

**Pamerson Ifill**  
Oral History Memoir

Interviewed in person by Jennifer Rudolph

October 29, 2015  
Brockton, MA

**RUDOLPH:** This is Jennifer Rudolph, Coordinator of Libraries at Massasoit Community College. Today is Thursday, October 29, 2015. I am interviewing for the first time Pamerson Ifill, Chairman of the Massasoit Community College Board of Trustees. The interview is taking place in the president's area of the Brockton campus at One Massasoit Boulevard. This interview is being conducted by the Massasoit Community College Library and is part of the Oral History Project for the fiftieth anniversary of the college. I want to welcome you, Pamerson, and thank you for taking the time to tell us your Massasoit story.

**IFILL:** Thank you.

**RUDOLPH:** Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you grew up and went to school?

**IFILL:** I grew up on the island of Barbados. I was one of ten kids raised by a single mom. Barbados at the time was largely agricultural, so it was right in the area around sugar plantations, cane sugar. When I was about nine years old, my mother passed away, unfortunately too young, at the age of forty. She left ten kids. We were divided into any number of groups living among relatives and family members. I ended up living with an aunt in an area of Barbados called Britton's Hill. I lived with her for four years and for all of the years that I was there, I always longed to go back to where I grew up because I missed that rural lifestyle. She lived in more of an—sort of outside of Bridgetown, Barbados; but it was more urban than rural, and I kind of liked the freedom of being able to run through hills and fields and pastures and play and sort of the unbridled freedom of more of a natural childhood than one in a restricted environment. So I remember when I was about thirteen, I went to watch a cricket game involving Trinidad and Barbados; women playing each other, and women's cricket at the time was sort of a novelty, but it

was something to see. And I remember I stayed later than I thought I would and ended up liking it and watching it, and then when I went home, I remember getting a beating for being out too late, and I decided that was it. I ran away. Ran to my brother's house, and he took me back to the place where my mother had died and left us a chattel house. And I lived there from the time I was thirteen years, off and on alone, went to school. First when I was [alone?], I went to Saint Silas Primary School and Saint Silas senior school. But then after when I was living with my aunt, I went to a school called Bay Primary, so I was in multiple schools within a very short span. A couple of years later, the government built secondary and expanded secondary education in Barbados, which is probably for me at the time, second to none, and I went to a high school called Garrison Secondary, but I was living alone at that time. Had a brother who would give me ten dollars every Friday, and I would use that to buy macaroni, sardines, and things. I'd buy chicken back or chicken feet, but that was my subsistence from week to week. At that time, you could buy a bus pass to get to school for many days ahead; money for school, but no money for lunch. And so they always say you couldn't learn on a hungry belly [*laughs*], and in essence, you know, there's some truth in that and there is if you desire enough, you would.

**RUDOLPH:** Could I ask you—you were thirteen years old, you were on your own, living in a house, and you were given ten dollars a week. That shows quite a bit of ambition to go to school.

**IFILL:** Yeah, because it was the only place where I could still have friends and be—it isn't so much about safe—I mean I have older brothers sometimes or sisters who would come in and stay for months, and they would go off and back. And then I had a brother who moved with his girlfriend home, but for most of that I was on my own, and in terms of ambition, I like learning; I love reading. I was a prolific reader. As a matter of fact, as a young boy, all through my teenage years, I stole books. I stole books from bookstores, from libraries, from—

**RUDOLPH:** Sorry—

**IFILL:** No disrespect. And I had this huge collection of all sorts of books. It didn't matter what it was; I would read it. And I always saw myself, even as a young kid, I saw

myself in America as a cowboy, nothing else. So there was that novelty there. But a lot of it was driven by the desire to want to do more. I mean, life—my childhood early on was, I think, riddled with poverty. I didn't see it as that then; I saw it as—it was just something that I knew for a life. But as I look back upon it, I realize the challenges, and you know, I used to say sometimes I had two good friends, and it was hunger and starvation. But within that, there was always this yearning for more. And it wasn't necessarily a yearning to acquire money, but a yearning for a better life, so I think that is what drove me at an early age.

**RUDOLPH:** I believe that you became involved in boxing while you were a young man. In Barbados. How did that happen?

[0:05:32.2]

**IFILL:** That came about as a result—I remember a funny story about that. I used to get into little scrapes or fights, but I remember one time I got into a fight with a friend of mine who's now my best friend, his name is Mark [Phyllis?], and I got into a fight with him and his brother named Peter. And I remember I didn't like the closeness of the fight. You would have said they probably won, but I felt I did enough damage; I could walk away with my health and respect. But I remember another time I got into a fight with a guy named Steven and he ended up stabbing me in my chest. And, you know, this policemen named Maycott[?] came and saw me and he said, "Pamerson, if you don't stop doing that foolishness, they're going to have to lock you up or you should try going to the local city gym and start boxing." I did that, and within six months, I was representing Barbados. So, you asked earlier about that sort of passion and drive; but there was always. I thought boxing offered me something that no other sport or any other activity could. Even at the time, my high school boxing offered me a way out of the island because within a short time, there were people from other islands and other countries telling me that I had great potential, so that in of itself was how I got into boxing. But going from getting into those scrapes and fighting with people around the neighborhood to end up within a six-month-span picking up the skill that was long, lean, lanky and I could hit hard. And that gave me an opportunity to start boxing for Barbados.

**RUDOLPH:** And you were quite a boxer in Barbados in the 80s, twenty-one wins and four losses.

**IFILL:** And some people would say that may not have been a lot of fights, but in the Caribbean, it was. The islands are scattered, and in order to get fights, you would have to go from island to island; I was always dependent \_\_\_\_?? I had a coach who wasn't well liked by the national government, even though he was a national coach on the Sports Council, so fighters that trained with him always had a difficult time. But I remember in 1983-84 when the United States invaded Grenada; after the coup, local contingent backed by Cuba. I went to Grenada, fought, some U.S. coaches saw me down there, invited the Grenadian team back to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I came over to Fort Bragg, North Carolina; I spent several months there training with the boxing team. I was successful boxing there. In 1985-86, Marvin Johnson was fighting the light heavyweight champion in the world and I had seen Leslie Stewart[?] who was [sparring for it?], and I knew him well and knew his style. So they hired me as a sparring partner, so I was sparring with Marvin Johnson in Indianapolis, Indiana, and had a sister who was living in Kansas City; her name was Johnny May Johnson, very beautiful woman. We started dating. I went back to—I was going to fight in the Indianapolis Golden Gloves; they wouldn't allow me to compete any further into the tournament, so they invited me. I found out there was a tournament from her in Kansas City. I went; didn't say much about where I was from; knocked everybody out within the first, second round, ended up winning the 1986 Golden Gloves. Went to nationals there; was noticed in Cedar Rapids [Iron??] 1986, was noticed by the Petronellis who invited me back to Brockton. I also had a sponsor; heard through the Petronelli's world and ended up coming to Brockton to pursue a professional boxing career. Ended up living at the Brockton Y in one of those small, single units with a bunch of veterans and people with different issues who were living in that building and people that were down and out on their luck but would pay? Sixty dollars a week. And that's where the Petronellis housed boxers from all over the world. Some of the best amateur professional boxers came from around the world to fight for the Petronellis, and they ended up living at the Y. I happened to be one of those. So that's how, in a nutshell, how I got into boxing.

**[09:44.9]**

**RUDOLPH:** Now you came here to box. Did you go professional as a boxer?

**IFILL:** Yeah, I fought at the Petronellis. I ended up actually fighting fifteen wins and one loss, and one of the reasons I retired from boxing was a ruptured disk. I was lifting weights with a trainer and deadlifting too much weight, and it resulted in a disk going out of alignment and rupturing. So, that in essence, there are a lot of pieces in between there, but that in essence was the end of my boxing career, but a lot happened in that timeline. I remember in 1980—late '86, I was here. I came over to fight in late '86; I think I came here in 1986, September. September 28<sup>th</sup> is when I came to Brockton to fight in a tournament that was occurring two weeks later, but while they were doing the—I had to go get a physical, and the physical showed that I had abnormal heart rate, so they didn't let me fight. They thought something was wrong. And so I thought that was the end of my boxing career, and I was panic-stricken, depressed, because then at the thought of going back home as a loser and somebody who failed, wasn't something inviting. And I started going over to Mount Moriah Church, and somebody told me, You know you really should—the Reverend at that church is named Reverend Eugene Neville said, “You know, there's a lady over at Massasoit that you should really go see, and her name is Mary Baker.” And I came over to Massasoit, I saw Mary Baker, who has since passed away, and I talked to Mary, and Mary says, “Well, your problems are a little more complex than I can handle. I work with African American students that are here, but there's this lady named Ida O'Donnell who you should really talk to because she's more familiar with immigration and immigration laws, and she can talk to you about that process.” And I remember coming and sitting and talking to Ida and telling her and somehow she took a liking to me; I don't know, you know. We engaged in conversation. I stayed around and for three weeks I would come to her office every day, nine o'clock. I was on the 8:45 bus that would get to Massasoit around 9, 9:05, and I would sit and wait till Ida come in and I'd come in, and we'd talk and talk, and I would sit there until 4:30, then I would go back to the Y, get something to eat, go to the gym. Even though I wasn't competing, I was still training. And Ida—after three weeks, she got tired of me of just sitting, occupying space in her office. She took me over to see Dr. Burke and she said, “Dr. Burke, I'm afraid if you don't give this guy a scholarship or get him into school, I'll never get rid of him out of my office.” [*laughs*]. Ida introduced me to Roberta Newdell

[phonetic] who knew everything about I20s and student visas and the president says, “I’ll tell you what. If we give you a scholarship” and Roberta says, “Well if he gets a scholarship, then I can get him the I20,” and she got me the I20, which allowed me to go to school. And as long as the school provided funding, I was able to remain in the U.S. legally, so needless to say. I remember one morning I was sitting outside Ida’s office, and this beautiful Asian lady came to her, she was sitting there with her aunt and her mother looking to register for school. And I started talking and telling them about the school, even though I didn’t know Massasoit. Even though I wasn’t a student; I knew so much from talking about Ida about the whole process of registering. I talked to her, we talked, and then I didn’t see her for a few days. Then when school started, I went to Ida’s office, and who comes walking in as a new student, well, that’s my---we got married six months later, and we’ve been married for twenty-seven years. So that’s my wife.

**RUDOLPH:** A love story.

**IFILL:** Yeah. Yeah, it is a love—and I think that’s why I’m so loyal and come back to Massasoit all the time because so much of my life, so much of all of my success really is a result of the foundation and the opportunities that were given here.

**RUDOLPH:** What was your first impression of Massasoit? Now you came here, you sat with Ida, and when you first started to go to class?

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**IFILL:** I have, you know, there was a lot of optimism. There was a lot of, you know, for me it was the light at the end of the tunnel. For some students who came to college, it is something that they have to do, but for me it was everything that—there was so much central here. I had Ida who became more of a mother than anything else. By that time I was—my wife and I who were dating for six months, we got married. I woke up in the morning to come here because remember, before that there was some desperation because I thought I couldn’t box anymore. So Massasoit was for me a place where, which abounded with opportunity, was welcoming; people were friendly. I found a lot of friends fast as a result of being an outgoing, happy-go-lucky kind of person. I didn’t say that people were looking up to me, but I think one of the things—you know people—everyone knew I was boxing or I was involved in boxing and people act courteous toward

you; they were friendly; they were engaged; they wanted to learn. And to sort of bring this full circle, I remember that maybe about my second week, I went back and I saw Mary Baker, and we were talking about employment, and she took me over to the Brockton Y and introduced to me to some folks over there, and I got a job, and I started working, I got insurance. And then I went back and I after a month of working a couple of weeks, I was able to get insurance; I went and saw a doctor, and he said, “There’s nothing wrong with your heart, you just have a large heart, and as a result of that, your EKG looks abnormal.” So I got a stress test and I was back into boxing. And so coming to Massasoit, meeting Mary Baker, meeting Ida, all of the pieces that were missing fell into place, and that for me is what really got my life on track. I had my wife who, you know, sort of provided all the stability and care that I needed. So everything that I needed was right here at Massasoit. This was my world; it still is in many ways it is.

**RUDOLPH:** Well, thank you. It’s a very interesting story. Glad you’re telling me. What part do you feel Massasoit plays in the community?

**IFILL:** Look, I think Massasoit is a place where for people like me who were down on their luck or who just have hope and like a [diamond\_\_\_?] Bob Marley has this great song. He says, “.” And I think in the ultimate sense, you know being the chair of the board and coming full circle. I see this now; I used to hear that song—didn’t have that relevance; now I know exactly what it means. But in terms what it means or what it can do for people, it provides opportunity. It’s a place where people that out on their luck, who are looking for that next step or looking for that place to build a foundation, that is what Massasoit is about. And for me, there’s no greater place.

**RUDOLPH:** Me either. I think it’s a wonderful place.

**IFILL:** It is.

**RUDOLPH:** After receiving your Massasoit associate’s degree, you continued your education. Where and what did you study?

**IFILL:** So, when I graduated from Massasoit, Ida says to me, “Okay, now finish.” [laughs]. And she called some folks over at Stonehill—a guy by the name of Sam Smith who was in charge of international students. And we went over; there’s also another

person whose was instrumental and his name was Jeff Russell. He was also part of Y family that I still remain very close to today. And you know, Ida took me over to see Sam Smith. I was offered a scholarship and some money and funding. Jeff Russell also introduced me to a gentleman by the name of Herbert Wesleyan[phonetic] who was also very instrumental in getting me the funds to be able to go to school because I could still not afford it making—I don't know what I was making at the Y—\$10, \$12, \$13 bucks an hour, so trying to be married and working and doing all of those things. But I went on to Stonehill and got my bachelor's in political science, and then I thought I was done and rested with education, and Ida says, "Nope. We're going over to Brandeis." So she got her car, we drove over to Brandeis, introduced me by a name a gentleman of Jerry Burke, and she says, "Mr. Burke, there's a man here I'd like you to listen to his story and tell me if you wouldn't want him at Brandeis." And he sat down as we were here; he didn't have a microphone, but he started asking me some questions about my life and my story, and I told him, and he says, "I want you here." And graduated from Brandeis nineteen months later, but that is sort of my educational journey in many ways. You know, Ida's still mad that I didn't go on and get my doctorate, but—

**RUDOLPH:** [*laughs*] She may be after you yet. Currently you are the regional state-wide supervisor with the Massachusetts Probation Service; can you talk about that position?

**[0:19:11.5]**

**IFILL:** Well, my role in terms of regional supervisor, I oversee what is called Region 1 in Massachusetts, and Region 1 is most courts along the southern coast of the state: New Bedford District Court, Fall River, Plymouth, Wareham, and everything down on the Cape. And there's a court in Edgartown on the island, there's one on Nantucket as well, Orleans District Court and then Falmouth and Barnstable. So I oversee all of the probation functions and that involves the supervision of offenders who come before the court who are placed on probation, then they are assessed at whatever level of risk that they present to the community. So part of my job is to make sure that those courts are enforcing or implementing, supervising people according to supervision standards which is whatever level of risk you present, they have to supervise you. You may have to report

once a week, twice a month, three times a month, based on the risk. We supervise individuals who are driving under the influence of liquor, which are called a DUI or OUI. We also supervise people who are placed on administrative probation or individuals who are on pre-trial probation. And a lot of our job is one to protect the public or protect public safety and at the same time try to get people to rehabilitate their lives. And part of it is finding appropriate treatment, for finding employment, finding mental health counseling. We are in the midst of an opioid epidemic. A lot of my job is reviewing cases to make sure people that who are struggling with these issues find the right times of treatment and programming and service. So my job is to make sure that chief probation officers as well as probation departments in Region I work with individuals, one, to keep the community safe; and two, to find them the right types of treatment so they can have rehabilitation. So reducing recidivism is a big part of what we do, and a lot of my job—I enjoy my job—I love it; I think I’m good at it, and I think for me the greatest satisfaction is hearing folks say, This really made a difference in my life.

**RUDOLPH:** Social service is a good position to be in. It really is helpful for people. How do you feel that Massasoit helped you to achieve your success in this field?

**IFILL:** A lot of it has to do with providing me with the foundation that I need. I mean I think it allowed me to get comfortable—and even in Barbados I was always a good student, but I didn’t have anybody to say, you know, Focus on this. I didn’t have anybody to say, Do your homework. I think the one saving grace for me was that was that I was such a prolific reader that once you read a lot, you always retain it. Even to this day, my kids are always amazed that I could read a book in what takes them a whole day can take me forty-five minutes to an hour. But a lot of what does, really, it provided me with a foundation to build on. It provided me with a place where I can get comfortable, polish my skills, meet people that are supportive, people that when they say they care, they really meant they care. People that, if you needed a book or you needed books, they find you a way to get it. if you were struggling financially, they would find somebody who could help you, and again, Ida has been for me a savior in more ways than one. When I got married, she was there. My wife and I eloped and were married for thirty days before her parents knew. *[both laugh]* Ida was the peacemaker. Ida drove us down and says, “You have to tell her parents.” And she walked in the house like she owned the house and

she says, “They have a story to tell you and you need to listen.” [*laughs*] And we told them and they [stayed?] shocked, and so this is home. This will always be home. This will always be the place that allowed me to find my foot in America and I went on to Stonehill and Brandeis, but those are places that I had to go. This is a place that I always want to come to.

**RUDOLPH:** That’s great. You are giving back to Massasoit as a member of our Board of Trustees, currently as Chairman of the Board. Can you talk about what the duties of a member of the Board are and what is the Board’s overall responsibility to the college?

**IFILL:** Well, the Board, in essence is the steward of the college. Our role is to ensure that one, the college operates and functions as an effective entity in providing education and services educating the community. So our role, we are looking to make sure that one, that the faculty and staff are performing their duties based on the trust that is given to them through the Commonwealth. It is important that we as a board recognize the mission and the values and the core responsibilities of the college, so a lot of our time is spent making sure that things are run effectively, that the faculty and staff have the tools that they need; that students have an enjoyable or quality learning experience here. Part of it is to realize that it is a much broader mission, that the college is an anchor in the community and part of that mission and that role is to make sure that we provide for the needs of anybody who walks through this door, that it isn’t so much about cost, but more about the quality. It is important that students have a great experience here, and I think the role of the Board is to sort of provide the guidance and steward that make those things possible.

**RUDOLPH:** You’ve come a long way, Mr. Chairman, both physically—from a tropical island to a New England state in the northern part of the United States, and figuratively from your life as a boxer, fighting for your life’s work to your life as an officer for the court, helping others fight for their lives. What would you say to a boxer coming from Barbados today about his opportunities here? And what advice would you give him?

**[0:25:27.1]**

**IFILL:** Look, the one thing that I think is important here in that whole lesson is that people—that if you’re willing to work hard and if you’re willing to forego a lot of the

things that people find pleasure in—the dancing, the partying, the excitement—that there are people there who are willing to help you. That if you wanted to make those sort of small sacrifices for a greater good or the bigger picture, that there are people, I mean there's a lot—it's often said that people aren't helpful, but I've never found that to be true. I'm always constantly reminded that people who didn't know me were willing to help me and that if you show people respect and that you show people that you have a passion about wanting to do something, so that would be my advice. If you want something and if you're polite and you're respectful and you engage in and you demonstrate to people that you are willing to work hard to succeed, that you can be successful. For my advice to a boxer from Barbados is that this is still the land of opportunity. There's still a place where you can come and find your niche, but you're going to have to surround yourself with the right people, and when opportunity comes, you're going to have to take it. You have to want it, but you also have to see success. I think a long time ago, I always saw myself as successful. I never knew in what and where, but you have to picture it and you have to want it really bad.

**RUDOLPH:** Your story is a remarkable one.

**IFILL:** Thank you. I think it is a normal story. [*laughs*]

**RUDOLPH:** [*laughs*] I think, though, that I find other students at Massasoit have similar stories.

**IFILL:** And that is true because when I was here, we had students that were refugees from Laos, from Cambodia. We had folks that were fleeing poverty and different sort of strife in Haiti and Argentina and some parts of Central America, parts of Africa. So I understand that my story—and I say this all the time—it isn't unique as a Massasoit story because at any given day, that's what we have here at this college. People who are coming to a place searching for a dream knowing that whatever they do here at Massasoit, it is much better than where they came from. And so part of that is this willingness to—not necessarily always make a difference for you, but to work as hard as you can and in if you do, you'll be successful, and you'll make a difference for others as well.

**RUDOLPH:** Well, thank you very much. It's been great talking to you.

**IFILL:** It's a pleasure.

**RUDOLPH:** And it's also going to be great that we have this story, and it's going to help people to realize what the history of Massasoit really is.

**IFILL:** Well, I appreciate the opportunity. It's a pleasure talking to you, and I'm sorry it took so long.

**RUDOLPH:** Thank you.