

HOW WE GOT THROUGH: VOICES OF OUR ELDERS

An Everyday Boston series

Sally Graham, of Dorchester

INTERVIEWED BY DARIANNA MEREJO,
NEW MISSION HIGH SCHOOL

Sally: I had a charmed childhood, really. I grew up in the suburbs in the 50s and 60s. Never worried about a roof over my head or food on the table, et cetera.

Having said that, there were things that happened. I was a teenager, and I don't know whether you've heard about this or read about this in your studies, but there was a thing, I think it was in 1962: The Cuban Missile crisis?

Darianna: Wow.

Sally: Which was, you know, it was a part of the Cold War, and the Russians had built up a lot of military arsenal in Cuba. And according to what they told us, it was all pointed right at the United States. And the US said to Russia: You've got to get it out of Cuba. And the Russians said: We're not going anywhere.

So there was this whole huge standoff, an international thing. I was in high school and we were like: Is this the end of the world? I remember one night going to bed, thinking: I don't know if I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning.

But we did. And we lived to tell about it. The Russians apparently backed down. It's one of those situations where people are getting ready to have a fight and somebody blinks and backs away.

There've been a lot of things that I've lived through over the years that were terrible for me, but they were mostly terrible for everybody.

Every night on the news during the Vietnam War, they'd say how many--they'd call them troops, but it was men, it was people fighting--they'd say how many U.S. troops were killed, how many men were killed, and they'd give a body count report. And I feel like watching the news now you get a similar kind of thing, with how many people died now from the virus. So it's very scary.

But I think one of the things that has gotten me through a lot of bad things that have been more universal things that have happened, as opposed to individual, is just knowing you're going to get through it, and that the community-- however that is defined-- comes together to support one another.

And I feel like we're seeing that now with this current crisis. But we've certainly seen it in the past-- that people get together when things are terrible, you support one another, and you sort of live to fight another day.



But it takes, I think, people realizing that they're not alone. For me, I've had to know: I can reach out to somebody else. Somebody else can reach out to me. Even if it's just offering them a hand, or something tangible, like a blanket or a bag of food or a place to sleep for the night.

It's not always easy. It's sometimes easier to get mad or go to bed like: I don't want to hear about it, I'm just going to put my head under the pillow kind of thing.

You really have to have faith in yourself--well, beyond yourself, you have to have faith in something. People call it different things. I think it's mostly about there is a being, there is an entity, that is going to watch out over people.

And bad things are gonna happen. And they do happen. And they can be crushing. But my personal feeling or belief is that the Lord doesn't want you to be crushed by it. He/she/it really wants you to go forward with the message of loving one another and helping one another out.

I've lived through both my parents passing away. It was hard, and there's a loss there, but it wasn't sort of my darkest hour. They were both in pretty good places, and my relationship with them was in a pretty good place. I have regrets that I wasn't there for them more, et cetera, but I don't have any regrets that our relationship was a mess-- that we left things unsaid, or we left angry.



Darianna: You were talking about support. When you were growing up, did you have anyone specific that helped you or supported you?

Sally: You know, that's interesting. Along the way I did have teachers that I felt really sort of got me. I wasn't one of the "smart kids." I plugged along, I did okay. But I had teachers who really encouraged me who...I guess I felt like they cared about me.

And then I had an aunt. My family was very small. Everybody lived in not close places, so we'd see each other once or twice a year. So I had one aunt that I really really liked. She was very outspoken, and she was, "You can do it, and this is how you do it." She was very encouraging.

When I first went to college, I really didn't do very well and I got right up to the door of quitting, and she was like, "You know, it's okay if you don't want to go back to this school. There are lots of other schools that you can go to--that you can try to go to, anyway." So that's what I ended up doing.

And then along the way, even as an adult, I've had other women--my mother never sort of fell into this camp, for better or for worse--but I've had other women who were older than me who provided me with support or a sounding board, if I wasn't happy with my job, which happened far too often, that I was in jobs where it wasn't the right fit, And they were very encouraging: Take a step back, find something else that you can do.



So I did have people along the way that were supportive and served as role models for me even if they didn't know it.

Darianna: If you don't mind my asking, what made you realize that college wasn't for you, or the college you were at?

Sally: I don't mind you asking. The college I went to, the first college- this was back in the day when they had all women's schools and all men's schools--so it was all women.

I grew up outside of New York City, and this college was in a very small town in Ohio. And I was frankly a little bit of an East Coast snob. There were people at the school who were from, like Oregon and Washington state and places like that, and they said they had come East to go to college. And I was like, "No. Ohio is not the East!"

Darianna: (Laughs)

Sally: New York is the East! It was very insulated. It was very isolated. You know, you saw a boy and you freaked out, so that's not a healthy thing to have going on. And quite frankly it was all white women, and I was like, I'm a white woman and this is what I grew up in- all white people. And I was looking to mix it up a little more. I had no idea what that meant, of course. But it was just...to me, it was just very stifling. It felt like I couldn't really breathe.

So I did transfer, and I ended up going to school in New York City, which was vastly different.



But it was still New York. I don't know if you've ever been to New York, but it's a very different city.

Darianna: Can you talk a little more about the change from going from an all girls school to a school in the city?

Sally: Yeah, well, I mean, first of all, the school was huge. And even though I grew up outside of NYC, I came from a very small town. My high school graduating class had 150 kids in it.

Darianna: Wow.

Sally: Everybody knew each other. We'd all grown up together. And so then, going to New York was like huge. I had no idea what I was doing. I thought I was Ms. Know It All, and sophisticated, and I can handle this kind of thing, but riding the buses and the trains and just all the different people, it was very different. But I actually liked it.

I mean, I'm sure I made a lot of mistakes with talking to people and my actions. I don't know why, but I was never particularly afraid. I remember people saying, "Ooh, you go to the South Bronx?" And I'm like, "Uh, yeah, that's the only way I can get back to my campus, number one, but I also volunteered at a local church that was in the South Bronx that had an after school program.

And you know frankly, in the late 60s, the South Bronx was...it could be pretty intense, let's put it that way.



But I didn't know any better--I had my head in the clouds, I guess-- and I liked being with the people in the program, and the kids who came in for the after school activities.

It felt comfortable to me. I felt like I was challenged to get out of the bubble I was in--you know, my little white suburban growing up everything's happy--and really learn about other people and other experiences and other cultures. I mean, other cultures? There was no other cultures when I was growing up.

Darianna: Can you tell me about a time when you felt your lowest, and how did you get through that?

Sally: I think the time I probably felt my lowest was when I was having some emotional issues. And I'm trying to think how to say it.

When I was growing up, there was a lot of conflict in my house. And so even though we lived in the suburbs, and everything was happy happy, there was still a lot of conflict going on. Both of my parents drank too much, and sometimes there would be money issues, but we couldn't talk about that because we were all very happy.

I had two younger siblings, and I was always responsible for them and their behavior, which I did a very terrible job of, because they didn't respond to me very well, let's put it that way. So anyways, I started to have a lot of feelings about how I'd failed, and I was really angry at my parents, and I took it out on myself.



I beat myself up: You're not good enough. You hate your job. You've been through four jobs in the last two years. You don't fit anywhere.

So I was very low then. And what really helped me was reaching out and finding other people. It wasn't necessarily a particular individual, but sometimes somebody would say something, and it would be: "Oh, that's what that means!" One person said something, and I was like: "Oh, maybe my parents were alcoholics. Oh. Okay." So then that set me off on another path, and I got to support groups- well, AA is the famous one, but there are other spinoff groups for children and families of alcoholics.

And we'd all been through--somebody used to say, "Same house, different furniture." So we grew up in the same house. We grew up in a house where there was alcoholism, dysfunction, whatever. Everybody's furniture was arranged a little bit differently, in terms of how many kids there were in the family, et cetera, et cetera, but it was still the substance abuse.

And then, once I sort of got on the path of realizing that my parents had had issues with alcohol, then things started to follow into place, and there was a lot of support from other people around that.



And I think that's true for people who are survivors of violence and trauma and all kinds of things, when you can have a support group of people who can hold your hand and let you cry and weep and rage, and then also read you the riot act.

Everything's a big mess in life. But at any rate, it will get sorted through. I guess that's my point. It sort of never goes away. You're always reaching out and helping people and they're helping you.

Darianna: I'm sorry to hear about how your life was with your parents and stuff.

Sally: Well, it was hard, I don't want to minimize it. But on the other hand, I didn't ever have to worry about the roof over my head, or the clothes on my back, or the food on my table. My parents, they may have been having financial problems, but they always sort of papered it over so that it looked okay. I remember my father used to say, 'When you grow up, you're going to find out life is not a bowl of cherries.'

And I used to think: What is he talking about? Because I was like: You think this is a bowl of cherries, where we're living now, with all these issues that everybody's got going on? But I know what he was saying. He was doing his best to keep everything going. And sometimes you do your best to keep everything going and it's not quite enough. But I'm not blaming him for that at this point. Or my mother.



Darianna: I just want to say thank you again. I know it's hard to share personal things, but I'm glad you did. It really inspired me. I can find some things we had in common. I don't want to take more of your time, but thank you so much for taking some of your day...

Sally: Well, thank you so much. This has been delightful. The last day or so, I've been trying to figure out what this (interview) would be like. I don't really have a big huge crisis in my life- some big thing where everybody was adrift, and we had to pull everything together.

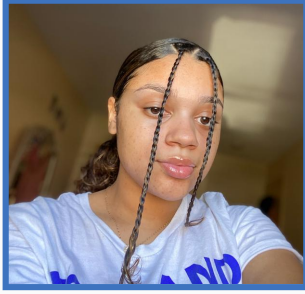
In some ways, that's just life. There's always going to be bumps in the road and hiccups and sidebars. You just have to kind of keep focused on where you're going, and try to work through that stuff.

Some of it's very hard. I have friends who have stepped in and are raising children for their kids and nieces and nephews because they're having problems. So life ain't easy, I know. I'm sure you know that.

I really enjoyed talking to you.

Darianna: Me too.





Darianna Merejo is a junior at New Mission High School. She lives in Dorchester and enjoys drawing and watching movies. She wants to go to school for nursing because she loves to help people.



Sally Graham retired from many years in health and human services. She now works with her neighborhood civic associations and on local and state political campaigns. She is also a member of Boston City Councilor Andrea Campbell's Senior Ambassadors Council.

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, and whose stories we rely on during challenging times.

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.

