

# HOW WE GOT THROUGH: VOICES OF OUR ELDERS

An Everyday Boston Series

## Sonia Booker, of Dorchester

INTERVIEWED BY ABIGAYLE COOPER,  
NEW MISSION HIGH SCHOOL

**Abigayle:** How are you?

**Sonia:** I'm blessed by the best!

**Abigayle:** Me too!

**Sonia:** I am blessed by the best, not stressed, depressed, or oppressed!

**Abigayle:** That's great! Okay, first question: What has this crisis been like for you?

**Sonia:** It's been very upsetting because it's not like the flu. It just seems like it's taken so many lives. All you can do is pray. I have a son in a nursing home, and it hit him. So far so good, Praise God. Hopefully, he'll come out of this. My step-sister's husband was buried two weeks ago, and my god sister was buried last Friday, both from the virus.

**Abigayle:** That's a lot of family members. How have you been dealing with this?

**Sonia:** What else can you do but leave it in the Lord's hands? Give me the strength to go through this.

The thing I always say is there's power in "I am." It's good if you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and say: I am able. I am blessed. I am beautiful. Everything you can think of that's good for you, say it in the mirror. I'm prosperous. I'm talented. I'm vital. I'm energetic.

**Abigayle:** Wow, I've never thought about that before. I might try that. That's good to hear that you're dealing with this so wonderfully. A lot of people couldn't take it that way.

**Sonia:** You have to. If you sit down and feel dejected, "Oh, it's gonna hit me," it WILL hit you! When I get up in the morning, and I can wash my own face, get my own water to drink, get my own cup of tea or coffee, I say: "Thank you, Father, for this day."

**Abigayle:** Who's been taking care of you, if your son is in a nursing home?

**Sonia:** Who's been taking care of me? Oh, honey, please! I've got grandchildren and great grandchildren, and great greats and everything else. And then I have a very good friend, and he's a retired chef, and he comes in and he'll cook my food and clean my house. And I'm really happy with my family. I've been through cancer and everything.

**Abigayle:** You have?! Wow, that's crazy.



**Sonia:** Yes, in 2001, I went through breast cancer and I'm through with that. And in 2017, I had a 13 hour operation. I had two operations in one.

When I was told I had the cancer, I didn't scream or holler or nothing. I said, "Well, Lord, we're in this now, just me and you." My daughter who took me to the hospital, she said, "How do you feel about this?" I said, "What am I supposed to do? I'm not the only one that has cancer."

When I was goin' in the operating room, I said, "Lord, you are my surgeon. You know what to do. I leave it all in your hands." And when I came out, my family all around me...I felt great! And I'm in remission now.

**Abigayle:** That's great! That's God taking you through. So what advice can you give someone now who's suffering because of Covid, or just life?

**Sonia:** Hebrews 11 chapter, the first verse: Faith! You've gotta have faith that things will be alright. And they will be alright. You can't sit and lament and cry over things. Honey, I am legally blind. I'm having hearing problems--I have to wear hearing aides and everything else. You think I let that bother me?

Don't. Let. Things. Get you down.

You know what? There's a lot of things that happen in life, people's lives. When you think you got it bad, somebody else has it worse.



Now, I lost two children. In 1988. My oldest and my youngest. Six months apart. And when I lost the first one, that was my youngest son, he was 21 years old.

It was Father's Day, and we had just come out of church, and he left me, he said, "Ma, I'll be right back." And I never seen him alive. (He was shot and killed later that day.)

That was my youngest son. I was going through that, and December 12, six months later, my daughter died in her sleep- my oldest child. She had a stroke.

And you know, you cry tears.

**Abigayle:** I mean you have to. You have to mourn, right?

**Sonia:** You have to cry.

But you know what? You say, "Help me, Lord. Help me through this." And he helped me through it. The tears dried up, and all I could think of was the good times we had and the bad times we had.

Everybody goes through these things. But if you can't go through it with your Heavenly Father, you're in trouble.

**Abigayle:** Did they believe in God as well?



**Sonia:** My daughter? Oh, she was a gospel singer. And my son-- well, see, I came out of a musical family anyway-- he played cello for the Greater Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra.

**Abigayle:** He must have been really good then.

**Sonia:** He was. Because the orchestra was getting ready to go to Europe. My son was getting ready to go when he got killed. And he could play the cello. And my daughter could sing some gospel.

You know what? I'm a concert pianist. I am a concert pianist.

**Abigayle:** Wait, so can you still play?

**Sonia:** I have a keyboard now. Because you see, where I live, I had to give my piano away because the place I live in now is smaller.

Right now what I'm doing is playing scales. I have music piled up here. I can't read it cause I can't see it. But I have a doctor that says she can help me get something where I'd be able to see to play my music. And I have an appointment with her in July.

That would be the HAPPIEST day of my life. I'm telling you, because I love my concert music.

**Abigayle:** I have a keyboard as well, but I have no idea how to play it.



**Sonia:** Really? Where you going with it then?

**Abigayle:** I started learning, but then I stopped because I had to switch schools. So I don't have a teacher anymore.

**Sonia:** Oh, you know, that's strange. They have teachers around.

Now the keyboard I got, it was given to me by one of my doctors. Because him and I used to talk music all the time. And I told him I didn't have a piano because I had to give my piano away.

One Sunday morning, I was going out to church, and his protege rang my bell and dropped the keyboard off for me. And I am happy to have it. So you know, when everything goes bad, don't worry about it. Everything's gonna come up right and you're gonna be happy.

**Abigayle:** When one door closes, another door opens, right?

**Sonia:** That's right. You know it, don't you?

**Abigayle:** Yeah, I do. (Laughs)

**Sonia:** (Laughs) I sang in the choir. And I was told my mother--my mother died when I was three, I grew up with my grandparents--that my mother had an operatic voice. But she couldn't go into opera because you know why?

**Abigayle:** Why?



**Sonia:** The color.

**Abigayle:** Really?

**Sonia:** Yeah. The first Black person in opera, do you know who that was?

**Abigayle:** No, ma'am.

**Sonia:** Roland Hayes was one. And Marian Anderson. I think they were the first Blacks in opera. I used to go to opera and listen to them because my grandmother, she knew I liked it.

My grandfather had a beautiful bass voice. And I used to play music with him. And he'd sit on the piano stool with me and we would sing. My grandfather was a minister, and my grandmother, she'd sing in the choir. Listen, honey, I stayed in church alllll week long with my grandparents. My sister and I. We were into everything, you know.

So I had a good life being brought up by my grandparents. I got a very good education- from THEM. I wasn't home schooled. But I was homeschooled AFTER school. When we had our supper and everything else, then it was sit down at the dining room table doing homework and learning. My grandfather was a very very articulate person.

**Abigayle:** Wait, and you had no problem with that as a child--just learning, learning, learning?



**Sonia:** I didn't have no problems with it. I loved it! I loved it. I graduated and I retired as a teacher now.

**Abigayle:** Really! What'd you teach?

**Sonia:** Listen, anything I could teach, I taught. I love teaching! I love it. And I used to tutor at home--any kids that needed help, I would tutor them at home.

(The kids today), they're not taught the way we were taught. They're not hooked on phonics. They're stuck on stupid. 'Cause when I talk to them about educational things, they look at me like: "Hmm. What's she talking about?"

I asked a boy one day to give me the five great lakes. He said: "Where's that at?" I said, "The five great lakes! You never heard of the five great lakes? Don't they teach you geography or nothing?"

Can YOU (name them), Abigayle?

**Abigayle:** No, I cannot!

**Sonia:** Why not? (Laughs)

**Abigayle:** Well, I'm from Jamaica.





**Sonia:** Oh, listen, honey, my family's from Barbados. Yeah, and my grandfather was a stickler for education. Now I'm gonna tell you how I taught them how to remember the five great lakes.

**Abigayle:** Alright, ready.

**Sonia:** Alright. Huron--H. Ontario--O. Michigan--M. Erie--E. Superior--S. Now what does that spell?

**Abigayle:** Homes!

**Sonia:** That's the way I taught this boy when he didn't know the five great lakes! I have a very bad habit of taking things apart--like spelling and things. I won the spelling bee in the eighth grade. The word I spelled was "adhere."

There's always a way to spell. You have to take the word apart. And listen, if the person says it right, you can spell it. But they have to say it right. They can't mumble and mess around with it.

Abigayle: Well, Miss Sonia, I don't want to take up any more of your time or your day...

Sonia: I'm enjoying it.

Abigayle: I love talking to you



**Sonia:** Everybody's out of the house and it's quiet now. You know what, talking to you has been wonderful. Did you get to ask all the questions you wanted to ask me?

**Abigayle:** I have one more. Want me to ask you one more?

**Sonia:** Okay, go ahead.

**Abigayle:** Tell me about a time you'll never forget.

**Sonia:** A time I'll never forget? Let me see. I got married early, so I think it's when I went back to school, and finished school and I decided to go to college.

I went through Roxbury Community College and was on the Dean's list twice. And then I went to Emmanuel College for four years and I graduated from there, too.

**Abigayle:** What degrees did you end up with?

**Sonia:** Bachelor's degree. And I wanted to go back but I couldn't because of my sight.



**Abigayle:** What did you pursue?

**Sonia:** I went to do my music first, and I finished that course early. And a lot of the students would come and sit down with me and ask me a lot of questions about the subjects we were in. And one of the nuns-- 'cause Emmanuel College was a Catholic College-- one of the nuns said to me, "Why don't you and I get together and get a club or something together so that we can help these kids that are having some problems?"

**Abigayle:** And that's when you got into education?

**Sonia:** Yup, that's when I got into education.

**Abigayle:** And that was the happiest day of your life?

**Sonia:** Yeah, when I graduated. Because I was the first one in my family to go to college. I think that was the most happiest day of my life, to see all my family there, just screamin' and hollerin.' It was wonderful.

I wanted to go back. I wanted to go as far as getting my PhD. You know, the Commission for the Blind says they can help me. So I'm going to see what they can do, you know?

**Abigayle:** Well, at least you had some great memories in the process.

**Sonia:** I think going to college is the utmost. College really really was the most wonderful time in my life.



**Abigayle:** That sounds so good to me.

**Sonia:** You know what happened to me, though?

I had this professor, and we were talking about life and things in the Bible, and he said something, and I said, "You're wrong." And because I showed him up in the class, because I opened my Bible, he saw he was wrong, but he got angry with me.

**Abigayle:** Did he kick you out?

**Sonia:** No, you know what he did?

**Abigayle:** No.

**Sonia:** He gave me a bad mark. 'Cause I was nominated to go into Phi Beta Kappa. And that bad mark kept me out of it. Because I showed him up in the class.

But I said, "You know what? Okay." I had that nomination, and that meant a lot to me, too. So I felt like I had really accomplished one of the greatest things in life.

**Abigayle:** That makes me happy to hear. That you accomplished one of the greatest things in your life. It makes me want to do the same.

**Sonia:** Do it, honey. Do it. You'll get SO MUCH OUT OF IT.



**Abigayle:** Yes, ma'am. I will.

**Sonia:** If you put something into it, you'll get everything out. Do you know how old I am?

**Abigayle:** Yes, I was told. You want to remind me again?

**Sonia:** I'm 87. And I don't feel like that. You know what I feel like?

**Abigayle:** What?

**Sonia:** A recycled teenager! Honey, I feel wonderful. God is good.

**Abigayle:** All the time. I had an awesome time talking to you.

**Sonia:** I am so glad. I am so happy I had the chance to talk to you.

**Abigayle:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Sonia:** And I hope that everything will go right for you in your future, everything will be wonderful.





**Abigayle Cooper** is a senior at New Mission High School. She lives in Dorchester and enjoys reading and singing. She wants to travel the world, helping people better their lives as she goes.



**Sonia Booker** is a retired Boston Public Schools middle school teacher who was influential in the creation of GrandFamilies House, a residential program recognized by the White House as a national model for grandparents raising grandchildren.

## 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.**

