



# Otha Day

Williamstown, MA

Otha Day has advanced degrees in piano performance and piano pedagogy; he has performed as a solo pianist and with orchestras and ensembles in both classical and jazz genres. But his musical focus changed later in life.

In his words: “I transitioned to being a drum circle facilitator when I had the first of my two strokes, about 15 years ago. I took up drums after the first and then more seriously after the second. I had surgery after my second stroke and my kids had to be very quiet in the house because of it, and everyone was sad. My son is a cellist, and on a trip to the Wood Brothers Music store for him, I noticed they had two conga drums for sale; I bought them as a gift for me and my family. The change through physical therapy was quite dramatic because of the drumming — having to do 2 or 3 things at one time helped with recovery.”

Since then he has brought the joy and healing power of drumming to people of all ages in all kinds of settings. He has enough instruments for 2,000 people, though his groups are usually smaller.

Recently Otha began offering a new program that uses drumming to engage in conversations about race with community and school groups. “I’m from Mississippi, and I grew up in Chicago, so as a black man growing up in the Midwest I’ve experienced different forms of racism. Emmett Till was murdered two years after I was born and about an hour away from me. People find it hard to talk about race. In my drum-to-talk program we use drums and drum circles to get to conversations about it.”

Why does he do this work? “I’m all about helping people realize how connected we all are. We play the heartbeat rhythm and my intention is to get them to realize we’re on one earth, we are all responsible for each other, and to give folks strength to share....when I see people smiling and laughing and connecting, it means hearts are opening.”

*Quotes by Mr. Day are from Rural Intelligence’s Rural We column.*

**Photography:** Igor Greenwald

**Words:** Joanne Fribush and Megan Whilden