

VDC Interview Transcript

Gretchen Taylor, daughter of nominee Bettye Robinson

10.24.16

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**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck

GT: Gretchen Taylor

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC team member)

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team member)

CF: It is a pleasure and an honor to talk with you about your mother. My colleague, Melanye White Dixon, nominated Bettye Robinson to be in the first round of these interviews, and it has been difficult to find the information that we seek about her, so we have much to learn from you.

GT: Okay. Hope I can do a good job.

CF: You mentioned that your mom is not from Ohio.

GT: Mom was born on June 13, 1928 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to William and Elizabeth Jews.

CF: Did she dance there?

GT: Actually, at the age of six, Mom's parents separated and her dad took custody. He worked long hours, so she went to live with his Aunt, Viola Turner. She never had any kids, so she raised Mom as her own. Mom's career in dance started at the age of seven, and she had various teachers. We have a lot of information — of course, during that time back in 1928, I wasn't even thought of! Mom always complained that she was born with two flat feet, so she had to practice more to correct her feet positions. Essie Marie Dorsey, a very fair-skinned black lady, was Mom's first dance teacher. Her studio was over top of a bowling alley in South Philadelphia. Mom took ballet, tap and acrobatic classes for over four years with Ms. Dorsey and even assisted her with class procedures.<sup>1</sup> Mom started teaching her own dance classes in Philadelphia in 1946.

CF: Did she dance with Marion Cuyjet?

GT: (Nodding). She danced with Miss Marion — because my mom was pretty proper: "That's not your *friend*, so you call a person by "Miss," you know. So Miss Cuyjet — mom danced at her studio and once my mother had her own studio, she would take her students back every year to New York, and to her, and to various different teachers to learn what it's like to be in a professional type of dancing and share what *she* had learned from various people as well. So they became very good

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<sup>1</sup> Additional information provided by Ms. Taylor post-interview: "Mom continued her dance career, studying under such great teachers as Linkenfelter, (dancer with *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*), Thomas Cannon, William Sena, George Chaffee, Vladimir Doakkondorsky, and George Balanchine, to name a few. She performed with the Drama Opera Company of Philadelphia, (first black opera company), performing in *Carmen*, *Faust*, and *La Traviata*. Mom started teaching her own dance classes in Philadelphia in 1946.

friends — I know they were friends, because I remember sitting at the table eating lunch with her and her family.<sup>2</sup>

CF: When did your mother leave Philadelphia, then?

GT: I believe we must have left Philly in 1952, after her divorce from our father, Roswell Brown. Ricky, my brother was around four and I was three. We went there to live with Mom's mother and stepfather, Elizabeth and Russell Penman, who were from Cape May, New Jersey. (We're all Elizabeth — we have Elizabeth in all our names.) Gram was a registered nurse and Russell was the Head Chef for the Erie, PA. railroads. We all attended St. Augustine's Church, where Mom taught Sunday School. Mom taught ballet, tap, modern jazz in Gram's basement at 730 Parmalee Avenue. Many of her dance students came from church, word of mouth, family and friends.<sup>3</sup> During this time Mom found love again and married Atty. Ross B. Robinson. We moved into our own house on Norwood Avenue, in Youngstown, where she built a dance studio on the back of our house. I was, I believe, going into first or second grade, because I remember my school was Jefferson Elementary School, and I remember that studio; it was hooked onto the back of the house, and when you entered the studio from our house, you came through my mother's bedroom into the studio. I don't know *how* they built the thing...Then on *top* of the studio — my brother and I liked animals, so we had the chickens and the ducks and everything on the *roof* of the studio, and it was very *different* growing up with all *that* kind of stuff!

CF: I imagine so! How old were you when you left Youngstown?

GT: In 1960, my stepfather was promoted to a job working for the State Department in Columbus. I remember going to Fair Avenue School on Fair Street. We lived in an apartment on the back of Maynard Dickerson's house for a little over a year. My brother had stayed in Youngstown with Grandma Penman to watch after her mother, who had Alzheimer's, for almost two years, so it was just my mother and myself and my dad in that little apartment. Then we moved into our own house at 1709 Franklin Avenue — a nice big house, and Mom started yet another dancing school in the basement. Mom had so many kids that they had to tear down a wall in the basement to make another room. I was twelve when they started the dancing school, there in the basement.

CF: Do you know how big her dance school was in Youngstown — how many students...?

GT: She had over a hundred dance students and even taught adult classes.

CF: Did she ever talk to you about, perhaps, the difficulties...I mean, here she was, dancing at a pretty high level in Philadelphia and then she got married and things changed...

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<sup>2</sup> Additional information provided by Ms. Taylor post-interview: "I remember one summer, [Mrs. Cuyjet] was visiting Mom when we lived in Columbus, and I asked her to critique a creative dance routine I performed for her in our basement. Mrs. Cuyjet's daughter, Judith Cuyjet, was a guest artist at Mom's 5<sup>th</sup> Dance Recital in Youngstown, Ohio in 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Additional information provided by Ms. Taylor post-interview: "Mom was a member of the Board of Trustees, Mahoning County Society for Crippled Children and Adults, Junior Civic League, Choreographer of Green Pastures at the Playhouse, Kenley Players of Warren, Ohio and was the first choreographer of the Cinderella Ball. She taught dance classes at Youngstown College, Warren, Ohio, and Sharon, PA.

GT: Well, you know when you're an early adult, and you decide to get married and you're in love and all of that— well, then I guess you choose to do other things, and sometimes what you wanted to be or do in life kind of takes a back-step when you have children, as well. So, remember, mom is 20 and 21 when she has my brother and I. So now she's got these two little kids, and she has to take care of them, so when she packed up and we moved to Youngstown, that's kind of where most of her dance began, there in Youngstown. But then when we moved to Columbus, this is where she took off — you know, I mean *really*, because she had so many students and they were *very*, very good. And she would then take them, like I said, to New York and various places. She would take them to colleges, and they would perform there, and they would perform for many dignitaries. And her recitals, there were just so many. I even taught the little *kids*... You know, "You have a *class*." "Okay, Mamma, okay." "You have the three to five-year olds." "Okay," and I just loved that. So, the older kids – now I danced, too, but she had dancers that were just "*Ooh!*" You know, they could touch their nose with their legs and stuff, and put their legs behind their neck, you know, by sitting down, and all that — and then she had those kind of dancers that want to *be* dancers. Now you can take classes, but if you want to be a *dancer*-dancer, then you've got to take other kind of classes, and you have to really, really want to do these things and perform a little more — well, actually, not a little — a *lot* more in-depth ...and you got to take risks and you got to practice hours on end — you can't just take one class; you got to take four or five classes a week.

Mom also made mention when she was taking dance lessons with Essie Marie Dorsey, her first teacher back in 1935, that only certain students were always chosen to perform at special events. She nor any of the brown skinned students were ever asked to perform, regardless of their skill level! Mom never bit her tongue if she felt there was an injustice! She asked her teacher "Why?" The reply was, "Bettye, you are one of my best students, but people won't accept you as easily as they do Jane, Amy, Lucy, Maggie and Beth" (white or very fair skinned dancers)! Ms. Dorsey said, "Keep on dancing, never stop, and you will be accepted for your talents; then someday, you'll understand!" This was only one of the many unfortunate trials and tribulations of the life of black dancers and teachers in the 1930's through the year 2012 for my mom. There were always the beliefs that black dancers didn't have the right body build, or had too much explosive strength, were not graceful enough, or their feet had no high arches, so they were steered into other forms of dance like tap or contemporary forms! During that time it was quite expensive to take several classes as required for classical ballet, and this in itself excluded black kids. Mom always said "it didn't matter the color of your skin, 'cause dance is about the movement in your soul that has no color. It's your desire, dedication and determination that makes you the person you want to become, period!"

CF: In the tributes to your mother from some of her former students, they indicate that it was the breadth of types of classes that she got at your mother's school. Do you remember what kind of classes were included?

GT: Mom taught ballet, tap, modern dance, creative dance and praise dance. She bought a piano and put the piano in the studio — this is the studio on Main Street. So somebody's playing the piano while the kids are dancing and performing. You know, like *that*. One time she had somebody playing a trombone-like thing while somebody was dancing. When they did African dances, somebody was playing the bongos and that kind of thing. So she tried to give them, educate them on what dance *is*, what it's all about, what it can do *to* you... to your *soul* — and if this is what you really wanted, to be a dancer. Mom introduced you to who you could be in this world through participating in the life of dance! And, like I say, I swear she had maybe fifteen students that really wanted to be the prima ballerina. And I wanted to be the prima ballerina, too, but I wasn't that good — and plus, the toe

shoes were killing my feet and I couldn't stand them. So, that wasn't for me! But she did have those — and a lot of her dancers went on to have their own dance studios — and create things that mom taught them on how to do things, because it's not just take a class and that's what you learn: you learn life lessons...you learn budgeting, you learn time — how to monitor your time, how to be responsible for your area, your clothing, what to put on, what not to put on — and you know, responsibility. And then, you have to learn how to be in a group, and how to act — when you go out in public somewhere, you have to know how to act, you have to know where to be at when it's your time to be on the stage. So, you know, I'm thinking that mom — when kids say she taught us about life, those are the things that she taught about life, I believe.

CF: Would you say that your mother's own personal strength was in ballet? She taught all these forms but would you say that ballet was her primary area of expertise?

GT: I don't think that ballet necessarily was necessarily her *major* thing, but it was definitely the foundation for all the other dances taught at her studio, so with that said, then yes, ballet was one of Mom's personal strengths and her primary contribution in the dance arena. I think that...when I said that she taught ballet, tap, modern dance, and creative dance, African (dance), that she wanted to make sure that they got *everything* about dance. And not just *that* — also the *history* of dance. Mom had all kind of *books*, you know, for them to read — their *parents* to read also, because *they* had to be involved as well. She'd have books out where the parents — if they're waiting for their child, that they're reading the books. You know, and, so she had, like — how schools have PTAs and stuff — well, she had a little board...made-up of parents and things that took care of different little things like tickets, and... raffle tickets they would do, and things at the recital — you know, stuff like that. So, it was like a *family*. ...And that's why they... used to call — well, everybody knows my mother as *Aunt Bettye* — I don't know who *started* that, but the kids, that's all they called her, "Aunt Bettye, can we do this?" "Aunt Bettye?" You know, like that. And the reason why my mother's name is Bettye —that's not her born name — her *born* name is Elizabeth Taylor Jews. And *my* grandmother's name is Elizabeth *Taylor*. So, so that they did not call my grandmother and then my mother's answering, they said, "Okay we're gonna' call you Bettye, then" — and so that's how the "Bettye" came into her life.

CF: You mentioned the studio in the basement on Franklin. When did the move to Main Street happen?

GT: Actually, Main Street was the *last* studio, because she had another studio on Whittier Street where some of the kids took classes. It was kind of like a storefront-type studio, and then she got the one there at Main Street. Since the basement at the house was getting too small, she used a storefront building for the overflow of students. The classes continued to grow, so she began to look for a larger building to accommodate her following. She also did things at the recreation centers and she had the kids dancing there or had them teaching dance. I taught dance at one of the recreation centers, and I think that Melba, or China,<sup>4</sup> also taught at recreation centers.

CF: So, did she simply exceed the studio in the basement at Franklin?

GT: Right. Yes, there were too many students per class and not enough room to accommodate their learning experiences, even though another wall was removed in the basement, because it's just a

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<sup>4</sup> China White's given name is Melba.

room and a half. Actually, it was the room, and then a little piece of a room, and then it's the room where the furnace is that you changed your clothes, and it was a bathroom downstairs, like that. And the record player and stuff was under the steps... And then mom put mirrors up in the little half-room, so you had the mirrors and then on the wall you had the *barre*. And then she had a *barre* that you could move place to place, like that. And then, there was a big pole that I guess was what holds the house up or something, so you're dancing around that pole and into the other room and then you're trying to look at yourself in the mirror. So it just got to be — she got too big, in other words. And the door was *always* open — *always*, we never locked our doors, and because they were coming in and out, and in and out, like all day long, everyday, even Sunday. Here are the kids: "Hey!" We're up in the kitchen, you know — we're eating. Or they'd come up the stairs, and "What you all eating?" — and they'd sit down and eat, too.

CF: Do you remember approximately when she left the basement and went to the first studio?

GT: Maybe I was about seventeen — we stayed in that basement a long time — so, I think I might have been gone to college. We got in that basement when I was about twelve — so maybe she was in that basement about five years. I remember on Main Street there was a church right on the corner, Holy Rosary Church, I believe. Well right next door was the church Father's house and it was up for sale. Mom saw a great opportunity to build a studio in the large parking lot area and attach it to the house. She had a vision for this building and so she bought it and built The Bettye Robinson School of Dance. The house part was used for teaching some dance classes, arts and crafts, piano lessons and dance school business meetings while the studio was being built. So I would say the actual move to the studio was in the early 70's.

CF: Okay. She outgrew the studio on Whittier Street as well?

GT: Yeah, because it was just a storefront and a room, and she outgrew that. She was always looking for a bigger place because she had so many kids, and then she had her kids become student teachers, and so she had her actual kids and the teachers — and then *they* had classes. So it was just a lot — all the time.

CF: I imagine that your mom faced a lot of challenges and many struggles, not only as an African American woman running her own business, but in the arts, period. It's not easy!

GT: Mm-hmm

CF: Would you talk about some of those, as your mother shared with you?

GT: Probably, you know, she kind of would stay stuff like "You had to believe in yourself, you know. If you think you're good enough to be in a particular situation, then you go for it." We understood that we were black, you know? Mom made sure that we understood who we were and who we could be, and to reach to the highest, and she was giving us every opportunity to do that. Mom was a very ambitious and hardworking woman. She seldom was denied the things she had a passion for. She married a lawyer, so she had firsthand knowledge of rules and regulations that pertain to things she wanted to accomplish. She got some doors closed in her face in the early years, such as trying to enter a dance contest, some auditions, buying dance costumes, staying in certain hotels, renting places to have her recitals, applying for grants, loans from banks, attending workshops and getting memberships to certain clubs. My mother was the kind of person that when

I went to Bishop Hartley [High School], I guess there were about 3,500 students there — my brother and I and about fifty blacks that went there out of the 3,500. Yes, it was a Catholic school. And sometimes you can *feel* what prejudice is — and believe it or not ... I do believe some of the nuns were prejudiced — that's just my feeling, and what I went through and what my brother went through. And my mother — during the civil rights stuff — she made sure that we *understood* what people were fighting for — voting, and why you should vote. And if you were choosing a candidate, to make sure that that candidate had the kind of things that you thought that that person could do for the world — not just for a few people, but for everybody. She always made sure that we knew that we were somebody, and that the *somebody* could be a great person. One time she broke her leg bowling, and my brother and I had got into trouble at school — and it was a racial thing, and mom — she was not supposed to leave the bed, but she came up there hobbling on the thing — and talked to the Father and the nun about what the situation was. So my mom was always a person that was going to *not* let you destroy what she had produced in terms of her children — or anybody else's children, as well. And that's why they loved her so *much* — she's going to tell you it *straight*, now — if you don't have a tough skin, you might be crying — but she's going to tell you just like it is — and if you're wrong, she's going to tell you you're wrong. Now, she's going to stand *by* you, but if you're wrong, she's going to let you know. And that's how she did her students, too — her ballet students. As mom got older, she had a *stick*, and the kids would tell you stories about the stick — because she would be *slapping* that stick on the ground, talking about: “Fix your feet in first!” And I forget the little sayings that she had — it's in some of those articles — about the stick, and what she would say to her students, and so on. She'd sit on the stool, but she had that stick, and it was a long stick, and the stick could reach over there where you are on the *barre*. She didn't hit anybody with the stick, she just made sure that you were pointing your feet like they was supposed to with that stick, when she couldn't... you know, her back was getting bad and stuff like that. So, she was a remarkable person...

CF: She *had* to be. Did she — I mean, there was such terrible bias against African American...

GT: Mm-hmm.

CF: ...*dancers* joining companies, professional companies. How did she prepare her students for that?

GT: Well, she opened up her *own* company. And she decided that she had enough talent that she could do this non-profit, and educate other people as to what black dancers looked like and how well they can dance. And it's not about the color of your skin — and always would tell us “It's not the color of the skin, baby, it's what you got up here (gesturing to her head) and how you *use* it.” And her dancers — she made sure that if we went somewhere and they were performing, they knew exactly what they were doing, and that they looked good, and they *were* good, and they knew how to talk, as well. And the language of dance — she *taught* them the terminology of dance: so you don't just step out there and start shaking it up — if you don't know why you're shaking this (demonstrating with her arm), you know — why are you shaking this? So terminology was a big thing with my mom, too. She took over seventy students to New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, New Jersey and Chicago to take master classes and audition for memberships. Mom had a vision, along with four of her most talented students and family. She opened up her own company, the first black ballet company in Columbus, Ohio.

CF: So was that *Les Danseurs Noirs*?

GT: Mm-hmm.

CF: Do you remember when she started that company?

GT: I don't know the exact date, because I went on to college when she was doing these things — so I was away when all of that took place.<sup>5</sup>

CF: How long did she keep that company?

GT: She kept the company, to my knowledge, until she retired. Then, I believe they just stopped.

CF: Can you talk about — as you remember, or as your mother told you later, some of her most important achievements?

GT: She would tell you that her most important achievements were her birth children, you know — as I would tell you my most important achievements are my children, as well: Doc and Tamika. She said that...to show people that there are very good black dancers that can dance as well as American Ballet, Russia — and all that — if you put your mind to it, and your body in your mind — that you want to be that good, you can be. It's not about color: ...it's about your body and your dignity and your dedication. So, ...it was dedication: my mom had a big thing on dedication — and *time*: be on time. You know, because “when you're not there for your class, then your class is *over* — you're *done!* We move to the next class.” So her students learned time management as well.

CF: Did your mother take some of the dancers out on the road? Did the company tour? Or did she take her best students?

GT: Yes. She would take them, like I said, to New York — and she would take them to different colleges, as well — because I remember going to Cincinnati, going to Atlanta ...to different places... that they were taking classes and workshops: Alvin Ailey: — they would go there and take classes. We did a lot of things in Philadelphia and New York. — And Wildwood, New Jersey, we would go there because we had relatives, since her mother was from Cape May, New Jersey. And so we would go there as a treat — she would bring the kids and we'd go on the Boardwalk... in Wildwood and stuff, after you did your workshop in New York or Philadelphia — places like that — with the Masters, you know. They were taking classes and workshops with the great names in

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<sup>5</sup> Information added by Ms. Taylor post-interview: *Les Danseurs Noir* was a non-profit black dance company, incorporated on July 3, 1979. It was established to perform on legitimate stages and do lecture/demonstrations for any public, parochial, or private school system, college or university. Its repertoire consists of ballet, tap, jazz, religious and African dances by local and national choreographers, using musical scores composed mainly by black composers. Every year the members were required to attend dance workshops and conventions held in Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania to improve their technique and to keep abreast of the latest dance concepts. During the past 10+years, some of the members of *Les Danseurs Noir* were former members of the Columbus Civic Ballet Company; they have taught dance for the Columbus Stage Center, Paul Lawrence Dunbar Center, Upward Bound at Ohio Dominican College, Columbus Recreation Department, local day care centers, Fort Hayes Career Center, and at Bettye Robinson School of Dance.

dance: Alvin Alley, Marion Cuyjet, George Balanchine's Dance Conference, Arthur Mitchell (Dance Theatre of Harlem), Rod Rogers, Luigi.

CF: Her husband must have been very supportive.

GT: Oh yes, mm-hmm, he was, he was very supportive in every thing that she did — actually, in everything that we *all* did — myself, my brother — my father would come to the track, because I ran track — he would come to the track meets, and one time they had him out there holding the rope, and I came through first and he never let go of the rope until it was wrapping around my neck. You know, it was that yarn-type of rope — and I'm at the finish line trying to grab the rope because he didn't let it go, he was so excited. And he did a lot of driving to these different places because we didn't have the kind of money, you know, to fly. And the kids he would take — like twelve, fifteen kids. You know, we had to do fund-raisers, and stuff. And people didn't give her a lot of donations and stuff like that so, you know, she'd use a lot of her money. Like school teachers — they say, "Well, I had to go in my pocket, and make sure my class is taken care of..." Well, okay, that's what *they* did, mom and dad — in their pockets ...to do this. Dad kept the books straight.

CF: You must have been proud to see your mom recognized on the Long Street Bridge Wall.

GT: You know, proud isn't the word. It's like — that's your *mom!* And to look and see that, all the honors that your mom has received. When mom died, we had so many things: plaques and all kind of different dance statues and proclamations and thank you cards and pictures of people that just appreciated her. One thing about my mother is that she loved other people's kids, but *her* kids always came first. And to be a dance teacher, or a coach — or anything like that — sometimes you kind of like — your kids take the back seat? That never happened. Never, ever did we ever feel that we were slighted on anything. We were always up front with everything that she was doing and participated in. And so just to see people hug her, you know, and say "Aunt Bettye, thank you —because if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't ...have *made* it..." Mom — they would be calling at all hours of the night, you know — people were in *jail*, and they were calling mom to help them and stuff. She wasn't just a dance teacher — she was like their moms, too. And so the "Aunt Bettye," stayed with bunches of them — "That's my Aunt Bettye!"

CF: When did your mom retire?

GT: I believe Mom retired in 1990. She retired — but you see, the thing of it is when you retire, that's when you're supposed to not have anything else to do with what you were doing. But no! You know, you may *retire*, but...they're still calling. They *still* want you... "Could you come to my recital? I'm making a dedication for you." Stephanie Bland was one of her top dancers, and she has a dance school called "Two Left Feet in the Right Direction." Mom was living in Cleveland, Ohio, when Stephanie called and said "I want you to come to my recital." When we got to the recital, Stephanie had made a dedication to my mother. Every little dance that they would do had something to do with my mother. And she said all these wonderful things — which were true! While mom sat there, she gave her flowers, and many of her old students came back for this. It was just fantastic. It was nice to see that they respected her that much and cared about her that much, that they wanted her to know as they were older — you know, they're grown up now — they wanted her to know that "If it wasn't for Aunt Bettye, I wouldn't *have* this"...

CF: How was it that your mother's studio ended up belonging to China White?<sup>6</sup>

GT: Well, mom retired. Most of her very, *very* good students became teachers, and they opened up their own studios: they taught in recreation centers, or they had their own place. And China, then, was teaching school and also in the recreation department and places, and she was teaching at the studio, so who not but China to take over? You know, I mean, she's our family. So, you want to leave it in the hands of somebody that loves the culture — knows what it's like, and what you have to do to keep it up. And she had her own clientele, also. So she brought them along and, of course, she taught there, too. So, it was for her.

CF: What was your mom's studio called?

GT: During Mom's early years in teaching dance, the school was called Bettye Brown Dance School. Then, she got married again and changed the name to Bettye Brown Robinson Dance School and now it is called Bettye Robinson School of Dance.

CF: You mentioned Stephanie Bland as one of your mother's accomplished dancers — your mother had, really, many...

GT: And her sister was Debbie: Debbie Bland.

CF: Yes, and she had many students, who really went far — with Arthur Mitchell, for example, like China... Could you talk about some of those students and how your mother felt to see them go where, perhaps, she didn't get to go?

GT: China [White], she lived with us, and she was like my sister-type, because I didn't have (a sister) — it was just my brother and I, and I didn't have a sister, so China was like my older sister when I was growing up, my teenage years and stuff. And so I was always saying "Wow! China is so good!" And then the other kids wanted to be China. And so they worked hard to be like China — but one thing my mother always said: "You are not *that* person; you are your *own* person, so you work to be who *you* are, for you will be if great if not *better* than China — like that. And so, Debbie, Stephanie, Dantanya, Jackie — there's so many... of them that went on to be really, really good and carried on the Bettye Robinson name. And now Dantanya, she was like the *tap*-dancing artist, and more like... Afro-American type.... So mom had different students that... were best at certain things — and real creative, like Stephanie was really good on her toes too... and *creative* things. And her sister, Debbie, was like the prima ballerina-type for my mom. And all the little kids wanted to be Debbie or China or Stephanie. And then came Jakki Greene, and all the rest of them, and so they kind of followed, and they stayed as a *family*, and they grew *up* together — they took class after class, year after year after year. So when they were *young* and little — you know, now they're teenagers and they're *still* dancing, and then they become adults and now they're teaching their *own*. So she had them all their life, like — and they were in *our* life all their life.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Theatre Street Dance Academy: 627 East Main Street, Columbus, OH 43205, currently owned and directed by her student China White, was the former Bettye Robinson School of Dance.

<sup>7</sup> Additional information provided by Taylor after the interview: "China White, nine year member of Dance Theatre of Harlem, now at Fort Hayes in the Dance Department, owner of Theatre Street Dance Academy, danced in *The Wiz*; Quin Bass, dancer and singer in Japan with Disney World; Deborah Bland-Hardy, earned

CF: Returning for a moment to your mom's time in Youngstown, one of the things I read is that she choreographed for the Youngstown Junior Civic League, and she did the Cinderella Ball — is that something that she did for years?

GT: Yes, and she did cotillions, and various things like that. She belonged to several different types of clubs, and when she was with the different clubs, they *always* wanted her kids to perform at the different sessions and other events that they had. So, she belonged to *various* different organizations...<sup>8</sup>

CF: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that I haven't asked, maybe? You know so much more, of course, than I do about your mother and her *achievements*...

CT: My mom, once she retired and came to Cleveland, I *asked* her — I said, “Mom, you know, I'm here in Cleveland, you've stayed in Columbus most of your life, but I'm here now and your grandkids are here. You don't have the dance anymore, so would you move here to Cleveland with us? And *that's* why she came to Cleveland — so she could be with us, and her grandkids, and like that. So my granddaughter, Taylor Ivory, started taking dance lessons with the Pulse Dance Studio here in downtown Bedford, she started when she was six, Taylor did — and she got to be pretty good and started on her toes, in toe shoes, as well. And my mom would say, “It just carries on...” You know? And I said, “Well, I don't know if she's going to be having a studio and all of *that*, mom” — because I think I had a studio — a dance studio — when I first got here, when I got married, to please my mom. And I had a studio for four years, but that just wasn't *me*. So I said, “She looks like she may carry on — she's on her toes now” — and that kind of thing. And mom said, “I don't *think* so — 'cause she's not on her toes like she's *supposed* to be, she's not working *hard*. And at my mom's funeral, Taylor got up and read this poem that she had made for my mom. And in the poem she said “*Whoa!*” They called my mother ‘Nana.’ “Nana”— and many of my mother's students came to the funeral and said “Nana bent my back so hard, I thought it was broke!” And everybody bust out laughing, because they knew what that was like from my mother doing that. And she just said it, just out of the blue. She broke — almost broke my back,” you know, “Nana did, saying ‘*Stretch! Stretch!*’” I said, “Oh my goodness!” You know, for her to be so little — to get up there and say that. And it just brought tears to many of her students' eyes, to see that little child get up there and say that about her Nana, like that.

CF: Do you think your mother knew, in her later years, what she had accomplished? Do you think she was aware of her achievements?

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a Master's degree in Dance from The Ohio State University, founder and director of the Hardy Contemporary Dance Theatre and Studio and appeared in theatre productions Off-Broadway; Deidra Hamlar, Attorney at Law; Stephanie Bland, member of Columbus Civic Ballet Company, danced in the *Nutcracker Suite*, choreographic works of Purlie, owner of Two Left Feet in the Right Direction, member of *Les Danseurs Noir*. Linda Goodrich, former director of Dance at the Dunbar Center, taught jazz dance at Mills College in Oakland, California. Rhonda B. Spero, OSU graduate, studied in New York with Luigi and Chaffey and operates her own studio.

<sup>8</sup> Additional information provided by Ms. Taylor post-interview: “Mom also choreographed at Youngstown Playhouse, Kenley Players of Warren, Ohio, Victory Matrons Starlite Cotillion, Miss Black Teenage Pageant, Ohio Dominican College Drama and Music Department, along with several others.”

GT: I think my mom *did*.<sup>9</sup> And I think my mom *expected* to leave a legacy. My mom started a book, and she asked me...“Could you please complete my book?” — And I said, “Okay, Mamma. I’ll do the best I *can*.” So, I have all of her papers and pictures she left, some dating back to 1935. She put them together, and she said “I want you to read it *over* and *over*.” She got me these lessons — like a workshop — “You can go to a workshop and they’ll teach you how to write a book.” And I said “Okay, Mamma. I’m going to do it.” I haven’t gotten it together yet, but I’m going to get that book together — for her, because I promised her that. But I *do*, I *do* think that my mother... was *appreciative* that she had a *purpose*. God gave her a *purpose* on this *earth*, and through that purpose, she’s helped many, *many* kids — black, white, green, purple — it didn’t *matter*, the color. If you *wanted* to dance and she was *able* to help you, she would. And some of them couldn’t pay! They couldn’t pay for their classes — and it didn’t matter. She took care of it...because that’s what the kid wanted to do. So I’m real honored — they said “You know, you act *just* like your mother when you’re coaching and teaching your Physical Education classes,” and that’s an honor for me, to say “I’m like my mom.”

CF: Anybody want to ask anything else? Any questions?

MB: I have a question. So, when she opened her studios in Youngstown and when she was in Columbus, how did she find students? How did she introduce herself to those communities? And how did she get people in the door? What did she say about dance? How did she bring people in to her world?

GT: Okay, so — how she went about getting students — she would go to the schools, and she would send out flyers. Then it became word-of-mouth. So, if she had ten students, then those ten students would say “Hey, my daughter’s taking dance! She’s five years old and she’s doing this and that.” So, by word-of-mouth, a lot of it traveled that way. And then from ten students, the next year it might have been thirty and then by word-of-mouth again. And she would always take the kids somewhere to perform. So, if you see this little kid performing, you want to say, “Well...” — the grandmothers, “Well, I want *my* little granddaughter to have that little tutu on!” So then they would call, and come — and it just went from there. And then Mom had that kind of bubbly personality — now, she can be *mean* when she wants to, now — but she had that kind of bubbly type that draws you in, and makes you know that she’s sincere, and that she’s going to help you and she’s a “depend-on-her-type” of person. — There’s not many people like that. And you can always tell that kind of person, and you want to be around them — she would crack [a] few jokes...here and there, and talk about you if you didn’t have the right clothes on, or your hair was looking wild, or you put you

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<sup>9</sup> Additional information provided by Ms. Taylor post-interview: On June 8, 1974 the immediate family members gave Mom a Testimonial Dinner in gratitude for her prophetic spirit and consecrated leadership in the betterment of human relations; for her dedication and unselfishness of the many hours of stress and strain in dealing with everyday rearing of family situations, while making not only her life so meaningful, but by making many people around her, healthier and happier just by having known her. Mom was among a unique group of women at the “Legendary Steps to Follow” dance reunion and open house. She was one of the honored Central Ohio Pioneers of Dance. The event chair was Katina M. Jennings, a dance student of mom’s. The Blue Chip Award was established in 1992 to recognize individuals and corporations for their significant contributions to the African-American community; Mom was selected and honored in 1996. This is a very important appreciation letter that Mom received from our high school principal, Father White, from Columbus Bishop Hartley in 1970. Mom’s students danced at the school on their Black Experience Day. He wrote, the students seemed to be impressed, so you have helped us to take a step forward in better human understanding and mutual respect. In closing, he asked Mom to come back and speak to the students in the future. I graduated in 1967, my brother in 1966.

make-up on and it didn't go with how you should be looking — she'd crack a lot of jokes here and there, too.

CF: It sounds like she was very charismatic!

GT: Mm-hmm —*mm-hmm!*

CF: I know that her best achievement in life was her children and, no doubt, her grandchildren — but if she were here today — *aside* from her family, what do you think she felt was her *best* accomplishment, her highest honor?

GT I think that her highest honor, maybe, that she felt was giving — having within herself the ambition and the strength and dedication to have a dancing school, to be a dance teacher. And to be able to open up the eyes in the world of some of the less fortunate kids that would have never, ever, been to New York, or dance before Masters or ever put on toe shoes; they probably never knew what a toe shoe *was* except on TV or something — or to go to a performance to the theatre to see *The Nutcracker*, and that kind of thing. And as a matter of fact, my granddaughter was “Claire” in *The Nutcracker* in her dance studio's first production of it, the Pulse Dance Studio in Bedford Heights, Ohio. Mom was so excited and proud!

So, I'm so honored that you guys even *thought* of her. And she *should* be there— she really should. And that her students, or people that do know my mother felt and feel that she should be honored... that's a *high* honor, and I do appreciate it. I do.

CF: She deserves it! Who else would you recommend we reach out to, regarding your mother?

GT: Well, Stephanie Bland, Donnetta Mahdi, Catherine Estes, Jakki Greene, Vickie Paxton, Lynne Towers, Karen Tucker, Toya Griffin, Pam Mizelle, Diedra Hamlar, Quin Bass, Debra Toles, Eric Simmons, Rick Moore, Karen Tucker, Karla Autry, Wanakee Ector, Michelle Davis, Rick Brown, Nanna Watson, Diane Messer, Juanita Johnson, Robert White.

You know, my brother did all the swooping and lifting of the girls! He loved it! He was like “Mamma, I'm not putting on any tights, now — I'm not doing none of that.” You know, “I'll have on pants, but I'll lift them” — so he was part of the dancing — but only on the lifting part. He would walk like... *not* a dancer — just walk. And then when they would run and jump into his arms and all of that, he did all that.

MDB: Can I ask one more quick question about your mom's company? Did they kind of collectively make work together? Was she kind of the head choreographer? How did that dynamic work?

GT: She would choreograph, and they would choreograph. Because they were old enough — older then, and had been teaching the classes. In some of my mother's recital books, you would see “choreographed by Stephanie Bland” or “choreographed by”... this person and that person. So they kind of did it all together. She probably did the big finale-type stuff, and they probably did choreograph some of the dances in there, too.

CF: Where were they performed?

GT: They performed at churches, they performed at convention centers, they performed at recreation centers, they performed at half-time at games — out there on the field, they performed everywhere — everywhere there was a platform, they performed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Additional information provided by Ms. Taylor post-interview: They performed in Cleveland and local schools, on television, Columbus Cotillion, Kenley Players, local and state teenage pageants, social organizations, sororities, fraternities, Antioch College, Central State University Dance Department, churches, the Ohio Festival of the Arts, the United Festival, guest dancers at local dance recitals, Ohio State University Black Studies Extension Center, Doris L. Allen Minority Caucus Ohio Education Association, Hyatt Regency, Sheraton Columbus Plaza, RKO Palace, Aladdin Shrine Mosque, The Ohio Center (Atrium Stage), Ohio Dominican Theatre, Ohio State University (Sullivant Hall Theatre), Palace Theatre, Westerville South High School, St. Charles School Theatre, and the Greater Columbus Arts Festival.