



# Maryanne Monsour

Driving through the neighborhoods and many one-way streets of New Bedford, MA still evokes spontaneous stories of childhood antics and special memories for my husband, Robert. Born in 1955, Robert was the son of immigrants from the Cape Verde islands. His family lived in several neighborhoods in New Bedford, as his parents navigated their journey of adapting to a new country and culture in the U.S. They originally lived in a tenement on Purchase St. and eventually were able to buy their own home. Here and throughout his childhood, Robert was exposed to a diversity of cultures and people that would impact his life.

Robert's mother came to New Bedford when she was 21. She learned to speak English by watching soap operas on TV and by reading the NB Standard Times. She took a night course to further her education. She was a hard worker and took pride in her children, her cooking and her job at St. Luke's Hospital.

Robert's father's family came to New Bedford in the 1930's. His grandmother struggled to adjust to their new home in the U.S. and she and her 8 children moved back to Cape Verde leaving her husband in New Bedford. She was quite poor and unable to care for the children. The country of Portugal eventually placed the children in an orphanage in Lisbon. Robert's father lived in that orphanage, until he was 17, when a friend paid for his passage and he was able to come to the U.S. He eventually met Robert's mother and they married and had 4 children.

Robert's dad was a merchant seaman and shipped out for 3, or 6 months at a time, and often was away for up to a year, leaving Robert's mother to care for the children. His absence was challenging for the family. At one point, his father tried working at the Steamship Authority, on the Nantucket ferry, to be closer to his family, but eventually he returned to being a merchant marine where he worked on different tankers and ships and traveled all over the world.

One day, when Robert and his siblings were teenagers, his father shipped out of New Bedford, as he had done many times before, however this time, he never came back. This was devastating for Robert and his family. His mother was forced to sell their home and to eventually return to an apartment in New Bedford. She worked several jobs to keep the family afloat. Over the years, and later as an adult, Robert searched for his father, but was unable to locate him, and feared he had died. Thirty years later, out of the blue, his father contacted the family and returned to New Bedford. Robert had many questions for his father and the search for understanding was a difficult one.

Despite the instability and challenges of his childhood, when Robert reflects on those years, there are fond memories, good friends, and positive events that fill his brain. He recalls with joy, the many friends and neighbors, community support and positive experiences in New Bedford that helped to shape and define his life. He realized long ago that his community embraced him and assisted in his growth and development and success as an adult.

As a young boy of color in the 1960's, Robert always felt safe in his adventures in New Bedford. At age 10 he had a paper route and he would pick up the bundles at the House of Correction, complete his deliveries and delight in earning tips, especially at the holidays. He saved his money and on Sundays, he would buy a day bus pass for 50 cents and he would ride all over the city, making stops in the south end, at the beach, the north end and the center of town. He spent time at the Boys and Girls Club, played basketball in Buttonwood Park, and practically lived at certain friends' homes. He was lucky to have male mentors in the community and friends' parents who were there for him, to answer his many questions and would include him in their family's events. When Robert had a motorized mini bike, his buddy Steve would hop on the back and they would explore the neighborhoods



together, trying not to get caught.

When he was an adolescent, and living on Arnold St., Robert and some friends from the neighborhood decided to find an outlet to express their individual talents and put together a show for the neighborhood, They called themselves the “Park Street Gang”, and the group put on several shows with music, singing, dancing, skits etc. One summer, parents collaborated with the kids and helped them build a stage. They sold tickets and raised \$1,000 for their charity. It became a neighborhood production that everyone looked forward to. One year the New Bedford Standard Times, came to the show and they made it into the newspaper.

One of Robert’s fondest memories as a young teen, was working as a dishwasher at Bunny’s Sandwich shop on Union St. which was owned by a Chinese man named Don. Robert loved working at Bunny’s so much that he would hang out at the restaurant even after his shift was over. He and Don really enjoyed talking to each other. Robert would ask him about his Chinese culture, and Don would make him a great meal each day. Don was kind and generous to him and on more than one occasion, Don bought him sneakers when he knew Robert needed them. They had a strong alliance and when Robert had to quit the job due to family circumstances, it was bitter sweet for them both.

Robert loves running into old friends and neighbors from the old days, and cherishes the stories and memories that they alone shared. The diversity and community spirit that he experienced growing up in New Bedford was the foundation he needed to forge ahead with confidence and gratitude.