

VDC Interview Transcript

Bettye Robinson Group: Stephanie Bland, Catherine Estes, Katina Jennings, Karen King-Cavin, China White

11.6.16

Total Time: 1:28:16

Theatre Street Dance Academy

1627 E. Main St.

Columbus, OH 43205

**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck

SB: Stephanie Bland

CE: Catherine Estes

KJ: Katina Jennings

KKC: Karen King-Cavin

CW: China White

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC team)

CF: Please introduce yourselves and tell us something about your relationship to Bettye Robinson.

CW: I'm China White. Bettye's my aunt. We're both from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She was very good friends with my original dance teacher, Marion Cuyjet at the Judimar School of Dance. They were good friends and they grew up in the Essie Marie Dorsey Dance Studio. So I studied there, and also lived with Aunt Bettye and Gretchen and Uncle Ross and Ricky.<sup>1</sup> I studied under Aunt Bettye and I also taught in her school. And she's the one who took me to audition at the Dance Theatre of Harlem, by the way. Yeah, *she* did that — and she knew my itinerary better than me. She would show up at various places, and I would say "Aunt Bettye! You're here!" And she would say "Yeah, I came to see you dance."

SB: My name is Stephanie Bland, and I encountered Aunt Bettye actually from my sister,<sup>2</sup> who was a dancer.

CW: She was good!

SB: I wasn't dancing at first, but after a while I decided that I would go ahead and give it a whirl, and I loved it.

SB: Aunt Bettye was like family, and that's why we call her Aunt Bettye. She was more like family. She really encouraged me to do a lot, and I believe that Columbus Civic [Ballet] was one of them: she was adamant that we further our dance abilities and education. So I had a studio for twenty-three years, and I find myself even saying catch-phrases that Aunt Bettye would say, like "You have amnesia!" and different little things, but I say stuff that she would say *to this day* to my classes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bettye's family — her husband Ross and two children Gretchen Brown Taylor and Ricky Brown, are referenced here.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie's sister, Deborah (Debbie) Bland-Hardy, was another outstanding student of Bettye's training.

CW: Could I say something? Columbus Civic Ballet really *evolved* into BalletMet!

SB: Yes!

CW: ...and we all danced [in it]...

SB: Well, you and I. Yep, she (CW) and I — and my sister.

KJ: I'm Katina Jennings, and I started taking dance class with Mrs. Robinson, aka "Aunt Bettye," probably, as my parents tell me, I was about three and a half. I had started with another dance studio here in the city, but they heard so much about Mrs. Robinson, they said, well, they wanted me to come and take with her. So I started and I was with her throughout, I think, my young adult age — I think after I graduated from East High School, and almost starting to Ohio State; I stopped because with my coursework, it just got too hectic. But I danced with her, I learned so much, and I became her Dance Manager for *Les Danseurs Noir* from 1983 for about fifteen months until I got another job, but that's where I learned so much. I learned about the background of the arts, and that's what my love is — to do production — so I really key that to all I learned from her, just being under her wing. That's why I really love her!

CE: My name is Catherine Estes or Cathy. I started with Aunt Bettye when I was about two and a half, three. And I have pictures — with bunny ears — at three, on Central Ohio<sup>3</sup> stage! My upbringing with Aunt Bettye was very *personal*. Aunt Bettye was a task-master, and she was very critical of those who she found to have *talent* but didn't *know* how strong their talents were. So she became more attached to you. I was very, like I said, attached to *her* because she attached herself to *me* — and pushed me. And I used to cry because she was just mean, but that wasn't her intent! She wasn't trying to be mean; she was just *diligent* about making sure we understood the dynamics, the language, and had a *reverence* for the art and everything that we were being taught. And what was passed down from her, *through* her to *us* was something to be revered. And this is why I've always had a very deep-felt appreciation for all the screaming and the threats and the cane...

CW: Oh! The cane! (laughter)

SB: I didn't *like* the cane!

CE: And doing it over and over and over again, you know, until we just *died*. But she developed me to the point of being able to audition for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre School, and I received a two-year scholarship when I was 21. And at that age — you know, the average age was 15/16 — that I was competing against, and no one knew I was 21. So I credit that to her, preparing me and getting me *mentally* ready for the unknown. Coming from Columbus to New York, you know, is a big difference — in the talent as well as the tutelage — but because she was trained by Madame...

CW: Essie Marie Dorsey...

---

<sup>3</sup> A reference to the Central High School building, now on the National Register of Historic Places, and partially incorporated into the COSI (Center of Science and Industry) Building. The building is located along the west side of the Scioto River.

CE: ...Miss Dorsey, she was *phenomenal*. I don't want to get choked up...

KKC: I'm Karen King-Cavin. I started dancing with Bettye Robinson when I was six. I stayed until I was ten, and decided I wanted to quit — because I wanted to watch cartoons on Saturday. And then I came back and auditioned for *Les Danseurs Noir*, and performed with the company. I think I'd like to pick up on what Cathy said in the sense that I really respected the fact that she wanted us to learn the vocabulary of ballet, and she wanted us to work hard. I just remember those vocabulary notebooks; she'd write the vocabulary down on the chalkboard and we'd have to copy down the vocabulary. So I really appreciated that — and also just the sense of really trying to promote the arts. That was my first introduction to European classical music, which I still listen to today as a result. She also gave me a feeling for history, so I really became interested in dance history, and that's kind of what my — I didn't dance professionally, but I am a researcher. That's what I like to do, and I'd like to credit her for that, too.

CF: She sounds amazing! We will probably spend most of our time talking about the school and Bettye, but I'm interested — Megan (Megan Davis Bushway, a member of the VDC team) had this question: How would you describe her — anybody can answer this — as a mover, herself? Did any of you get to see her as a dancer?

CE: Yes! She could sit in that chair, and she would point that foot or she would get that cane...it wasn't so much the physicality of her body moving as a *dancer*. Now, I saw the images of her in the tutu in the black and white pictures when she was younger as a dancer: that was enough for me to know she *knew*, she *understood*, she wasn't just someone who said "I'm going to start a ballet company or a school." When she could give you a phrase *in French* of floor work that you needed to do, you understood because you were in the front line, or the front row — you understood what she meant. Those who were behind you could *hear* it, but they needed to see it. So for me, I watched the big girls, the older girls — the ones who were older than me, and had more training than I did. She could *verbally* give you that picture in your mind of what you needed to do, but put it on the girls. She wasn't *always* stoic — you know, in the chair, not moving — she could get up and dance. But because I was younger than everyone else, I watched China — China used to teach *my* class.

SB: I did, too.

CE: Stephanie, when she got here...

SB: She (Catherine) came in on her tiptoes, with muscles. She was gorgeous!

CE: I would watch them! So this wasn't something of a *phenomenon* for me. I never thought of it as black or white, because I wasn't exposed to white dancers when I was coming up: this is all I saw, the shades of brown. This was the norm: you see Aunt Bettye speaking in French, spouting anything and everything that we were taught, but you saw *dancers* — and to this day, I don't see the difference between a white dancer or a black dancer as long as they are trained properly on the proper technique. And that's what I got out of Aunt Bettye, because she trained *everyone* with the proper technique.

CW: I didn't see her dance *per se*, but one time she shared a story with me: she was playing a role in one of her dances and she said "I dropped down into that split, because nobody thought I could do it!"

SB: She could do that.

CW: ...So she was flexible. The other thing I know is this: when she was in Essie Marie Dorsey's studio, the light-skinned girls would always be chosen to go out and dance, you know, at various places — and she couldn't go. And Essie explained to her that you know, "Although you're the *better* dancer, we can't take you."

SB: Mm-hmm.

CW: So she could *dance!*

CF: I don't know if anybody else would like to add to a description of her as a mover — but I'd certainly like to pick up on that struggle, and how she prepared you to face racism in the dance world.

KKC: I was going to say, she came about at a time — I know, with Essie Marie Dorsey — when, if you were African American, the expectation was that you were *entertaining*. And so moving to the concert stage was very difficult. A lot of [African American] dancers could not get training, and so if you were light enough, or they didn't *know* you were African American, you might take classes and then you'd go back and share it. Or you'd stand in the wings and watch. Or you'd have private classes — they used to call them "Jim Crow classes" — they were very expensive. Or you would just have somebody who was willing, after studio hours, to teach you. So she came about at a time to pick up information in that time period, which was really phenomenal — to really get the technique, the vocabulary, and understand ballet as an artform.

CW: Now, Essie Marie Dorsey passed for Spanish. That's a fact — because Marion Cuyjet told me. — And Marion Cuyjet looked white.

SB: Yeah, she did.

CW: But she let *everybody* know that she was black. And that was a big deal.

(A chorus of agreement through the panel.)

SB: What did I want to say? Yeah, when I was in Columbus Civic Ballet...

CW: We were the alternate swans.

SB: ...it was a real struggle. There was a lot of controversy back then. There were the people that owned the ballet company — like Schottensteins, I think it was (she looks to China for confirmation), Lazaruses — they *owned* the company. And when we got in, they thought that there were too many African American girls...

CW: Because there were how *many* of us?

SB: They had never seen this before in the company...

CW: Yeah! Yeah...

SB: ...so we really had to *literally* dance...

CW: ...better.

SB: ...*better* — to get a part. So, I can remember, like you said (turning to China White) in *The Nutcracker* — and I don't even *see* this person anymore — when Bud had choreographed *The Nutcracker* — and he made me the Spanish dancer, and I thought “Why am I the Spanish dancer?” And I don't even think there *was* a Spanish dancer in the original *Nutcracker* — but you know, I was something *other* than what I was — in other words, in order to kind of appease the audience, you know. As far as our color structure was, and my sister danced as well in that company...

CW: She was big time!

SB: ...and also danced for Miss Cuyjet in Philly.

CW: Yeah, she sure did!

SB: She used to take us there to dance with Mrs. Cuyjet. She really *pushed* us, like they said — in the terminology, she was right on point: we never went *anywhere* and not known what the instructor wanted from us.

CW: Right.

CF: What I'm hearing you say is that she *prepared* you...

SB: She did.

CF: ... for a racist world — by making you excellent.

SB: Right. Exactly.

CE: Well, on top of that, any discussions that we had weren't really circled around the racially disparaging issues that were going on. There was BalletMet, there were other companies or studios, but *this* was kind of like a *cocoon* for us. Because we *had* our own fan base, we *had* our own following. We had a large number of kids coming up from the school that would *watch* our rehearsals. So, it wasn't so much that we needed to be prepared for the outside world, as much as we needed to be prepared for performance, whether it was in *this* studio — because we had in-studio performances — or out on the Ohio Theatre, or the Shrine<sup>4</sup> — wherever we were going to perform, we had to *represent her name* as an authority of dance — not even “Black Dance,” because there was no such thing as “Black Dance” — these were black dancers, who were trained in neoclassical ballet. Period. So whatever the audience's mindset or frame of mind about these black dancers being inadequate, or not as professional or professionally trained as whomever else they had seen dance locally or professionally outside of Ohio it didn't really matter to us, because that wasn't part of the instruction that we were given. *We* needed to learn and know our part, independent of one another or

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Katina Jennings, Bettye Robinson held at least one gala performance at the Aladdin Shrine Mosque in Columbus.

collectively, and that was the expectation. It wasn't so much "Who are you going to *fight* against when you go out there?" You fought against yourself to make sure you understood what you needed to do.

KKC: I think she did, though, for *me* — because we had discussions. Because the political atmosphere in Columbus is very much controlled by certain families. They definitely dictate who they want to see on stage, because if you look at BalletMet today, there is still that struggle. I know when I was at Ohio State, and I came back and I was showing her some of the things that they were doing at Ohio State, I said "I don't move like this!" I mean, it was definitely a different aesthetic, and you know, her advice to me was, "I *know* that." She said, "You just keep true to yourself, but you just do what they tell you to do, so you can get by and pass." So I really respected that, but she definitely was, you know, *aware*, because I think... even today if you look at — I mean Misty Copeland is very, you know, out there — and there are other people, too — but there is still that consciousness of color, because you haven't seen a very dark brown-skinned prima ballerina up there. I mean, under the lights, Misty Copeland's going to blend in. So there *is* that struggle and I think Bettye was aware of that struggle — because she *lived* that struggle!

KJ: Right. She really prepared us for life. You know, dance — besides performance — is *discipline*. And that's what she really did — I wish we could have had some tapings of her, because I could really see — even though, you know, as we get older we all get a little larger, but you could *see* that she had that pride, just in the way she walked, and she still had those turned-out feet. That was her!

CE: Yes, that erect posture!

KJ: That posture! She just carried that, and that pride that was *in* her, and she instilled that in *us*. And she just shared with us about life, and she was *transparent* about life. And she shared with us even with her own — I won't say the name of the church here, but there was a struggle between even — I'll say it — light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks at the *church* she attended, and she said "That's the way it is, but you just have to be true to yourself." Of course, things are a little different now, but still that existed. And she let us know that, "This is the way it is, but you've got to be you and be the best that you can be." So I just wanted to share that also.

CF: A couple of threads I'd like to go back to: one is for those of you who were in the Columbus Civic Ballet. When it evolved into BalletMet, did they take you? Did you go? Or had you already moved on?

SB: I had moved on.

CW: I was gone.

SB: And when it was Columbus Civic, it was only a dance company; it was nothing else. When it turned into BalletMet, they gave classes, they opened a school, where you could go and train — and then try out for the company and what-have-you. But it was just a ballet company; that was it. That was the difference. We collectively just came from whatever studio we came from.

CF: Speaking to the "cocoon" that Bettye made for you, did any of you study in her basement studio?

(Catherine, Katina, Stephanie and China all raise their hands, laughing.)

KKC: I was on my hiatus then...

CF: You were watching cartoons!

KKC: Yes, I was watching cartoons. But my sister was there. My sister also studied there.

SB: Yeah, Denise.

CE: She was beautiful, too.

KJ: Yes, she was (general indication of agreement among the group on this point).

CE: If you were a Bettie Robinson dancer, you passed through the basement.

SB: Well, if you were around at that time, she started in the basement of her home, and she tore out a wall, remember? And made it a little bit bigger...

CE: Mm-hmm. Wider.

SB: Then we went from there to Whittier Street, and then from Whittier to High Street, and from High Street to here.

(There is much chiming in on this statement.)

CE: I wish she would have stayed at High Street.

SB: And it just kept growing. The numbers kept getting larger. We were busting at the seams at that point.

CW: Yeah.

CF: Her daughter, Gretchen, had told me about Whittier, which she described as kind of a storefront?

SB: It was. And you'd go in the back — the studio was in the back. It had that little picture window you could see out? (Again, murmurs of agreement.)

CE: As a three-year old, [I remember] walking that long walk from the sidewalk to get up into [the studio], it was a very small space. To me, this hallway (gesturing to the hallway behind where they are seated) is probably about the width of the walkway, the area to get into the studio, but once you got into the studio, it was another world.

CW: Yeah.

CE: Until you had to go into the basement to change — (to the others): Was it the basement you had to go into to change?

SB: I think so.

CE: So, it was a really small [space] — as a small person, everything is big, it's magnified — but that studio was everything!

CW: I loved that studio!

CE: That's where, for me, the memories started, and *stayed* with me, every move we made — from the basement to Whittier to High Street and to here, and, you know, being a part of building this *up* — those were the lasting memories you just can't let go of.

CW: And when she first bought this studio, that room upstairs (pointing) was the studio.

SB: That was the studio, because this (gesturing to the large, sunlit studio where we are now sitting) was an add-on.

CW: Because I was with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and I came to teach a master class...

SB: Yep.

CW: ...and it was on Channel 10, and she said "Wow! That camera made that space look big, didn't it?" And I said "Yes!" *That* was the studio; we watched her *build* this.

CF: I wonder...some of you were quite young when you started with her, but you must have had a sense of shared pride in her growth — or were you oblivious to it? It was just getting bigger, and then this!

CE: This was *ours*.

Others: "Mm-hmm."

CE: We had our *own* space; we didn't *have* to go to BalletMet.

SB: We didn't have to rent from people...

CE: No, she brought people in to *our* space.

SB: When she started with *Les Danseurs Noir*, she brought in Jeraldyne Blunden; Jeraldyne Blunden from DCDC — they were friends. I remember Kim Carter because she would stay at my house every time she came. She would choreograph for Cathy and (to Katina) — was it you?

KJ: No, I wasn't here.

SB: Well, I guess it was the other kids, who were in *Les Danseurs Noir*. She knew Jeraldyne quite well, and we were just blessed to have them come and choreograph for the company.

KJ: Yes.



CE: Even before we moved over here — just like she took you two to Philadelphia — I didn't know that...

SB: We went to New York, too. We went to New York in the summer time.

CE: Was it the same time that I had gone?

SB: No, you were too young!

CE: That's why I was saying, if this was something of a pilgrimage prior to me, we all went to New York!

SB: Yeah, our neighbor, who was a doctor — Dr. Manuel<sup>5</sup> — and he bought this motor home. So Aunt Bettye would pile her car up with girls, and we'd put about six of them in the motor home and we'd go to Philly, New Jersey and we'd go to New York to dance in the summer time.

CW: Did you go to Georgetown?

SB: Yeah, Georgetown.

CW: She was also a member of — now, let me get this right — I don't know if it was SAB [School of American Ballet] then or New York City Ballet, but they had a teacher training program and she was ----- . That's how Cathy Estes got the full scholarship, for Aunt Bettye's studio. Wait! That was Jakki Greene. Jakki Greene got the full scholarship for Aunt Bettye's studio for a year because the ballerina...

KKC: ...Suzanne Farrell.

CW: ...Suzanne Farrell — she's the only one Balanchine didn't marry, but he loved her — you know, he married five of them! Anyway, she [Farrell] used to travel around, and she selected Jakki Greene, and that's how she got the scholarship. Aunt Bettye was involved in that program that they had at the New York City Ballet, which I'm involved in now, with Mr. Mitchell coming. Yeah — way back then.

CF: Tell me a little bit about the beginning of *Les Danseurs Noir*. When did that start? How long did that go on? How long was *your* involvement? Anything at all about the company.

CE: I don't remember the year that it started.

SB: I don't remember the year that it started, but when it did start, I had left and went out on my own to teach and choreograph for a theatre group.

KJ: I think it might have been around 1980 — around there. '79/'80 timeframe.

---

<sup>5</sup> A general practitioner, Dr. Manuel M.D. was Bettye's neighbor on Franklin Avenue. His wife, Evelyn, was on the Board of *Les Danseurs Noir*.

CE: It was. I was in middle school, so it would have been the late '70s — '78/'79, because when I left for New York, I was in my second year at Ohio State...so at least from '78 to '85 was when the company was in existence?

KKC: I think so, because I was there and then went to Ohio State, and I think I got there when it ended.

CF: Tell me about the company. How large was it?

CE: We had at least fifteen to twenty people.

SB: Oh really? Wow!

CE: Fifteen to twenty people — and then, junior company started as well. So junior company, I wouldn't say was always *involved* with what we did, but they were here, and watching, or learning parts, just for the simple fact of how to — the word escapes me — understudy. So, understanding the business behind the scene, understanding that when someone was injured — because you just never knew — if anything were to happen, you need to learn. And even those who were in the company who didn't have a section or a solo given to them — or earned — anything could have happened. So someone else always had to be on the side; there are pictures where you would see people standing on the side, or doing things or just watching intently because they're not just looking, you know, at somebody moving; they're watching because they needed to understand what that part needed or entailed. Like I said, this was *our* company. This wasn't something where — for me, I didn't feel like we were competing with anybody else outside of these four corners, or these four walls. This was built up through the school, through the tutelage of Aunt Bettye, this was her baby and she saw the fruition of her work — instilling in us everything that was taught to *her*. And then what she couldn't share or convey to us, she brought others in — so it wasn't always about her choreography.

SB: No.

CE: She wanted us to expand and be exposed: African, Caribbean, Modern, Ballet. We *always* had ballet, we always had *barre*, center — it was a full spectrum of classes; it wasn't, you know, coming in and stretching and then starting with the music, and dancing.

KKC: She brought in choreographers, too, like Leslie Anderson, Noel Hall, Debbie Blunden — they all came in to choreograph. Just to really give those African American choreographers a chance to get exposure.

KJ: Exposure, exposure. Right.

CW: She had a lot of accompaniment, too. Because when I came here, there were two pianos. Isn't that true?

CE: There was one...an upright.

CW: There was a stand-up piano over there (pointing to corner).

CF: Gretchen told us about a trombonist playing for class, perhaps at Whittier.

SB: I don't remember that.

CW: I don't either!

CF: Did Aunt Bettye hand-pick you for the company? Did it require an audition? Obviously it was another commitment, on top of classes.

KJ: Mm-hmm.

KKC: I know I auditioned. The company had started before I auditioned. And there was a panel of people: Diana Turner...

KJ: Diane Turner-Forte,<sup>6</sup> right.

CE: Oh my gosh, I forgot about that.

KKC: I can't remember, but there was a panel of people that we had to audition for.

CE: Diana Turner taught at BalletMet. She was an instructor at BalletMet at the time, because she was my ballet teacher.

CF: She had a small liturgical dance company?

CE: Yes!

KKC: Yes, "Footprints."

CF: How much did *Les Danseurs Noir* tour? What did the company *do*, over and beyond what you were doing at the studio?

KKC: We did a lot of community performances. We had performances at Ohio Dominican, in their theatre. We traveled to Denison. (To Catherine) Were you still there when we went to Denison?

CE: I think so.

KKC: We performed there.

SB: But it was mostly local, wasn't it?

(Murmurs of agreement around the room.)

KKC: The one thing that I would say about her, as I look back now, is that she was a *community* person. And when you look at her old programs, you see the support that she had from different community organizations and people. And she did a lot for the community; it wasn't about getting

---

<sup>6</sup> A dancer with BalletMet, who also directed the liturgical dance group, Footprints.

paid or anything. Even her classes were very reasonable for people to take — and some people even did some work around the studio to pay for their classes: she was very community-oriented.

CW: She choreographed for the Cotillions, too. Because didn't we dance in them?

CE: Yes, I saw the videos of those.

CW: I do that now, you know?

SB: Mm-hmm. My son was in it!

CW: Yes! I had your son in there! Hers, too (pointing at Karen) — and didn't know it.

KJ: And I know she had three galas that I know of, because again I came... in '81, I had just graduated Ohio State, so I came in around '82. So she had, like, three galas, and that was a big thing. And, again, she liked to coordinate, like I said, bring in other choreographers to give them exposure. So it was an exciting thing to do that, and then of course, she had to establish a Board with having a dance company, because she got grants and things. She used prominent people in the community, like George Barnett<sup>7</sup> and I remember Ivery Foreman,<sup>8</sup> and she brought a lot of people together and that's the exciting part that I got to see behind the scenes, what makes a company work.

CW: She was involved with the political figures of that time. She was right in there with them.

KJ: Yes.

SB: Jim Trella used to come here.

CW: Yeah!

KJ: I had left in '83, so I don't know how much longer the company lasted — I don't know.

CE: Up until the time I — when I was in New York, one of my cousins wrote me a letter letting me know that the company had disbanded, and I broke down. I broke down at that point, because it was... you know, the first memory was “We're having a birthday party for Aunt Bettye at her house, and we had a stripper for her.” And so I had to distract her! So when I'm in New York reading this letter, I go back to that Saturday evening, and you know, everybody's telling *me* this was the right time to tell her that I'm going to New York — because I didn't know how to tell her that I had *done* this. Because *again*, she's like a *family* member — so how do you tell someone that you didn't include in the loop, you know, “I'm getting ready to go to New York, and this is what I'm doing!” I thought she would kind of be *mad* at me, so I took her into one of her bedrooms, and I told her — I said, “Aunt Bettye, I have something to *tell* you...” — and she thought I was pregnant. And I was like, “No! I'm not pregnant — I don't know *why* you would think that!”

SB: But she gave excellent advice!

---

<sup>7</sup> Dr. George Barnett, Jr. is a family practice physician affiliated with Grant Hospital/Ohio Health.

<sup>8</sup> Ivery D. Foreman, ESQ, is a partner with the law firm Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease on Gay Street in downtown Columbus.

CE: Nooooo! That would be like that cane coming across my back in a heartbeat! But, anyway, I told her, and it was just enough time to tell her I was going to New York, and by then, that's when the stripper came in. And so, I remember reading this letter thinking, "But I just *told* her I'm going to New York! How can the company not still be in *existence*? It's just a matter of weeks!" So... I never knew why, and...

SB: I think I can tell you why. When Aunt Bettye started the company, she wasn't a young person at that point — she was later along in life, you know? And this was kind of like her ending point to all those many years of teaching. And I think that had she not waited until so long in life to start the company, it probably would have lasted longer.

CE: It was a large job for one person.

SB: It was.

CE: It was. Because you've got too many personalities to deal with, and you know, the outside world that everybody still has to live in and have their own profession. I could see that...

SB: Mm-hmm.

CE: Still, it was a gut wrench!

CF: You know, something that I've heard before — and you've alluded to it today — is that she was not only there for you as a teacher of dance, but she went way beyond teaching dance...

SB: Yep!

CF: Would anyone want to share stories of what she did for you, or anyone you knew? I mean, just taking all of you to New York, Philadelphia and all of that — but any stories to tell there?

SB: I can remember when the studio was at the house, in her basement, and I was over there practically every day, because I lived around the corner. And she'd always leave the side door open — it was never locked.

CW: Yeah! It was never locked!

SB: And you could always come over to Aunt Bettye's — whether she was home or not — and I would go over there and wait for her to get home from work, because she was a Special Ed teacher in Hilliard City Schools. And I would wait for her to come home from work, and we'd sit down, and if there was *anything* that I was having a problem with, we would talk about it.

CW: Mm-hmm.

SB: And it was like a second home!

CW: And you could talk to her about...

SB: You could talk to her about *anything*! Things that you couldn't even tell your parents!

CW: Yeah.

SB: You could tell her — and get *sound* advice.

CW: Mm-hmm.

KKC: I was going to say that she's the reason I got into Ohio State, in the Masters program, because at that time Karen Hubbard was trying to recruit people, and Bettye said "You need to talk to her, because they have money." She said "You should *go!*" And I thought, "Hmmm, okay." And I did, and it was paid for! So that's how I got to go to grad school.

CF: She was really connected...

CW: Oh yeah!

CE: Oh yes — she was connected. You never knew how well she was connected — until you *needed* to know.

CW: Right.

CE: And when you needed something...

CW: She could get it!

CE: ...she could get it. It would get done.

KKC: Mm-hmm.

CE: And so you didn't question. You just knew you had that opportunity.

CW: The zoning for this building was changed. Hammond<sup>9</sup> did that — because I guess you couldn't have a studio here or something? But, oh yes. She was something else! It was done... oh yeah.

CF: Was her husband, as an attorney, helpful in getting these things done?

CE: He wasn't *around*, was he? During *this* time — when this was built? Was Ross around?

SB & CW: He was at home.

SB: At a certain point in his life, though, he was in a wheelchair.

KJ: Yeah.

SB: He didn't really come to all of these different locations, but he was always at the house. I talked to him there all the time.

---

<sup>9</sup> Among other accomplishments, Jerry Hammond (1934 - 2010) served on the Columbus City Council for sixteen years (1974-1990), including six years as the first African American Council President (1984-1990).

KKC: He supported her.

SB: *Very* supportive.

KJ: Yeah, he did. He was very supportive.

KKC: And the monkey was always there, too!

CE: The monkey was there too!

SB: Oh, Nietzsche! That was Nietzsche — we might have to edit that.

KKC: She had a pet monkey.

SB: Well, no — it was Ricky's.

CW: It was supposed to be Ricky's!

SB: — and the tarantula, and the snake. We can edit all that.

CF: Gretchen had acknowledged that she and her brother loved animals and kept them upstairs on the roof of one of the houses — but she didn't say which animals!

SB: Oh, Nietzsche! (laughing) Oops!

CE: That evil monkey!

CW: Well, I actually lived with her, so you know she was a mother figure for me. I remember one time, I was at Ohio State, and I was taking this Anatomy course — that was when they used to kill the cats and skin them — I took the cat out [home] to study it. And she lit up the whole house — Wait: Traveling on the bus with this cat!! — And Aunt Bettye said “Don't you ever bring a cat like that over here again!” And I said, “Aunt Bettye, I promise I'll *never* do it again.” I mean, the whole house smelled of this cat! But you know, she dealt with it.

SB: Mm-hmm.

CW: I was trying to get an A, which I didn't — *that* time. Next time, I did — I studied with somebody who was smart in the class. But, yeah, I brought a dead cat home, right out of the formaldehyde! (There is more talk of the dead cat — not necessary to recount here...)

CF: I must say this was the first I've heard about Aunt Bettye having a *day* job...

All: Yes!!

CE: She had her Masters, right?

SB: She was a retired teacher in Special Education. She had a Masters.

CF: So, you're telling me that all day long, she went to Hilliard and taught and then ran the studio and the company? All this, after hours?

CE: Yes, that was the passion that she had for what she saw in us, what we were achieving — so it was a reciprocal relationship. What she put in us, we gave back to her — so we committed to her, we committed to being here...I mean, she got in my butt because I started running — there were three of us: Darlene Hart and Shawne Stewart — we were all dancers; we all started running track.

KKC: So did Denise.

CE: Well she got in Darlene's and my butts, *big time!* Because structurally, it started changing us. We never said anything to her about running, but she could see the physical changes in our legs, and when she found out that we had started running, she went *off!* She told me that I would have to make a choice, and I couldn't! Because I had found a *niche* — I started running hurdles, and I could show other girls how to properly run hurdles by doing the same movements that we did in class: the preparation, the *gliding* over it. So I started showing other girls, and the next thing you know, I'm doing it! I couldn't stop, but I started running other events as well, and when she found out that I hadn't stopped, she was like "Well, you're going to have to make a choice. You're either going to be in this company, or you're not." And I'm thinking "I'm in high school...how can I make this [choice]?" It was one of those kinds of things where I had to think "For me, where is *my* passion now? What do I really want out of this?" And so even though I couldn't understand at the time why she was making me face that kind of a challenge and decision, she wanted to know where my heart was: was my heart out on the track field, or was my heart here? Not so much my commitment to her, but also the bigger commitment was to this company. And so I started limiting my ... (we are briefly interrupted by a cell phone ringing.) I had to realize that there are certain things that I am passionate about that I didn't realize that I was passionate about. So all the training that she'd instilled in me and the love I had — even through the pain of rehearsals and being yelled at, or whatever — it wasn't all for nothing. So I made that commitment, and I finished out that track season with my commitment to them — because I told her, "I'll finish this out, since I've already committed to it, and then I'll drop it." And I did. I don't know about Darlene or Shawne, but at that point, we were flourishing, we were a full-fledged company. So between Darlene and myself — Shawne kind of dropped out of the scene after a while — we committed.

SB: So, why was that? Was it interfering with rehearsals? I don't understand...I never got that impression from her.

CE: No, it was her thing, when she saw how structurally we were changing. We were bulking up, our thighs were bulking up — you know, our quadriceps were thickening up, and to this day, you know, we danced on our toes, I ran on my toes, and I am quad-heavy.

SB: Cathy, show your legs. Just do that. Those legs ought to be insured! (Laughter around)

CE: Not any more! That's why we wear black! But I made that commitment to her because she made that commitment to me, early on.

SB: See, I was multi-talented and she was behind me 100% of the way. I was not only a dancer, but I was an artist, and I loved to sing. And she pushed me every step of the way.



CF: But those things did not interfere with your physicality.

SB: It didn't interfere with my physicality at all. But then, it also didn't interfere with any of her rehearsals because I was out in the community doing other things then, teaching other places.

CE: It wasn't a rehearsal thing for me; it was more what she saw structurally. And none of us were a uniform size, by any means — so that was never a point of her concern, that everybody had to be the same — you know, tall, thin, strong but not muscular. We brought various talents, abilities — and that's what she worked with. But we were still structurally strong because we were technically strong. And that was the basis of it.

SB: I think, too, probably she was ... of stature; this was not a little frail woman. And she could move what she had! She was extremely flexible, but this was a woman of stature, and I don't see her discriminating against anyone's body-type, or shape.

KKC: No, she didn't.

SB: She didn't.

KJ: Right.

CW: I want to say one thing about Aunt Bettye. She was a type of person that you always wanted to be near.

CE: Mm-hmm.

CW: You wanted to be in her presence and in her company.

SB: Mm-hmm.

CW: Because she was comforting and inspirational and very supportive. Like, she would push you to do something and to go as far as you possibly could, but at the same time there was always that like comforting part about her (she wraps her arms around her body), like just a warm embrace. It was almost like...my mother or (she tears up), my sister.

SB: Mm-hmm.

CW: (To Stephanie): You know?

SB: Mm-hmm.

CF: That leads me to ask each of you — and you can speak of yourselves or the larger community — about her enduring legacy in the life of this community.

KKC: I think for me, and I think for others, there are so many people that studied with her that continue with dance, in some way: either teaching, dancing, writing about dance (someone else on the panel adds “choreographing”), to which KKC responds “right.” I think that legacy is one that just continues because, you know, I think then *her* dancers touched *other* people. And so, it just continues to go.

CW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. She was like the foundation of dance in Columbus. Her hand was *in* that foundation that developed into this entity that we have now. She was *in* it, and it *evolved* out of her: BalletMet — and arts organizations that she was involved with, and things like that. If you look back in history, she was there. You know, promoting things, and trying to get things done. Yeah.

CE: Even those who never walked through the studio or walked through any of her classes, *know* of her legacy. They *know* the history of what it took for her to succeed, they understood — even some of the lasting thoughts that few dancers had when they came through. Because not everyone understood Aunt Bettye. They didn't understand why she walked around with a cane. She could walk without a cane. She was perfectly fine without a cane.

SB: That was a *tool*!

CE: She used that tool as an extension of her arm, her hand — you know, where she needed you to continue that leg and *developpé*, or to *tendu* without a sickled foot — she would come over and *tap* that foot, or she would come under that thigh to raise that leg up, just to let you know “You're being lazy right now. Lift!” So she was very misunderstood by a lot of dancers. I used to say, because people would come up to me at times: “I remember you with Bettye Robinson!” I couldn't remember their faces, but if they said that they were there, to me it was almost as though *every* black child in my generation, and prior, passed through Aunt Bettye — whether they liked it, whether it was through their parents — whatever the case, they passed through her doors. Her legacy has passed on because she touched — she didn't just *touch* — she really got into their *souls*, and left her handprint on them.

SB: Well, I could say — what's today? November 6, 2016 — I *am* Bettye Robinson's legacy. And I've taught thousands of children, and I'm still doing it. I *am* her legacy.

CF: You *all* are! (Many affirmations around the panel.) Do you, in your teaching of children, talk about Aunt Bettye?

CW: When I teach a “flap,” I say “My aunt used to say “Kill a bug: brush it, and tap it down.” I say that every time we do flaps.

SB: Or she said, “It dies into the floor.” (She stamps her foot down beneath her, to make the point.) “It dies into the floor!” That's what I tell my kids! We talk just like her! And they learn!

KKC: I think that one of the things, when I'm teaching — and I'm in the public school system, so I have children who want to be there, and who don't want to be there...

SB: Exactly.

KKC: ...and who have different behaviors. But the one thing that she said to me, she said “Whenever you are hard on somebody in class,” she said, “you need to let that child have something *positive* to leave with — you need to say something positive before they walk out the door.” And I think that, for me, I have to remember that in my teaching, and so I try to do that — but I just thought that was a very important thing, to still make people feel good: even though you are being very critical, they need to feel good about themselves.

CE: I *get* that now! Because as hard as she was on me, she'd always give me that smile, and that smile was like a confirmation: "You did it, you did it." Yeah. And I have still been dancing — up until summer of '14, when I found out that I had stressed my IT bands, which led to a hip flexor and piriformis issue that I'm still working through now. So I haven't been able to do anything physical, but only because she instilled in me this *bucket* — I mean, this *dam* of knowledge. And I still have my ballet book of terminology — I mean, I still have the tools that she influenced me and *insisted* that I *study* ballet. You just don't go into class and think you're going to get it: some people learn by the actions, some people learn by the reading — and I had to do both, because I needed to see phonetically how things were done or said. And I had to go and buy books, which I still have at home.

KJ: I was just thinking about things that you say to your classes, and I work with a community group called SELAH.<sup>10</sup> I established that back in 1989. And sometimes we go to places, even when we dance in churches — and she always used to say "You have to know how to dance on a postage stamp, girl!" And those are the kind of things...

CE: And we did! On a dime.

KJ: But besides that, for me, she instilled in me the love of classical music. And so, again, that's something I still love to this day. And also, just the people she coordinated with, like Leland Johnson<sup>11</sup> — and exposed people to African dance, different dances — she didn't say "Well, I'm a one-woman show, and I'm going to do it all myself." She wanted to be able to share this gift with other people.

CE: That's part of the community.

KJ: That's part of the community. And also with the male dancers — I don't remember them all... what was his name? (to Stephanie) Was it Rodney?

SB: Rodney, mm-hmm. (To CW) You remember Rodney.

CW: Yeah, Rodney!

KJ: Yeah, to teach the African American men that classical dance was something that you can do, and to train them. So that was a legendary impact she left, you know, Rick Moore<sup>12</sup> — (sounds of recollection in the group) and some of them...

SB: And Eddie!<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Special Events League "AH"lelua

<sup>11</sup> According to Katina Jennings, Leland Johnson danced with Gwen Kagey (1904-1993), the first white dance instructor who taught Blacks in Columbus. He was a member of her *Sans Souci Dancers*, a group that performed authentic dances of the Caribbean.

<sup>12</sup> According to Katina Jennings, Ricky Moore co-choreographed a tribute dance piece in honor of Bettye Robinson with Ms. Jennings. He studied with several well-known instructors, including Dino Anderson, who collaborated with Debbie Bland.

<sup>13</sup> Edward "Eddie" Scott, Jr.

KJ: ... are still dancing because of her. Mm-hmm.

SB: Music-wise, she was *very*, very deep into jazz music. And I love jazz music to this day. I mean, I love classical — I love all music. But she and Uncle Ross were pretty knowledgeable in jazz music, and jazz artists. (To the group): Do you remember that? (Affirmative murmurs, all around.)

CF: Let's see...I'm getting a sense of her as very demanding...

All: Mm-hmm.

CF: ... very community-minded...

SB: Yes.

CF: What I didn't quite get until today is that she had to be absolutely *tireless* — to work all day, and then build all this through the week-ends and in the evenings...

KJ: Mm-hmm.

SB: Right.

KKC: I don't know *how* she did that. Because I can't *imagine* — and she worked with special needs students...

SB: ...all day!

KKC: And she would share the experiences of what she did at school. But then to have the energy to come in here in the evening — that's phenomenal.

CF: It is. I know you all consider yourselves lucky to have known her, and I don't want to get everybody weeping, but when she died, it must have been quite a loss.

SB: Yeah... Well, she would come to China's performances, and she came to just about all of my performances — from Cleveland. She'd have either Ricky or someone drive her down...

CW: Yes, she did.

SB: She made time to come to just about all of mine that she could.

CW: She came to several of mine, too.

SB: Yep. And then I gave a (to KJ): Remember the tribute of Rochelle? <sup>14</sup>

CW: That was fabulous!

---

<sup>14</sup> Rochelle Pitts, one of Bettye Robinson's dancers.

SB: I gave that for her at Capital University. I think that was — what? (to CW) 2006? I gave a tribute for her. So I invited... a *realm* of Columbus dance. I had all *types* of dance in that program, and she just *loved* it. And we had the slide show...

CE: I remember. She loved it.

CW: That was a good show.

SB: Yes, it was!

CW: I just wish that she could have come back here. That's the only thing...

SB: ... like a reunion?

CW: I mean when she *passed*.

SB: Oh! Come back to Columbus?

CW: Yeah.

CF: It must feel like quite an honor to be in her studio!

CW: Yes, because she is *right* here.

CE: Sitting right over there where that red box...

CF: You can see her and feel her?

CE: Yeah, she had that — it was like a little chair on rolling wheels, and she would roll back and forth...

CW: The office chair!

CE: The office chair! She would roll down, or she would sit in the center. I mean, I can still see her right there (she adopts a pose, staring).

CW: And I look at her everyday. You know, she's very much a part of the studio, actually. And I'm sure in a lot of ways I do teach like her. I think I'm a combination of Marion Cuyjet, Aunt Bettye and Arthur Mitchell, as far as my teaching. I know I am.

SB: Mm-hmm.

CW: I just don't have a stick! But sometimes, I do threaten them: I say, "Okay, my aunt had a stick; I'm going to find a stick if you don't get that leg up!" I do that sometimes, and they go (imitates students, straightening up).

CE: — with a hook! It was a cane — it wasn't a stick. It was a cane, and she came by and hooked you — to raise that leg up, or the arm, or the hand. I mean, she was a technician. So I kind of think

that if she saw something in us that she *knew* we knew better, it was an insult to her for us to, you now, not to follow through with what we knew better to do. And so, to get that hook — or the cane that didn't have the rubber grip on the end, to come and feel the tap — it was a corrective. It was to let you know, you know, that you're not conscientious about your placement. You have to start thinking — so those taps served as reminders: "Put your mind in gear. Do you have amnesia?" "Catherine, you must have amnesia!" "Yes, I do." (Others are laughing and commenting, but it is not possible to single out their remarks here.) In my mind: "Yes I *do*. And I'm just going to *stand* here until I figure it out — or I'm going to *match* somebody." But yeah, she was intimidating. She was bigger than life. She was highly intelligent.

(Affirmations of these statements all around)

She was very passionate, and she made sure that that passion resonated within us.

CW: And when I bought the studio, the realtor expressed that she [Bettye] was very much concerned that this *remain* a studio. So she really *wanted* me to get it — *anyone* who was going to keep the studio — that was very, very important to her.

CF: So you didn't come into it as a hand-off or a bequest; you chose to buy it.

CW: Actually, I was already renting it. I had a lease, you know, so I had been in here for...

SB: ...a long time, yep.

CW:...several years before I finally bought it. But I remember, she made that statement to the realtor because then, in turn, he made it to me. He said, you know, "She definitely wants it to remain a studio." And I said, "Oh, yes! I do too!" Yeah...

CF: What do any of you know about challenges that she faced along the way? It could be *anything* — For example, what did Bettye Robinson do during the Civil Rights movement of the '60s? What did she face in terms of keeping your company going at any given point? Or her school? Does anyone know anything about that?

SB: No, I don't.

CE: When did she start? Because I have recital booklets from the late '60s, but I don't know when she started. When did she start the studio, or the school?

SB: I don't even think she was in Columbus yet, was she? I can't remember the year she moved...

CW: I'll have to ask Dee Dee.<sup>15</sup> Yeah...

KKC: I think she was. Because she was in the city in '65.

---

<sup>15</sup> Deidre Hamlar. According to Katina Jennings, Deidre's parents, Dr. and Mrs. David Hamlar, were very good friends with Bettye Robinson. Mrs. Hamlar served as a member of the Board of *Les Danseurs Noir* at one time.

KJ: '65, yes.

CF: According to Gretchen, she moved from Pennsylvania to Youngstown in '46. Gretchen was 10 or 11 when she moved down here, so that's...the mid to late '50s, from what I can piece together.

SB: So, I don't know that she had a studio at that point, when she first got here.

CE: I mean like a school, when she started classes.

SB: She started classes on Franklin Avenue, in the basement.

CE: In the what — early '60s?

SB: I can't remember...

KKC: I think there are different ways that people can approach how to deal with civil rights, and I think her way was to teach us to be proud African American people.

CW: Mm-hmm.

SB: Exactly.

KKC: And I think that that's one of the biggest ways that you can institute that kind of idea of self-pride, and civil rights...

SB: Mm-hmm.

KKC: So, I think that's how she handled it.

CW: And she wanted us to be the best — although we *had* to be the best, because with the Columbus Civic Ballet, all the black dancers were *her* dancers.

SB: Exactly!

CW: She was the one.

CF: Is there anything else that I haven't asked, or you haven't had a chance to say that any of you would like to say about Bettye Robinson, her legacy, or *anything* that we haven't touched on?

SB: I just think that it will go on forever and ever.

CW: Me, too.

SB: I have students that teach other students and it's just — it just keeps going (she gestures into the distance in front of her).

CW: It does. It keeps going.

KKC: And I'm glad that we're doing *this*...

SB: Yes!

KKC: ...because she's touched so many people and had such great impact, that not to be recognized would really be... a crime, really.

SB: It would, and to that, she had like, hundreds of students.

CE: Every black child in Columbus, it seems to me, during that time period, came through her door.

SB: If you were black — and you danced — you came through this studio. I can remember recitals lasting four hours!

KKC: Yes!

SB: And my mother would go (looking at an imaginary watch on her wrist): “Well, what time will *you* be on?” And I would say, “Well, mom, I’m in the second half.” And she would say “Well, your dad and I will be down there around 9:00...). I mean, and there was no air-conditioning in here, and they would have the windows open, everybody with their fans — and there were like hundreds of people — *hundreds* of people!

CE: Whooo, man!

SB: There were like, (tapping her knee for emphasis), *four-hour long* recitals. If you can imagine!

KKC: Yes, you know, I remember that so well — and when they were changing that into COSI...

SB: Oh, yeah!

KKC: ... I had this *spiritual* feeling about the place, and I thought “Oh gosh! Did they tear down the auditorium?”)

SB: No.

KKC: Yeah, they did. The *building* is still there...

SB: They *just* did! But that older part of the structure is still there.

CE: The front part is still there.

KKC: But she had these *massive* recitals! I mean, they did go on forever.

SB: They did. They were huge!

KKC: And then, at the end, when the dancing was done, she gave us...

SB: A party!

KKC: ...trophies!



CE: Yes! The trophies!

SB: I remember that!

CE: For “Best *this*, or whatever they were — you got your *trophy* because you’ve *earned* — you came through it. You know, and this was your reward — so not just getting the costume, and being all dressed up and being in two sections — you know, your ballet and your tap. But she also had big productions, where she would have scenery.

KKC: She did.

CE: She was...whatever the local company was that provided scenery for plays...

SB: Schells!

CE: Schells! Yeah. Schells would provide — and between them and who was the lady that was down on Main Street that did the [costumes]...The Wright Place.

CW: Jackie Wright!

CE: Jackie Wright! You would always go down to Jackie Wright, and she would personally — Jackie always fit me for my pointe shoes because Jackie understood how a pointe shoe should be, and there was only Capezio’s at the time. But Jackie understood how your foot and this pointe shoe should work together. And she would never allow you to come out of there with a pointe shoe if you were not ready to stand on it. So she would have me — and I watched her with other kids, too — stand on the wood and see if you could go into *relevé*, and depending on how your ankle and knee and hip were in alignment, if she said “No, you’re not ready,” it wasn’t *about* what your instructor told you: Jackie said you weren’t ready, and you’re not walking out with pointe shoes. Or, if you are, you’re going to suffer later. But she [Bettye] would send me down to Mrs. Wright and say “You talk to Jackie,” [she would] tell my mother (whose name is also Jackie), “and get fitted.” And there was a time that Jackie said “She’s not ready.”

KKC: Mm-hmm.

CE: Didn’t matter to me because they *hurt!* I was good! But Aunt Bettye understood if Jackie said no, it was no. And so Aunt Bettye worked on me, getting my legs ready, getting my placement ready, getting everything prepared for the next season so that I would be ready to go on pointe. And after that, it was *on*: I was breaking in everybody *else’s* pointe shoes, because I was prepared. But she had that relationship with Miss Wright, with Schells, with whomever in the community.

KKC: Mm-hmm.

CE: She got things done.

SB: The best thing I liked about the recital was the after-party, and you got to keep your make-up on.

CE: I was too young.

SB: I was wearing lipstick to bed. (To CW): Remember the after-party? “Don’t touch my face, I’m keeping all this make-up on — and I’m going to sleep in it.” Because my mother would say “Wash your face!”

KKC: And it was also a very theatrical experience. Because I remember as a child, we did “Tiptoe through the Tulips,” and we had little wheelbarrows and little plastic flowers on the floor. And then there were some recitals where there was singing as well.

SB: I sang!

KKC: Did you sing?

SB: I sang for one of them.

KKC: Yeah, so it was a very rich and full kind of experience. But I do want to say — you don’t have to include this; you’ll probably want to edit it out — I was so hurt a few years ago when somebody did some kind of a collection of dance in Columbus, and they left out African Americans. And I want to say that we have such a *rich* history of dance in this community that it was a shame that we still fell back on that — who we thought mattered, and who didn’t matter. So I’m *really* glad you’re doing this because she definitely matters.

CE: She impacted.

KKC: Mm-hmm.

CF: Does anybody have a sense — and of course, you talked about her teachers, such as Miss Cuyjet in Philadelphia — where did she get her confidence, her training, her passion? I mean, did she ever talk about her own training? I asked her daughter, Gretchen, this: how must it have *been* for her? It seems she could have gone on as a performer herself, but her life went another direction. Anything about that?

CW: The only thing is what I said earlier that I remember her sharing with me was when Aunt Essie Marie Dorsey would take the dancers out into various places to perform in Philadelphia, and she could never go. That’s what I remember, but she didn’t go into detail...and she said Aunt Essie would say something to the effect that “You’re very good! But you cannot go, because of your color.” And she took the ones that looked white.

KKC: Mm-hmm.

CW: And that stuck with her. So she was very, very supportive of all of us, because, you know, she said “All of us come in *all* different colors.” And she promoted in us that you just work hard and do your very best. And you *will* make it And don’t let *anyone* keep you from making it — you know, someone saying “No, you can’t do it.” No! She said “If that’s what you want, you work for it and you go and you *do* it.”

CF: She must surely have found support of a kind in Jeraldyn Blunden’s career — not too far away, and what she was building at the time in Dayton; in Alvin Ailey starting his company, I believe in

1958; not to mention Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem — so she had a sort of network of people who were working similarly. Did she *talk* about that?

KKC: She did a little bit. I know that Jeraldynne tried to encourage her to start hiring some different choreographers, such as Talley Beatty, to do some work with us. There is a funny story that she used to tell — because I've heard the same thing, that because of her complexion, she was not able to go, or had to get in the back. She was a fully adult woman, and she had her studio, and she was a part of that legacy of going to study in New York, and someone said "Everybody will come tomorrow with their leotards and tights on," and she said "*Everybody?*" and he said "You *will* have your leotards and tights on tomorrow" — so she found some leotards and tights and went to class. It was so funny, the way she told the story because she was a full-statured woman, and she was much older, and he said "No, you will have your leotard and tights on." And she went to class, and danced with her leotard and tights. It was very funny.

CF: Any memories that you would share about those mobile home trips? That had to have been exciting and fun, and there must have been some adventures...

SB: It was! A lot of fun!

CE: That summer that we all went to New York...No — I'm sorry, this was to Philadelphia, because the first trip was to New York to Dance Theatre of Harlem — we were there for a week. The second trip I took as...

SB: Was that with Aunt Bettye?

CE: Oh yeah.

SB: Oh, okay. See, I don't remember that.

CE: Yeah, because there was a full press done right before we left; all of our pictures were done to promote our trip to New York. But the second trip that she pulled together for select dancers was to Philadelphia. This was in a hotel ballroom; some of the rooms were split up for different types of classes. And I just remember collectively there had to have been at least two or three hundred girls, young ladies, there. But in this ballroom was a [Level] Four or Five — I can't remember, but it was a top ballet class, and Aunt Bettye — it was Darlene Hart and myself — and we were in this ballet class, and Aunt Bettye told us (pointing her finger sharply) "*Get your ass up front! Don't you get in the back — get up front!*" And we were the only black girls there. Now, you can see my color has not really changed, so I could kind of blend in. Darlene is more (she looks from side to side, finally settling on KKC) about your complexion. She told us "*Get your ass up front. Don't you get in the back. Get up front.*"

SB: I never had that problem — I was short, and I wanted to be seen, so I was *going* to the front!

CE: But she said "Get up front because you need to be there. That's where you need to be." She was telling us "You don't ever..." and in our minds, "Okay," you know, you're not processing the "whys" about it; you just know she's telling you (she drops her voice to a whisper here) "Get your ass up front." So we got up front, and we're doing these combinations in front of these other girls, and we could see in the mirror, they're *watching* us. I'm *struggling*, I'm *sweating*, I'm doing *exactly* what I'm being told — and because of her telling me to get my --- up front, I ended up being selected as

the top performer. Walking in that room, I would have just gone to the center because at least I would have had someone in front of me that would have been more distracting if I had messed up — thinking, “Nobody’s going to see me. But they’ll see *them* — I can just, you know, pick up everybody else’s good or bad technique, and just keep it moving.” But by her having me be up front, that ended up making me be more accountable to what she had instilled in me, and now showing them “These are *my* girls.” And so for me to receive that award — and she sat back in the chair the evening of the ceremony (pausing to demonstrate a very confident, but slightly bored demeanor), and when they called my name, I’m *shocked*; I’m just *overwhelmed* because I have no idea why they’re calling my name *anyway*! So for them to say that I was receiving this award, she sat back, “Mm-hmm” (she imitates again the slightly aloof, utterly confident pose that Aunt Bettye was striking), and so (that look again, of the pose) “Mm-hmm” — not only for me, but “I’m telling you this is what I know to be true about you.” She’s also (she glides her hand in front of her face and upper body, again referencing Aunt Bettye’s demeanor), she’s also — her pride. But that was how she, to me, showed her level of approval for me, and the pride she had in us was (again, the pose — a slight *épaulement* of the head with an almost indiscernible nod of the head) “Mm-hmm.”

CW: She wrote a paper about me once, when I was with Dance Theatre of Harlem. At one point, Mr. Mitchell did not have a definite cast for the High Priestess in *Rhythmetron*<sup>16</sup>, and there were several of us that he would trade off on, and this particular night — I think we were in Cincinnati, because she was there — and I was sick that night, too, by the way. And I said “I’ve got to get up on the stage because I know if I get up on the stage tonight, it is *mine*.” So when I came back to visit, she read the essay — because she was working on her Masters — and she said at the end, they introduced “Such and such will be dancing the role of High Priestess” of *Rhythmetron*. And when she read it, she looked at me and I looked at her and she looked at me — that was one of the special moments! And the pride that I felt that she had for me *and* herself — it was a special moment that we had. And I’ll always remember that. And then she said “And I got an ‘A.’” Yeah.

CF: So she taught all day, ran the studio, ran the company and got her Masters. How amazing.

CE: She just had that fortitude.

CW: She did!

CE: She had fortitude. And that’s not something that can be learned; it was just innate in her. She had a vision; where that vision was going to go, I have no idea if *she* even knew where it would go. I don’t know how much control she had in place in creating her destiny — or if she just followed the path she knew that she was supposed to be on. So if she bowed to that, this was all for nothing. She did this because it was *supposed* to be, and not for nothing. So that’s why we’re here today speaking about her legacy, because she followed that path and she *stayed* on that path, and she was a servant. So everything that — or I should say, a shepherd — because what was instilled in her, she shepherded over all of us and taught all of us the life of ballet within the studio and outside the studio. So we can all be here talking about our own personal life-lessons that we shared or experienced with her — because I had some “Come-to-Jesus” moments with her, and her sitting me down, because when you’re in high school and junior high and hormones start changing — you know, there were a *lot* of hormonal changes going on around here! So she — I don’t know about anybody else, but we’ve all had — or I’ve, at least, had some discussions with her that clarified life.

---

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Mitchell created this piece in 1968.

CW: And you know what else? She will *always* be remembered because *all* of us always *speak* of her. There are generations and generations that never *knew* her — but they *know* her!

(Group affirmations to this)

And I think they're going, in turn, to do the same thing, because like you said (to SB), she's going to live forever!

SB: Mm-hmm.

CW: Yeah.

CF: Maybe we could close by having each of you mention what you either *are* doing or *have* done since the days of being with Aunt Bettye. Could we do that?

KKC: I went to Ohio State, and got a Masters at Ohio State, and then I danced with Shir Lee Wu.<sup>17</sup> And then I did some adjunct teaching at Ohio State. I've been teaching in the school system for thirty years, teaching dance from Pre-K all the way to Middle School. I'm taking a tap class right now. So, I'm still involved with dance, wrote a thesis about black dancers in coping with the politics of society — so still very much involved, because of her.

CE: So, from 2 ½, 3, up until about 21, I danced with her, and went up to New York after receiving a scholarship at Alvin Ailey through their school, came back home, went back to school. I continue to dance with various artists around the city who would start up these little small companies — just to keep the momentum going, not just for me, but the momentum of dance in Columbus, and keeping that alive. Stopped after I had my two sons, but picked it back up. So up until, I want to say, the last twelve years, fourteen years, I've been dancing — until 2014. I had to stop because of injuries, but hopefully within the next year, I'll be fine — I can get back on my feet.

KJ: I established a group called SELAH — it was really a vision that God gave me. I did a production at my former church for a singles conference, and it so happened that Aunt Bettye came to that performance, and that's, like I said, one she came to and I'll never forget that. I use different people in the community so that's where I got the vision. So that was 1989. I've been working with the group on and off, then productions. Again, that's where I found that's where my love is: putting people together with a special theme and putting on productions. My first was in 1995 — that was the first time we did something in a major theatre. Ever since then, we've been doing things for various community groups like Coming Home, so that's where my love is. I still dance to this day — I mean, I've been getting back into it. I'm taking classes; it's hard to believe it's been over fifty years, but that love that she instilled within me, I try to keep it going.

SB: And (to KJ) Katina also connects to the dance world around here through email — I appreciate everything that you send! She stays connected with the dance community. Excellent.

KJ: Well, thank you.

---

<sup>17</sup> A celebrated local dance educator and director, who formerly danced professionally and was trained at Joffrey and Graham schools, among others, who owns the Columbus City Ballet School.

SB: And, I still teach. After I left Aunt Bettye's, I started to choreograph for a theatre group here, and did maybe, like, four productions. I did a lot of Master Classes, you know — I danced in a premiere for Suzanne Pleshette — do you remember? — in Los Angeles. Let's see. Other than going to New York or where-have-you, when Aunt Bettye had me, and Columbus Civic, I started a dance studio and I had a dance studio for twenty-three years: I started out at the King Arts Complex and I was there for fifteen or sixteen years. Then I moved it down to the Ohio Theatre, and I was down there for seven and a half years, and I started an outreach program of my own where I go to different schools to see if they would like me to come in and teach a class after school. And so I started doing that, and after I closed the studio, I'm *still* doing contracts with the schools. I also did 95% of the middle schools in Columbus Public — (to KKC) remember that? I was at your school — through the Greater Columbus Arts Council. Right now, I'm still contracting with the school system. I've done many, many classes and choreographed for Christmas programs and so on with Columbus Public Schools. Now I'm at A+ Arts Academy, and it just goes on and on. *Lots* of kids.

CW: Because of Aunt Bettye, I danced with Dance Theatre of Harlem. While I was there, I did several movies — *The Wiz* was my last — and some commercials, too; Sugar Free Doctor Pepper was my last, because I used to watch that commercial when I had come back here. I had my Masters from Ohio State in the Dance program. I teach at Fort Hayes Metropolitan Education Center, in the Professional Dance program. Of course, I also have my own studio, Theatre Street Dance Academy, which is housed in Aunt Bettye's studio. I have performed with *my* studio in Opera Columbus — there were two sold-out performances. The one was *Aida* and the other was — oh, I can't think. Anyway, I performed in both of those. And I have performed at Fort Hayes, too, but I do very little performing right now. So, I'm still teaching. Right now I'm involved with Arthur Mitchell because he is traveling, looking for dancers for SAB, which feeds into New York City Ballet. So I'm working with a small group of dancers, trying to get them ready for his next visit. And that's pretty much it — I talk about Aunt Bettye *often* when I'm teaching!

CF: I feel sorry that I didn't get the opportunity to know her, but I feel I got to know her a little bit through you. Thank you all so much for sharing your stories.