



Dawn Blake Souza

Interviewer:

All right, we are recording. This is Emily Reinl here with Dawn Blake Souza, who's going to tell us some childhood stories, so I will turn it over to you, Dawn.

Dawn:

Okay. My name is Dawn Blake Souza. I grew up in what is called the Old West End of New Bedford. It was a relatively small neighborhood. I'd like to share some of my memories from that.

There was a time in my life when the world was just about perfect. My whole universe, from Mill Street on the north, Court on the south, Summer on the east, and Emerson on the west, contained all that I needed or wanted. Friends, relatives, school, playground, stores, et cetera were all within the tiny neighborhood we call the West End, or more affectionately, the best end.

This is my birthplace, a small two-story New England cottage that occupied number 290 Ash Street. I was, in fact, delivered in my parents' upstairs back bedroom on a hot August day in 1944 by our family doctor, Maurice Portnoy.

Barely large enough for our sizable clan, the house was dwarfed by several larger three-story homes that sandwiched it in. There were only three bedrooms, and we four girls shared one of them. Three of my brothers shared one. The older three boys had already left for the military by the time I could remember. Of course, there was mama and papa's room at the top of the stairs.

As much as I was a part of 290 Ash, it was an integral part of me. I knew all of its secrets, which stair creaked, and as one crept down to the kitchen for a forbidden late night snack, how to push up the bathroom window in just such a way as not to let it fall down on your fingers, and the best time to find the bathroom available.

Like many houses in New England, ours had a long front porch called the piazza, where we could sit outside on hot summer evenings and talk with our neighbors. So many memories are attached to Ash Street. The neighbors were more like family members, and the bond we shared with them is as strong today as it was more than 40 years ago when we moved away.

The folks who lived nearby were tacitly conferred by our parents with the authority to reproach us for any perceived wrongdoing. They also served as a neighborhood security force to protect us from any potential dangers.

One summer night when we engaged in a game of hide and seek, I was crouched behind a parked car, out of the light of the street lamp. I must have been around eight years old. I took the business of hiding very seriously. The person who was it was clear on the other side of the street, stealthily tracking his prey, when suddenly a dark-colored automobile stopped in the street directly in front of me.

The stranger behind the wheel signaled to me to come closer as though he wanted to ask me something, but before I could respond, Ms. Margie came flying out of her house with curlers in her hair and a pink chenille bathrobe flapping in the evening breeze. "Leave that baby alone and get the hell away from here," she yelled, as she waved her finger at the startled driver who sped up Ash Street.

My protective cocoon had held. The next evening, we were back on the corner of Ash and Middle, in front of Ms. Margie's house, ready for another big, adventurous game.

Another memory that I'd like to share is from the Old West End. Like many urban neighborhoods of the fifties, the Old West End had a number of delightful traditions designed to strengthen ties and celebrate ourselves.



One of these traditions, neighborhood block parties, is particularly memorable and evokes strong feelings of nostalgia for me. The block party was always held during the summer and required weeks of planning and preparations. Because certain streets had to be blocked off for traffic, I imagine the cooperation of the New Bedford Police Department had to be secured in advance.

The days leading up to the big night were filled with anticipation, and posters were placed on telephone poles to remind folks of the upcoming event. As soon as it got dark, the festivities would begin. We children were given the go ahead to start making our rounds.

The air was filled with music, and the streets and sidewalks became crowded with celebrants eating, laughing, dancing, and generally reveling in the gaiety of the warm summer night. I recall tables laden with an array of delectable foods like watermelon, fried chicken, homemade cakes, and ice cream placed in front of the houses on Cedar Street, between Elm and Middle.

How we waited patiently for a signal to help ourselves. Everything was free and everyone shared. Some yards were lit with little paper lanterns and others operated only by the light of the street lamps. People were friendly and courteous to each other, and there was a genuine atmosphere of camaraderie.

I don't recall when the block party tradition started or when they ceased, but I can attest to how effective this event was in real community-building. It's easy to see why the practice of holding old-fashioned block parties is being resurrected in communities around the country. I have one more story I'd like to share.

Interviewer:

Great.

Dawn:

When I was a kid, the Friends Academy that is now located in Dartmouth was located two blocks from my home. It was one of the large old homes in the West End of New Bedford. They used to have rummage sales there.

One of the benefits of growing up poor is that the simplest pleasures can make you happy. All one need do is to observe so many of the children today who have every imaginable expensive toy: TVs in every room, the latest video games, cell phones, iPods, iPads, et cetera, and yet they still complain that they are bored and have nothing to do.

Flashback to my childhood, when my greatest treasure was an old used book. Each year, the Friends Academy, a private school located a couple of blocks from our house, between Elm Street and Morgan Street, was the site of our treasure hunt.

Faithfully we saved our hard-earned pennies, nickels, and dimes all year, placing them in two jars. One was for the special summer excursion to Lincoln Park, and the second was reserved for a rummage sale fund.

It's hard to imagine kids today getting so excited over the possibility of buying a few used items at a rummage sale, but it was a really big deal for us. We always managed to arrive before the doors opened and couldn't wait for mama to utter those magic words, "You can go in now, but spend your money wisely."

While she headed for the household furnishings, I set my footsteps toward the used book section. My brother, Danny, generally went for the used toys, and we never left disappointed.

Although it was springtime, it might as well have been Christmas all over again. The academy relocated many years ago to its present location in a beautiful area of North Dartmouth. It still holds its rummage sales today.

One day when I recently visited there, I was pleasantly taken back to that bygone day when I observed some young children shuffling through the book section and saw that familiar gleam in their eyes as they hunted for true treasures.



Interviewer:

Wonderful. You painted such beautiful and vivid pictures of your childhood.

Dawn:

Thank you.

Interviewer:

Any others you want to share or ...

Dawn:

Yes. In 1956, the film Moby Dick was being premiered in New Bedford. The stars were all here, Gregory Peck and everything. This story I call Starstruck.

It was all the talk around town. The movie, Moby Dick starring Gregory Peck, was holding its premiere right here at the State Theater, now the Zeiterion. The giant actor himself was going to be there.

Well, come hell or high water, Dawny Blake was going to meet her idol somehow, though I didn't really have a plan. The year was 1956, and I was 12 years old, practically grown, I thought. Certainly old enough to devise a plan to meet Mr. Gregory Peck, handsome Hollywood hot rod.

I talked my brother, Danny, poor Danny, into making our way through the crowds gathered along the motorcade along the route on Pleasant Street. His lack of enthusiasm for my mission did not dissuade me. I was determined.

Then, before I knew it, the motorcade came to an abrupt stop right in front of us, while we stood on the steps of the post office building. The crowd surged around the open convertible that carried my hero, but my path to him was cut off.

Danny tried to convince me to give up. "You'll never get through. Let's just go home," he pleaded. As I studied the situation and realized that my short height was a decided disadvantage to me, my plan unfolded. I quickly got down on my knees and crawled under the legs of the people gathered around, heading in the general direction of my target.

Much to my amazement, I emerged from my crawlspace directly adjacent to the front passenger door of Mr. Peck's luxurious convertible, up close and personal. I was beaming, but all I could do was grin. No words, no movements would come out. Completely awestruck. I simply froze.

Then, without saying a word, my hero rose from the backseat, leaned over and shook my hand. What? I could hardly believe it. Did anyone have a camera to record this historic moment? Gregory Peck, larger than life, had actually shaken Dawny Blake's hand.

Poor Danny had to hear about it all the way home, and for years after that. What's the big deal? You got to shake Gregory Peck's hand. I don't see what the big deal is. True story.

Interviewer:

I love it.

Dawn:

This is a story about one of our neighbors.

Interviewer:

Okay.



Dawn:

His name was Joseph Andrade, but we all called him Pa. They lived next door. When I think of Pa Andrade so many images flood my memory, a strong, steadfast gentleman who savored the simple pleasures of life.

I picture him sitting under his lovingly tended great arbor, relishing the cool shade of a lazy August afternoon and resting his work-weary bones. No doubt his thoughts flashing back to his younger glorier days as a whaler, and when he sailed in his own schooner, the Brunhilda, from Cape Verde all the way across the Atlantic, carrying his new bride, my beautiful future godmother [inaudible 00:14:24].

I remember how he admired the lilacs and morning glories that climbed along the weathered fence that divided our yards, but never really separated them. Who could forget the soft, stern voice that seemed to come out of nowhere when one of us did something that we shouldn't have?

I think that his sense of loyalty to family, friends, and neighbors, and the disappointment in his eyes, betrayed when someone moved away. Most of all, I see an old man standing quietly, gazing at the empty space where his beloved 303 Elm Street once stood, wondering why someone decided that it didn't have any worth anymore.

The worth it had ironically could never be measured except in his heart and very soul. It is that value, that love, that loyalty, that simple joy, and those treasured days that I remember most about Pa Andrade. That was the urban renewal that took place in New Bedford.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Dawn:

They tore down our homes. Very sad time for everyone.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Yeah.

Dawn:

I have one more story I'd like to share.

Interviewer:

Sure.

Dawn:

I'm the youngest of four girls, and I had six brothers. My oldest sister, Cynthia, was a surrogate mother because she had to take care of all of us, so I call this one Adventures with Cynthia.

Some people remain eternally childlike in their refusal to give in to what they perceive as the drudgery of growing old. My big sister, Cynthia, was one of those special souls. Every day around Cyn the 4th of July and Christmas all rolled into one.

She took great delight in spoiling her numerous younger siblings by taking us to a movie, buy us an ice cream cone, while sharing the ultimate experience of taking a trip to Lincoln Park.

Being 12 years older than me, she was my surrogate mother, but in the way she conducted herself, she was much more my peer. Because this was the way she treated her kid sisters and brothers, there was rarely a need to reprimand any of us.

If Cynthia told us to do something, we simply did it. No fuss. Anyway, there was always the promise of a new



exciting adventure waiting as reward for our good behavior. Sometimes they were small adventures, like a day trip to the park or the beach, but then there were the major events that we saved up our nickels and dimes for year-round.

Lincoln Park seemed like it was so far away. In reality, it was only a few miles outside of the city limits, but it still took forever to get there. The days leading up to our departure were filled with preparations and very explicit instructions from mama's right-hand man.

Believe me, we had them down pat, and we weren't about to mess anything up. Each of us knew what our limitations were, how long we could spend on each ride, what we were allowed to ask for, and most importantly, what we absolutely could not do.

The cardinal rule was simple. When Cynthia was on a roll at one of the booths trying to win a stuffed animal or some other trinket, do not, under any circumstances, bug her to leave before she was ready. When Cyn was on a roll, she was in the zone.

I think it was here that she was first bitten by the gambling bug, an unsympathetic and parasitic creature that never let go of her, but that story is for another day.

Unlike the other parents, Cynthia let us go on every ride we chose, and she would come along with us without fear. In fact, she was probably one of the biggest risk-takers on the rides. I don't know who derived more joy from a day at Lincoln Park, Cynthia or her younger siblings. By the wails of laughter, I'd say it was pretty much a tossup.

Interviewer:

Thank you so much.

Dawn:

You're very welcome.

Interviewer:

Those were such nice little stories from your childhood.

Dawn:

Good. It was a good time. It was a very good time. We have a few of our neighbors ... Obviously, when they had the urban renewal, the neighborhood was scattered all over the city.

Interviewer:

Yep.

Dawn:

But the old, what they call the Old West End, our immediate neighbors, we stay in touch with each other. We've lost a lot of them. We have reunions once in a great while, and we do keep in touch.

Interviewer:

That's good. That's good. Yeah.

Dawn:

By the way, that ... Pa Andrade, he's in the Whaling Museum in the Cape Verde exhibit. There's a photograph of him.



Interviewer:

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Dawn:

His name was Joseph . There's a little story about him being a whaler. When he came from Cape Verde, he owned his own ship, so there's definitely a tie-in there.

Interviewer:

Yeah. That's great. Thank you. Any final things you want to add before we stop the recording or ...

Dawn:

Well, I think that it's really important that ... What you're doing.

Interviewer:

Thank you. Yeah.

Dawn:

This project was very important because years ago nobody asked us our stories, except our family members. Even they didn't really ask a lot. Now we're having young people want to know, what was it like, grandma? What was it like auntie?

Then you have organizations like the Whaling Museum and the Bedford Historical Society really recording those stories and setting them down for posterity.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Dawn:

I wish I had my grandmother's and my great-grandmother's stories, so I think it's important. I really am grateful that you're doing this.

Interviewer:

Of course. I'm really grateful that you're participating in it, so thank you. Thank you very much.

Dawn:

You're very welcome.