

VDC Interview Transcript

DCDC: Debbie Blunden Diggs, Ro Nita Hawes-Saunders, Sheri “Sparkle” Williams, Crystal Michelle Perkins

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Dayton Contemporary Dance Theatre/Jeraldyne Blunden

DCDC Offices

840 Germantown Street

Dayton, Ohio 45402

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

DBD: Debbie Blunden-Diggs

RH: Ro Nita Hawes-Saunders

SSW: Sheri “Sprinkle” Williams

CMP: Crystal Michelle Perkins

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC Team)

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team)

JD: Jane D’Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: Allow me to congratulate you on your city of Dayton Proclamation!¹ What timing!

DBD: Yes!

SSW: Hey, hey!

CF: At some point, I hope you will talk about that. It’s an understatement to say that DCDC² has had and continues to have a distinguished role in the dance world. In this project, we are particularly interested in Jeraldyne Blunden’s role in founding the company, as she was specifically nominated. And I know that everything she did reaches forward into what you do now, so overlaps are fine. What a remarkable woman, and how much she packed into her too-short life! It is as if she lived several lifetimes...

DBD: Yes! (This is echoed around the room)

CF: Please introduce yourselves and tell us briefly something about your individual history with the company.

DBD: I guess my history is probably the longest. I’m Debbie Blunden-Diggs. I’m the Artistic Director, but I’m also Jeraldyne’s daughter, so I’ve been here since in-utero. I like to say that it’s in my DNA: I started dancing with the company when I was twelve years old, so this is actually my 44th

¹ Dayton City Commissioners declared Friday, Nov. 4, 2016 DCDC Day.

² The much-used acronym for the company

season, and I've kind of just grown up through the ranks, and now I have the privilege of being the Artistic Director of the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

RHS: My name is Ro Nita Hawes-Saunders. I am the Chief Executive Officer for the world-renowned Dayton Contemporary Dance Company. I have been here for eleven years, and Jeraldyn was a personal friend of mine, and my contemporary. We had an opportunity to do several projects together here in the city, and she is near and dear to my heart as is the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

SSW: I am Sheri "Sparkle" Williams, a Daytonian, and a longtime member of the company. I'm a dancer. I've been dancing with the company now for many years: this is my 43rd season. Along with dancing, I'm the company fitness trainer as well, but Jeraldyn Blunden has been my mentor, second mom, and someone I've always looked up to and wanted to make proud.

CF: I am curious what any of you may know or remember from her telling — about what the dance landscape, or lack thereof, was like here in Dayton when Jeraldyn first started.

DBD: I certainly think that there was a "lack thereof," especially in this Midwestern community. I mean, everyone still sort of believes that all dance hails from New York and California. Now it's been proven time and time again that that's not true, but there really was *no place* here. Actually, the school started before the company, but the company emerged out of the school five years after. She wanted to *create* a place and *establish* a place where quality contemporary dance could be studied. Her mentors were wonderful: Josephine and Hermene Schwarz;³ the Dayton Ballet Company, you know, had made its own historical footsteps in this region for a ballet company, but there certainly was no modern dance company — especially not an African American modern dance company. And I don't think that she really was thinking about having a "Black" company, I just think that she wanted a *good* dance company, good quality in this part of the region, in this part of the United States.

RHS: I think also because of what was happening in our country at that particular time, during the Civil Rights movement and during all the challenges that were taking place, what African Americans were asked — or blacks, at that particular time — was to use your talents, use your voice to try to make the world a better place, to try to help solve some of these problems — and what better way can that take place than through art? So I think Jeraldyn absolutely met the cause and met the challenge by what it is that she felt she could do through her own natural abilities, but also by the vision of being able to provide opportunities for other individuals.

SSW: I'll speak to the topic. As the youngster that I was when I came into her environment at nine years of age — and I didn't know about the volatility that was going on between the races and other adversities that were going on at the time — it was a *haven* for young kids. First of all, we had a good time: we worked, we had a good time and we acquired *discipline*; this was something that she was a stickler about. So, we made friends, comrades, learned a skill and an art, had good times, life lessons were learned — and we became *disciplined*. Mm-hmm!

³ The Schwarz sisters were important figures in Dayton. Among their accomplishments was the founding of the Schwarz School of Dance in 1927, later the Dayton Ballet School.

CF: I've read several of her well-known quotes, but the one I loved was "This is not Burger King. You cannot have it your way." (Sheri "Sparkle" Williams finishes the quote along with me here, and there are deep smiles of recognition around the room.) She *was* a stickler, right?

RHS: Yes, yes. No nonsense about it. That's right.

CF: Regarding the Schwarz sisters, I know that was a close relationship. But how did she come to the idea of *contemporary* dance? How did she get there, do you know? I grew up in nearby Cincinnati, and it wasn't something that was easy to find at that time.

DBD: Well, I think that she came to it — my grandparents were very insightful, if not specifically knowledgeable — about the fact that the world was much bigger than Dayton, Ohio. Her opportunity to study at Connecticut College for Women, and at Jacob's Pillow opened up that world of contemporary modern dance. She trained — you know, when you danced, particularly back in the '60s, you started with ballet. And ballet is still the basis for all dance, and so I think she had the opportunity to be ingrained in something different through those experiences than those her parents were able to provide for her, and I think that just opened something *up* in her, something that she wanted to contribute to, in a way. And you know, she choreographed most of the ballets for the company early, early on — she never felt that it was her strong suit; she *never*, I don't think, desired to be a choreographer. She desired to put a group of people together and mentor and teach and help them get better in whatever that would be. But I actually think just her exposure to something other than ballet was important — along with the fact that there really was no place except for Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem for a Black American person, but particularly for an African American *body*: we're built much differently, our bone structure is different, where we carry our weight and our curves is different. And so those two things didn't line *up*, but I believe that her thought was that that doesn't *mean* that we can't — fill in the blank, the very large blank.

RHS: I would agree. I think that in looking at what contemporary dance *stands* for, and looking at the *necessity* for self-expression, it seemed logical that it not just be what *was*, in terms of ballet, but let us take the best of what there *is* in terms of all dance forms and be able to express who we *are* as a people and who she believed that we needed to be *able* to be in terms of expressing this artform. So I think that's one of the reasons why she would have chosen contemporary dance at that time, in terms of just the necessity of being able to self-express in magnificent ways on all levels — not limitations but being able to have expansion.

SSW: Mmmm, that's great. And you know, being in Dayton, Ohio *away* from the status quo where everyone was, I guess, centered on a Mecca — the New York area and that kind of thing — where dance was prevalent, she would bring dance to *us*, you know, those who were becoming and had established themselves as greats or aficionados, so to speak, in various techniques or whatever — she would *bring* those people to our studios in little old Dayton, Ohio, and expose us that way as well. And then in our summers when we weren't in school and things, we would travel to those places as well, and study. So she made sure that we were influenced and exposed.

CF: Perhaps I'm making a jump here or putting words in your mouths but, in my view, freedom and democratic processes are closely aligned with the contemporary dance movement, so I see where that was a good fit for her ideals and her time.

DBD: Right.

SSW: Absolutely.

CF: And it's also the case that Alvin Ailey was closely aligned in time with her in terms of starting and founding his company, so that must have given her support, a feeling that somebody else was doing the same kind of thing.

DBD: Yes. Yes.

SSW: Absolutely. And as far as I know he was very supportive of *her*.

DBD: *Very* supportive of her. It was hard *not* to be!

SSW: Yeah, that's true! That's very true.

DBD: It was *pretty* hard not to be...

RHS: No, not just because this is her daughter speaking; *truly*, individuals who were not related to her by blood felt the exact same way. When Jeraldine presented herself, when she presented the idea, when she talked about the passion and the necessity of being able to make sure that the artform was celebrated, then (she snaps her fingers to underscore the immediacy of the effect) you came on board — right then and there — just because of the way she presented the *opportunity*. That's what she would say: "This is an *opportunity* for...and then, whatever it was — a *business* opportunity, or an expression of our young people, or whatever.

CF: What an impassioned person she must have been — and a charismatic one, to pull so many people in!

SSW: — and genuine, in so doing. Do you know what I mean? It's not a *sale*. I never got that impression. It was just a genuine desire to get this where she wanted it to go. You know? "Get on board! *Help* me." You know?

CF: Her teachers: there were the Schwarz sisters and her ballet training here in Dayton; she had the opportunities you've mentioned to study at Connecticut College, the American Dance Festival, New York, I suppose. Could you say who really impressed her early on?

DBD: I would hazard a guess only because I heard the name: The Clark Center⁴ was established in New York, and she would talk about that and the teachers, the array of teachers that would come through there. You know, as I look back, the dance scene in California and the dance scene in New York were very different back then. They're still very different; there's more of a blending now, but back then they were *very*, very different. And so teachers like Jimmy Truitte, who was not that much older than her, developing his life with Lester Horton and then moving to the East coast and becoming a part of the original Ailey Company...but I think Clark Center was the *place*, and I think

⁴ Clark Center for the Performing Arts, created in 1959 as a uniquely diverse arts community in New York City. For 30 years Clark Center trained dancers, encouraged emerging companies, and identified and developed new choreographic talent. The Westside YWCA provided the space as well as administrative salaries and services. Originally a multi-arts center that included classes and performances in other disciplines such as opera and theater, by 1970 it focused almost exclusively on dance.

it was located in the Y(WCA) if I remember correctly. It was just a melting pot, and people went there to work with bodies, to teach.

DBD: She talked about that, she talked about the influences of *course* of Mr. Ailey, and of course Mr. Mitchell — who weren't her contemporaries, but they did *become* her contemporaries, so it was very interesting how that just sort of rose up for her, and she *did* this —there's a picture of her over there (she points to the table where a photographic archive has been laid out) where she's dancing as *Snow White* and she's actually pregnant with me — and she is not only doing this from the Midwest, but — and I can never use the word *typical* with her — but *typical*: she's a wife, you know, to my dad; she's my mother; and she has this school. So her path to being their contemporary was quite different. *Quite* different.

CF: At what point did she start bringing in the extraordinary roster of works that were made for DCDC? I know I'm jumping ahead, but how did all of that begin? What was the first big work?

DBD: Well, she started internally — like all things went for her. There were dancers who —(turning to the other panelists): Do you remember Dave Barron?

SSW: I sure do.

DBD: There were dancers here who exhibited a passion for creating, and that's when she started *internally* mentoring choreographers who had, you know, really creative minds — maybe not the tool belt that choreographers come along with now, but those who could take a piece of music and could take a group of dancers and create something. Stuart Sebastian, who was at the Dayton Ballet, came over here and created an incredible piece for the company: *Mars, the Bringer of War*. And so she just really could sense in people — now, everything that's been created on us from the beginning even until now has not all been a great, wonderful piece. I mean, you know, when you carry a repertory this large, there are some things that are like, “Oh, we'll only do this once, and then we'll move on.” But she just had this *sense* for people, but what she *also* had was the courage to say what she wanted or needed: she *never* just said “Will you come create a piece for my company?” She would say, “I need a piece for my company that —” and there were some parameters around it. And so I think maybe one of the first stair-steps to a big choreographer may have been Gary DeLoatch and Lonnie McNeil. Gary DeLoatch was a dancer with the Ailey Company, and he came in and created a work, called *Keys*...

SSW: I am *remembering* this now!

DBD: Mm-hmm, and Lonnie McNeil choreographed our first theatrical dance piece, “Class of '46” because he was from the theatre world. And then after that, the conversation — she had to kind of *convince* people to come here: you know, “What's in Dayton besides cows and corn?” That was always the response they gave. And back in the *early* days when we brought choreographers in —you think budgets are tight now — budgets were *really* small. So 90% of the time, we hosted them at our house, which created a very interesting dynamic for *me* — but that's what you did: they stayed at your house, and a Board member would feed them dinner every night. You know, the fees were very small, but people wanted to create. And people still have the same passion, coming here. But I think Lonnie and Gary were the first.

RHS: And, just moving further, when I got here, I used to ask choreographers “Why do you want to work with the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company? Tell me what is different about us?” And they would talk about what Jeraldynne was able to offer them in their early days: they were emerging choreographers at that particular time. Specifically (for example), Dianne McIntyre or Donald Bird — and they said that Jeraldynne *believed* in them and gave them an opportunity *before* they became the big nationally known choreographers. And she also had a way that *allowed* them as choreographers to be able to work with her company in a unique pattern, a unique style, a unique form, where all of the dancers were able to execute at a *magnificent* level. And I didn’t understand that because I am not a dancer, and I said, “What are you talking about?” and they said “She did not train her dancers to learn one particular, unique style, but she trained her dancers to be able to dance in *several* styles” — so that when a choreographer came in, they were able to create this *magic* in a way that they may not be able to do with other companies. Now, these dancers here (looking at the others) would know better what that meant, but that was fascinating to me. So that’s one of the other special reasons why people came to Dayton, Ohio, to work with the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

DBD: Well, she exposed us to things — everything: things that were good for us, things that weren’t, so that — I know *now* — so that we would know the difference. I remember that we would go places and take classes, and we’re thinking “What *is* this? Why are we *doing* this?” But I think her philosophy was “Exposure is exposure.” You can only learn and know if you’re exposed. — It’s like when I say “I don’t like beets.” “Well, how do you *know*? Have you ever eaten them? Have you ever tasted them?” “No.” Well, then you don’t know. You don’t know. And so I think that was sort of her whole feeling about everything: anybody that she could get to come in here and teach this company, she would invite in. Any place that we could go and find a master class, we would go. She was very, very generous in wanting to expose us. She never thought that she was the only person who could give us what we needed to become an artist.

CF: Well, it’s not coincidental, I think, that she formed a repertory company like Ailey did —and at a time when companies were more characteristically identified with their founders: *The Graham Company*, *The Cunningham Company*, and so on. And I think it speaks to an openness to multiple points of view, which I am understanding from you is how she worked.

SSW: Mm-hmm. And speaking of what Debbie was saying about how she exposed us to everything, that’s exactly what the repertory company dancers need to *be*, you know: well-versed so that they can morph from one person’s work to the next throughout an evening.

RHS: — in an exceptional manner!

SSW: Ah, well, thank you.

CF: It’s also interesting: 1968 was the official year of the company’s founding, though I’m sure there may have been fledgling versions, such as Jeraldynne’s School of the Dance — there must have been a lot of steps. But 1968 was a tumultuous time for our country: the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War — a time of great passion, but a time of great struggle. What do you know about her interface with that — or your own, really, at that time?

DBD: Well, I was eight! Eight, and pretty darn *sheltered* from all of the madness. So, you know, I have the history book version: I know what I know because of what I’ve learned; I *don’t* know what I know because I *experienced* it. We were very sheltered...

SSW: *We were!*

DBD: ...as children in our households, but even as students of dance. And quite interestingly enough, I didn't even take classes here until I joined the company. My early dance training was at the Schwarz School of Dance. Because, I think, she thought it might be imprudent to teach her child, or *hard* to teach her child — and so my earliest dance training came from Josephine and Hermene [Schwarz] and Jon Rodriguez and Bess Sayers. I mean those were my first teachers, and really good teachers. So, Ro Nita may be able to speak on the time much better than Sheri and me.

RHS: Well, I can talk a little bit about the time because I, too, am a native Daytonian, and growing up in this city during the '50s and '60s was quite a challenging experience. My family was very involved in the Civil Rights movement, so when you think about what was going on in the country but also really what was going on here in our hometown, you participated in not only the marches that took place and you participated as a young child in some of the discrimination situations, and then you realized that your mother and father and, in this case, Jeraldine, was making *sure* that things were going to change. Things were going to change in *her* hometown. So what does that mean? That means that you have to then have your *voice* and make sure you brought whatever *you* could bring to the table to be able to correct the situation that was occurring. And so there were racial riots that were taking place here in our hometown, and just a lot of turmoil for youngsters, but also for teenagers like myself. And in the classroom, it was a difficult time as well, because you didn't *understand* why this was occurring, and so what I would believe — and only because of the kind of woman that Jeraldine was — I would believe that what she wanted to do was to be able to help to solve the problem in the best way that she could, but also to have a strong voice about what the opportunities for the future could be if indeed you could embrace our history, our culture and our art — just because of the kind of woman she was.

SSW: Excellent.

DBD: Do you remember the riots, Sheri?

SSW: No, I don't.

DBD: I have one fleeting memory of the riots — were they in the summer time?

RHS: Mm-hmm.

DBD: We must have been doing some kind of summer course, because there was a girl that stayed at our house that was taking class, and I remember my father saying to her, "Jeraldine, y'all have to not *do* this today — you cannot have these classes, you can't have those kids traveling down to the studio." That is my one fleeting memory of all of that.

CF: I also recall reading her statement that "Man has created boundaries for race, religion, and culture. If we can get past that, we can realize that there is much more in life which connects us." You mentioned earlier that she knew what to ask for; she knew what she wanted. Did she look for choreographers who would make a political statement? And by political, I include choreographic statements that would embrace humanity and diversity.

RSH: Now, I had a conversation with Eleo Pomare about his art and what *his* expression was at a given time. And he said that Jeraldyn took a *chance* on him. He really had a lot of political statements that he was making around the world, and not every place would allow him to come in and create art, and yet Jeraldyn did. And the works that he was creating at that particular time were works that were a part of *his* self-expression, but they were making a political statement. (Turning to Debbie) And you danced these works.

DBD: And that was in the '80s. And so yes, we did dance those works, and it was very...eye-opening. I mean, Eleo Pomare can tell a story through dance better than almost anybody I know. Donald McKayle (she gestures with her hands back and forth to signify that McKayle is similarly gifted): those two are master storytellers with their work. But Eleo chose the hard, in-your-face — I mean, you know its history: burning American flags onstage — it's "*in-your-face*" in your face! I think she did make a statement by saying "I want those works *here*." Now, American Dance Festival certainly helped us make that statement in their whole campaign to revive some of those works, but I don't think that was her intent, ever. I think her intent was to have art created here that is good art — *great art* — that makes everybody grow: that challenges the artists, that challenges the creator of the work, that challenges the audience that sees the work — and not always a thought-provoking challenge. You know, also challenged to look at the beauty of the artform, or the athleticism of the artform. I think she was just looking for the opportunity to present great art that is created in this part of the country that actually was recognized — and then we started to gain a national reputation.

CF: Do you remember when you had a sense that that reputation was happening — the national reputation, the attention from outside? Was it associated with any particular company or choreographic landmark?

SSW: I know I had an eye-opening experience with ADF⁵ when they wanted to revitalize classics in the African American genre of modern dance, when I found out that these choreographers — they were Eleo Pomare, Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty — I think those were the ones...Katherine Dunham...

DBD: Not for *us*, but they restored a lot of her works —

SSW: ...ten, fifteen or so works were going to be part of the project, and the choreographers chose Dayton Contemporary Dance Company to mount those works on.⁶ And I was proud.

DBD: Time and time and time and time again.

SSW: Yeah, that was pretty amazing to me.

CF: Are you talking about the 1988 American Dance Festival?

SSW: Yes.

⁵ American Dance Festival

⁶ The company was one of four dance companies chosen by the American Dance Festival (ADF) to participate in ADF's Black Tradition in American Modern Dance project in 1988, which involved the reconstruction of classic dance works by African-American choreographers.

CF: It is not easy to run a dance company in this country — never has been. There were some years when it might have been a *little* bit easier. (They all shake their heads no.) Would you care to reminisce about some of the landmark achievements and some of the challenges she — or you all — had to overcome?

DBD: Well, I'll talk about what I heard stories about, early on. When she decided that she wanted to start a dance company here, and went to whomever you go to — Do you go to a banker? The Arts Council? The response that is blatantly given is “Why do we need another dance company here, particularly a Black dance company? We already have a dance company — the Dayton Ballet. And so I mention it to say that those remnants still exist, almost a half century later. And they show their face in different ways — Ro Nita deals with that far more than I deal with it, because I can escape to the art; I can escape to the creation of the art. But for me, for this company being a half-century old, we are still running uphill, and still having some of the same battles that we had forty-eight years ago, over and over again.

SSW: It's like haven't we proven ourselves *yet*?

RHS: What Debbie is saying is so very true in terms of not only arts organizations but also, in her heart of hearts, I believe that Jeraldyn absolutely thought “We deserve to have this opportunity, and my dancers deserve to be able to express this art, so we're going to do this, we're going to *do* this, we are *going* to do this!” And so the earlier Board members that I talked to, the individuals who were trying to make sure that the company had what it needed in order to grow, often talked about the struggles — and how difficult it is for the community at large, but also for the business community to understand the worth and value of what a Dayton Contemporary Dance Company really brings to the table. If you don't understand contemporary dance, if you're not a lover of art and culture like this, then most cities will embrace Opera, Philharmonic and Ballet because those are the norms...

DBD: — the “traditional.”

RHS: ...because those are the traditional!

DBD: Mm-hmm.

RHS: So then when you are stepping out, and you're non-traditional, in a sense, and then you're African American on *top* of that, it makes the challenge even, I think, greater. However, I knew Jeraldyn at a time when I had a business, and we would talk about the exposure in this community — and I often say that if I had known the struggle that she was having (even though she was *expressing* the struggle, I just didn't hear it — because she had such a phenomenal organization with these magnificent dancers being recognized throughout the country, why would the struggle be so very hard? But the struggle *was* hard because we were not a part of “the norm.” And that's what she was, I think, trying to express to me when I was not the Executive Director, and not the CEO, but I was in another role. And I think that it took several years, and maybe some growth of some other modern dance companies for people to even understand who we are and what we have to offer. It was always more challenging, it was always more difficult than it should have been, but because she believed in it so much and she had the “I-will-not-give-up” attitude, it worked. She *made* it work. And so we are still here today, almost fifty years old, because she made it work, and then Debbie

continues, and Sheri continues and our wonderful Board of Directors continues making it happen — in *spite* of — but it should be *because* of.

CF: I'm hearing it as a triple whammy: contemporary dance — not understood.

DBD: Correct.

CF: African American contributions — not appreciated.

RHS: Correct.

CF: Women — need I say more? The trifecta of challenges — and she made it work. And you all made it work.

RHS: And we're *still* making it work.

Crystal Michelle Perkins joins the discussion.

CF: Would you mind introducing yourself and telling us how you first got involved with Dayton Contemporary Dance Company?

CMP: Right. I'm Crystal Michelle, Associate Artistic Director of Dayton Contemporary Dance Company. I first found out about DCDC, or became aware of the legacy of DCDC really, when I was auditioning. I was attending Southern Methodist University, and was looking for a place to use my degree, to use that education and training — and I was having a very difficult time searching for a place as a ballet dancer. And I walked into the office at SMU, and there was DCDC on the cover of *Dance Spirit* magazine that year. It was audition season, so it must have been the Winter edition of 2001, and I had a lot of questions about who these women were. Sheri was on the cover, and another longtime dancer, DeShona Pepper Robertson, and what I noticed about them is that they had these extremely athletic bodies that were not in hiding. It was like “Here we are!” — from the cultural space that we're from and the bodies that we're born in, and that is what the company is supporting, right? This kind of athletic woman in motion: dancing, brown skin, African American presence. And I was totally drawn to it — I had no idea, I had never heard about DCDC before, and actually had very little information going through undergraduate studies about Black dance in America. And so I asked about it. A dancer [from SMU] was already here [at DCDC]: Julius Brewster Cotton. And so the head of the department at that time said “You should go — I can't believe you don't know, first of all, about DCDC — but you should go and ask Julius and visit, and take the audition.” And I did. So that was my first experience of trying to figure out who DCDC was.

CF: Given what we've just been talking about, isn't that amazing, that an African American woman dancer, college-educated, still didn't know about the company in 2001 — I can hardly believe it. But you found out!

CM: I did. I found out quickly, but it was one of my worst auditions that audition season...

DBD: She says that!

CM: ...but I left the *happiest!* I left so curious about this whole other dance world that I kind of thought my body knew something about — that my blood memory knew something about, but I couldn't quite articulate. So I wanted to come in and experience that. I started in the second company, and then — here we are!

CF: We were talking when Crystal joined us about specific challenges or specific landmark moments for the company: is there anything any of you would like to talk about — to celebrate, or to mark an achievement, or to identify a challenge met.

SSW: For me, it was Jeraldine receiving the MacArthur Fellowship. *That* speaks volumes.

CF: And the year was 1994.

SSW: '94, okay! For me, that was a “Wow”!

CF: How did it come to your attention? Tell me about the announcement.

SSW: How did that go? How did I learn that? Actually, it was announced in the studio — and I don't know who said it. Someone on staff came into the studio and told us all. Jeraldine didn't — it wasn't Jeraldine; it was somebody from the staff who came into the studio while we were rehearsing, and told us that she had been awarded. I didn't know about any nomination at all...

DBD: Did you know what it was? I mean, I didn't even *know*...they called her, and then she called me, and I was like “Oh! Okay, good!” You know, I didn't know...I didn't *know!*

SSW: I know what you're saying. I didn't know until that *day*, when I researched it (she imitates a typing motion, fingers searching an imagined keyboard).

DBD: I didn't know what that *meant!* For me, you know, I didn't know a lot. I didn't know — Crystal and I were talking about this not too long ago — I didn't know about her importance to the world at large — until she died, until her funeral. *I just didn't know!* I mean, she was my mother, and yes, this was a great company, and yes, we do great work — but I just didn't *understand* the *impact* that she *had* on the dance world at large!

SSW: You know when I first became aware of her impact, was when she became ill.

DBD: The first time?

SSW: Mm-hmm.

CF: In 1990, approximately?

DBD: Yes.

SSW: We were learning [Ulysses] Dove's *Urban Folk Dance*⁷ — a Miami University production. We had just gotten through that performance, that premiere for PBS, and after that, she had gone into

⁷ Later performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, this work was made at DCDC and premiered there in 1990.

the hospital. And the *deluge* of people, not only coming *physically* to the hospital, but trying to find out about this, and sending regards, and wanting to make sure that she had the best care. I mean, I don't know if I should say his name or not — but one supporter of hers was to the extent of wanting to pay for whatever she needed to have done, you know — whatever hospitalization that she needed, whatever care: *Get it to her, you know. Wow!*

CF: You can say the name if you want to.

SSW: Mr. Bassani. Suzanne Bassani's husband, Pino.

CM: She's talked about it.

SSW: Mm-hmm.

RHS: I think when we consider impact, it's not only the impact in the dance world, it's not only the impact in terms of the dance art, but it's the impact in terms of just community in general, and people and connectivity. And we've talked about how Jeraldynne wanted the *art* to connect, but as an individual, she truly *believed* that this was her community — Dayton, Ohio and the people in Dayton that she cared about, in addition to everyone else in the world — and I've said to Debbie often that one of the best memories that I have is a conversation with her that I had about doing a special event that I was involved in, in my previous life. And what I was doing was putting on a free concert for our community, and it was a free concert during the holiday time, and it was called "An Old Fashioned Family Christmas." I had approached Jeraldynne about having the dancers participate, and she said "Oh my goodness! I really want to do this! But it doesn't work in our schedule." How much I understand that *now*... "It doesn't work in our schedule, but I really want to do this because it will be the first time that young children in the thousands would have an opportunity to be exposed to the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company," she said. Because it was a family celebration for the holidays, and it was done at the University of Dayton Arena, so there were going to be some 13, 14,000 people that were going to be there. And she said "We have to be able to figure this out. We *have* to be able to make this happen, Ro Nita, because I want those young people *en masse* to be able to see DCDC. And so we did. We worked it out, and we figured it out, and it was the first time *ever* that that number of young African American children had an opportunity to see what she had created based upon *The Dream*. And I've told this story often, because you just never know what *you* can do to impact the future. It was a wonderful city celebration, and it was something that DCDC participated in — and after that moment, Jeraldynne and I talked about it often.

CF: I've read about Crystal's *Dancing to the Curriculum* program. These days, you have a big outreach program that touches the lives of many young Dayton citizens. Is that something you would like to talk about as an extension, or segue?

DBD: I will start. We've always done outreach — *forever and ever, amen*, we've done outreach. And so when I took the seat as Artistic Director, I'm like, "Well, we do outreach, but I want to make it the other side of our triangle." So we're a resident company, there's also a touring company, and I also want to view outreach in a different kind of way. I want to make it part of our everyday lives, so to speak — and so much so that when we audition dancers, I say to them "Now, look. We travel around the nation and sometimes out of the country, but what we also do is outreach in education and if you're a dancer who only wants to be on the proscenium stage performing repertory work, then this probably isn't the company for you. Because we're also in the classroom, on gym floors, on

cement platforms in the park, because *I* believe that dance should not be elitist; it should be *available* to *everybody*.” And so in the last — (she looks to Ro Nita) this is your eleventh year; this is now my ninth year — we’ve made a huge push. And Crystal’s written a wonderful curriculum, and we’ve developed many programs, and so now nine years into that, I think it’s great. It’s great how we integrate the arts. But now I hunger and I strive for just *experiential* art. I don’t always want to have to attach a state standard to it; I don’t always want to have to create a rubric for it, I don’t always want to have to talk about, you know, how do we measure the outcomes! I want to sometimes just say the outcome is that *this* child has the *experience* they might not normally have. And so for me, we’ve come full circle. I will never stop doing it, because I know how important it is; I know how impactful it is for young people to see it. And so we’ll keep doing it, we’ll keep writing rubrics if we have to, we’ll do whatever we have to do to continue to be able to provide it like that.

CF: You also have “Women in Motion,” which seems to be a fairly new program. Would you want to speak to that as well?

DBD: You know, I think we’re just plagued with so many health issues, health challenges — and Ro Nita and I were talking about planning last season. When Ro Nita was in her other life, she produced this wonderful conference: “Beautiful Women Conference.” And so we started to think about a design that could use that format, but highlight what we do. And so we came up with WIM — and it’s Women in Motion — and why did we name it Women in Motion? Because last year we were celebrating the *Year of the Woman*.” It was Ro-Nita’s tenth year, the leadership obviously here is driven by women; however, we do have a hugely supportive male contingent in our staff. But the drive comes from women, so we developed how we integrate what we do — movement — with this real need and challenge for women to start to think about their health from a different kind of perspective.

RHS: Yes, and we were also celebrating what would have been Jeraldyn’s 75th year, and so we wanted to also bring recognition to that. So the Healthy Women Initiative is to take the dance art, and to remind women — African American women — this year we’ve expanded to Hispanic women — but *all* women about their “numbers.” And what better way to be able to remind them than for them to be able to see these beautiful dancers — as Crystal described before, with their athletic bodies — to say “You may not want to look like a dancer, but certainly what you need to do is to be your best self.” And so that’s what Women in Motion empowered by dance is all about. And so, twice a month we have an opportunity to come together, to hear a speaker about some aspect of women’s health, or health in general, and then to have a movement class that they participate in. This past month you (gesturing to Crystal) led the class...

CM: I did, I did! I was just thinking. I led the movement experience for Women in Motion, but even as Debbie was talking about our programs for pre-K through 12, one of the things that floats to the top is that really all of this education and outreach and community work are about access to a very powerful craft, to think about health and intelligence and science and math in a whole other way — a way that maybe we haven’t thought about in other disciplines before. And so when I was working with the women in Women in Motion last week, I was thinking that it never ceases to amaze me how people really *don’t* move. Right? They just don’t *move* the way we understand, and to watch them be excited about moving from head to toe and possibly giving them that as a thing to use — for most of them, in their mid-forties on until end of life — as a tool to provide joy and health and connection with that very same community, that we have something in common as a group. That’s really exciting for me to see in the Women in Motion as well as in Dancing to the Curriculum or

whatever education program that we have — the ability that dance has to lock us around an idea. That's really special.

CF: I would like to know from you, in particular, Debbie, but anybody who has a story to tell about this transition for themselves — you grew up in the company, you said you studied at the Schwarz school, really, and then joined the company. I mean, it's been your whole life, in one way — yet this is a different step, taking over for your mother.

DBD: It's a different step. Well, the transition happened quite to all of our surprise. Losing her at 58 was not what anyone thought or predicted; however, we were ready, because she *made* us ready. Kevin Ward sat as Artistic Director immediately after her, and Kevin was the Artistic Director for nine years. And I say that we were ready because we *were*. We weren't ready because she said "Kevin, you're going to be Artistic Director next, and Debbie, you're going to be Associate to his Artistic Director and deal with the second company; she made us *ready* by putting us in positions, many, many years before. Kevin *came* to us. Kevin is a Dayton native who went to Interlochen [Arts Academy]. He is an incredibly, *incredibly* brilliant and gifted man. He's brilliant, he was an incredible dancer, and he's also a very gifted pianist. So Kevin had danced with Dance Theatre of Harlem for some years, was injured, came home, picked up his career with Cincinnati Ballet, and re-injured himself. So he was home, and she asked him to simply come in and start accompanying for ballet class. So he played piano. And one day — I don't know if *she* asked him or he *decided* to take class — I mean, once a dancer, always a dancer, and it's really hard to sit still, but he took class — and I didn't *know* Kevin. So, he takes class and we're all looking, like "Really?"

SSW: "Dag!"

DBD: "Dag!" *Hub?*" And so Jon Rodriguez wanted to set a piece for us that was all men, *Half-Past Six in the Afternoon*, and asked Kevin to be one of the leads in it. We had men, but they were very green, they were very new — but Jeraldynne was very excited to showcase this grouping of men. And so Jon came in to set this piece, for which Kevin was the lead, and from that time on, he became one of the dancers, one of the spectacular, incredible performing artists. *Kevin is brilliant!* And he started working with the second company — not because he raised his hand up in the air and said, "Oh, I want to work with the second company," but because there was a need, and she said, in her way, "Kevin, I need you to do this." And he'd just kind of go "Okay. Okay." He did the second company. I was Resident Choreographer at the time, and we kind of just went through our daily lives, doing things. Then, when she got sick the first time, in the '90s, she was down for the count, and so he moved up to the day-to-day stuff with the first company, and I took over the second company. And you just kind of do what you *know* to do: you do what you know to do, and what you've been *taught* to do. And, you know, she recovered from that, and he stayed on as Associate Artistic Director of the first company, and I was with the second company. And the company grew by leaps and bounds, and Jeraldynne started to attend more national things with her contemporaries: she was part of Dance USA, which she was able to do because Kevin was in the studio. So at the time of her passing, everybody was ready. We were already in place, you know: he already had a hand in choosing who the dancers were. You know, she was a *part* of it; she would say to him, "Well, Kevin, who do *you* like?" "*You're* going to have to work with them every day. I mean, who do *you* see in the room that you believe can do what we need to do?" And so the first year was very interestingly difficult, but not in the way that you would *think* it was. Because what we didn't have — and were very *clear* that we didn't have — was her *vision*. It was like, "Okay, we can make sure that the dancers do the thing that they do, but who's going to know and understand what choreographer

to bring in here?” You know, who was a good choice? Who was *not* a good choice? So, I think Kevin and I both decided we were just going to have to get out there and figure it out. We were going to have to do it by trial and error, like she did. And I think we did okay; I think we did okay. I mean, there was a whole nation of people who really thought that we would *not* survive her death. They thought this was a one-woman operation, they thought the brilliance in her vision was too big for *anybody* to be able to follow in the footsteps. But the other reason that we were able to do it — both him and his nine years, and my going into my ninth season was because she also taught us that we didn’t have to do it *exactly* the way she did for it to be wonderful. She gave us the foundation, she gave us the standard, and then you do it how *you* think best.

CF: She empowered you.

DBD: Yes, she empowered us. And so, you know, here we are: Year 48!

RHS: And I feel that she’s still doing that. I think that her guidance, I think that the foundation that she laid but also the values that she had, the principles that she had, the choices that she made from Sheri and Debbie and Crystal and those who came before her, I think we still have that in the leadership of Debbie and Crystal, and with Sheri still being part of the essence of the company.

DBD: But it’s funny — you said Crystal...

CM: I was just getting ready to say that I never *met* her!

SSW: But you get that *feeling* from Crystal...

CM: My relationship with Miss Jeraldine is totally *spiritual*. I say that she “comes to me” — as a matter of fact, we were here together just yesterday (gesturing to the display of photographs and articles she had laid out for this interview) as I was laying out the archive materials, trying to figure out what would bring forward memories about her time, and then I realized that I had seen every photo and every article, and how intimate I already was. That thing, that empowering thing that Debbie talks about, the *massiveness* of her vision that Ro Nita was talking about, that is *infectious*. And it’s difficult for people who knew her *not* to pass it on. So as soon as you go out into the community, or you come into this place and you say that you want to be a part of this legacy, people immediately share — and immediately start to operate the way she operated: “Oh, that young dancer looks like they can choreograph, so come over here and choreograph; you look like you can teach, so come over here and teach — you don’t *know* you can teach — yet — so let me give you this experience.” “Crystal, I need you, too.” “Okay.” That same kind of thing — and so as the leadership pulls forward, we all share: I get that from them (indicating toward Sheri, Ro Nita and Debbie), and now I’m giving the same sort of thing to the *next* generation. So I didn’t know her personally, but I feel like I *do*. I feel like I do: I know her through her vision and through these people and anytime someone has what I call a “Miss Jeraldine story” — I get about two or three of them a year — I stop what I’m doing, no matter how busy I am, because I *know* that that’s important. I remember sitting down one time at a balloon launch with Mr. B,⁸ and he was talking about the studio — was it on 3rd Street? — where water was coming in on the stairs. And I just sat, and took that story in, because at the time we were upgrading this space in a way — sometimes you can’t see the end of the vision, right? — I think he *knew* that I needed that story at that time. You know, “Just pace yourself.

⁸ She refers here to Mr. Blunden, Jeraldine’s husband and Debbie’s father.

There is an endpoint to the vision, that you can move into an empty space and create a thing no one ever *could* imagine.” And I think that’s what DCDC is in a lot of ways: she moved into an empty space, and created an access point and a vision so large that almost no one could imagine what the impact of that would be.

RHS: Crystal mentions Mr. B., and Debbie’s father, Jeraldine’s husband, had an impact on not only who we *are* but on the fact of what we have been able to stabilize in memory and honor of Jeraldine Blunden’s legacy. And one of the things that he told me about those early years is that the conversations took place around the kitchen table, which they did in many African American homes — all kinds of conversation — and he said she would talk about what she wanted to do for the dancers. And he said “And I would listen, and I would wonder, ‘wonder how we’re going to do that?’” And then, shortly thereafter, she would say “And this is the *way* we’re going to be able to do that.” So, he was a very supportive husband who not only loved his wife, but loved the work that she was doing, and you could tell that from the stories that he would tell or how he embraced the vision in his own very, very quiet manner, in his own style, just to be able to say “This is what needs to be done, because my wife wants to be able to do that.” It was a beautiful love story.

CF: What’s next — in the near future for the company? And I also invite you to talk about anything that perhaps has not come up yet that you’d just love to say about DCDC or about Miss Jeraldine. So I’ll start with “What’s next?” and let you think about whether you have a lingering statement or something you’d like to share.

DBD: I mean, what’s next is unimaginable. What’s next is whatever is out there for us to reach for. You know, for me, 44 years in and getting ready to go into our fiftieth anniversary is huge. *Overwhelmingly* huge — from the perspective of being here, a part of this; huge from the perspective of who we are, and who we can be, and what do we look like in year 55, or year 57. I am surrounded every day by an incredible, *incredible* group of people, both artistically and administratively — and, as hard as the work is — and the work is *hard* — as hard as the work is, I can still talk about what are we going to look like at 55? What are we going to look like at 58? I don’t *want* to stop doing this — I don’t want this *company* to stop doing this magical thing that we do here. I always try to fill my room with artists that make the magic happen, I try to surround myself with people who are different than me, who have access to this art from a different angle, so that it always continues to challenge everyone that’s a part of it, and around the table. So, for me, *infinite* possibilities are what’s ahead.

CF: You sound like your mother’s daughter there! (This prompts deep laughter from the group.) Does anyone want to add anything to dreams for the fiftieth, or for beyond?

CM: I’ll say I have a lot of dreams for this place. I’ll share it in the form of a *challenge*, though. The American contemporary dancer is *physically* changing. And so I find myself a lot when I’m in the rehearsal studio thinking about what that means, to keep close to our hearts the classic works in a body that doesn’t train the same way we as once did fifty years ago. And it doesn’t necessarily have the *very* same political, religious, social concerns — they include some other ways of being — and that really affects how dancers process work, *physically*, in the studio. And so then, who do you invite, who’s the next choreographic voice to speak to our mission and vision? So I think about that, in the next fifty years. What’s next is how to *identify* those dancers who can round out our ensemble, and those choreographers who can speak to who we are— who we *say* we are in our mission and our vision — but in some really futuristic kind of way.

RHS: I think for us as a dance company, as a small business, as a group of individuals with passion and heart, what's next for us is to be able to make sure that our voice is *heard* — our voice is heard here locally, nationally, and internationally, in terms of not only great dance *art*, but also to be an absolutely *respected* legacy for Jeraldine Blunden. I think that what's next for us is to be able to have the strength and the power and the passion to be able to say “We are *important* in this world, we are *connected* to this world.” And as Debbie said, all things are truly possible. I think what's next for us is to be able to set a standard, and to be able to be the leader in many aspects of not only dance art, but in the way that this profession can move forward — for our people, for our profession, and for our world, in a significant way.

SSW: Mm-hmm, beautiful!

CF: Anything else that anyone would like to say? Any stories to tell, anything I haven't been able to elicit in the short time we've had. Anything that you *thought* about when you agreed to get together for this conversation...

RHS: I just want to say thank you for this opportunity. We are *so* busy, *so often*, doing what we do that just having the moment to think and to reflect, and to really *feel* Jeraldine's presence *right now* at this particular time is something that I am very grateful for. So I appreciate those who have supported this project, this initiative, and Crystal's vision of being able to make sure that we are here — and Rodney [Veal] and everyone who has helped to get us to this moment in time. Because I truly believe that things don't just *happen*; they happen because they are *supposed* to — and so I am very grateful to not only be sitting in the seat where I sit in representation of the world-renowned Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, but to be surrounded by people who can *appreciate* the legacy and can understand the work that we do. That's a gift and a blessing from God. Thank you.

CF: Thank you, Jane D'Angelo! (A chorus of thank you's to Jane is echoed around the panel.)

JD: And thank you, Rodney Veal!

SSW: Just being involved in this process right here has made me think that we need to expose this to the dancers — none of the dancers know or have ever known Jeraldine...

CM: (looking at the archival display she has arranged): I was thinking, I'll leave these materials out today...

SSW: You know, they represent well, because we carry on the legacy of the artistry. We set a standard below which we *never* go, and they learn that immediately, and perpetuate that on and on — so they need to know why. We need to make them know.

CF: The Ohio Dance VDC website will help do that, too. We hope that the site will put this out there in such a way that they and others can know something more about this history.

(Turning to the VDC team): You all always have questions...

MDB: Sheri, I was wondering if you could talk about how the seasons have perhaps developed and changed over time. You've been with the company for so long, it's amazing — can you speak to the *inside* world of the company?

SSW: It's changed a lot. You know as a *dancer* — and I keep myself *as* that — *they* can speak eons about the running of the company and la-la-la and getting this out on the road and all that, but I am not involved in that at all. I keep myself in the studio — or on the Marley as we call it, — but from that aspect, it's funny: because I have been here so long, people will come in and give me the impression that they expect me to lead them somewhere — that kind of thing. And I will step *into* that role, but I let them find their way for a little bit — *or* one of two things happens: a dancer will follow a path that the other dancers are leading — and, you know, rather quietly: dancers are typically seen and not heard; you put your work in your body, and you do your work — but they'll either follow the path that way, or we'll have some kind of angst about it — because you work hard when you step into this studio here; there's no way around it. And when I find that faltering coming, then I'll step in just a little bit, to let them know what's expected — that it is *undoubtedly* overwhelming, I'm sure, at first — but I offer it as a challenge to you, to *accept* the challenge and let it allow you to *blossom*. And that's what happens throughout the years. It's not so much *me* now — you know, 43 years, not so much *my* doing anymore — I *love* the dancing, I keep doing *that* — but I get the best joy in seeing or helping — if I can at all be involved — with that blossoming and processing of the new dancer. You know, that kind of thing. So throughout the seasons, I'm still offering the challenge to myself to be able to continue what it is — and there's never any time that I'm not encouraged, because we're *always* challenged: there's always wonderful work to do, even if we're wishing that we could have more time in the studio to get these things going sometimes — that's just how logistics work, but that's always something. I've never been in a lull —like, ugh, "I'm doing *this* again" — that never seems to be the case. Yet we are always in an environment that seems to be positive and nurturing. It's a good time: you've got a good challenge for yourself, you've got excellent work to do, you've got the ability to be able to satisfy whatever it is that's *your* hunger, with regard to dance — and I get to do it constantly and constantly (her hands indicate a wheel, continuously turning) with different people: people come, people go, people come, people go — there's always a change as far as my colleagues are involved. And so, like I said, now — this end — the blossoming effect in the *other* dancers is something that really nourishes me. I don't know if that's selfish, but I get inspired by that, all the time.

CF: On that note, I'd like to say how inspired I am being in the room with *you* all, and I wish you the best and look forward to watching what happens next. I hope that we might continue this conversation in the future, because I know we have only scratched the surface. Our thanks to you all.