



HOW WE GOT THROUGH: VOICES OF OUR ELDERERS

Doris Dennis, of Dorchester

INTERVIEWED BY BRITTANY CHRISTIAN,
NEW MISSION HIGH SCHOOL

Brittany: Tell me about a tough time you had to go through, and how did you get through it?

Doris: Well, the only thing I had to deal with was segregation, back in the 50s, when my husband was in the military. We would live in different places, and we was the only Blacks there, and they treated us badly. That's the only thing that I can think of that was bad, that I can remember.

Brittany: What helped you all get through it?

Doris: Well, we wrote letters to different Congressmen and we just went through it, you know, day by day.

They refused to give us housing on a military base. And my kids were the only Black kids in the school, and they treated them bad. The kids would fight them, wouldn't let them sit down on buses.

So we just took time, and as the time went by, it got better.

Brittany: Wow. After that situation that your family went through, how did that make you feel?

Doris: It made me feel angry that my husband had been in the Korean War and fighting, and then they treated him different, and stuff like that. You know, then we moved to a different base where it wasn't segregated and it was different..

Most of my life, 25 years, was spent on a military bases, and after we got through the 50s, I moved to foreign countries, where it was different.

I went to Japan and stayed there, and then I came back to the United States and stayed for maybe three years, and then I went back to Germany- Nuremberg, Germany- and then I came back to the States.

And by that time everything was settled down, and my kids was older, and then I began to have a real good life, you know. My kids in school and my husband retired.

We started working and being in the community and doing different things. And I started doing school. And then my husband got sick and then I worked and life began to get better. That's the best I can say.

Brittany: So even though you spent all your time on the military base with your husband, did you like the traveling?

Doris: Oh, that was fun. That was really fun. Because then you felt like you belonged to the world, and you was just as good as the next person and you didn't have those worries. Because again, we went to places where everybody was equal.



And the kids was happy, and they began to be in different things in school. And then I began to be, you know, mixing with everybody. And life began to be good.

And as I've got older, I began to help other people--you know, children, and volunteering in different things, and doing charity work. And then after that I became a foster grandparent to early Head Start, and I enjoyed doing that because I was helping kids and meeting different people.

Brittany: That's amazing.

Doris: And then I began with the politicians, and I began to do little volunteer things, you know, like get the senior citizens out to vote, and then I began to tell the politicians, they must concentrate on one thing, in case you don't know: Your best thing is senior citizens. They make the world. They are the ones that can help you through it. And stuff like that, because senior citizens is very important.

Right now, after traveling around, I consider Boston is the best place for senior citizens. I don't care how cold it gets, you stay in the house, and they got rides and shuttles that come almost to your door, and they ring the door and say, I'm outside.

So all I can say, senior citizens, the best place for them to be is here.



Brittany: So I'm going to assume that you're happy that you stood by your husband after all the tough times and that you're happy where you are at the end of the day.

Doris: I'm almost 90, and I've never had a full time job, I've only worked part-time, I worked at Jordan Marsh for over 20 years. And then other times I just was a stay home mom, cause it's very important for children to come home from school and find their mother home.

The only thing now I hate is buses. The kids outside standing by themselves waiting for the bus. If they had good schools in the area, then I think the kids would get more out of it, because by the time they get through riding the bus and stuff, they're too tired to even think about study.

Brittany: That's true.

Doris: What else would you like to know about me that I haven't told?

Brittany: Well, is there a time that you felt trapped, like a situation happened and you couldn't fix it or take it back, and if you could, you would?

Doris: Oh, dear. The only thing is around prejudice and racism, and everybody should be treated equal, and get the same privileges that everybody have. I would fix stuff like that--that everybody got the same thing as one another, but that's the only thing.



Brittany: Your heart's in a good place, ma'am.

Doris: The other thing I would fix is you'd have better schools and stuff on that order.

And what else would I like to see fixed?...

Oh, I would like to see the world come to peace and everybody get along and stop having sides. And that's the problem, cause it looks like to me both sides should want the same thing.

And people be honest, and then politicians, treat the poor just as good as the rich, cause the rich get the better deal--poor folks have to pay more taxes and stuff.

That's the only thing I can think of right now is I'd like to see the world come to peace and I'd like to see this virus end. And I hope that after it's over, that everybody learned their lesson and learned how get along with each other, cause you never know what's gonna happen from one day to the other.

But see, with some things right now, they're not really paying attention, they're taking chances and they're hurtin' other people because they're just so selfish.

And you realize how many senior citizens that live alone and can't get out and have nobody to come to help them, like to take them any place and things like that.



So that's the only thing-- if I could bat my eyes and make the world a better place and end this virus-- that I would like to see done soon so everybody can get back out and be happy.

And I hope by the time spring comes that everybody be able to get out in the yard and get together and talk to each other over the fence, like they used to, but make sure they learned a lesson to help each other.

Brittany: I agree with everything you just said. I feel like the whole community, the whole world matter of fact, needs to come together and stop fighting.

Doris: Yeah, because up there in Washington, they're still fighting and disagreeing and go along with the President just because he IS the President, whether he's right or wrong. He doesn't care about the people, he's just thinking about himself, but that's not fair. So something like that I wish would change. And I hope and pray that the next one we get, whoever, Black or white, that they do the right thing by people.

Brittany: Exactly.

Doris: That's right, because since this has been going on, I haven't been outside, no more than the front porch, because I have two daughters and a son that's been very good, that they don't want me out. And I got a granddaughter in DC, she don't even want me to look outside.

It's hard to be in here but I'm thankful that I have that, you know. And I'm praying that it'll be over soon.



Brittany: Me too.

Doris: That's about it. I've had a wonderful life, I couldn't ask for a better one.

I've been to every island that they have. I've lived in California. I've lived in Michigan. I've lived in Alabama, Georgia, I've lived in all these places. My kids was exposed, they've been to Berlin.

Brittany: Wow, that's a lot of places.

Doris: Can't too many people say they've traveled that much. But back in the day, you could travel and enjoy.

And I remember one time I was going down Florida with some people I lived with in Bulgaria--this goes way back-- they told the lady that I was with that I couldn't eat in the dining room, but I could have room service (laughs).

Back then it didn't matter, cause I was young. But now you think about it and, you know, that wasn't nice. But things have changed. But in some places, still got the same problem.

Back in the day, people didn't even think nothin' about that. They just figured that's the way the world was like. White was better, and you had to do this, you had to use the back door, and you couldn't mix in, or you couldn't drink at the same fountain and stuff like that.



And you know, they fought for it as the years went by, but lookin back, it didn't bother me cause I didn't know any better. You get older, you learn, and realize that wasn't nice, you know.

Brittany: At all.

I like your stories. They're really interesting. I like how you traveled all over the place.

Doris: Well, you know, it's nice, but I think after this is over, not too many people's gonna do much traveling. Cause I think it's gonna take a long time for this to subside, for people to be comfortable.

My daughter, we used to take a vacation July, September, October, back to back, but now I don't know. You don't want to get in the hot tub and stuff cause you just don't know. You're not gonna be comfortable and enjoy. You just have to take one day at a time and see what happens and trust in the Lord.

Brittany: Okay, so I know these questions might be hard to talk about, so this will brighten the mood: What was one of the best days of your life that you didn't want to end?

Doris: Oh, dear! The best day of my life was when I lived in Japan.

Brittany: What did you do there?



Doris: Well, let's put it this way. I had servants, you know. I had a maid, I had a registered nurse, I had a seamstress. Everything you could think of, I had that kind of service.

Brittany: Oh, you were living your best life!

Doris: That was the best part. And you know, to this day, you're not gonna believe it: I feel like people should wait on me. And most of the places I go, for some reason, they wait on me or help me do things.

If I go someplace, I have to be dropped off at the door cause I don't want to be walking and stuff like that because I'm just so used to that life back in the day. And now I'm too old- they have to do that for me.

Brittany: What was your favorite thing about Japan, apart from the maids and the pampering and stuff?

Doris: Well, in the United States, women was first. But women over there waited on the men, and that's why we lost a lot of husbands living in Japan, cause they took their families over there, cause the women catered to the men, they waited on them hand and foot, and the men they used to lay back and fan them and stuff like that. And so we lost a lot of husbands like that.

Cause I had a friend, we was good friends, and he got involved with a Japanese girl and they ended up gettin' a divorce.



So coming back to the States, even when I moved into this house, it wasn't nice. There wasn't no Blacks on this street, and they didn't want me on it for a long time, until at least I went to Germany, come back, and a few other Black people had moved in on the street. And now, it's just mixed of whoever, cause the rent is so high you're lucky to live anywhere.

Other than that, that's really the only place I would like to have again, that kind of life.

Brittany: I had a really good time talking to you because you're very interesting and I really like your stories.

Doris: Okay, I hope I talked enough. And out of all that talking you can put something together.

Cause right now I'm just trying to survive. I just had a birthday party and thank God I had it then, I didn't want til 90, I said, I'm gonna have it right now, I'm not gonna wait, I might not make it to 90.

Thank God I did have it last year, and I was lucky- all my grandchildren and my children had a black tie affair. July the 13th, last year. And all my family and all my friends and it was catered and a DJ and a photographer there.

We just had a good time, cause nowadays people don't dress up. But I like to dress up. Even now in the house, I get up sometimes and put on makeup and stuff.



But I miss going to my Early Head Start just to be with the kids, to have them meet you at the door, “Good morning, Grandma!” you know. I miss that and I miss my friends and I miss going to church and listening to the Word. So.

All I can say, I’ve had a good, blessed life. I had my mother til she was 103, my father til he was 93. I don’t know that there was anything else that I missed out on.





Doris Dennis has been a Foster Grandmother with ABCD for 14 years. Watch her speech about the difference between prejudice in the North and the South [here](#). Doris is also a member of Boston City Councilor Andrea Campbell's Senior Ambassadors Council.



Brittany Christian is a junior at New Mission High School. She used to play volleyball and currently loves to shop. She loves helping people and would love to travel in the future. She also loves making money.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

During the pandemic, Everyday Boston is connecting elders with younger members of the community for recorded phone conversations about life- and how the elders got through tough times.

The “How We Got Through” project is designed to ease the burden of isolation for everyone involved, and to amplify the voices of our elders, who have always been our guides in life.

Thank you to our partners on this interview: Cheryl Harding, Senior Advisor for Boston City Councilor Andrea Campbell, and Brinda Tahiliani, History Teacher at New Mission High School.

