



# Bruce Rose

Naomi Slipp:

This is Naomi Slipp. I'm here recording a story for Common Ground. Would you like to introduce yourself

Bruce Rose:

And I'm Bruce Rose.

Naomi Slipp:

Great. So we're going to talk a little bit about your connections to the area and to New Bedford. Do you have anything you want to share right out of the-

Bruce Rose:

Well, I was born and raised in New Bedford and I grew up just a couple of blocks over here in the Bay Village housing development. Actually lived there for a good many years before I went off to school in Amherst, and stayed in Amherst for about eight years finishing up my degrees. And then I moved to Boston and Jersey, and 25 years later I'd come back to New Bedford.

Naomi Slipp:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Bruce Rose:

Since I've been here, I've always tried to be active and engaged in the community in some aspect. Probably my longest engagement has been with the NAACP and the Cape Verdean Recognition Committee, and worked with a number of other organizations here. I came back to New Bedford and I assumed a position at UMass Dartmouth, and after 15 years there I retired, and here I am.

Naomi Slipp:

When you came back, did you have family that was still here from growing up?

Bruce Rose:

Yes, yes. My brothers and... When I came back my mother had already passed and my father had passed as well, but I have many cousins and all my closest friends were still here.

Bruce Rose:

And so it was nice coming back to some place that I was familiar with, that I had a deep attachment to, and that I had always wanted to come back to. But obviously finding work in my career was difficult, there's only one university here so. So it was great.

Naomi Slipp:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bruce Rose:

Yeah.

Naomi Slipp: And you mentioned two organizations that you've been very active with, can you tell us a little more about them?



Bruce Rose:

Yeah, I started working with NAACP probably in the late nineties, although I had been a member before then. In the late nineties, I came on the executive board. I was most recently president of the organization until about 2018 or 2019. I obviously continue to work as a member of the executive committee. I also am one of the co-founders of the New Bedford Historical Society, as well as a co-founder of the Cape Verdean Recognition Committee, which I worked very closely with now and have been doing so since I believe 2004.

Naomi Slipp:

That's a lot of engagement.

Bruce Rose:

Yeah. Yeah.

Naomi Slipp:

Can you talk a little bit about the importance of the local chapter of the NAACP to the community?

Bruce Rose:

Yeah, sure. The NAACP is of course a national organization and New Bedford is just one of the many branches, but the New Bedford branch has been fairly active in the community over the years. There was some periods where it was relatively inactive because of low activity and no leadership at the time until I decided to take it over. But we've done I think some important, made some important accomplishments in the New Bedford.

Bruce Rose:

Way back in the mid-to-late nineties, the NAACP filed a complaint with the Department of Justice Office for Civil Rights, complaint against the public school system, the high school in particular, because of the tracking system that they were employing, which clearly had a discriminatory impact on students of color and lower income folks as well.

Bruce Rose:

So the Office for Civil Rights came in and did a review and convinced the school committee to, the school department I should say, to sign a conciliatory agreement with the Office for Civil Rights. And as part of that conciliatory agreement, they had to either dismantle the tracking system or develop some non-discriminatory alternative.

Bruce Rose:

So the school department called for a citywide committee to become involved in this, and to work with them in making the necessary modifications. The only organization that responded was the NAACP. We worked with a superintendent, who at that time was Mike Longo. Well, actually Joe Sylvia was the superintendent but Mike Longo, the deputy, was taking over all of that.

Bruce Rose:

And long and the short is that after a year or two of working with the committee, the school department came up with a number of recommendations, which we had worked on with them, and as part of it meant dismantling the tracking system and instituting the middle school system. Prior to that, we had a junior high school system in New Bedford and they moved it to a middle school system.

Bruce Rose:

And since that time, it has been a strong focus on education in the city. Particularly when, as one of the leaders of NAACP I also participated in the New Bedford Education Roundtable, which shined a light on the fact that New Bedford schools had extremely low MCAS scores. This was pretty much a secret that was being kept from the community, they were not well aware of it at all, and the Roundtable sounded the alarm bell on that. It caused a lot of ruckus, a lot of people were angry with us.



Bruce Rose:

The long and the short is that some significant changes had been made. A new superintendent was brought in later, and significant changes were made, and some progress was made. I think a lot of it is attributed to the work of both the NAACP and the New Bedford Education Roundtable that we've made the kinds of improvements, and of course the good, hard working people of the school department, that we'd forced some significant and very necessary improvements in the public school offering.

Bruce Rose:

And I think they're making considerable progress at this point under the current superintendent who I think is doing a pretty good job.

Naomi Slipp:

That's an extraordinary impact.

Bruce Rose:

Yeah. Yeah.

Naomi Slipp:

Between that work and your own career, it sounds like education has been a kind of central or cornerstone of your life.

Bruce Rose:

Yeah. Yeah.

Naomi Slipp:

Do you tie that to your experiences as a kid, or your parents, or?

Bruce Rose:

To my experiences, personally and professionally. Obviously, my entire professional career had been in public higher education, as I said I retired as assistant vice chancellor at UMass Dartmouth. But before that, as I was growing up as a kid, I can recall that I didn't have much trouble in school. It kind of came easy for me. At the same time, I didn't apply myself as I should have and could have.

Bruce Rose:

And to make a long story short, I got in some trouble when I got to New Bedford High. I was in the ROTC, and let's just say I wasn't adjusting well there. So I had come to understand that they were going to discharge me from ROTC because of my antics. I was not a bad person, I just liked the horse around a whole lot and play jokes on people a lot of the times, so they said I wasn't taking it seriously enough.

Bruce Rose:

I was led to understand that if you got kicked out of ROTC, you couldn't graduate on stage. And so I sat and I thought about that for a while and I had to come up with a scheme, as I was prone to do in those kinds of situations. I also understood that if... They had this unwritten policy that if you left school, you quit school, and a little while later you decided that you made the wrong decision and you'd like to come back to school, they'd welcome you back.

Bruce Rose:

So, I had it all figured out. I convinced my mother to sign a letter to allow me to quit high school with the understanding that I was going to go back. So I made the promise to her and she signed the letter.



Bruce Rose:

What I planned was that I would quit in the beginning of December, come back after the Christmas break and say, "I made a bad decision. I want to get back in." So that's what I did, right after new year's I came back to school. The assistant principal there was someone who really did not like me. So, he told me that, "We don't want you back." So I was not allowed to go back into school.

Bruce Rose:

The other interesting thing about all that is that when I was sitting with the guidance counselor to fill out the paperwork or do whatever was necessary to quit school, he said to me, "Oh, your name is Rose huh. Are you in relation to Ben Rose or Clipper Rose?" I said, "Well, Clipper Rose is my father and Ben Rose is cousin." So he says, "Oh, I play ball with them guys. Great ball players." And he signs and lets me walk out the door.

Bruce Rose:

At that time I was about a B+ student. It was clear to me many years later that where not for the color of my skin, there might have been some attempt to dissuade me from quitting school. So I quit and I went to a New Bedford Evening Extension School and get my diploma there. And then I went on to Bristol community college and when I finished there, I went to UMass and got my three degrees there.

Bruce Rose:

But that experience in the New Bedford public school system told me a lot about the system as I examined it, retrospectively. And being engaged in education, higher education, I always came to understand that for people of color in particular the root out of poverty might be through education. And so I dedicated my career and my civic sense of obligation to addressing issues of inequity in the schools. And to this day, I continued to try to do the same.

Naomi Slipp:

It's extraordinarily important work.

Bruce Rose:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I think so. I think so.

Naomi Slipp:

So clearly there were administrators that made some of your experience challenging. Were there teachers that you remember that stand out in the other way for you?

Bruce Rose:

I certainly do. Yeah. I had a sixth-grade teacher who was the first teacher of color that I ever had, and she was right from the New Bedford [inaudible 00:15:18]. I had an admiration for her. When I saw her and there was another, we had another black school teacher, [inaudible 00:15:36], who was in the same school. When I saw the two of them, it was clear to me that people of color can have professional positions.

Bruce Rose:

We later on became very good friends as adults. She moved on into higher education as I had done. So she was pretty much an inspiration for me. I think that she was really the kind of person that had an impact on me in terms of enhancing my self-confidence. So she was an important person in my early career, early educational experience.

Bruce Rose:

Later on at the college level, there were several people at Bristol Community College that significantly impacted me, and some of those people are still with us. It's been a while since I graduated. Dan Gilbarg, who was one of the principles of the Coalition for Social Justice. He was instrumental in getting me to see things with a broader perspective sociologically.



Bruce Rose:

Rachel Holland, who has since passed, was my first black college professor. She was one who kind of had a sense of obligation to all the other black students at school and so she mentored many of us, myself included. Another woman was Tania Nicolet, who was a professor at BCC, and she as well encouraged me to further my education beyond BCC.

Bruce Rose:

So there were some very good people, both black and white, who were encouraging to me that clearly had had an impact on where I went and how confident I felt in going to those places.

Naomi Slipp:

Great. Is there anyone else that you'd like to talk about or any other stories that you'd like to share about New Bedford?

Bruce Rose: Well of course there are people in the community who had an enormous impact on me. One individual who has since passed is man by the name of Jack Custodio, whom everybody, anybody who lived in New Bedford at that time knew who he was. He was a very abrasive black activist, older gentleman, who had an act for making people feel uncomfortable, but did it for righteous purposes.

Bruce Rose:

He is someone whose activism I tried to model some of my activism around. It's interesting because Jack was the kind of guy that you either liked him or you hated him. Fortunately, I liked him in spite of the fact that he was a great nemesis to my wife who was on the school committee. He caused a lot of trouble but he did a lot of good, as we would say.

Bruce Rose:

Lee Charlton, who was a former longtime president of the New Bedford NAACP. He and I, were almost like family because he married a woman whose family lived upstairs from our family. He was kind of a role model for folks to look up to. As I became of college age I had an internship in Boston, and he worked in Boston and we'd ride to work together in the morning. And I learned a lot from him, more than 50 years later I'm still learning a lot from him, and he was certainly a significant person in my community.

Bruce Rose:

But I had people who had very humble backgrounds and personas that I admired and oftentimes tried to model my behavior after. Some of them are relatives, some of them are friends and people in the community, people I've worked with in different organizations. When I started working with New Bedford NAACP and with Cape Verdean Recognition Committee, this was years ago and so there were people who were older than me who were serving on those boards, I find now that I'm those people and I don't feel bad about that at all.

Naomi Slipp:

Can you talk about the importance of this kind of generational mentorship, especially within the Cape Verdean community?

Bruce Rose:

Oh yeah. For people of low income backgrounds and people of color, it's so important to have support mechanisms. I mean, it's important to have support mechanisms regardless of what your status was, but for us it was even more important because there were so many barriers that we were confronted with and having someone there who gave you inspiration, encouragement, support, and in many instances pushed you to do what you could and should do was so very important to me and to those who grew up around me.



Bruce Rose:

I try to model their behavior by grooming and mentoring young people who work in the various organizations that I work with, or whom I happen to know in the community. I just think that that's a role that you play as a responsible adult, I learned that from them and I'm trying to continuously put that lesson into practice.

Naomi Slipp:

Is there anything else that you'd like to share, talk about?

Bruce Rose:

Well, there's an interesting story I have to tell about the Whaling Museum.

Naomi Slipp:

Oh, please.

Bruce Rose:

As I said, I grew up in the projects right over here. I remember as a kid, none of us in the neighborhood had ever been in the Whaling Museum. And so a few of us, more adventurous kids, mischievous kids you might say, decided one day to come and check out the Whaling Museum. And so we opened, there was a door, there used to be a door on this side that was the entrance. I'd say this side, I'm not sure the direction.

Bruce Rose:

And so we tried to sneak in one day and we got in there, so somebody met us at the entryway and told us, "No, no. You can't come in here," and so we went off about our business. But later on in life it never occurred to me, you know what black folk don't really go to the Whaling Museum. And from that day when I was a little kid, the first time I set foot in the Whaling Museum again was when I was a graduate student.

Bruce Rose:

At that time I was working for the City Planning Department and the city planner and the mayor needed some papers that I had and so they called me and asked me to deliver it, they were meeting here, and that was the first time I had been in the Whaling Museum in all those years. So that was a five minute visit, and it wasn't until many years later that I came back in here again for something.

Bruce Rose:

So I was heartened when Anne Brengle, the president of the Whaling Museum, she was the first person in leadership here, to my knowledge, that began to reach out to the community of color and to try to bring some diversity and inclusion to the Whaling Museum. Her efforts I think were significant because her successor picked up on that, and it seems with each succeeding CEO there's been a stronger, a more intense effort to address the issues of diversity and inclusion.

Bruce Rose: So I'm happy to be a part of the DEI committee, working with Amanda and the others as we.... started, I think we started last year, the DEI committee in putting things together and bringing in the consultants. I know that we've come a long way for the Whaling Museum and I saw that through my own personal experience.

Naomi Slipp: Were there other institutions in the city at the time when you were 8, 9, 10, where you felt like you had a home or a space to be where you were welcome?

Bruce Rose:

Well, let me talk about one more place where I knew I wasn't welcome.



Bruce Rose:

I remember some years ago when I was the executive director for Affirmative Action for the Massachusetts Board of Regents of Higher Education, with responsibility for the 29 public institutions. So, at that time, Jim... Geez. Mental block. Name escaping me. (silence)

Bruce Rose:

I'm missing his last name. Jim, who was the director of the New Bedford Chamber of Commerce. Because he and I were both alumni from BCC, he was a few years after me, he had called and asked if I would give a talk to the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club on the matter of affirmative action, and so I said, "Well, sure."

Bruce Rose:

So the luncheon talk was to be held at the... Not Rodman House. Right here on County Street. Rotch–Jones–Duff.

Naomi Slipp:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bruce Rose:

No, not Rotch–Jones–Duff. Oh man. I'm forgetting the name.

Naomi Slipp:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Bruce Rose:

On the corner of Union and County Street.

Naomi Slipp:

That's not the Wamsutta?

Bruce Rose:

Wamsutta.

Naomi Slipp:

Is it? Okay.

Bruce Rose: Wamsutta Club. Geez.

Naomi Slipp:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Bruce Rose:

As a kid, I used to always come by to Wamsutta Club, around the next streets and stuff. So in opening my talk at the luncheon I told folks, and of course I'm speaking to an all white audience, business persons from around the city, the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club were pretty much a white entity at that time.

Bruce Rose:

I said, "Yeah, I find it really ironic that when I was a kid I used to come by this building all the time. I didn't know what went on in here but I knew that I wasn't welcome, and so every time I came by at night I broke a window in the back." I said, "I just find it ironic that I'm here addressing you on a matter of affirmative action."



Bruce Rose:

Well, I'm startled Chamber's club has changed as well. But places that I felt comfortable were absolutely in my community. Growing up in the Bay Village, my playground, both literally and figuratively, was Monte Park, and all of my friends were gathered there all the time. I also hung out in the West End as well.

Bruce Rose:

So it was always in those communities of color that I felt comfortable, relaxed, easy. They looked like me, they acted like me, they didn't reject me. But it was whenever I was in an all white environment I knew that I was, quote, unquote, "different."

Bruce Rose:

Later on in life I came to recognize that not only am I different from them, but they're different from me. But New Bedford is home to me in so many different ways. I grew up here. I came back and tried to make a contribution here and I'll die here.

Naomi Slipp:

Right. Okay?

Bruce Rose:

I'm all set.

Naomi Slipp:

Okay.