittier School. She kind of monitored those two areas, all of the kids that lived in the area, to make sure that they got through the traffic and stuff, which was kind of nice. Yeah.

Q: Now, P.T. Barnum was a housing complex. How did you come to hear about the Arts Center?

Williams: Well, it was so funny for me – I'll never forget the very first time that I went—they had a lunch program there--this is the early seventies--they actually had a lunch program in the inner city because of the poverty level. And it only happened in the summertime that they allowed--that they had this lunch program. And it ended up being that they housed the food that they were giving us in the Cultural Arts Center. I forgot her name. I believe she's still alive to this day but I forgot her name. She was running the Cultural Arts Center at the time. But she had told us--she was telling us, a few of the kids, that they had music playing on the other side and the dates that they had it. To me, it was just amazing go to hear that they had music. So I was like, "Oh, okay." I can remember that very, very well. So I believe it was summertime--school was out--and the program went from the last day of school all the way up to the beginning of school.

We ended up going to lunch--I don't know what day it was, it was so many years ago--but I ended up going that next week. And they had--you could learn to play the drums, you could learn to draw, you could learn to play the piano. It was just amazing. The sketchings, they had everything, it was just--and the people that were there which is such an amazing amazing gift to help out people in the community, I mean, seriously, it got to the point I was there every day. And sometimes they set it up where we had art on one day--you couldn't do music. Music was on Wednesday. You know? Because on Wednesday then you had sketching or you had pastels on Friday. There was just so much to do there. And in order to participate, you had to do the other stuff, too. I can remember that. You just couldn't do music. You had to do art. You had to do that. And both know some great people that were there so that's how it became a part of my life. I knew that music was something serious for me then when I decided to do it.

Q: Do you know the approximate dates when you started to attend? How old you were?

Williams: At the time I was about seven, eight, and this is back in --I can honestly say this is back in late June of '87. Late June of '88.

Q: I just want to say I remember those lunches. I remember the carton juices.

Williams: The carton juices.

Q: Mm-hmm.

Williams: The cartons. The plastic over the lunch. You know, you had a sandwich and orange juice. You had a peach or a pear.

Q: Piece of fruit.

Williams: They'd always give you a sandwich. It was a cold sandwich. And that was the great thing--they never gave us hot food, they always gave us cold food. And if you didn't want a fruit, they gave us a banana. Remember when they'd give us a banana? They always had bananas. It was a great way for us to -- I guess it was just the appreciation that the inner city kids needed something to do rather than be a statistic.

And even then it was really, really bad, it was really really bad. And just knowing friends who were a part of the Cultural Arts Center that have been murdered, that have been killed that we know that we grew up with that started with that lunch program. It all started with that lunch program, which was just amazing.

Q: Did you know anything about the history of the Cultural Arts Center, how it came to be there?

Williams: I never knew of the history. It was just at the time when my mom was telling us there was a lunch program. I never knew of the history.

Q: Did you ever call it the Gary Crooks Center or did you always call it the Arts Center?

Williams: We've always called it-- I always called it, believe it or not, the Gary Crooks Center. I've always--you know, it we felt great about calling it--"Oh, I'm going to the Arts Center" or "I'm going to the Gary Crooks Center." It wasn't -- you know, I knew the history behind its being called the Gary Crooks Center.

Q: Can you share that?

Williams: Well, the history behind it being called the Gary Crooks Center was Gary Crooks was a young man that had pretty much drowned in the cesspools behind it. Apparently what ended up happening from the stories we were told--the young man was playing in that area where you weren't supposed to be and ended up falling into one of them and as--when he fell into it, of course, apparently he passed away. So in memorial of him they named the building after him. So I would assume that the building itself had probably been there prior to his demise. I believe that.

Q: And when you were there, obviously, it was located at P.T. --the staff members, who do you remember?

Williams: Oh, man. Well, there was of course your dad who was such a great, great man, Mr. Ralph Williams. Mr. Ben Johnson and I've forgotten Mr. Johnson's wife's name. I forgot her name--she was also an artist. It was some time--it was just those three. And there was a white guy. He did the art. I forgot his name.

Q: Richard Stamats? The photographer?

Williams: The photographer, yes. So it was those three and a few years later Ben's brother (Jami Ayinde)--I'm not sure if he came from Chicago or something--

Q: Jami Johnson.

Williams: Jami Johnson came--he had come in. We used to all --he was amazing. That's when piano became a part of my life.

Q: Because you were a drummer before.

Williams: I was a drummer. I used to compete with you and your brothers, man, about who was going to the --

Q: That's true.

Williams: who was going to play the timbales. Who was going to play the timbales and who was going to do this and who was going to do that. But yeah, I was a drummer first. I started out as a drummer, which was amazing. What I appreciated about that then is you had kids you were growing up with who had the same vision as you. You always tried to outdo each other each other. You know that.

Q: Mm-hmm.

Williams: We always tried to outdo each other. If we had to do our peradiddles, if we had to do flams, we'd try to outdo each other. It was just amazing. So with that you always had something to look forward to. And then there were times I can remember--I'm serious and it brings tears to my eyes--I can remember those times when the Arts Center was closed; it was a day when the Center wasn't opened. We were lost; the kids were lost because that day--if it didn't open up that day, we had to resort to other things. And there really wasn't a lot for us to do. And sometimes Tina--that's her name, the lady that opened up--she was Brazilian, I don't know if she was Czechoslovakian, I don't know what she was, but Miss Tina used to allow me sometimes--I would beg her: "Please can I go in back into the Arts Center?" Because she had the key. She was the director of the place. And I would go in the back. She would open up the door for me and I would go in there and play the drums or I would go in there and play the piano. I never really messed with the painting because Mr. Ben Johnson knew his stuff. (LAUGHTER) But I used to play piano and the drums. I remember that. That was one of the most craziest things because you really thought your life was going to end because the Arts Center was closed that day. You were like, "What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do? But it ended up being something great. It definitely ended up being something great that I really appreciate that is now part of my life.

Q: You talked a little bit about this, but what would you say the impact was on you at the time? And the lasting impact? What really had an effect on you?

Williams: Well, the impact that it had on me then was the fact that it was something to do. It kept me from all of the other negative things outside that was happening around me. Trust me. The things that were around me that were so negative--it was crazy--because I could actually see it, the negativity, around me on my way to the Arts Center. You can see the drugs, you can see the shooting of the dice back then, you can see the prostitution. You see just so much, you could see the negativity around me. And then believe it or not, it's amazing how the setting of where we lived was. Because if you notice, P.T. Barnum was on the inside of it and Gary Crooks was on the outside of it. So the negativity of where we were and then to leave from so negative and then to surround yourself with so much positivity, it was just amazing. It would have been so different had it been on the inside of P.T. You know what I'm saying? That's just something different. But I always felt so safe when I was there-- seriously, when I think about it. I had so much strength when I walked out of that place I never even noticed the negativity when I got home.

Q: Well, you went on to become a pretty well-known musician in high school.

Williams: Yes.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about that and how Gary Crooks Center set you up for that?

Williams: Well, the Arts Center is definitely – the Arts Center is definitely the person and the place that will get the honor due for that because when it comes to music in high school--

Q: You were known as the one man band. You could make a single drum set sound like an entire --do you remember that?

Williams: I remember those days.

Q: It was amazing.

Williams: Yeah, well, you weren't bad yourself. It comes from the fact that the Gary Crooks-- see now I'm saying Gary Crooks. The Gary Crooks or the Arts Center --it had a lot to do with the experience that prepared me for high school. And in my preparation for high school, it was the confidence that I knew that I could do the job because I was in the place surrounded by my peers and the younger people that we grew up with. And in high school it's kind of a competition. You want people to appreciate what you do but then again they look at you and say, "He knows what he's doing." And in high school of course they didn't have whole drum sets, so I joined the marching band. And the whole time--and even at Gary Crooks I learned to play the saxophone. Remember they gave us the saxophone--it has that one mouthpiece--which you didn't want because you knew that it belonged to someone else. And going to high school, this is amazing--this is like so amazing that I'm thinking of it and I'm so excited--that going to high school--the preparation was that walking into a place that you knew that you were prepared for it because of the negativity that you've come out of and to a place that's positive!

Now you're moving. I was ready to make a name for myself. And when people say, "Man, where did you go to school? Where did you study?" "Hey, the Arts Center?" "P.T.? Out there in P.T.?" "Yeah, P.T." There's so much negativity. Yeah, people know it, the place has a name for itself, of course. And people --"That's where you were born? Whoa, I'm a little afraid." But I was ready in high school.

So I joined the high school band where because of the Arts Center he started me on sax freshman year. I don't want to play the sax. Because of the Arts Center, sophomore year: baritone sax. I didn't want to play it. I wanted to play drums. Junior year, because of the Arts Center, he put me on trumpet. Didn't you play trumpet?

Q: No. Ortiz did.

Williams: Ortiz did. I didn't want to play trumpet. I wanted to play drums. Senior in high school, he finally decided to give me my chance. And of course I stayed back that year because whatever--because then, believe it or not, in high school when I didn't go to class I was in music. It was just the space. It was just the, you know, the place that reminds me so much of the Arts Center. So if didn't want to go to class then, I would go to the music room.

Q: And you went to high school at--?

Williams: Bassick High School.

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

Williams: Well, I personally believe the impact that it definitely would have on the community would be able to give that community the opportunity as it forwarded me. It would definitely give the kids in that particular place that opportunity to know that there are choices. And you know, even growing up then--and it's so funny, even growing up then--you know, we had choices. We really did. We had choices. So when people there are not really many choices out there, I really believe that for these kids that are coming up in this crazy world that we're living in, they would have an opportunity. I believe that. I mean, and especially if it's looking to forward them the same opportunities that it's given me. If it's offering them music, if it's offering that arts program, if it's offering being able to take photography--if it's offering the kids those opportunities, I believe it would definitely be something great. I mean, we're living in a social media world right now, but still, you know, those things hold true. Music is something that still needs to be played by people. Of course computer scan draw but there's nothing like the interpretation of drawing through that person. You know? Just like music--the interpretation of music can only come from you. And that's where the Arts Center has always been special to me because where I am in my life right now, being able to produce music and play music. That interpretation has come from a place that has been my foundation. And that's what the Arts Center did.

Q: It ended up actually impacting your work in terms of ministry, in terms of your career, in terms of things you've done. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Williams: Definitely-- it has helped me to become a better musician. And even as my career as a musician--I studied a little bit at Berklee. I did go to school, I didn't finish but I did learn how to get the know-hows on how to do that. And after doing that, of course, learning how to read. I put myself in a situation to where it's not just reading but then again being able to producing as far as music. And not just that, of course, with God being a part of my life--you know what I'm saying? The one that gave me the gift. And that's the most important thing. You know, with Him giving me the gift, the Arts Center pulling it out of me. Mr. Ralph Williams--great man.

And Mr. Ben Johnson. And Mister Jami. I really, really appreciate those guys. And for me in the ministry because of the Arts Center people in the ministry of churches have been blessed thinking that-- "Wow, he went to school for this." This had nothing to do with school. It has a lot to do with where it comes from when I was young. And if people --and if you can really honestly take people on a journey of your life when you were little, they could not believe the fact that this little place started me to be where I am today--and to make them feel and appreciate how they feel because of that place.

Q: To your knowledge, why did the Arts Center close?

Williams: To my knowledge, I was told funding was the issue. Funding. And then the second thing I heard was because of the poverty level and because of the poverty in the area, I heard that there were many break-ins, there were so much that was going on that they chose not to put the funding back into something like that. Which was really, really sad. It's a sad case because of the fact that--and I don't speak for the people of P.T., I speak for myself, and the results of what people may need--and what I basically mean by that is sometimes the results of the things that have happened in the past is because maybe they didn't have. So if they broke into the Arts Center, to steal something, to pay for food or anything, you know, I guess those results affected the financial part of helping the Arts Center stay open. It was desperate measures. Even now if I go out there, I still get this kid feeling that, you know, this is something great. It really allows me to know that it can still be something great, it's because it's still standing there with a proud name on it, called the Gary Crooks.

Q: You actually my answered my next question, which is how do you think Bridgeport would benefit from the reopening of a cultural arts center?

Williams: It would definitely benefit from the reopening because it would hold true of the heritage of a lot of black people, especially our children. Because with everything that's going on --Captain's Cove (marina at head of Black Rock harbor in this area of city) and buying up a lot of the property that's kind of pushing our people out of the way, it's a sad thing that if that was the case to happen I'm sure there would be a fight to keep the Cultural Arts Center open, to where our people can be a part of something, to say, "Hey, listen this is not something that just opened up. This is something that's been here for some time. And this is what the children need." So I really believe that it would definitely help and benefit the area. It's just a great place. And I think we've gotten away from holding true to what has gotten us over.

Q: What would you like to say about the Arts Center that hasn't already been asked? Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you think--

Williams: Well, you didn't ask me--No, I think that's pretty much it. I mean, just have me back as one of the workers there. (laughs)

Q: Let me give you a couple of --just the things that I'm interested in. I think what's interesting for me, the first time that I really --you know, I've always been around Latinos, Puerto Ricans, on my side of town, but the Arts Center--you mentioned Tina--where we got exposed to Latin culture and music.

Williams: Exactly. I do remember that. It was amazing about that is because we --black people were not-- African Americans were not the ones that lived in that area. You had a lot of Latinos. What is his name? I forgot his name? He was actually a conga player. He lived in P.T. I forgot his name. He was very --he wasn't seen as much but I can remember--

Q: Was it Ruben?

Williams: No, not Ruben. This was an older guy. I can remember there being times when the Arts Center was closed, he would--because he lived in Building 10, he would be outside playing his bongos, he'd be outside playing his congas. And it was just amazing. So he would allow the kids to come and play. So now what's happening is a whole different type of music, and I'm like: "What kind of music is this?" And he was telling us. But this is what they were teaching us at the Arts Center. You know? We had the time we had to take our hands and put them over and --You remember? (demonstrating drumming method)

Q: Do that again.

Williams: It's amazing we would have to put our hands over the bongos and we would have to do this until you cannot do it anymore. Amazing! And by the time you get to twenty, you're like--

Q: Vividly. Vividly. It was almost medieval torture.

Williams: I can agree. I can agree. But the Latino part of it was definitely another open door for the communities to connect. And we even had some white people that lived in the Ellsworth Field area that would come to the Arts Center to do music. That was the most amazing part--we would actually have them. And some of the kids, you know, we never--we never were prejudiced about it.

Q: I'm sorry, I have to get you doing that exercise. And while I'm doing that, I also wanted to ask you: do you remember any other students? There are probably about half a dozen--I remember you vividly just because you talk about the competition-- But my brother and I, if we went to the Arts Center and you were there that was kind of one of those things: "We're gonna

jam today because Lamont's here. The drums and the-- we're set."

Williams: Exactly!

Q: Maybe Thomas, maybe we'd look forward to him. Do you remember any of the other students that you went there with?

Williams: In art, there was a guy named Leonard. Do you remember him? He was a drawer.

Q: I do remember him.

Williams: -- if you get down to the Arts Center, he drew the Captain America. I actually have the picture I can send it to you.

Q: So I remember Leonardo.

Williams: Leonardo.

Q: Leonardo did Captain America.

Williams: Yeah. For me it was trying to do everything that other people were good at. Xylophone--Ortiz. Amazing. Amazing. I wanted the competition with him. What is his name? He used to play the drums. He's my friend on Facebook. I forgot his name. It'll come to me. But my competition then was just those people that I knew were great at what they were doing. Ortiz, yourself, we used to fight over who was going to play drums that day.

Q: We did, all the time.

Williams: And the thing that surprised me was your dad Ralph was making sure everyone got the proper time on the drums. You know? And I can admit that. To the point to where I felt more connected not just because my name was Williams, but because of the fact that there was a connection of us being there at the Arts Center.

Q: I felt like it taught us how to share.

Williams: Yeah.

Q: I honestly believe that—because everyone was talented-- at a certain point, it didn't matter who was sitting behind that -- not to sound arrogant—you kind of knew when that nucleus was there, we were gonna sound good. But it was the fact that you knew, "Hey, I gotta learn how to

play this because I'm not always gonna be sitting behind that drum set." And you talk about the same sense of resilience when you went to high school and you went from sax to baritone to trumpet, but you knew you were gonna get your opportunity.

Williams: Opportunity to do it. And that was the amazing thing and that's so true. We were all able to accommodate one another. We didn't lack in a certain area. We were able to switch and it would be nothing. "Okay? So everybody just shift." And now you're playing xylophone, I'm playing drums. And one thing that's amazing to me--when I talk about the Latinos--let me go back to that -- for us, growing up, the younger people, poverty did not teach us prejudice. It did not teach us prejudice. Because if you can look at where we were --we were all together. It didn't teach us prejudice, it just didn't. If you were there in the same place as me, you were letting me know that you were no better than me. You know? That we treat each other--- we grew together: Puerto Rican, Hispanic, white and I think that was one of the most greatest things of where I am today because coming from a level of poverty, being in an impoverished area, I never seen anyone better than me because we were all there at the same time.

[note sound quality problems for this segment]

Q: That's true, that's true. Lamont, this was a great interview. I appreciate that. I'm going to put this on pause. (INTERRUPTION) Just talking about the elements of the Arts Center with Jami where really there was this Black History and Black culture component. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Williams: Well, that was one of the most important things that we had, when it comes the Arts Center. It was always around, he was the one, Jami Johnson was always the one that taught us about our culture. Letting us know that we are strong people. We are who we say we are. And we can accomplish anything. And it's so funny, we would do --it was never Christmas time but it was always after Christmas when we did Kwanza and he taught us words like "umojia" (unity) and "kujichagulia" means self-determination, those things. And we had songs about them and it was always after Christmas and they would rent out the big room. And that one time, I'll never forget it, it was so funny, that one time we were actually in there and we were playing the drums and just in the spirit of Kwanza and I'm serious, something like came over me, and it was just amazing. And that is one of those things like you said that we were talking about is what he had brought to the black people and to the area. Because that was one of the things we didn't have, we just had the Cultural Center, we had the Arts Center, we had music, we had all of that stuff, but that was something that he brought and he always wore his kufi [western African cap]. He stayed true to who he was.

Q: He had this charisma about him but it was the poetry, the black artist, for lack of a better term, kind of an Amiri Baraka, the plays --he was getting us, and you mentioned something, he

was always getting us to sing and I never thought of that as being significant but as young people we are very shy so to be in that space and we're singing--

Williams: But we did it because my friend was doing it, we did it because we were all in the same area. So if you can do it and I can see you doing it, then I can do it too. And that was the power we had and it's because --and learning and learning, we learned together and that's where our strength came from, learning together as African Americans, that we have so much in us. And that's what we need to get back to learn that we can work together for the Arts Center and I think that's one of the greatest things that will help the Arts Center, is the fact that if you put people in a place where everyone can learn together no one is bigger than the other one and that's why we are where we are. I respect who you are as a person and I'm so proud to know where you come from and to see you where you are and I'm sure you feel the same for me in a different light. But we've learned together and I think that's what it is, the power we have and that's what Jami brought. He brought that. And I would sit there and listen to him play and I would say "I wanna play just like that, I wanna play just like that. I don't want the beard. I don't want the scruffy beard. I don't want the Kufi. I don't want that. I just want to be able to play like that."

Q: Do you remember *Signifying Monkey*?

Williams: Yes! [sings]

*Signifying monkey, stay up in your tree.
You are always lying, signifying.
But you ain't gonna monkey on me.*

Williams: Is that it?

Q: That's it. On that note--

Williams: Love you man. Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW