

Pearl Emmons
Place, Race, Memory:
The West Medford Afro-American Remembrance Project
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Interviews with: Mrs. Shirley Kountze
Mr. Elmer Kountze
Ms. Carol Rickenbacker

Shirley, she's a proponent of children's rights...

-Elmer Kountze

Shirley would extend herself more than necessary; she was a person who would bend over backwards... telling the children the importance of their education. ...if it wasn't for her I wouldn't be where I am today, a good strong teacher. She was just a trailblazer of education... She has made some big changes in Medford that will be in stone...

-Carol Rickenbacker

Shirley Kountze

Shirley Kountze, a woman who has lived a life worth revering. With her roots deeply planted in West Medford – a town of relationships and support – she was able to become one of the most influential women to leave a mark in this town. Her strong life has rippled from generation to generation and will forever affect the way in which school systems are organized and governed as well as the many people who were students or teachers under her jurisdiction in West Medford. She exerted the ability to crush the strong force of racism, while assuring that every child had equal access to education. She has helped many succeed and live lives that were not so different from that of Mrs. Kountze herself.

During Shirley's childhood, her parents kept her under their wings, protected, and with minimal exposure to racism. The support she received as a child was perhaps the foundation needed to confront such unique challenges as she has faced in her career. This foundation enabled her to confront the positions that society insisted she occupy. West Medford also gave her a basis of support and encouragement that enabled her to become the first African American school Principal in Medford. In this position, she implemented a multicultural vision that resonates back to the diverse neighborhood in which she grew up.

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When... [Shirley] arrived in Medford she had expectations already, and was able to kind of pull me along, and pull other people along at the same time.

-Elmer Kountze

Shirley was born and raised in the Bronx neighborhood of New York City by her father, a lawyer, and her mother, a schoolteacher. She was an only child. It was a middle-class area, mainly populated by first-generation Jewish and Italian immigrants with a block and a half of African Americans. This ethnic mosaic left Shirley feeling exceptionally comfortable with all races. Shirley attended the Bronx High School of Science, which was 90% Jewish. "My mother taught in Harlem," Mrs. Kountze explained, "and she was amazed that this was still the same New York City school system, because the books that I had in my school were very different from the books that she had. She used to borrow... mine to take down and teach in her class." This gap in the quality of the textbooks was the outcome of the different racial mix of these two schools. Throughout her childhood,

Shirley attended a mostly white school with very few African Americans, but because of her family's support, she did not feel inferior. Mrs. Kountze remembers:

One time [in] fifth grade, [the] teacher had the kids who finished their [class] work first make coloring kids for the... Christmas bulletin board. And I made all my children brown. The other girls in the in the class said, "Mrs. Lynch is going to be mad Shirley; they are supposed to be flesh colored,..." She came and said, "oh, these are wonderful," and she put them up every year.

Throughout Shirley's childhood – without her awareness – her parents assured that she was protected from experiencing direct racism. For example, if she was to attend a new ballet class, or a birthday party of a peer, her mother would call ahead to make sure that they knew she was Black. That way, Shirley could avoid being made to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, there were times when her parents could not protect her. In school, for instance, Mrs. Kountze recalled, *"One teacher came in with her mink coat and was telling other teachers that... she had just got a 'nigger brown' mink coat. You overhear things like [that]."* When asked, what effect this had on her. She replied:

You know, "Why [are] they... still calling us this?" I would go home, and my parents would say... "they're ignorant, they don't know you're no different..." That sort of made you want to get better grades, and to [do] better, just to show them. We were taking the test for Bronx High... you had to take a test to get in.

There were about 800 in my senior class and only three were picked. I remember the teacher calling out the names and I was the last name, and she gave me the dirtiest look. It was great 'cos the kids said yeah, yeah, yeah – good for you! And she had this awful smirk on her face. I guess I sort of internalized[it]... If [I] can have a part to play, kids... are going to have opportunities, options, and they are going to respect themselves, and they're going to respect others. And they're not going to have [to] be denied because of [their race].

The efforts made by Shirley's parents to create a safe and encouraging environment for her did not go unrewarded. As Mrs. Kountze states, *“One of the things that they instilled in me was that there was nothing I couldn't do and there was no place I couldn't go; ... which carried me into adulthood. If I felt that something needed to be said,... I was never afraid to speak up.”*

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Shirley was living in Boston... I heard that there was a very attractive young lady living on Mountfort Street. That young lady was not Shirley. I went to see the other lady and there was Shirley lying on the floor watching TV and I stumbled over her, and she wanted to know what I was doing there, and we have been fighting ever since.

-Elmer Kountze

Shirley and Elmer Kountze – otherwise known as Al – met when they both were majoring in history at Boston University. In 1959, when Shirley was going into her senior year, they got married: *“...I met my wonderful husband Al, who swept me off my feet. That was the day you went to college and you wanted to get a good education and work,*

but you also wanted to get a husband.” Shirley became the envy of her sorority sisters. After getting married, they used their motor scooter to get around, and each had an allowance from their parents for living expenses. Shirley became pregnant in her senior year, and their first baby was born on July 7, 1960. They soon found that the money their family gave them was not quite enough, so they moved in with Al’s parents. This was Shirley’s arrival in West Medford.

Her in-laws lived in a large house on the corner of Jerome Street and Harvard Avenue, which were two of the three streets that African Americans were able to find housing on in West Medford. Shirley recalls:

For two days straight I saw cousins and nieces and nephews and aunts, and I said, “Elmer, how big is your family? Do they come over like this all the time?” He said, “No, they are coming over to check you out. Because you’re an outsider. Not only are you not from the Black community in West Medford, you’re not from Massachusetts. You’re this New Yorker.” His Aunt Mat, Madeline Andrews’s mother was a sorority sister of mine, she was sort of like a matriarch in the family, and she gave her stamp of approval.

Shirley said she was amazed with the large African American community Al grew up in, compared to the block and a half of her old Bronx neighborhood.

She began to take on the role of a homemaker and got involved in the community from a mother’s point of view. West Medford’s welcoming and community-oriented qualities made Shirley feel at ease. Everybody knew each other and was supportive of

one another; there was a comfort in walking the streets “know[ing] that nothing was going to happen to you, or if you got into a difficulty, there was going to be somebody to help you,” states Mrs. Kountze. Despite the tight community they had in West Medford, it was still difficult to know that you were often unwelcome “across the tracks.” This was especially so for Shirley, who grew up in a culturally diverse community, where in all parts she usually felt welcome. Because of this, the racially-charged pockets in Medford were all too obvious to her, and the desire to break them down grew inside her. Her remedy was to bring the schoolchildren together despite race and cultural differences.

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I remember the night that she was appointed Principal, that was such a big and exciting night. Nothing like that had ever happened in Medford and I wanted to be right there in case something went wrong. It was suspenseful...

-Elmer Kountze

“When I was growing up, I didn’t want to be a teacher. My mother was a teacher. And of course, I didn’t want to follow in [her] footsteps,” laughed Mrs. Kountze, because that was exactly what she ended up doing. Shirley always had an aptitude with children, and early in her life thought about being a child psychologist. As she became a mother and got involved with family life in West Medford, she fell into being a teacher and then a Principal. “I settled into being [a] homemaker... [And] got involved in the community, from a mom’s point of view” states Mrs. Kountze. “At that time,” Mrs. Kountze recalls, “Women who had families stayed home..., or if you had a job or a career it had to work around your family’s needs.” She decided to become a teacher when she became pregnant with her second child, because as a teacher she could have summers off, and

work the same hours as her children attended school. She began to work on her Masters Degree in Elementary Education from Salem State College, and later earned her Principal's Certificate. For two years, she taught four-year-olds at Elliot Pearson, a Tufts University early childhood lab school.

Meanwhile, in 1964, because of the Massachusetts State Racial Balance law the neighborhood's Hervey School was declared racially imbalanced. Since the Hervey school was in the predominantly African American area of West Medford, the school's student body reflected its neighborhood. Thus, during desegregation most of the African American children of West Medford attended the Hervey School only for kindergarten, and would then have to be bused to other schools in Medford. The choices were the Gleason on Playstead Road, the Wait on Powder House Road, the Dames on George Street, or the Brooks school on High Street. Initially this did not pose a problem, as parents were happy to send their children to these schools. According to Mrs. Kountze:

At that time the community was not opposed to having their kids redistricted out of the Hervey, 'cause these were supposedly... "the best schools in the city." They were in all white affluent communities [and] had good teachers. The Hervey School was thought to have a turnover of teachers. So they didn't complain about redistricting, and it was a short ride to those other schools.

The busing of the children lasted for four years until there was a snowstorm in 1969 that left streets inaccessible. The children would wait at the bus stop for thirty minutes to an hour in the cold, snow-filled streets. Parents, including Shirley, realized

that they were being burdened with racial balancing the schools. The only white children being bussed to the Hervey School were Special Education students. They balanced the school in number, but not in the actual classrooms, since they were taught separately and did not attend the same classes as other Hervey students. It was the late sixties, a time of social change and activism, so it did not take long for these discrepancies to be noticed. These parents, in their twenties were prepared to fight for equal rights.

This fight was won through the Improvement Association of West Medford, which met in the West Medford Community Center. The Improvement Association was a tool used by the community to bring up issues and find solutions for problems that arose in the neighborhood. Shirley and the other parents went there for help in getting the children back to the local Hervey School, and for relieving African Americans of the burden of racially balancing the schools by themselves. They organized according to Martin Luther King's example of peaceful activism. Shirley made a speech at the School Committee, requesting fair treatment: *"We met, [and] brought our issues to them. The white population [wasn't] having to travel around,"* remembers Mrs. Kountze. Time went by and nothing happened, so the group of parents called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP sent a lawyer and filed a lawsuit against the School System in Federal Court, naming five parents as the plaintiffs. *"Courts at that time favored giving School Systems time to solve issues...they wanted to give them every opportunity to rectify, and directed them to find a equitable solution, as soon as possible"* explains Mrs. Kountze.

Near the end of the school year, frustrated by the lack of motivation and action on the part of the courts and school systems, and tired of meeting with no solution in sight,

the parents decided to have their last meeting. Determined to have their children back at the local school and not be solely responsible for desegregation, they chose to take action. After fruitlessly addressing the School Committee once again, asking them to act on the court order to make changes, with no results, in May of 1969 they took action:

We decided that none of the kids, the Black kids were... going to get on the buses. They [were] all going to go over to the Hervey School. All of us had jobs but we all called in sick for the next day. Ada Sherwood was a Black teacher at the Hervey. We did notify her, she was the only one who knew what was going to happen the next day. We had three teachers, anyway who were going to go over to the Hervey School with... the elementary children so that... there would be some teaching. While that was going on a group of us were going to go to the Superintendent's office and take it over, and... have a sit in... I remember... my job was to type the press releases. I dropped my kids off at the [Community] Center. They marched them up to the Hervey School. The Principal was like, "what is going on here," because of all these kids. Another friend of ours who worked for the telephone company took over the switchboard and when people would call in, they would say "business is not going on as usual in the school system today; there is a sit in." ...The lawyer from the NAACP who came to see us... said, "you know, all of you can go to jail... 'cause your trespassing." And we said, "Well, we're willing... If that's what happens that has to happen." My husband was out of town on business... I told my mother in law..., "you might have to have the kids. I might be in jail." And so, it was a community venture.

Well what happened, they called an emergency meeting of the School Committee. Of course, we had all the news, the press [was] there... the television media, and the written media, and so forth. What came out of that was... [The] School Committee was going to ask the State Department of Ed to bring in their consultant to work with the Superintendent to devise another plan that was more equitable.

Many of the parents who mobilized this transformation of the school system helped the Committee to design a new program that would be implemented in September of 1970. They started a Magnet school, a school with the goal to attract white students, which would racially balance the Hervey. It did this by offering perks such as all-day school, hot lunch, door-to-door transportation, and a multi-media center that created ways of learning other than, textbooks, pencil, and paper. The idea was that the school would attract rather than force white students to attend. The school had about 150 students, and on the first year of the Magnet program, 20 or 30 of them were white. Although this was a small number, it was a huge accomplishment to have them willing to come during that time of racial segregation.

At that point, the Hervey School had only one African American teacher, Mrs. Ada Sherwood. Shirley and the group of parents said to the superintendent, *“We want to have Black teachers.”* The response of the superintendent was *“I can’t find them. If I had them I would hire them but I don’t have them.”* Shirley, certified to teach kindergarten through eighth grade immediately offered her services, as did another mother, who was certified and had substituted in the school system. *“You’ve got two*

right here,” laughed Mrs. Kountze. “So he gulped and said ‘yeah ok’, and we were hired.”

“I can remember my first year teaching [at the Hervey] was horrendous,” said Mrs. Kountze. “Number one, I think I had thirteen boys and four girls. Oh my, and some of them were eight year olds going on nineteen.” Shirley had come from Elliot Pearson, a school with a more progressive teaching style than that in the Medford school system. The Hervey students were used to sitting in rows and using pencil and paper only. Shirley came in with different ideas, offering work groups and learning centers. “So my classroom for the first few months was very chaotic,” explained Mrs. Kountze, “And the Principal used to come in and shake his head. I said I am determined... I didn’t want to give up my philosophy.” When asked if she had to give it up, she replied, “not entirely, no, but I got to a happy medium.”

Mrs. Kountze talked about a time when she assigned her children to make special-interest books based on magazines. They could make anything that interested them: “One of my students made up a book of nothing but girls in bikinis. And he said, ‘Well you told me to work on my special interest. That’s my special interest, Mrs. Kountze.’ ...After that answer, I knew I had a long year ahead.” Another story she told from her first years at the Hervey was about a boy who was not very interested in class; she got him involved by relating everything to racecars, which he loved. This was not the only time that Shirley was able to look past someone’s shortcomings and work out what they needed to have available in order to excel. Many would say this is what made her such a wonderful teacher and Principal.

Shirley taught at the Hervey from 1970 to 1974. Then the School District received federal funds to implement a supplementary program in language arts, because they were one of the first to be balanced racially. *“I said...if you’re getting this money because of your racial balance efforts... why can’t you have somebody from the Black community or someone that is Black working on this also. Since I was teaching, the superintendent said, ‘Well do you want to work on it?’ So I said, ‘Yes’.”* She worked on the language arts program with the Principal of the Swan School, who recommended her to supervise it. Eventually they stopped receiving the money because larger districts started to qualify for it. Because Shirley was the supervisor of the program, this gave the superintendent the chance to see her in an administrative role, which eventually led to her becoming the Principal of the Hervey and Hillside Schools in 1975

In 1981, with the close of Hillside School, she became Principal of the Hervey and Brooks elementary schools. Then in 1984, the Hervey School was closed and a junior high school—the Hobbs—was added, creating the Brooks-Hobbs Magnet School. During this time Shirley was Magnet Principal, expanding the Magnet program from the Second Grade at the Hervey to the Eighth Grade at the Brooks-Hobbs.

Mrs. Kountze commented, *“So now, you could say [to] the community... We had [Black] teachers in the Magnet school, in the Hervey... and you also have a Black Principal.”* In her new role as Principal, she had many goals, but most of all she wanted to create a multicultural environment in which every student had access to all programs. She gave children the opportunity to go on field trips and do special projects. As she states, *“I was going to make sure that everybody was exposed to everything the school*

had to offer. And everybody was going to know about everybody's culture. And celebrate that."

Shirley had an excellent way of modeling what she expected from the students and the teachers. Her expectations were always high but never unreachable, and she offered resources for them to follow through. She explained:

I modeled the behavior I wanted them to do with the kids; I modeled it with my behavior toward them. ...They were professionals; they were treated as professionals until they showed me something different. If we had an issue, the teachers and I talked one-on-one behind closed doors. If a teacher had an issue with a child, I expected them to talk to the child privately because I didn't want them to embarrass a student in front of the [whole] class.

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I don't think Shirley realized, her being a Principal, how much of an impact [she had] in the community... She immediately became a celebrity, a point person. She was called on for a lot of things that didn't necessarily have to do with school. They just knew she was a special person. The only time it wasn't good was when every parent stopped to ask at the Stop and Shop about their little one. You go for a bag of rice and you're there for two hours!

-Elmer Kountze

It is useful to look a little further at the impact Shirley had on the community of West Medford. She has touched many lives with her ideals in education, equality, and tolerance. Shirley was not only the first African American Principal in Medford, but also a trailblazer in many ways, which the community recognized. People of her generation,

with children attending her schools, could see how instrumental she was in making school a better place for all children. They could see how completely different the school was compared to when they had attended it. Elmer Kountze shared the following memory:

I never had any interactions except negative ones with Principals. I can tell you when I went to the Hobbs School in the seventh grade, [I was] about the same height I am now [around 6 feet tall]. [It was the] third day [and I was] playing at recess, the guidance counselor came up to me, and he wanted to show that... at 6 feet, I was not going to have too much influence in the school system. He knocked me down. I hit my head on the cement. Still have a mark. I had a concussion. There weren't any repercussions from that. Think in terms of Shirley coming to the school system and what a difference that makes. The [children of color] finally had a voice. I think she saw herself as the voice of the Black community when she took that job.

As a Principal, she had the opportunity to leave her mark on her colleagues as well. One of these was Carol Rickenbacker who was a teacher at Shirley's schools for many years and became a Vice Principal for some of those years. When I asked if Shirley's presence had influenced her, Ms. Rickenbacker responded:

Most definitely, because if it wasn't for Shirley I wouldn't be where I am today. Just watching her just made me want to become a Principal. It made me a

stronger person, to see all the things that you can be involved in and make a difference in someone's life, and Shirley has done that to me – to make me a better teacher for these students.

At the same time as Shirley became Principal, Carol had a student who was not doing well. When she questioned Shirley about what to do, Shirley told her to , “...try to take time and be very patient with this child. Try to just give him a lot of TLC and maybe he’ll start to turn around because he’s gotten a lot of negative feedback at home. To this day, I can still hear those same words...,” recalls Ms. Rickenbacker. She began to let the child stay longer after school so that he could do his homework, because he did not have the opportunity to do it at home. She told me that at Christmas time he really wanted a belt, but did not get one, so she bought him three. She consistently remembered Shirley telling her to give the child a little extra care; now he is a top private eye in Puerto Rico. Whenever he comes home, he makes a visit to Carol. “*He’s one of my success stories,*” states Ms. Rickenbacker.

He is not the only such success, but for all of them Carol Rickenbacker credits the caring and multicultural work that Shirley inspired at the school. Demonstrating Shirley’s impact on the community, Ms. Rickenbacker said:

We wanted these kids to reach for the stars. Look at Terri Lyne Carrington [a famous drummer from the West Medford community]. So many of my children have gone to Harvard. That makes me jump up in joy. Shirley and I – we wanted

them to do that. We wanted these students to take every opportunity to excel to their highest potential. We made them feel special, all of them.

In a neighborhood that itself became a model community, West Medford was the home to a great Principal, as Mr. Kountze states, “*a first in many ways*” who laid down the law of respect, understanding, and compassion for all people. She left her imprint on many of her students who no longer live in West Medford. On her colleagues, the Medford school system and on the children, present and future, who attend school in Medford. She initiated a change in the way children are treated that will not be forgotten. “*You’re young, you’re proud, and you’re skilled,*” insists Mrs. Kountze.