

Circling the Drums with Cornell Coley

By Lance Chapman

There is no such thing as a typical day at Goddard House Assisted Living. Picture a November afternoon with 20 people ages 16 to 96 inside a warm library room, walls brimming with bookshelves. Today however, drums are almost as plentiful as the books on the shelves. As I entered the room, a circle of residents and staff members seated in chairs with drums in front of each person flowed out in front of me. I'm greeted by a deep pulsating rhythm in the air. Smiles and looks of deep concentration light up on each face. In the middle of the circle Cornell Coley, our Drum Spirit Guide conducts, leads and directs with his voice and his hands. Assisted by three teens from his drum program at the Hyde Square Task Force, he narrates the music with his direction and encouragements. The volume rises and the rhythm continues – some using their hands to play drums others using sticks, beaters or scrapers to create the variety of sounds. I grab a small set of bongo drums and find an empty seat. I begin to play along---suddenly connected by the music - the beat. Connected to the drum circle.



Resident Peggy, Program Assistant Michala, and Cornell Coley

A week before the drum circle event, I called Cornell on the phone to talk about his thoughts and philosophies about music, drums and community. As a young boy growing up in Roxbury, MA near Egleston Square, Cornell first became interested in drums around the age of nine. He told me he was drawn to drumming because of the energy generated by the ways drummers moved when they played. As a drummer myself, I understood what he meant when he described the energy and sound that surrounds and emanates as drummers play. He explained how he became more deeply impacted as he watched some of the famous and influential drummers of the 60's and 70's such as Max Roach, Buddy Rich, Bernard Purdie and later Billy Cobham and Jack DeJohnette.



Music Therapist Deb Gromack dancing to the rhythm

As Cornell's interest in drums deepened, his father purchased his first drum set for him at age fourteen. Soon into his college years as an English major at Tufts, Cornell spent a year in Ghana and became interested in African dance. After college he moved to Berkeley, CA and continued pursuing his interests in both dance and music while joining a Ghanaian band, the *Hedzoleh Sounds*. He was seeking to explore the west coast culture and was interested in the vast differences in how they experience life. Concepts and beliefs in religion, art, music and community were more openly structured "out west." It was here in California that Cornell got turned onto Latin music, Mexican food and making his own clothing. It was also the first time he had seen a St. Patrick's Day parade with black and Latino people marching in it.

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His first experiences as a teacher occurred after being hired by a community arts organization to perform and teach dance. In 1979, he moved south to attend grad school at the UCLA dance department. In 1980, Cornell taught dance again in the National Cultural Center in Kingston, Jamaica for a summer. His earliest memories of teaching drums was with an organization called *Spontaneous Celebrations* in nearby Jamaica Plain, MA about 10 years ago. First it was toddler drumming, then he started his own band and developed his own 1-hour educational music program called "*A Fascinating Rhythm*," which is a combination of drums, dance and from the Afro Latin cultures. He has presented this program over 300 times throughout New England.

Though he never stopped drumming, drum circles became a part of Cornell's life when he met Arthur Hull, a master drum circle facilitator, through the Earth Drum Council who ran weekly drum circles in Harvard Square many years ago. Cornell states, "It has been proven that drumming does have important therapeutic effects including mild exercise, mind/body alignment, the release of immune system-boosting white blood cells and the shift to stress-relieving alpha brain waves - plus, it's fun!" Drum circles can also create entraining rhythms and pulses that connect us all. It has also been documented that music and drumming can create new neural pathways in the brain and reconnect older ones that have been broken. "This makes drumming a wonderful activity for those with memory loss and neurological disorders," Cornell continued. "As a social activity, drumming together can help to build community and common bonds between participants."

We look forward to circling the drums again here at Goddard House in the future. We also hope for a continued partnership with Cornell and his wonderful guidance into this special therapeutic and healing world of the drum circle.



Residents, staff, Cornell, and his students making music



Residents Ed and Joe playing the drums

