

VDC Interview Transcript
Elaine Gibbs/Diane McIntyre and Laverne Wilcox
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OhioDance
Cleveland State University
Middough Building
1901 E. 13th Street
Room 255
Cleveland, OH

Key:

CF: Candace Feck
DM: Dianne McIntyre
LW: Laverne Wilcox
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway, VDC film team
JD: Jane D'Angelo, Director, OhioDance

CF:

It's a pleasure to follow up with you both about this amazing woman, your teacher, Elaine Gibbs Redmond. Perhaps the obvious place to begin is to get on record how you first came into contact with Miss Gibbs. Let's begin with you, Laverne.

LW: Oh, okay! I first met Elaine Gibbs when I was four years old. I don't remember all of this, but I do know that my mother used to bring me to dancing school. I did not want to be there, but she insisted (she looks at Dianne, and both chuckle at this admission). Every week, I would go fighting and screaming to dance school, and I do remember that. And I do remember this very large room, and of course it was, I think, the gym (she looks to Dianne for confirmation)...

DM: Yes (nodding).

LW: ...at Cory Methodist Church¹ on East 105th, and I remember every Saturday we went to dancing school, and as I said we began when I was four years old. I don't quite remember if Dianne (she addresses her): You were probably there...I think you had been there a little before me...

DM: Okay.

LW: ...and that's how *we* met (looking again to Dianne). Because I was four, and (to Dianne): I think you were dancing then, too, and you had been there, I don't know, about a year or so before me?

¹Located at 1117 E. 105th St. in Cleveland, OH, Cory Methodist Church is one of the oldest African American churches in Cleveland. It was one of the largest Black-owned churches in the United States at the time of its dedication (at its present site) in 1947, and has remained an important historical landmark, serving as a nationally important stop for Civil Rights luminaries in the 1960s, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, who both gave important speeches there. The church has also always housed a number of community services, such as the dance classes taught there by Elaine Gibbs Redmond.

DM: Depends on our age difference, I can't remember — maybe a couple of years (she laughs).

LW: Okay, not a problem.

DM: I think I might have been there a year ahead of you.

LW: Okay, so that's how I met Elaine. I can't tell you when I really began to develop an appreciation for the Dance, but I do remember that I stayed with her for many years, until I was about sixteen or seventeen years old. So she has had a very, very strong impact on my life.

CF: And I want to come back exactly to that point, but I want to hear about Dianne's memories of meeting Miss Gibbs. (To Laverne) I know that you've mentioned your mother knew about Miss Gibbs; (to Dianne) was it the same for you?

DM: No. My parents tell me that when I was little, I just danced around the house a lot. The radio would be on, and I just made up dances to the music on the radio, and I guess I had a lot of moving energy, so they felt "Maybe she should be dancing!" My father and his family were friends of Elaine Gibbs and her family. They had grown up not far from each other in the Mt. Pleasant area — even though at this period, both families were living in the Glenville area of Cleveland. My father knew Elaine Gibbs, and so my mother and father said, "Oh, yeah, take her to Elaine." But Elaine hadn't started a dance school yet. He knew that she was a dancer, because their families knew each other. So, she was starting her classes in her basement; it was, I guess, in her parents' basement, and so that's where I started taking classes with her, in her basement — and I think at first, I was the only person (she laughs) — it was just *me!* Maybe later, there were a couple of others, but I distinctly remember me, by myself, with her, when I was a little girl — I think I was four, and she instructed me there, in her basement. And then not long after — I don't remember how long it was — that then we were going to Cory Church. Cory was actually only, like, two blocks from where we lived, and probably only one block from where she lived, and so it was very close. The thing I remember about Cory is that when you walked in that door (she looks to Laverne) — it wasn't the door where you go into the church...

LW: Yes (nodding affirmatively).

DM: ...it was more of a side door, and we'd go down the stairs into the gymnasium, and the thing I always remember about it was the smell. (Looking to Laverne) It was *so clean!* It was just the smell of clean! I don't know, it was just like Spic 'n' Span, it was just like "Oh, yes!" I don't know if it was some disinfectant or something, I don't know what it was, but I just love the memory of that smell. And then we'd go down the steps into that big, huge room, which later I realized, too, was a big gymnasium. That church is huge!

LW: Yes, it is.

CF: I've seen photos of it...

DM: (to LW) I heard something on the radio about it the other day...

LW: Oh, really?

DM: Mm-hmm. Yeah, because they were talking about how Martin Luther King had spoken there...

LW: Yes.

DM: ...and Malcolm X...

LW: Yes.

DM: ...and they were speaking to the man who is the pastor there now.

LW: Oh...

DM: It's bigger than we thought. There were all kinds of places in there. It was a Jewish Synagogue first...before our time.

LW: Yes (nodding her agreement).

DM: That's how I became introduced to Miss Gibbs.

CF: And there were other very famous people who came through there: Janet Collins, Paul Robeson, I think...

LW: Yes!

CF: And I believe Elaine Gibbs told us that Janet Collins had remarked about you...

DM: But Elaine just told me that a few years ago. I never knew! I guess Janet Collins and Paul Robeson might have been touring around the church, and Elaine says that Janet Collins was watching a class, and she pointed me out and she said, "Oh, you have a dancer there!"

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: And the thing is that for many years, I was always a fan of Janet Collins...I never saw her dance. She was just like an icon in dance history. The pictures that I've seen of her...because she was both a ballet dancer and a modern dancer; I guess she veered into modern dance because there were only so many opportunities — there were really *no* opportunities for a black ballerina, even though she was a ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera. And I even met her one time! And I told her I got to see her when I was a little girl, performing. I met her in about the early 90s, but I never knew anything about this until about 2006 or something, when Elaine told me that story about Janet Collins.

LW: She just recently told me about that — this year, as a matter of fact.

DM: Really? (LW nods, affirmatively.) So...we had a good time, every Saturday.

CF: Every Saturday. Did she teach all day long there, with many classes? (They nod). And you would advance, then, into the next level of classes?

LW: We started about... what? (She looks to DM): At about 9:30 in the morning?

DM: Mm-hmm...

LW: And our class was the last one...

DM: You have a good memory!

LW: Oh yes, I remember that very well.

DM: Okay, girl.

LW: And the reason I remember it is that when she was having babies, then I ended up being the one that...

DM: ...demonstrated...

LW: ...did all the work: I opened the studio, I taught the classes, and then when it came to *our* class, we *all* sort of taught ourselves, with each other. But that was always at the end, and that was usually around 3:00.

DM: Yes, yes.

LW: We usually ended up about 4:00.

DM: 4:00, yes.

LW: But we were there from about 8:30 in the morning until 4:00 on Saturdays — *every* Saturday!

DM: Mm-hmm.

CF: What an act of generosity on *her* part because I didn't know until talking with her recently that she *only* taught on Saturdays. She had a weekday job! And *then* she came in and did the whole Saturday! It wasn't for an income; she did it because it was important to her!

DM: Yes, it was her love!

Break to answer phone 8:26 – 8:31

LW: Yes, it was — and still is, actually.

DM: It still *is*! Yes, when you hear her talk about the Dance now, it's *in* her, yes.

LW: In fact, there have been times even as late as now, where she has talked about opening up a studio! I mean, even *now*. So, she...

DM: (nodding) Yes.

LW: ...still loves dance.

DM: Yes, she said "I can teach from the chair!"

(They laugh, admiringly.)

LW: Exactly! She says it exactly like that.

DM: She says, “I can teach from the chair. Other people do.”

LW: Yes! They do, they do.

CF: She mentioned that. She said, “Miss Gensler taught with a stick.” And she said, “I could do that.”

LW: (turning to DM) And you remember, Elaine used to *always* have a stick...

DM: That’s right, she always had a stick!

LW: She always had her own stick, and she would...

DM: She’d keep time with the stick, and...

LW: Yep.

DM: (turning to LW) I had forgotten about that!

LW: Oh, I didn’t!

DM: Well, she has a good memory! And when we would advance — even when she wasn’t having the babies — we would be the demonstrators for the younger children.

LW: Yes.

DM: So that’s why we were there all day, too.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: Because we were helping with the little ones. And she loved her little (to LW)... did she call them her babies?

LW: Mm-hmm, yeah. Yes, she did.

DM: The little ones, yes.

CF: How long was the Cory period — before she moved to a studio?

DM: I don’t know...

LW: I don’t recall *exactly* when she left Cory, but I do remember when we moved into the studio...

DM: ...138th St.

LW: Mm-hmm. 138th. We were...

DM: ...I think about eleven or so?

LW: Yeah, we were around eleven or twelve — something like that.

CF: So, if you started at four, Cory must have gone on for a good six or seven years...

DM: Yes, because that's why it's etched in our memories.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: It wasn't like a passing thing.

LW: Right.

DM: It was a while.

CF: And then, once she got to the studio, that was the place... I can't remember, did she have a second studio?

DM: That was later. I wasn't ... (to LW): Were you at that second studio?

LW: No, I wasn't there either.

DM: It was after...

LW: I sort of stopped dancing around sixteen, seventeen. Dianne had already gone to college, and I think the following year is when she opened up another studio, which was on Lee Road.

DM: Lee Road and Scottsdale.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: I visited there once, when she was teaching classes.

LW: Yeah...

CF: Well, it seems she became a kind of empire unto herself. It seems that she could have taught fulltime, but she kept it to Saturdays.

(They both nod agreement.)

CF: She was never lacking for students. And she said she didn't advertise — it was word of mouth.

LW: No, she didn't! She always had full classes. *Always*. I can remember when we would be there, and all of her classes, from the very beginners to the advanced classes — they were all full.

DM: They were always full.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: The thing is, okay, it was the place to go. I know she doesn't really want to emphasize racial things — and we didn't even know!

LW: We didn't.

DM: We were all black children, and we didn't know! This might sound weird to you, but we didn't notice that we were all black — which is funny, because the school that I went to — we lived in Mt. Pleasant, in the 50 and 60s — and my elementary, junior high and high [school] — all the time that I was with Elaine — those schools were integrated. They were mixed-race schools. So we had little children: Asian, Caucasian, Black— we were all together in school. But they weren't in our dancing school.

LW: No.

DM: But we didn't ...it was never pointed out to us.

LW: No.

DM: It's only when we look back on it.

(The both laugh about this.)

LW: We never ... (she shrugs)

DM: It was just like, "You go to dancing school." And the thing is now that we're looking back on it, it was the place for all the young people around Cleveland who were young people of color, that was the dancing school to go to.

LW: That was.

DM: That was where you went. That is why the classes were all full. And the word of mouth was just like, well...and you take your people, just like in any culture, *any* ethnicity, the people want their young people to have culture...

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: They want them to play an instrument, to be in the Arts, to dance — *something* to help with their refinement as they develop into adults. The same. So that was, well, you wanted your child — there were boys, there were girls — to be in the dance classes.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: So, it was the place to be. And the thing is, I don't know...it was probably also during that era — not that we looked for it — but we probably would not have been really able to go to the other dance schools. But we didn't know that.

LW: That's *true*.

DM: We did not notice. See, we did not — as adults, or children, we did not sit around thinking about those things.

LW: (shaking her head in agreement with this summary) And the idea of not becoming a professional dancer because of our color never occurred to us!

DM: No.

LW: We *never* thought of that.

DM: No.

LW: Because it was never discussed. I remember, even though I didn't become a professional dancer, at one time I had considered it, and I did classical ballet — I didn't really do modern — I was more classical. But it never occurred to me that I couldn't go on if I wanted to, and be a professional classical dancer. It *never* occurred to me. Even though the reality was, at that time, that that was never going to happen, in my era.

DM: It's still going on.

LW: Yeah! It's *still* going on, you're absolutely right.

DM: It's a big deal. See, *now* little African/American children know that.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: ... because it's pointed out to them. And then you have a young lady like Misty Copeland, and you see that "Oh, she's the first, tah-dah, da-dah-da-da." Okay, people have been dancing like her since the 1920s...

LW: Exactly, exactly.

DM: ...who are her *color*. It's just like, "Excuse me!" And then there's Dance Theater of Harlem, which *began* just to give that opportunity and show the world, "Yes, look at these brown dancers. They can do anything!"

LW: Yes! Mm-hmm.

DM: And so all of those things happened before when we were little.

LW: Yeah.

DM: We didn't know that there were some ...we knew about civil rights and things like that, as we got older — but we didn't think of it related to our dance.

LW: Exactly. Or related to *us* — at least *I* didn't.

DM: No.

LW: Because we had not been exposed to that. We had been exposed to culture. As far as we were concerned, we could do whatever we wanted to do.

DM: Yes...

LW: We were never told that because of our color, we could *not* do these things. And so we aspired to do them.

DM: Yes.

LW: Okay? With no thought about, “Oh, what happens if I go in, and...” And so (she looks to Dianne)... what more can we say other than that?

DM: (to LW) Did I tell you about the time Elaine took me to this dance — maybe it was an audition...

LW: Okay...

DM: She took me to this event. I was still a child. I don't think you were there.

LW: Okay...

DM: Maybe I was ten, or eleven. And she took me to a place...I'll have to ask her; (to Laverne) I've never *asked* her! I can't remember what it was. It was...kind of an audition. Maybe it was so I could take some more dance classes — maybe through the week or whatever, like that. And there was a panel of people — (she closes her eyes, trying to remember) — maybe I'm making that up...there were a few people there. There was no other black child there. Just me. But *still*, that was no big deal to me, because of my school — I had been in settings like this.

Okay, so we're all getting our little shoes on and everything, and we're all doing (her hands indicate a swing). I said “Oh, I wonder how I'm going to be compared to these other people, because (laughing) they've danced somewhere else. I can't remember how I was... related to them. I remember going across the floor, doing the pliés and everything. What I *remember distinctly* is that the teacher and the other people did *not* see me. And I'm only ten, eleven... I. Was. Invisible. Maybe there were ten, twelve of us in the class — I don't remember how many people there were in the class — I was invisible. That hurt me so! It was very big and obvious. I never even said it to Miss Gibbs.

LW: Hmm.

DM: I didn't say "Those people didn't even notice me!" I never said it to my parents, to *anybody*. Whatever it was you were supposed to get from it, I didn't get. You know, maybe a few of those people went on to some special classes or something — but that was a *distinct* thing that I remember. And I guess I felt that it was related to my race. But I had never had an experience like that before, so it was a little ... and I didn't talk to anybody about it, because it was, "I was like "Why didn't they pay any attention to me?" I *didn't* think it had to do with my dancing. I didn't think it was...like, "Look, she went tripping over her feet," or whatever. (She laughs) — like that.

LW: Hmm.

DM: (to LW): I never told you about that, did I?

LW: No! This is the first I'm hearing it.

DM: It's a vague memory. I have to ask Elaine about it.

CF: I understand she took her students on field trips...

DM: Oh, she did!

LW: Oh, yeah.

DM: She took us to ballet concerts...

LW: Oh, yeah. That was *nothing* unusual for us.

DM: Oh, yes. We got to see all the...but the same thing! We saw all these great ballets. It didn't occur to us... I mean, we didn't see anybody who looked like us.

LW: No.

DM: It was no big deal. NO big deal. (She begins to laugh) You know what? I have a friend in Atlanta — we went to all of these schools together: Rickoff, Hamilton and John Adams...when I saw her in Atlanta a couple of years ago, she said, "Dianne, you know where we lived when we were growing up? We lived in "Leave it to Beaver" Land! (They are both laughing hard). Yes, she did. (Still laughing). She said, "We lived in "Leave it to Beaver" Land. I said, "That's exactly right." (To me) I don't know if you ever heard of "Leave it to Beaver," but that was our existence. (I assure her that I was very familiar with the show.) (To LW) Yeah, things have changed, haven't they? She is still trying to compose herself. So that might give you...I said, "Wow! That's exactly right!" So, we had thoughts that were just like any young person growing up in America at that time.

LW: Yeah, yeah.

DM: That's what it was...

CF: Taking a departure here, are there any stories you might share about your years with Miss Gibbs — as a teacher, as a person?
She shared a story about you, Dianne.

DM: Oh, really?

CF: She told us how tiny you were... when you started dancing, that the ribbons on your shoes were always trailing behind you. She said she was always worrying that you might trip over them.

DM: Well, that probably just was me. I was always moving too fast, and probably didn't tie them well. It was like (she makes a series of very swift hand gestures): "Okay I'm ready!" (to LW's laughter) It probably was like that!

CF: Any anecdote that captures her spirit sheds light on what it was like to learn from her. Something she would say, something that stands out in your memory...

DM: You know, just about her whole physical...just her beauty.

LW: Yes.

DM: Her hands, her fingers...and she's still like that.

LW: Mm-hmm. She hasn't changed a bit.

DM: (Thinking, she turns to LW) What do you call that? It's like *you*! Yeah.

CF: Elegance?

DM: Yeah, her elegance.

LW: (Surprised, but pleased by the comparison) Oh!!! My goodness, and she was *very* elegant!

DM: Yes.

LW: And I, personally, have always said — and I really did say this: "When I grow up, I want to be just like her. And what's interesting is that I have ended up being very much like her... I used to admire the way that she carried herself, and you know, Elaine was never a very small woman, but she was always very graceful. And even though she was *animated*, even in the way that she moved — her hands, everything was very graceful. And I *always* (her voice drops to a reverent tone) wanted to be *just* like her (Turning to DM): I even — no one ever knew this — I even wanted to try to *write* like her, that's how...

DM: Oh! Her writing! My *goodness*, her penmanship!

LW: Oh, it was flowing (she waves her hands, softly)...

DM: Yes!

LW: It was just beautiful! Just flowing — always flowing...

DM: That's right!

LW: So, I mean, I remember that, and always even to this day, I *still* call her my “second mother,” because we were *with* her — even though we were only there on Saturdays — Dianne and I also babysat for her, so we were at her home, many times.

DM: Yes.

LW: And then sometimes, we’d be over there for ... (turning to DM): Remember those overnights we would have over there?

DM: Yes, overnights!

LW: We were the senior dancers...

DM: Yeah, it was the senior dancers...

LW: And we would go to her house for the overnights, and it would be *so much fun!*

DM: *Yeab...* it was a family!

LW: Yeah! It was — *very* much a family! But, just her *beauty*...

DM: Mm-hmm...

LW: — just inside and out. She was — and still is — you know. And when I see her, and even though she is up in age now, but she still has that beauty, the grace, the poise...

DM: Yes, the poise...

LW: Even though, you know, she’s walking with a walker, there’s still that beautiful... you know. You can’t help but see her, wherever she is. Everyone *stops* and looks at her when she’s in a room.

DM: Yes.

The dancers from Dance Theatre of Harlem got to meet her when they were here last year...

LW: (Gasps) Oh, how awesome!

DM: Yeah, and they were like... I said this is my first dance teacher and they were like (leaning forward) “Oh!” And they surrounded her; she was telling them stories ... they were in heaven and so was she.

LW: Yes! (Laughing, with obvious pleasure, imagining the scene.)

DM: I remember she always wore a bracelet that had a little tinkle sound...

LW: (Nodding) She had it on the other day!

DM: And then we would go out to get her snacks and things like that.

There was a...must have been a drug store on the corner of 140th...

LW: Mm-hmm, I remember the drug store.

DM: And they had a soda fountain, and I remember her receipt books...

LW: I do, too.

DM: Maybe that's why I remember her writing.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: She must have kept meticulous records of all the payments and all like that...

LW: Yes.

CF: She did do that for Miss Gensler;² she mentioned that she was the bookkeeper...

DM: So I guess she knew that from *her* mentor.

LW: Yes.

DM: Oh, so what happened was that Laverne was always completely into the classical ballet, which is what Elaine taught. And when I was in the upper elementary school — about the fifth grade, I also took modern dance classes after school, and I had a teacher named Virginia Dryansky.³ She was a Karamu⁴ dancer, so when I got to college, I found out that I was a very early person to learn modern dance. Usually, children don't get modern dance, but because Cleveland, as I told you, was

² Viola Gensler was Elaine Gibb's first teacher and employer.

³ At this writing, little is known about Virginia Dryansky (1929-2002). She was married to Leonard Dryansky (1928-1999), who was a graduate of Case Western Reserve University and was employed as an artist, playwright and professor emeritus of theater history and design at Syracuse University; he also served a stint as resident designer and art director for the Karamu House in Cleveland. At the time of his death, Leonard and Virginia had been married 51 years, and had four children, five grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. The two were summer residents of Sandisfield, MA for more than sixty-two years and had retired there in 1994.

⁴ A Swahili word meaning "Place of enjoyment in the Center of the Community," Karamu began as a Settlement House at the corner of East 38th and Central Avenue in Cleveland, intended to provide a common ground where people of different races, religions, social and economic backgrounds could come together to seek and share common ventures. Subsequently, it became clear that it was the arts that offered the perfect common ground. The Playhouse Settlement, renamed Karamu House in 1941, became — among other things — a magnet for some of the best African-American artists of the day. Now, over 100 years old, Karamu House has become a national treasure.

very advanced, it was part of our school — in our school at Rickoff,⁵ we had part of what was called the Mt. Pleasant Community Center, (looking to LW) which is now the Murtis Taylor⁶ Center...

LW: Oh!

DM: ...and Murtis Taylor was the Head of it; our family knew Miss Taylor. And the thing is that they offered after-school arts programs within the schools, even though it was a different arts program. So after school, on certain days of the week — it was probably once a week, but I can't remember — I took these modern dance classes. So I took those, and I was taking the classes with Elaine on Saturday.

CF: So you didn't go to Karamu; Miss Dryansky came to you?

DM: She came to us. Yeah, and I never saw her perform; I've only seen pictures of her with the Karamu Dancers — in recent years. I'm not sure if she's living, but I saw her in the late 90s when I did a performance. I saw her once in London; her husband had a residency there. I can't remember his work, but she came to a rehearsal of mine in London. She was so proud of me, just like Elaine. That was in the 80s, and then I saw her at Jacob's Pillow⁷ in the late 90s, and she and her husband lived close by, and so they read that I was going to be there. So I introduced to the audience that one of my early teachers was there, and that was very sweet. She had a certain condition. It was not Alzheimer's, but something like that; it was not that easy to communicate.

CF: Miss Gibbs taught only ballet?

DM: (both nodding) Yes. Well, she taught tap...

LW: Yeah.

DM: And, kind of acrobatics, too.

LW: Yeah, and she also did social dancing, too.

DM: Really?

⁵ Andrew J. Rickoff School is part of the Cleveland Municipal School District, a public school located in Cleveland, OH at 3500 E 147th St. 44120.

⁶ Murtis Taylor Human Services System is a county-wide United Way charitable organization Cleveland, OH, that provides Community Mental Health, Alcohol and other addiction services, Youth, Family, and Senior services. It serves more than 11,000 children and adults annually.

⁷ Purchased in 1931 by early modern dance pioneer, Ted Shawn, Jacob's Pillow was once a hard-scrabble mountaintop farm in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, and is now a home for international dance, a treasured 220-acre National Historic Landmark, a recipient of the prestigious National Medal of Arts, and home to America's longest-running international dance festival. The Pillow's mission is to support dance creation, presentation, education, and preservation; and to engage and deepen public appreciation and support for dance. Each summer season, world premieres, U.S. debuts, diverse artists, and collaborations with composers, visual artists, and writers comprise over 150 performances presented to thousands of visitors from across the U.S. and around the globe.

LW: Yeah, she did the ballroom dancing.

DM: I didn't know that!

LW: Mm-hmm. She didn't do much of it...

DM: Okay.

LW: ...but she did some. I was over there the other day and she mentioned that. She said, "Did you know that I taught ballroom?" "Yes, I knew that." I remember, you know, every once in a while...

DM: I didn't know! Were they grown people?

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: And did you talk about, you know, the singers?

LW: (Both laughing) No, I didn't talk about the singers, but we *can* talk about it. (There is an extended period of laughing here, as they remember.)

LW: Well, you see, *we've* talked about it.

DM: See, Elaine's father was from New York. She still has relatives in New York City. I didn't know that at the time. Well, she had the New York connections with some of her relatives. One of her relatives, I think, was an agent, or manager of certain artists in some singing groups...

CF: Her Uncle Frank, I think, managed Small's Paradise...

DM: Really? Oh, *you* talked about a lot of things!

LW: *Yeah*, I didn't know she had talked about that...

DM: Her Uncle Frank was what? Manager of Small's Paradise?

CF: I think so.

LW: Yeah.

DM: Wow!

LW: (Nodding) I remember...

CF: But tell about the singers.

DM: So, there was a singing group (to LW): Wasn't it Little Anthony and the Imperials?

LW: Well, not the...

DM: The local group...

DM: Well, I think her Uncle also *managed* Little Anthony and the Imperials...

DM: Yes.

LW: And we got to meet them. And also Gladys Knight and the Pips!

DM: Oh, really? Oh, okay.

LW: Yes, I remember them. We got to meet them and we were just so excited!

DM: We were so excited. I think we were over at her house one time and they were there...

LW: Yes.

DM: And then they left, and one of the girls – I don't know who it was — said, "Oh my goodness, this is the seat that Little Anthony was sitting in! I have to sit here!" (This provokes laughter from LW). Yeah, because he was very famous then.

LW: Yes, he was.

DM: But there was *another* group that rehearsed there. Well, I think she did their choreography.

LW: Yes.

DM: That's basically what we're trying to say. So, how that happened between New York and Cleveland, I don't know. We didn't think about those logistics.

LW: No! We just knew there were some really *cute* young men in our studio. (Looking to DM) Remember?

DM: Yeah, well they used to rehearse — but they were local. They were older than us, but we weren't *that* young. Like, nowadays, they would *not* be that much older than us...

LW: Right.

DM: They were about four...

LW: ...four years or so older, yeah.

DM: And we were like only twelve or thirteen, so they were *really* old! (They are both laughing at this shared memory.) I mean, because they might have been *seventeen* or *eighteen*! (with feigned amazement at the age difference).

LW: Yeah!

DM: And they were really cute! (Both laughing, again.)

LW: They *were*!

DM: (Shrieking with laughter). So we used to giggle about them while we were in the dressing room and they'd be in there rehearsing. I don't know if she worked with them or if they just used the studio to practice...

LW: She *worked* with them — I remember that.

DM: Oh, okay, so she helped with their choreography.

LW: And we'd be behind the curtain (she squeezes her fingers together, as if pinching a curtain to peer into the rehearsal), peeking out and just giggling (they are practically talking in one voice here). It was really funny.

DM: I think one of them was named Bobby Settles.

LW: Yes.

DM: And there's a young man — I saw him at Karamu the other day — and he's an actor. He was in a production I did a few years ago. And I said, "Devon, your last name is Settles, right?" I said, "Do you have a relative named Robert or an uncle or a grandfather or something? He said "No, there are a lot of Settles in Cleveland, and they're not all related to each other."

LW: Oh, okay...

CF: I think from what Miss Gibbs told us, her uncle was in New York, and she got to live there at least one summer with him, and she'd go back and forth, and got to see Bojangles and all these other performers...showgirls who would come to Small's Paradise after hours...

LW: Mm-hmm. After their shift...

CF: It seemed that was very inspirational to her, and she would bring that information back. And she retained all of those connections, obviously. She knew the cast of *Hair*, and traveled in Europe...

DM: Yes.

LW: Oh, yeah, she did a lot of traveling in Europe. Yeah, she did...

DM: And, I guess we got the *effects* of that cosmopolitan life...

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: And it's *not* like she was talking to us about it, but that was part of her DNA, so it rubbed off on us.

LW: (Turning to DM): More so on *you* — because you do a lot of traveling, even now.

DM: (Laughing) She was a big influence on us and so many, many young people all over the city — west side, east side...

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: And another person, Adenike...

CF: Adenike Sharpley.

DM: Yes, have you interviewed her for something else?

CF: I have tried, but haven't been able to connect with her...

DM: I saw her about a month and a half ago. She lives in South Carolina now.

LW: Oh!

DM: Yes, that's what it is. She retired from Oberlin, and she just *praises* Miss Gibbs *so* much! Because she was a student, and she went on to develop and to teach dance. She went into the African dance tradition.

LW: Was her name originally Marian?

DM: Yes.

LW: Okay, I know who you're talking about.

DM: Yes, yes. So she moved to South Carolina.

CF: Was she a classmate of yours at Miss Gibbs' studio?

DM: Yes, but she was a bit younger.

LW: I remember her, though. I do remember her.

CF: But she was Marian then?

LW: Yes — *then*.

DM: So she was *after* us.

CF: Yes, I had hoped to talk with her another time...

DM: Oh, she would talk about Miss Gibbs — and one time I got to take Miss Gibbs to Oberlin to see one of Marian's concerts, and her concert was just *amazing*! I thought it was just going to be, you know, a traditional African dance? However, it wasn't. It was like a play! And the people did all types of dance, and she had a band — a full band! Very, very unique, she did amazing work there at Oberlin. So she's retired from there now.

CF: Sounds like my chances to talk with her are going to shrink — but who knows?

DM: There's another lady, Marian Turner, who's a professor of Dance in North Carolina someplace...

CF: Another student of Miss Gibbs?

DM: Mm-hmm.

LW: Yeah, that name sounds familiar...

DM: Mm-hmm.

We discuss a couple of people who had been mentioned by Miss Gibbs in our earlier interview — people whose last names I did not catch at the time. One is Jackie Stratford, and another is Carla Ford.

LW: She's very much in touch with her now.

DM: Oh yes, they're very close.

LW: I spoke with her on the phone.

DM: Oh, you did?

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: Carla's sister is named Carol Jean [Ford]. Carla and Carol Jean were both students, however they're younger — I used to babysit them — the thing is that Carla lives in California, but they are very close with Elaine now.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: Their father was Dr. Ford...

LW: Yeah, I remember that.

DM: Their mother Muriel, they both have passed in the last year.

LW: Oh, I didn't know that...

Brief discussion about an earlier conversation about Carla coming in for an interview.

CF: What is clear is that Elaine has had such a lasting impact on so many of her students. I wonder if each of you would like to talk about her impact on you, personally? I mean, here you are older than she was when she was teaching, I suppose, and Laverne, you were over there just the other day; you both run into people who studied with her, you think of her, you know what a strong impact she had, and I'd love to hear more about that. What was it that she gave you and others — besides dance classes?

LW: Oh my goodness, where do we begin? I said this before and I'll say it again. She gave me the opportunity to learn about culture. My mother was a cultured woman, but didn't have the experience — she was not well-traveled like Elaine was. And I thank her to this day — and I'm just bringing my mother up because that's the reason that I started dancing in the first place — but where my mother was lacking, Elaine gave me what I needed in terms of an appreciation for classical music. You know black people, especially young black children, really didn't have that opportunity. I remember my daughter — of course I was older then — I was trying to teach her about classical music and so forth, and I remember I used to play it in my car all the time. When I would play it, and especially in the summer time when the windows were open, this is what my daughter would do (she shrinks back, and downwards, as if hiding beneath public view)...

DM: Ohhhh...

LW: ...so that nobody could see her in the car.

DM: Wow.

LW: And it bothered me, because I wanted to be able to give her the same thing that Elaine gave me. Okay, and to this day I still love classical music, being able to go to the theater and appreciate the theater — the poise and the grace and all those things... I do attribute that to her, okay. And I am *so* thankful that I knew her; that's why I say that I see her as my second mother, because she did give me so much of that. The appreciation of dance — and it's not just classical ballet — of all *kinds* of dance, and I just thank her so much for that, because I don't think that I would have gotten that had it not been for her. So that's what I can say that she gave me.

CF: There's also something embedded in what you said earlier — the fact that she gave you the confidence to believe that you could pursue *any* achievement, that you never even considered that you couldn't pursue dance if you wanted to.

LW: Oh! Absolutely. *Absolutely!* I never in my wildest dreams ever thought that I could *not* become a professional prima ballerina. *Really.* I, unlike Dianne, who loved both — she loved modern dance — I preferred classical dance — I always did. I did go to Karamu for a while — I was *not* having it. I was not excited about modern dance. It just never appealed to me. I liked to watch it, but I didn't want to do it. My thing was classical. But it never occurred to me that I could not be a prima ballerina. Never occurred to me. I was probably in my forties (she smiles at this point) before I realized I probably never *could* have been one! But, it was up until then that I felt if I had wanted to, I could have been out there doing it. So, that's what she gave to me.

CF: Confidence, and a sense of empowerment.

LW: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

CF: Limitless possibility.

LW: Yes! Absolutely.

CF: That's not a small thing.

CF: (To Dianne) How about you?

DM: Well, I will say first of all... I want to say about Laverne that I remember her dancing was exquisite.

LW: Oh!

DM: It was! It was.

LW: Wow.

DM: There were things that she could do that I couldn't do.

LW: Wow!

DM: You had the perfect line. You looked just like the pictures! You looked like the picture of perfect ballet dancers.

LW: (Clutching her chest) Oh, Dianne!

DM: It's true!

LW: Oh! (She wraps her arms around Dianne in an embrace, and kisses her on the cheek.) You've said that to me before and it brought tears to my eyes because I never, ever thought that. I loved dancing — I mean, I felt I could do it — but what you're saying to me, I never felt that!

DM: (To me): She was like that.

LW: Wow.

DM: And she worked *so hard*.

LW: (Shaking her head in astonishment.)

DM: She *did*, to achieve that. She did. It was really beautiful.

LW: Wow. (Turns toward Dianne, reaching for her hand.) Thank you so much. And, you know, coming from you? Oh, my! That is so special.

DM: Yeah, I can remember. Yes.

LW: That is so special. Mmmm.

DM: Yeah, the truth.

LW: Okay (fanning her face with her hand), I'm not going to cry, I promise. Wow (shaking her head).

DM: And so, I guess from Elaine, I got that — you know, the grace the poise, the grooming — she liked us to be very well-groomed! (She laughs.)

LW: (Nodding firmly.) Oh, yes. *Ohhhh*, yes!

DM: And, you know, I had that from my mother, also. What it is is that Elaine would *talk* about it; you know, from my mother it was an *example*, and just her, from when we were little, doing our nails — but Elaine would *talk* about it, just the certain ways you had to be groomed.

LW: Yes!

DM: And I also got from her — I guess, you know, I had my own dance school, too, and dance studio in New York. I guess I picked that up from her. And also I love teaching dance, and I got that confidence that I could do this — I could *pursue* this field — yes, I could *pursue* this field. There would be no barriers. I could move forward as a dancer, and (she chokes up a bit) I'm just grateful for that.

LW: Yes.

DM: Yes.

CF: What did she think about, let's say, your choice to study modern dance at Karamu on the weekdays, and then what did she think about you choosing to go to OSU?

DM: Oh, well, it was fine that I was doing that on the weekdays, and I never really studied dance at Karamu. When I got to college, and I was home in the summers, I would actually take classes at Karamu with Joan Hartshorn.⁸ She's a person you should interview. Joan Hartshorn was the director of Dance at Karamu for over twenty years. She used to dance with the Limon Company, and somehow, she and her husband ended up settling in Cleveland. So I would take classes with her — she was a brilliant teacher — in the summers — and then in my last couple of summers in college — maybe the last one — then, I taught, also. I taught some classes at Karamu, and I taught the children in the summer, around town. So, that was fun. The thing is that Elaine would come to my concerts at Ohio State with my parents. They would drive from Cleveland. My parents were at *everything*. (Turning to Laverne) From when we were little...

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: ...they were at every concert, growing up, and then they were at every concert that I was in at Ohio State, they were at every concert I was in, in New York. You know, a few years ago, I was at Oberlin, and my mother — on 2015, the year that my mother passed — I did a solo through CSU, at their concert — and there my mother was, in the front row.

LW: Wow!

⁸ In 1961 Joan Hartshorne, a Jose Limon dancer, became dance director at Karamu, where she carried on the Humphrey-Weidman tradition until 1981.

DM: Yeah, they were always there — even though she wasn't that enthusiastic about me pursuing that field, which I didn't know until I was older — Elaine told me that. My father was like, “Whatever you want to do.” So when she (Miss Gibbs) would come to OSU and see the dances and some that I was in, she would be critical of *some* of them. She would... I mean, she didn't say “Well, why are you doing that stuff? She didn't say that, but there would be specific gestures or specific ways of moving that she didn't really appreciate, and she would talk about it. She wasn't ever shy about talking about that (LW nods her head in agreement). But I remember we did a piece by Anna Sokolow⁹; it's recorded, it's there at Ohio State, filmed. That was like “Whoa!” It was quite life-transforming for all of us. It was a *very* hard piece, and we had to do hard stuff — not athletic, but hard — like, leaning back, way back, with your arms back, for like, you know, three minutes...

LW: Wow!

DM: It was called *Odes* (1964), and Elaine was always calling it “Odds” (she laughs): “What about that piece you did called ‘Odds’? What was that about?” She'd have very specific things. And the other thing about modern dance that she does not care about is that we don't use our hands in the classical ballet way.

LW: Yes.

DM: Sometimes you do, if it's called for. But the beginnings of modern dance were a reaction *against* the ballet, so in the early part of modern dance, they tried to do everything that's not like ballet. So in my early training, I was training with people who were just the second generation of the people who were the early modern dancers. So they were like, “Yes, let's get *rid* of all that stuff!” Even when I first went to OSU, we didn't *have* ballet classes — they came in toward the end of my period there. But she always appreciated my dancing, and my choreography, and she was just so happy that I pursued that area, and I always acknowledge her.

CF: Yes, that's how I knew about her!

DM: Yes, I always acknowledge her in my bio as one of my teachers.

LW: I never danced professionally, but I always taught dance. And I always remember everything that Elaine taught me; that's what I taught my students. First, I started out in nursery school, daycare. I thought “Okay, let me try this out with the little kids.” And that was fun, but then I also taught professionally at Cuyahoga Community College¹⁰ — and when I say “professionally,” I mean in another area. And I also taught dance there for a number of years, and I just loved it, and I remember one time — we would always do concerts at the end of our classes at Tri-C. The last time that I taught at a nursery school, I invited Elaine to come...

⁹ Anna Sokolow (1910-2000) was an American dancer and choreographer, who worked internationally, creating political and theatrical pieces. She worked with major companies, including the Martha Graham Company and Batsheva Dance Company. Sokolow also formed her own group “Dance Unit” which became Players' Project after its dispersal and her death. She was also a co-founder of the Actors Studio.

¹⁰ Opened in 1963 as Ohio's first community college, and popularly known as Tri-C, CCC is a well-known and well-established community college in Cleveland. It remains Ohio's oldest and largest public community college.

DM: Mm-hmm.

LW: Oh my goodness! *What* did I do that for? Oh, she “boo-hooed” almost throughout the whole thing, because she didn’t know that I was still dancing. You know, somehow we had lost touch, and she didn’t know. So, she saw me *teaching*, and it was almost, I guess, as if she were seeing herself all over again.

DM: Mmmm.

LW: And I also danced at the end of that concert — that was probably the last time I danced at all, and oh my goodness, she just “boo-hooed”...and so she called me that evening and she just said “Oh, Laverne, you were just so beautiful, and the concert was *so* beautiful!” And these were the little kids, but they really *were* very good! And she just thought that was just wonderful. Because she didn’t think that I had *pursued* dance, and I hadn’t talked with her in such a long time. And it touched me so, because I was so glad for her to see that no, I had not forgotten about anything that she had taught me.

CF: Does either of you recall when she closed her final studio? (To DM): You were probably in New York...

LW: Yeah, I think you were...

DM: I don’t know. But she was also the Head of the Department of Cultural Affairs or something by then.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: So a lot of people knew her, and she knew them in her capacity in that way. So, I don’t know...maybe in the 80s...or 70s? I don’t know (to LW).

LW: Probably. I’m thinking 80s.

DM: 80s? Because I came to visit that place once.

LW: I remember being there, too.

CF: I know that you could talk about Miss Gibbs forever. But is there something you would care to say that perhaps I haven’t thought to ask you about?

LW: Well, this is not about Miss Gibbs, (She looks at Dianne) but I do feel I want to say it. (Reaching out to touch Dianne’s hand) It’s about Dianne. (To Dianne) I don’t know if you ever knew this, so I’m going to share it with you anyway. And you might beat me up, but that’s okay.

When we were in dancing school, Dianne created a dance I will never forget. I probably still know the movements now. Do you remember the dance you created from *Waltz of the Toreadors*?¹¹

¹¹ Richard Addinsell, composer, 1962.

DM: No.

LW: You don't remember that?

DM: No.

LW: *I do.*

DM: Okay.

LW: I thought that was the most beautiful dance I had ever seen in my entire life.

DM: Awww...

LW: And she just... Oh! She was just so awesome, and we were just in dancing school then.

DM: We were teen-agers.

LW: We were just about ready to go to college when you did that. And this is the part you're going to beat me up about.

DM: (laughing) What?

LW: I loved that dance *so* much that I memorized that dance and I performed it a couple of times when I was asked to because I just thought it was so beautiful. (To me) I never told her that —(to DM): because you had already gone...

DM: Oh, that's beautiful.

LW: Yeah, it was to the *Waltz of the Toreadors* on... (she struggles to recall the details of the recording) It was beautiful, and I loved it. And I still remember the dance!

DM: You do? Oh, well one day you will have to show it to me, because I'd like to see it.

LW: I don't know if I could do it now...

DM: But then I'd remember some movements that I created back then, because I don't remember anything from back then; I don't remember anything from that time now...

LW: They were just beautiful! But also when I did it, I would make sure that everyone knew that I didn't create it —that you did! (To me) But that was before she was known, but still I'll never forget that.

DM: Oh, that is so beautiful! Did we wear yellow t-shirts and black pants?

LW: I don't remember. I don't remember that part.

DM: Okay, so that might have been a different dance.

LW: Yeah.

DM: I don't remember it at all.

LW: I remember, because the first time I saw it, I was in awe. And I remember you did it a couple of times, and I memorized every bit of it from the very beginning to the very end. It was just so beautiful.

DM: Oh, wow.

LW: Yeah. (Nodding her head)

DM: Oh, thank you, Laverne.

CF: Laverne, I know you didn't pursue a career in dance as Dianne did. What was your path after your dance years with Miss Gibbs?

LW: I went to school, and decided I wanted to be a teacher. And so I taught for thirty years at Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C). I taught in the area of Speech/Communication, and I did that for actually *more* than thirty years; I did it for about forty, but thirty at Tri-C. And I also delved into the fashion world. I trained models, I did model a little bit myself, and I started a Modeling and Charm School, called LVW Productions, which are my initials— that was the easiest way to do that. And so I sort of stayed in the professional world, in talent; I was fascinated with that area. That's what I did most of my life. And I still do fashion shows and things, but now I sort of live my life through my grandson, who has followed, I guess I could say, after my footsteps in dance. And I'm just doing everything I can to push him into the area that he wants to go into, which is dance. — Although he is like Dianne, he loves modern dance; he is not too much into the classical — he *does* classical, but he *loves* modern dance. And as I think you know, he works under Terrence Green¹². So that's me.

CF: Is there anything, Dianne, that you would like to say in closing — about any of this?

DM: Well, it's not necessarily a closing remark, but the thing is in talking to Elaine in recent years, I see that she knows a lot about the whole cultural make-up of *all* of Cleveland.

LW: Yes.

DM: Karamu, Cleveland Playhouse, and so on. Not just because she was the Head of the Department of Cultural Affairs; it was from her coming up here, too. She knew the dynamics, the politics, all — and she can really talk about that. I never *knew* she had any connections with Karamu, but she did from way back. She, Elaine, is like a history book, in a way.

LW: Mm-hmm.

¹² Director and Choreographer of Dance at Cuyahoga Community College's Creative Arts Academy.

DM: Like a Cleveland Cultural History Book. It's amazing — it doesn't come out that often unless you... it just comes up in conversation if you ask her about it.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: I have received so *much* from her — not just in Dance. Just how you live your life, and how you pursue your dreams!

LW: Yes.

DM: And I owe so much to her for that. And it's been a joy to have continued the connection with her, over the years. She was in my studio in New York City. We must have been doing some performances, or something... So at least once, she came to my studio, saw some of my students, and she was just thrilled. The fact that Laverne and I both have had the opportunity to keep up with her over the years, that's really been a joy. I guess it's reciprocal, because we received so much from her, and then we give back to her in our love and our sharing of what we do, and (to LW): like you with your grandson, it continues. It's a beautiful flower: it continues to bloom and blossom.

LW: Absolutely. Absolutely.

CF: Well, it was a pleasure to have met her, and to hear all of this. Speaking as a teacher myself, you can only hope that somebody remembers something of value from you...

LW: Yes.

CF: And she clearly really taught with a passion...

Both LW and DM: Oh, yes!

CF:...and stayed connected with her students.

LW: Yes.

CF: And she taught you of course, as is always the case with a good teacher, I think —she taught you *more* than the subject...

DM: Yes.

LW: Absolutely.

CF: And she taught the subject really well! But you learned so much from her, *beyond* that. I'm so glad that we've been able to talk about her and her long-lasting influence on both of you.

Usable information ends at 1:06:42, then resumes at 1:09:19 until it ends at 1:13:56

DM: Oh, that's the other thing. We didn't say that we had a concert every year!

LW: Yes, we did.

CF: She mentioned that that was something that had disappointed her when she was with Miss Gensler — that she did not have recitals.

LW: Never had one. Mm-hmm.

CF: And she really thought that was important, so obviously, she carried that wish through.

LW: Oh, she did!

DM: But I wonder why she had them?

LW: Why she had the concerts?

DM: I guess maybe she knew about that from New York. If Miss Gensler was her teacher, and she didn't have concerts, how did Miss Gibbs even know that you should have a concert?

LW: That's a good question, but I venture to say, like you did, from her background.

DM: Her background, mm-hmm.

LW: Yeah.

DM: Because she had concerts, just like every other dancing school has. And we'd have all the costumes, and... (to LW) where did those costumes come from?

LW: It wasn't Capezio's — what was it called then? They were from 'Taffy's'!

DM: Taffy's. Beautiful costumes.

LW: Oh! They were beautiful!

CF: Where did she stage those?

DM: At Cory.

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: Oh, we didn't tell you that!

LW: No!

DM: Cory had a theater. Cory had a full-out, legitimate theater. Not just an auditorium. Now when Martin Luther King was at Cory, and Malcolm X... I saw Martin Luther King there.

LW: Okay.

DM: He spoke in the chapel.

LW: Oh, okay...

DM: (To me). But this was not the chapel; this was a theater.

LW: And it was large!

DM: It was big! (To LW): They had seats on the sides, remember?

LW: Mm-hmm.

DM: There were benches. We should go by there one of these days.

LW: We said we were going to do that.

DM: We haven't done it yet. They had a stage, and we had nice theatrical lighting.

CF: So, even when she left Cory and moved to a private studio space, she still used the theater at Cory?

DM: Sometimes...

LW: Didn't we go to John Adams¹³ then?

DM: Oh, yes.

LW: But it was always a theatrical event.

DM: In June. Whew — it would be hot, too!

LW: Do you remember, I think the last dance we did together, and I'll never forget this. I've forgotten the music; it was Tchaikovsky, I think — and I always *love* that music when I hear it, but all of our costumes were blue — but they were different colors of blue.

DM: Oh...

LW: Do you remember that?

DM: No.

LW: *I* remember that.

DM: Were they like this — this long (gesturing downward below her knees)?

LW: No. Some were, and some were short. But that dance was just beautiful, and we (gesturing to the two of them), the advanced group, were the only ones in toe shoes — they call them pointe shoes now; back then, we called them “toe shoes.” But almost the whole studio was involved in that one dance. And I'll never forget — it was just so beautiful!

¹³ John Adams High School, at 3817 Martin Luther King Dr. Cleveland, OH 44105, was Dianne McIntyre's alma mater.

DM: And *she* used to dance on the concerts, too.

LW: Yes, she sure would.

DM: She would dance, like at the finale or right before intermission. We would be watching from the wings...

LW: Yeah, because that's the only time we ever saw her dance! And again, the poise, and the grace and the beauty...

DM: Yes.

LW: Just watching her move...

DM: I think I remember watching her with a flower in one piece...

LW: Yes, I remember that. Remember how she used to gild our shoes all the time?

DM: Oh, that's right...

LW: She'd take all of the shoes...

DM: Not the pointe shoes, though...

LW: No, the ballet shoes...were either gold...

DM: ...or silver. Now, we're thinking about all kinds of things!

CF: Well, thank you so much for your time and your memories.

LW: You're welcome!

DM: Oh, yes!