

Walter Isaacs

1909-1994



"The only thing you take with you when you're gone is what you leave behind."

-John Allston

West Medford African American Remembrance Project

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Interviews with:

Kenneth John Cleary II

Mrs. Alice Isaacs

Ms. Cynthia Isaacs

Mr. Horace Works

Mr. Wallace Kountze

Walter Isaacs was a man with a unique ability to teach, mentor, and motivate others. He did so through his role as a coach of various sports in the West Medford community, where he touched many people's lives by guiding them through hard times and encouraging them to achieve more.

Walter Isaacs grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in December 27th, 1909 in a large family of nine children. His parents came from the Caribbean, arriving in Cambridge around the turn of the 20th century. His widow, Mrs. Alice Isaacs, reflects upon that time:

As I look back now, really, life was wonderful. My husband was one of nine children, and his mother would go off and leave him with a neighbor. She'd say, "Now I'm going over to Central Square; would you mind looking over the children? And tell me if they do something that they shouldn't?" And the neighbor would say, "Now, Mrs. Isaacs, you know they're not going to do anything." But she didn't just go off and leave them—and when she got back she'd ask, "Now, did any of them misbehave?" and the neighbor would say, "Well, no, Mrs. Isaacs". And that's how they looked over each other, and she would do the same for the neighbor's children.

The young Walter's role as a leader and motivator began during his days as a student at Cambridge High and Latin School. There in the late 1920's and early '30's he built a strong foundation in sports: he was captain of the basketball team and played on the varsity baseball team. In those days Cambridge had a diverse student body: Walter

used to call his basketball team the “League of Nations.” During Walter’s childhood and youth in the Great Depression years, it was often difficult for families to achieve economic security. It was no different for Walter’s family: he was unable to complete high school because he had to help support his parents and siblings.

In 1933, however, he started his own family by marrying Alice Willis. Alice and Walter had known each other their whole lives, but had never considered each other as more than friends until high school. Mrs. Isaacs laughingly describes herself as having been a “homey-looking girl.” Then one day Walter noticed her. Mrs. Isaacs remembers that they started going to parties and spending time together:

Well, I hadn’t seen much of him. I used to see him after school. I lived near Cambridge High and Latin, and he used to come by my house after school. I never gave him any thought and he never gave me any thought. And then he asked if he could come and see me, and I said, “Yes.” My mother was very strict, so he came to the house. I was about 20 years old now, and I’m so amused today about how things are today. I still obeyed my mother at 20. And he came to the house and he took me out to a party, and he said, “I’m going to marry you”—and that took me by surprise! He was a quiet man. And so we got married, and we were married for 61 years at the time he passed away, which was ten years ago.

Mrs. Isaacs is now almost ninety four, and she speaks with power and clarity. She has a strong, captivating presence: when she talks, you listen. Her husband, she says, had the same presence: “*If he were a young man now and he were alive, he could talk to*

George Bush and tell him what to do. He had that knack.” She admired Walter’s ability to talk with power, yet to be soft and reassuring at the same time: *“He never raised his voice to the children, and he had a dry sense of humor,”* she says. Mr. Isaacs’s daughter Cynthia echoes this by adding that she never heard her father raise his voice more than once in her entire life.

When they were married, Walter and Alice Isaacs moved to West Medford. The community was mostly African American, and was restricted to three streets—Lincoln Street, Jerome Street, and one side of Arlington Street—due to racial discrimination amongst realtors renting property at that time. Yet despite this segregation and despite economic constraints, people like Walter and Alice Isaacs helped to make this a strong, nurturing community.

Walter Isaacs first worked for a woman in Boston who made hats, and would sometimes bring hats home for Alice. Shortly after that, he worked at the Watertown Hospital. Then he settled down and worked in a corrugated box factory, where he remained for over 30 years and eventually became a leader in the Union.

At home in West Medford, Walter Isaacs was one of those who helped build and maintain a living, flourishing neighborhood through caring for others. Alice Isaacs remembers one of many examples in her husband’s early legacy:

He liked to help people. The lady around the corner came here. Her husband was in the service and the baby came. And she had ordered this baby carriage, and it was crated and she didn’t know what to do with the crate. So someone told her, “Now, there’s Mr. Isaacs down the street,” and my husband was home because

he worked afternoons. And so she went and got my husband, and my husband came and put that baby carriage together. And she would talk about that for years—and now that baby is a practicing dentist!

Another example of Mr. Isaacs' early contribution is the part he played (with several other community leaders) in constructing the West Medford Community Center in the 1940's. His daughter, Cynthia Isaacs, recalls:

[H]e and a group of men built the first Community Center. It was a Quonset Hut, and they brought it over piece by piece. He and some other men built the first one. They paid maybe a dollar for it or something... They got it over in Charlestown... [M]y father had a friend, Mr. Rose. They used his truck and they brought it over section by section, and these same guys dug the cellar afterwards.

Quonset Huts were used in World War II, and were designed to be quick and easy to erect by relatively untrained people. This kind of hut, which was designed to be on the battlefield in war, was now used as the community "barracks" for guiding youth through the "battlefield" of life. The West Medford Community Center, built next to Dugger Park and the Mystic River, became a place where several generations of children would go to get together, to take part in neighborhood activities, and to watch movies. Through it, people got involved and built strong ties with others in the West Medford community.

Mr. Isaacs worked only one job at a time, and worked long hours for a relatively low income. But he was skilled at managing finances: his family never felt any financial

burden. Later, he put those skills to use on the Finance Committees for both the Shiloh Baptist Church and the West Medford Community Center. Despite his single income, Walter Isaacs was a generous man: “I never heard him say ‘no’ to anyone,” remembers his daughter Cynthia. According to Alice Isaacs,

I found out later how he would loan people money, but that didn't bother me. He took care of me, and I could sense that he was letting people have money. Because we weren't wealthy, but we were comfortable. But he never—the children and I never suffered, and he was wonderful to my mother. She lived with us, and he was wonderful to his own mother. And I know that he—after we were married—he helped her and that was all right because that was his mother, and we never suffered!

Mr. Horace Works, who used to be one of the boys Walter coached, reveals his former mentor's generosity in helping him buy his first house in West Medford in 1963:

Well what happened was, he knew that this house was going to be for sale and it was a friend of his and he said, “Before you sell it, let me talk to one of my friends.” And I knew the people that were living there at the time. So he comes to me, and he says, Horace, they are going to sell their house and it's a good size. You'd like it!” And I says, “I can't afford a house, I have no money!” And he said, “Now don't worry! You want a house!” And I did, but on the other hand, I was living with my mother-in-law and she was taking good care of me! Well, from

there I said, "Now where am I gonna get money from?" And he said, "Don't worry!" It's the gospel. He did so many things for other people; he'd go out of his way. Like the equipment when we played baseball and things like that! Whether he got it out of his own pocket or went somewhere else, he always provided for us. He said to me, "Well, I know Mr. Barkley at the bank." And I knew Mr. Barkley too because of some of the work I did in the community with the credit union, I knew him, but I didn't know him to the extent where I'd go and get a mortgage. But he said, "Don't worry, I spoke to Mr. Barkley, and if you're interested in buying a home I will do my best to take care of it." So Mr. Isaacs gave me the down payment. He said, "Now you want that house" I think at the time when I bought the house it was \$7,500 and I needed \$7,300, and he gave me the money I needed to get the mortgage and that's how I got this house. I paid him back, but he was instrumental. He did things like that!

Through these and other acts of generosity, he empowered young people. At the same time, he also taught them his own skills in managing money. Alice Isaacs remembers one of Walter's lessons:

We had nothing; we just wanted to be happy. But we managed. My husband always worked and he was a good father. He never raised his voice. He wasn't a cursing man. Of course there were six boys in the family. And I remember when we came along we weren't given allowances; only wealthy children were given allowances. And he gave my children five dollars apiece. And one day my son

went to him on Tuesday—my husband got paid and Thursday—and he said to my husband, “Dad, can I have my allowance early?” And my husband responded, “Well, what happened to the money I gave you last week?” And he said, “Well, I spent it.” And my husband said, “That’s too bad, you’ll have to wait until Thursday.” And my son said, “Well dad, I don’t have any money.” And my husband said in his low voice, “Well I don’t either.” I didn’t say anything. And he said, “Well, I’ll tell you what, when Container Corporation gives me my allowance, I’ll give you yours.” And that was it. That was my son’s first and last time asking for allowance in advance.

But above all, sports were the tool that Walter Isaacs used to empower and motivate the youth of West Medford. Starting in the early 1940’s, he put his soft-spoken yet powerful influence to use as a coach teaching children and youth how to play baseball, tennis, and bowling. Through those sports, he coached them through life. The bowling team was one of the most storied of his teams: bowling was the sport that changed lives. Horace Works credits many of his life accomplishments to the bowling team and the ways in which it molded how he approached and achieved goals in the rest of his life:

[T]his was a church and these were adults, a lot of them five, ten years older than I was. But I still bowled with them. But I couldn’t compete with them because they were so much better. But ...he [Walter Isaacs] encouraged me to come and stick with it. Number one, because I had a knack for figures, so I could keep score and

everything. And also I ended up being the captain of the team! I didn't bowl, but it was just that he motivated me to keep going. And the respect I got from the older people. But all of these people ... were always encouraging me that I could go just a step further.

It was this emphasis on persistence and working together that made Mr. Isaacs so effective in guiding youths. Horace Works also remembers a time when the baseball team coached by Mr. Isaacs lost 25 games in a season: *"It was a group of young men and we started a team... We weren't any good, we were bad; we lost 25 straight games... He (Mr. Isaacs) stuck with us and we stuck with him, and after a period of time we started to win."*

The inspiration that Walter Isaacs instilled in youths was something they carried with them for years to come. Wallace Kountze was another youth who now attributes many of his life's successes to Walter Isaacs:

As a baseball player I had a tendency to strike out when my bat came, and he has been a deciding factor in the game. He was an encourager, and that prompted me to stay in the game—not just baseball or tennis but in the game of life—when my backhand stroke in tennis was something to be desired. Walter Isaacs encouraged me to stay in there and not quit and keep going. And while I didn't really pursue the heights in tennis, because of what he encouraged...I was very successful in the game of squash, and I really succeeded in that position. I succeeded not just in

squash through Mr. Isaacs but in my positions in government—local, state, and federal— and high-profile jobs.

While Walter Isaacs is best known for coaching men’s teams, he also used his universally acclaimed coaching abilities to create and support women’s teams: “*He started the first woman’s bowling league out here,*” remembers his daughter, Cynthia Isaacs. Cynthia attributes her and her children’s enthusiasm for sports to her father, commenting, “*[A]s the boys in the family... grew up, as they got old enough, he put a bat in their hand, or a ball.*”

Horace Works is also proud that his own children and grandchildren continue Walter Isaacs’ sports legacy. For Mr. Works, Walter Isaacs continued to be a role model when he himself became a parent and mentor: “*I had five kids of my own; put four through college. I started a landscaping business. And while I was doing that I was grooming other kids like (Walter Isaacs) used to groom me.*”

For Mrs. Isaacs, some of her most cherished memories of her husband are of his ordinary routines. She remembers the family gathering around the television on Sundays:

[O]ne of the things I used to enjoy so much with him—you know every Sunday, how there’s a football game? Well, he would sit in a chair and [when] he came home from church, he never changed his clothes. That white shirt and necktie stayed on after we’d had dinner. He’d sit here and turn [on] the TV, and I would sit over there and—I used to knit for charity—I’d take up my knitting. Now, that would happen Sunday after Sunday for years when we were home. And I can see

him sitting here now, immaculately dressed, enjoying that game, as clear as clockwork, going to sleep until it was half-time. And then we'd have to have that ice cream and tea—and that's something that is very pleasant to think about.

She also remembers the boys' baseball meetings in their home:

And they would come here for meetings and people would say, "You let all those little grubby boys come into your house?" And I'd say, "Well, what do you mean? That's my husband's home. And he invited them to come here for a meeting, and I'm to tell them that they can't come?" It just didn't dawn on me.

She indicates a particular chair in her living room that was witness to many of those meetings: *"I still have a living room chair that those boys sat in, and Wally Kountze was one of them."* She is proud of that chair, an emblem of Walter's hospitality and of his nurturing of future generations.

When Walter Isaacs passed away in 1994, the seeds that he planted during his life had grown and borne fruit. The West Medford Community Center outgrew its first home in the Quonset Hut, and a new one is about to be built. The youth he motivated and mentored have themselves become mentors. Walter Isaacs lives through the many people he has taught, and through the stories that they remember.

One of the difficulties in dedicating your life to others is maintaining a life of your own. Walter Isaacs was one of those rare people who managed both. I will leave the last words to Alice and Cynthia Isaacs. *"[H]e was a quiet man, and he didn't talk a lot,*

and he liked people,” Mrs. Isaacs emphasizes, “He had some very, very good qualities and he would do anything for anybody in the neighborhood.” Cynthia adds: “And that’s the part I miss. He always had my back. And he kind of smoothed things over. And if someone asked him to do something, he’d do it.”