

## **A Woman Worth Knowing: Part 5**

Interview of Edith Renfrow Smith '37 by Jackie Hartling Stolze

Web extra for *The Grinnell Magazine*, Summer 2007, Volume 39, Number 4

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... so surprised and that's why I've enjoyed working at the Art Institute, because the people come from all over the world and it's interesting to hear about their experiences of when they come to Chicago, and the things that they have seen and what things that they have found important. And so it's really great.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah. Tell me about that, what do you do at the Art Institute?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

I'm in the Children's Museum, and I sit at the information desk. And of course, they want to know, well, what's here? And every two years they change what they offer. Now, with the... two years ago, they brought in all of these artisans from Africa. The man who told us how they made those staffs, they start at the top and as you go down the staff it tells a story, every one. And each person makes his own-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh, cool.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... each chieftain, and it tells his story. And the same thing with these tusks, they take the elephant tusk and it tells a story, each thing. And they had these women who sat and took a lump of clay, made chickens, made elephants, and the children could come and watch that. And it was just so... And then from China, they had the people who did block printing, and then those who did silk screen and those artisans were the ones that... they just... here you are just seated here, and here the children didn't gather around and get up close, find out how they did all these things. And they showed how they made the Kente cloth-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh, really?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... the Africans did.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Uh-huh (affirmative).

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Kente cloth is only made six inches wide.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

I didn't know that.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And do you know what they do?

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Mm-hmm (negative).

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

They weave it together in this... it could be any width, but they... And you can't tell where one really is joined to the other. And that was just wonderful to know that Kente cloth is made like that, because, see, most people get on a loom and they may get as wide as they want, but they didn't. They have just these little six inches and they make these long strips. Literally, you don't see... Things like that you just don't learn anywhere else.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Sounds like it's pretty exciting.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

It is exciting in the Field Museum, I mean, Art Institute. And you meet different people every day, every time I go. I've been there 15 years.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Really?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. I get my... After five years, they give you a lion, at 10 years, they put a stone in the lion, and then, 15 years you get another one.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Can I see your lion? Is he around here somewhere?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh no, no, no. It's just a little medallion, and I'm going to get a new pin, a new stone in May. So they have my pin-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Okay. Oh, I get it. Okay.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... so they can put the stone in it. Yeah.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

But that's pretty cool.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Isn't it?

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Isn't it? Yeah. And I volunteered with Goodwill and I'm still their treasurer in Goodwill auxiliary, and they have, what's called the pants to petticoats fashion show. And they start out with all the old fashioned clothes with the bustle and all of that. And-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

That's so cool.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... they also have a hat show with all the old hats, and they have written a script for the fashion show and for the hat show. And they charge \$650 for the fashion show and the money that they raise goes to help released prisoners learn a trade, and get them ready to go out in the world.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

That's terrific.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And the hat shows cost \$75 and they give you the script, and you put on your own hat show, and raise funds for whatever you want. And I've been with them since 1997.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So you are a dedicated volunteer.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Well, after all, people have given me so much, so it's time to give back, you know?

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

If you can. And since I feel all right, and since I can still drive.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

How long were you at the YMCA? How long were you the secretary there?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh, I was there for, let me see from... til 1940, three years.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Three years. Okay. And then you were a school teacher, right?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

No, not then. I didn't become a... I worked for the University of Chicago, and I worked for the state in their employment compensation office, and I worked for the city and their social work office.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And then, when I was at the University of Chicago, I decided I want to be a teacher, and my major had been psych and minors in economics and history, and so I had to take those education courses after, so I could teach. I taught for 21 years.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

What age kids did you teach?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

I taught sixth grade.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

And how many years? I'm sorry, I [crosstalk 00:07:02]-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh, 21.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

21.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And my last years I was called the head teacher, which is, I took the place of an assistant principal in a branch. And my very last year, I taught in a school where they had hearing impaired, partially sighted, gifted, and regular, and that was my greatest year, because I had so much supportive staff.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Did you enjoy teaching?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh, I loved it. And that last year I had a group of children, they were sixth graders, all of them were on the third grade level, when they finished that year with me, three of my boys went into the gifted program.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh my gosh, you must've been so proud.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

I was, because I had one girl who came to me from the Disney Magnet school, she didn't even know how to print her name on paper. So you see it was a really a mixed bag. And I thought... So that girl, I said to the assistant principal, I told him, "I'm not teaching the child. She came out of a magnet school. The very idea of her not being able to even print at a sixth grade, all she thought she's supposed to do is sit in the corner."

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Really?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

She had long blonde hair. She [inaudible 00:08:47] all the boys.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Just to look beautiful.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. She had long blonde hair. I said, "mm-hmm (negative), I'm sorry." And the first day they came in, one of the girls, the room was quiet and all of a sudden, "Bang!" She had jumped up, and dumped over her desk.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Really?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And you know all the children looked at me, because these children had all been together.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So they knew what to expect from her.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

They knew this, that's what she's gone do. "Oh, Ms. Smith she..." I said, "She's not going to do here." I said, "Christine, I tell you what you do. Pick up your desk, put all your things back into the desk, and I don't ever want to see you do that again."

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

They thought she was stupid. She wasn't. She was a smart girl. But she thought that was funny because people laugh, but see I didn't laugh. And she's went on, and she did well, she could pass. But when you let children do things like this and don't do anything about it that's when they're lost. But I was very... And she was very proud of those children-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

I bet.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... the principal that three of them, went to the gifted program.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So do you think it was the fact that you expected them to do well?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

I expected them to do their work. I didn't expect them not to do, and I taught them, I said, "We do not curse in this room. We do not tell each other shut up. We are courteous to each other." I said, "You always say, thank you. And you always say please." Well, see this was something... And you see it was... And I said, "And anybody who is unhappy, you see that door right there. You are welcome."

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

And they didn't go.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Nobody's going to go anywhere. They knew they couldn't go anywhere. But I think you respect children, you respect them as individuals, you do not do things to them that you don't want done to yourself. I saw one of my boys in court, in traffic court one day, since he's been grown, and he said, he told his friend that, "That's my teacher, Ms. Smith." I got [inaudible 00:11:25].

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

That must've been a fun moment.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

But it was. It was. It's fun when you see children.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And one of the boys I had in the very beginning, he was from Robert Taylor and Robert Taylor had a horrible reputation. But his mother had all these boys and every morning they had clean shirt, starched cuff and starched collar, and so do you know he left school in sixth grade, and signed up for the Vietnam War.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh, my gosh, sixth grade?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. And he went to Vietnam.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

He must have been-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And he got shot. All right, then he had shrapnel in his leg, and they sent him home. But you know he went back.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Did he really?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. And then, when he came out and he finished school, he went to Northeastern Illinois. He and his wife both get their master's degree.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh my gosh.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

So you see, it shows you that children can do, and you just respect the fact that they can do, if you just have faith. And for my 80th birthday, he and his wife invited my husband and I to have dinner on them at Chris' Steak House downtown.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Nice.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Wasn't that wonderful?

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. I said, "Well, now, see, he turned out so well." And his brother was a biggest dope dealer in Robert Taylor.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Well, he had somebody who cared, somebody who believed.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. And I don't know, it's just amazing how to children turn out.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So you taught in Chicago Public Schools?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. I taught... My first school was on the West Side, and when I started at the school, it was 95% white, and that was in September of '54, in June of '55, it was 95% black.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Because that was the-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Because that was the Jewish area, and they all moved.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah. That's a huge change though [crosstalk 00:14:10]-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Wasn't that a change? Wasn't that? In less than a year, that was less than a year.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Wow.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

From September to June.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Good heavens.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And then, after that I taught there for three years. And then I went to Beethoven, which was at Robert Taylor, and that's where I was the master teacher or head teacher. And they changed principals, well, the principal died, and-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So you kind of filled in?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

No, I went to Hope. And then from Hope I went to Bell, and that's where I retired from Bell. I had wonderful experiences as a teacher, but it taught me a lot, being a master teacher taught me a lot in that there are people who are not responsible. See, whatever came from the principal, I had to send out to my teachers, and I would always send a sheet, you signed that you had received this memo.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

If they didn't do it, I'd say, "Well, here's your name, you were supposed to be [inaudible 00:15:34]." But as I say, it shows you how people, [inaudible 00:15:42], I did it.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Well, that must have been frustrating.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

It is and, listen, being administrator over adults is very frustrating-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

I bet.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... so many of them take no responsibility for their actions. And now I wouldn't be an



administrator in the school system now, because it's so different. And the parents are so different. See parents respected teachers-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

I know.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... back in those days, but now they don't. And as a result of their lack of respect, the children have no respect. And see that lack of responsibility of the parent, it just makes your work so hard and it's not rewarding. And you just wonder why... and you know why the children don't learn. Because, if the child is supposed to turn in homework, you have to see that he does it at home, not after he gets to school. Don't tell me that, "Oh, well..." And another thing, I feel that if you tell the child, "Oh, now, go show that to your mother." I said, "but don't show it to her when she's cooking or something, because she's busy. But show it to her, so she'll see how nicely did this." I tell... "Mama, didn't look at it. Mama, didn't want to look at it." And this is discouraging, especially for a child who's having a difficult time.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Right, right. They need that.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

They need that encouragement-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

They do.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... just to do a little bit better.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

It's teamwork, parents and teachers

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh, yeah, teamwork. Yeah. And that's, I think that we don't have with the parents because you work with the teacher. If you work with the teacher, then the child does well. That just make it hard. It is, you feel so sorry the children have such a hard time.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And of course, that idiot box doesn't help, you know that, don't you? There's so much good stuff on, but there's so much that just doesn't help. And they could, because they could teach them all, because there's so much to learn that we didn't know anything... Just look at all the underwater exploration that they're doing, that's teaching us so much about the world that we had no idea. I didn't know there were mountains and rivers and they'll say... under the water-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah. Who knew, right?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... way down... Yeah. It's just something. And all of that is on TV, all of it, and they're telling it all to you.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah, and you can see it.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh yes. And I mean, it's just such a revelation, is to see all of these things, just like-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah. Things we would never get to see.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

No, never. Never, because you can't go everywhere.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Right, right, and the beautiful wildlife.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh yeah.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Science.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

They had some beautiful pictures on TV of infant wildlife. They had the hippopotamus, the baby elephant and you know... I said, they're just so-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

They're just adorable.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

It was. They were so cute. And I said, "This is just something that..." And I just think about my mother, how she would have loved it because it would mean something. Just like she used to look at my geography books when I was teaching. "Oh," she said, "I wish I had had these books like this when I was going to school." She said, "They wouldn't have been able to get me out of school."

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

She must've had a real love of learning.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh, she did. She did. Yeah. Like I said, my mother was really way before that, because she wouldn't cook in aluminum.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh, how smart was that?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. She said anything will change color, some of that must be in the food.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

She was right.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And she was, and they found out that these things are true. And they found out too, like iron, they found that in cooking in iron, the iron leaches into the food and the people are getting their iron, they don't have to take iron.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Right. Yeah. That was actually good for you.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah. And that's good for you. So, you see all these things we just didn't know.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Right. But your mom somehow did.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Oh, yeah, she did. Well, I don't know where she learned it, but she did. Yeah.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So tell me a little about your family, your two daughters.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

I have two daughters.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

What are their names?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Virginia was the oldest and then Alice.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Alice.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Grandchildren?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

No grandchildren or no son-in-laws, neither of them married. My oldest daughter worked for [Sealy 00:21:15] in Austin, but she developed a liver problem, and she was waiting for a liver and she had a stroke. She died at 57.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh, I'm so sorry.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And my youngest daughter went to... Well, they went to elementary school at U of C Lab School-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... University of Chicago Lab School. And Virginia went on to U of C college and Alice went to Aurora, and she finished Aurora and had been teaching in the Chicago system. So that's what they've done.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

I bet you're proud.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

[inaudible 00:22:06], I'm very proud of my children.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

And now we are here. It seems like a nice neighborhood, a nice place.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

It is, it's very lovely neighborhood. And I retired in '76, 1976, and my husband retired in '75. And-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

What did he do?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

He was a milkman.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

And what's his first name? I should know.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Henry.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Henry, okay.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And when would you retired, we traveled.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh yeah. Where did you go?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Well, my sister-in-law lived in British Columbia, so we drove there and then on down the coast around and his sister lived in LA.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So you drove.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

Yeah, we drove.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

That's a good way to see-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

These were all... And in fact, my husband, after he retired, tried to hit every state in the Union going-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Did you make [crosstalk 00:23:23]-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... somewhere. Only place he did not get was Florida.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

That's pretty darn good.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

And we went all the way across Canada to to Nova Scotia.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

So you really did see the country [crosstalk 00:23:43]-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

We did, we really saw the country. And he went up in the Canadian Rockies, because his sister, my brother and sister-in-law lived in British Columbia.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

What was your favorite place of all the places you visited?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

I think Nova Scotia. And-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Tell me-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

... Nova Scotia was such a revelation to me because I didn't realize that so many slaves had escaped to Nova Scotia, and they have done so much for the history of that city. Also, I didn't know that black people had done so much in the development of Texas, and at the museum in San Antonio, they have the great contribution that blacks have made. That's the-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

I didn't know that either, but-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

No, but you go to that museum in San Antonio and it's all there for you to see. It is just great. It is. It's just... And the same thing in Nova Scotia, they just have everything, all the contribution space. So it was great.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Yeah. You know what? I may have exhausted my supply of questions here.

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

That's all right.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Is there anything else that-

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

No, no. [crosstalk 00:25:31]-

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

... you thought I would ask you that I didn't or that I'd like to say?

**Edith Renfrow Smith:**

No, no. I didn't even think you knew me. No, I haven't thought of... and anything I said it just popped out, when I thought of it. So, it's been very nice having you.

**Jackie Hartling Stolze:**

Oh, it's been very nice to meet you.