

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

**Q:** Hello. My name is Michelle Black Smith and I am conducting an interview with Dr. Yohuru Williams for the Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center project. Dr. Williams, would you please state your full name and age.

**Williams:** Yohuru Williams, forty-four. Y-o-h-u-r-u is the spelling.

**Q:** And would you tell us where this interview is taking place?

**Williams:** At Fairfield University.

**Q:** And what is today's date?

**Williams:** 7-16-2016.

**Q:** Thank you. My first question for you, Dr. Williams, is: how did you hear about the Arts Center?

**Williams:** I grew up in the city of Bridgeport and my dad was a music instructor at the Cultural Arts Center. And at the time, I didn't appreciate the significance of the fact that he was employed there. This was just someplace that we would go with him in the summer--my dad pretty much mandated that we would have to go to work with because they would always have camp and other things, but it was his opportunity to watch us. But also it was an opportunity to be enrolled in and participate in all these great classes. For me, I never thought--my friends were going on vacation and they were doing summer camp, and I was doing going to the Arts Center--and I'd have art in the morning and sculpture in the afternoon, then music right before r\we went home. So, that was my summers. That's basically what we did for more than a decade. So that was my entrée into the Arts Center--through my dad.

**Q:** How old were you when you started going to the Arts Center?

**Williams:** I was born in '71 and I think my dad went to work for the Arts Center either in '73 or '74, I'm not sure. But I mean, I've seen photographs that show me as just a little tyke --I must have been three or four years old when was going. And I was always with my dad so I imagine as soon as I was able to stand up unassisted, and I went until it closed in 1988.

**Q:** What are some of your earliest memories of the Arts Center?

**Williams:** The things I remember most about the Arts Center are the art and the sculpture. It was a pretty unique place. I have the clearest memories of the Gary Crooks Center, so this was after they moved to P.T. Barnum. And I remember the way it smelled. I remember going into P.T. and that was something very distinctive as a young person, because it was very close to a

soap-making factory and the cesspools and so on and so forth. And we were going into what was the city's, I think, second or third largest housing project at the time. And so there was kind of this jarring experience of--because we lived on the East End -- driving into P.T., you're passing the scenic, beautiful, Seaside Park and then you're heading into this housing project, and then off the back sitting off the sight of this cesspool in that area, which unfortunately is where Gary Crooks drowned, is this oasis which is the cultural Arts Center where you walked and it was a smorgasbord of paint and sculptures and these amazing teachers and a collection of young people that quite frankly--you know, I think that was one of the hidden treasures of the Arts Center, is the people that it attracted. Sure, there were people who just came for camp and there were people who just kind of found their way off the streets. But there was also a core group of very talented young people of arts and musicians who went there on a regular basis, and I felt very lucky to be around them because they were very motivated and I think they recognized how important that space was.

**Q:** Do you remember any of those young talents by name?

**Williams:** Leonardo Drew stands out. He did a painting of Batman and Robin that was--I mean, when I say that it came off the canvas, I'm not doing it justice. My brother and I--this is the other thing, there were all these magnificent paintings that just sort of sat in the storage area of the Arts Center that students had done -- we looked at that thing for years and we wanted it and wanted to take it home. And finally, I don't know how, I think Leonardo may have given it to us or--you know, this magnificent work of art that we had for years of these iconic heroes that he presumably had done during one of his projects there -- so he sticks out.

There were a number of people whose names escape me now. There was a drummer named Edwin who was a Latino Puerto Rican. People talk about the Cultural Arts Center's connection to the African American community, but there were a large number of Latinos that made use of those facilities. In fact, the first time I became conscious of kind of Afro-Latin rhythms and the connections between -- all of that my dad of course talked about it -- but it was at the Arts Center, you know, really interacting with the kids from Puerto Rico, and the occasional Cubans you'd come across, all the people from the Caribbean. It was pretty special place in that regard. And then the influences they brought --. So we're black Americans and of course we're oriented to and interested in the African diaspora. But then you'd have people who were coming and they would talk about their music and their culture and their history and their food -- and all of that, all of that came together at the Arts Center.

**Q:** Tell me some of your memories of the art instructors who were at the Arts Center.

**Williams:** The people who stand out -- of course first and foremost was my dad. He was a terrific musician. I probably at the time didn't appreciate him as an instructor because he was just my dad. And the things that he did to -- remember talking about to Lamont Williams and we talked about this exercise that we would do -- and it's funny because Lucinda Anderson mentioned this too -- we would do this thing where we'd place our hands across the drum and we'd have to do hand raises to strengthen our wrists for playing congas. We'd play for hours. And we would do this until our hands hurt, and we would come out and complain and cry and the whole nine, but he was really strengthening us and making us responsible in our craft. And

we would practice for hours, you know, sometimes four, five, sometimes six hours a day, and it never seemed like practice. So he was great in that regard.

But the people that stood out in my mind are people like Rich Stamats who -- I mean, the first time I ever really came to appreciate the significance of sculpture was through Rich. And this was an individual who had a deep appreciation and caring for the students that were at the Arts Center. And I remember he did things -- you know, here was this white instructor working with predominantly minority students. And he had a mini-van and he would take all of us for Halloween, for example, out to Westport to go trick or treating. And he would load ten, fifteen kids in this van and his argument was, you know, "I wanted to expose the kids from this community to that people in that community, and to kind of dispel fear, and give these kids an opportunity to really have a --to go out and trick or treat in a place where there was going to be candy and there were going to be people who could give them something." I just thought that was amazing. He also took kids camping, I remember that. And then he was a great artist on top of it.

I remember Wendy Bridgeforth who --the thing that was phenomenal about her is she would play these records like "Evita" when we were doing art. And at the time of course you're not conscious of what that means, but she was teaching, even in a space where we weren't doing art, but at the same time she had classical music on, she would have Broadway soundtracks on -- music and art were came together. She wanted you to feel the emotion in your work. She was great.

Lucinda Anderson was the secretary -- presumably, that was her job; but I remember her tutoring -- she did accounting -- and she would tutor us in math. I remember there were always three or four kids after school in the fall when we would go and they would be in trouble for whatever reason, they'd be in with Cindy and my dad would go, "You've got to go and get your math right before you come back here and play the drums."

So it was a pretty special place.

And then, of course, Ben Johnson, the Director. And I think what was incredible about Ben is that he could really make a dollar out of fifteen cents, both in art and in terms of art and the way that he ran that, especially toward the end, on a shoestring, when budgetarily the Arts Center was in jeopardy.

I remember going to his house for the first time and just being surrounded in art. And this was not just his art but the art that had been produced by the students. And, you know, he and my dad and Rich and Patty and Wendy -- they would take ordinary, common household items and they would just turn them into works of art. And what they were teaching us was to be resourceful, to recognize beauty in the absence of anything that people would associate with something being artistic, and to create something from nothing -- and I think that's what they did very well.

**Q:** Besides those that you've already mentioned at the Arts Center, is there anyone else who you can think of that sticks out in our mind that you would want to talk a about?

**Williams:** I remember the Arts Center was interesting because even though the focus was on the arts, there were a lot of people who came through who did a lot of black history and black culture. So Jamie Johnson I remember used to do poetry with us -- very black power-inspired. The Black National Anthem -- the first time I learned that in its entirety -- I had always been, you know, enthralled with it, but to see him deliver it-- people like the Last Poets-- Jamie would recite those works. John Davis was a person who headed up a group called the African Gods, which was a rites of passage organization for young black men of color. We both met at the Arts Center and at the Raphola Taylor Center on the East End. And I remember his sons, Mark and Myron, they were very nationalist, they would wear dashikis and they had African names. We learned Yoruba language and culture. So they stand out.

I remember a lot of the community people that would come through: Cecil and of courses Reverend Johnson. And I remember --

**Q:** And when you say Cecil, you're talking about Cecil Young?

**Williams:** Cecil Young, yes. Cecil was something else. And I would always remember when he'd come because he'd come talking about community issues. But it would always be, you know --there was this opportunity where there you are sitting at the table and you're smelling the paint and you're hearing the music and he's talking politics at one of the long tables where the folks are kind of over in the corner talking about something -- and it emphasizes the importance of the Arts Center as a community space. It was a community center at its core. It wasn't a nine-to-five place. My dad never left at five o'clock. We were always there till seven, eight o'clock and during the winter when we had rehearsals or they would be putting up a Kwanza program, we'd be there longer. In the summer when we'd rehearse for Harambee Fiesta, we'd be there longer. Now, my dad in a lot of ways adopted a lot of those kids --but all the instructors did --those were their children and they took a deep sense of personal responsibility in them.

And I remember my first job --or my second job -- was at the Arts Center. I got a summer Youth Work job to work with young people there as a drum instructor from doing it for so long. And we put together a band and we would go out in the court yard, which was in P.T., we would bring the instruments across the street and we would play for the people in the community. We did that every day and the kids were just so excited because here they were sharing something. It didn't just happen in this little space across the street, this red brick building; they were bringing it out and sharing it with the people in the community. And they were many a day when we would have a nice train of kids that would follow us back across the street because they wanted to do that too.

**Q:** I'm curious: do you still drum?

**Williams:** I do, I do.

**Q:** So, what are the ways in which the Arts center has had an impact on you?

**Williams:** They're very tangible things. The Arts Center made me a performer. And I say that in a way that Shakespeare talked about the entire world being a stage, and most of what we do is an element of performance. Great teachers are great performers. Great speakers are great performers. The Arts Center taught me the importance of being able to stand up in front of a group of people, to be prepared, to work hard and to be able to deliver.

I resented those days when my dad --you know, we wanted to beat home watching "Mork and Mindy" (television sit-com), and we'd be at the Arts Center rehearsing until nine o'clock at night rehearsing with the kids. I came to appreciate that that's what hard work was. I think of people like Lamont Williams which is one of the students there who I was deeply competitive with. He was an amazing drummer, probably one of the best drummers I'd ever seen. And I would stay -- I would come home from school and I would drop my bags and I'd go downstairs and practice for an hour and a half because I thought somewhere in the universe Lamont must be practicing. And the two of us were going to meet in the summer. And he shared recently he was thinking the same thing. But it was a friendly competition -- it was a competition borne of trying to make one another better. I remember a very deep sense of brotherhood with the people who went there because we came from all over the city. When it moved to P.T., it became somewhat of a West End phenomenon, but the fact of the matter -- people forget -- is that schools would arrive, especially during the fall and spring, and in the summer, they would bring summer camps through, and so you met people from all over and you made some lasting friendships as a result.

**Q:** What impact do you think, Dr. Williams, that the Arts Center had on the community?

Williams; I think it was threefold. I think it gave people the space to congregate and to feel a part of a community. Bridgeport had gone through de-industrialization in the late sixties, early seventies, and so I remember my uncle worked at Jenkins Valve and so many of my family and people I knew worked at places like G.E. As those companies folded and in many cases moved to other places and as those jobs became less abundant, there were fewer and fewer places where people could get together, especially in secular spaces --we're not talking about what's happening on Sunday morning-- but just spaces in the community where people could come together and talk and just be together. And they would normally do those things around their children. So we think of the importance of the P.T.A. in that regard --the Arts Center was special because this was a place in a very low income area, one of the city's largest public housing complexes, public housing complexes, where there was high crime --and it gave people the sense that there were individuals who cared enough about them to be there, to be invested in the success of those children, and also provided a space where people could just come together and be. And that was important.

And I remember many a day --again, from the political discussions that happened in the Arts Center to the conflict resolution that happened in the Arts Center. Ben Johnson may have been a master musician, but he was also one of these people --and I remember this-- advocated for children who got into trouble. I remember many police officers stopping at the Arts Center and having questions about young people and Ben vouching for young people and making the case that, "This person should have been in this space on that day and we were closed on that day and this is why we're here and this is why we need it."

I think the second piece I was just to awaken in young men and women of color an importance and an appreciation for the arts. And that's something that's never left me. I lament the fact that you don't have arts in the public schools in the way that you once did. But it was --people call Bridgeport the Park City; in the late sixties, early seventies, it was the "Arts City." You think about people from Westport and people from the surrounding areas coming here and their appreciation for the arts, but they wanted to invest in and build that here too.

And you had this cadre of very progressive artists and musicians, who were willing to do that, --and who in their own way-- my dad talked about how working at the Arts Center allowed him to play, to practice; it gave him a space to do that and still to be employed even though he didn't have health insurance. He said, "It let me take care of my family, but it let me be an artist." But in the process, he and Ben and Patty all allowed us to grow as artists, to recognize the importance of expressive culture and to build that in ourselves. And I think that leads to the third piece.

It made us a community. The Arts Center was a community center at its core. It wasn't about pastel colors, it wasn't about the kiln, it wasn't about being able the fact that we could make popcorn. It was about the fact that when you walked out of that building onto that little patch of grass that was out there, one of the only green spaces in an otherwise urban jungle, we came together and we were all invested in the continuation of that.

I remember they would have school lunches for us. It would just be a little juice and a little milk and a bologna sandwich wrapped in-- and I remember how important that was to kids there. And I remember one day, probably one of the first summers I'd gone, this little boy was sitting next to me and he was deaf. This stands out in my mind to this day. And I was crying because I didn't get one of the juices. And of course my dad's there and --there's plenty of juice. And this little boy looked over and gave me his juice. It was the selflessness of that act in that space, the recognition that it was the great equalizer, the recognition that we all were disadvantaged but we weren't disadvantaged because here we were in this space. And I think kids who otherwise would have been scrapping for meager resources found commonality and camaraderie and brotherhood and be able to work together.

**Q:** So Dr. Williams, do you think our community would benefit from the recreation or the reopening of the Arts Center today?

**Williams:** I think what you would see --and working on this project with Michelle Black Smith has given me an opportunity to see this in a very tangible way-- people talk about the crime and the violence in the city of Bridgeport, but you see an explosion of that after the closing of programs like the Cultural Arts Center. You see, as there's a defunding and the de-investment, a lack of investment in those types of community programs and initiatives, people not having pathways to community, not having opportunities to engage in things that would build discussion. You know, probably one of the most underutilized aspects of the Arts Center was there was a little office at the back that had been, I guess, Bill or Rich's office, and it was a library. It was full of books. And you could take those books out and do whatever you wanted with them. Some were on art, some were on politics, some were on history, some were on drama, some were on music, but, again, it was kind of this coming together space.

Somewhere in the mid-80s, they started putting up basketball courts and they stopped putting up playgrounds and stopped investing in programs with human beings who were supposed to work one-on-one, to teach you something, to be mentors, to be role models. The instructors at the Arts Center I got the impression never really had a lot, but they were happy and they were content and they were giving back and they were working with us and building in us the same and appreciation for our community. It meant something to put on those dashikis that my mom would sew. And we'd all got the Harambee Fiesta and on Monday morning in school people would be like: "Wasn't that you guys up on the stage?" And you'd say, "Yeah, that was us." So, yeah, I think it would benefit from a bringing, from a resurgence of that to just build community and help connect people.

**Q:** And lastly, Dr. Williams, why did you say yes to doing this project with the Bridgeport Public Library?

**Williams:** As a historian, I've spent the last thirty years of my life writing about --well, the last twenty years of my life writing about the last thirty years studying and trying to come to grips with, the African American experience and why things have developed in the ways that they have. In my most recent book, I talk about the six degrees of segregation that people of color face in housing, in education, in Jim Crow justice which we're seeing on our streets today. And we very rarely look at the interventions, those successful things that individuals like Ben Johnson, like Reverend Johnson, like Patty Melvin, who was self-taught, did to try to make things better. We want to focus on the major players --the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther Kings and the Rosa Parks and we don't ever talk about the foot soldiers. And in communities all across this country from Washington, D.C. to Denver, Colorado to Bridgeport, Connecticut you had programs like this, centers like this.

I like to think of what was happening in Bridgeport as a mini-Harlem Renaissance. There was a Black Renaissance that was taking place in this city built around the arts. It brought people together from various places. My dad was from Mullen(?) South Carolina, Cindy was from South Carolina, Rich was from Indiana. And they all came together in this space. They were migrants. They had experienced de-industrialization. Many of them had made stops in other places --my dad had gone to Philadelphia first and then come here and then gone back to Philadelphia. They were politicized; they were coming out of the civil rights and black power movements. And they were committed to the idea that there was something inherently valuable in art. Booker T. Washington famously in the Atlanta Exhibition speech says no race can learn to prosper until it recognizes that there is as much dignity in sewing a field as there is in writing a poem. I always felt that that was unfortunate because it devalued the fact that one in writing a poem and in engaging in the arts finds the power to express oneself and the power to change oneself and to grow. It is tilling a different kind of a field, a fertile intellectual space where people can grow and self-actualize. And I think the Arts Center did that.

So, to answer your question, I think the reason I said yes is in talking to Michelle about the project and just thinking about this, I wondered how many seeds had been planted in me and were blooming in a way that I hadn't recognized until that moment when she said, "Do you remember this? And do you want to participate in this?" And all of a sudden a lot of my entire

life kind of came full circle and I think a lot of that started at the Gary Crooks Center.

**Q:** Thank you very much, Dr. Williams.

**Williams:** Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**