

VDC Interview Transcript  
 Karen Bell (OSU).2  
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**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck

KB: Karen Bell

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC team member)

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team member)

CF: Thank you for redoing this interview; we had sound problems with the previous recording. Why don't we start just generally, with you talking about Vickie's role in the department, particularly as a continuation or expansion of Helen's legacy and vision.

KB: Yes, let me talk a little bit about Vickie, and how she was a student of Helen's at Ohio State — and a believer in Helen's vision, which was this broad-based vision of bringing not only technique and composition and repertory, which was common in many of programs, but she was also thinking more broadly. Early on, there was Dance History, and then not much later, she started talking about Dance Notation — and she brought in world-class notators, as well as Dance Education, Production — and all through the lens of dance, *dancing*. Vickie was the beneficiary of Helen's vision, and she helped shape the vision with her, because she was around in the '50s. She went to New York for a little while, and then came back and started teaching here — she taught here for fifty years! She brought to Ohio State her incredible creative self as both a choreographer and a teacher of composition. And any of us who were around Vickie for any length of time started talking about weight — and resiliency — and lightness — and strength, and it was infused throughout the curriculum, both as a creative tool, but also as a dancing tool. I used to say to Vickie, “*You're the main technique teacher!*” — I mean, what she brought in terms of those qualities, and her incredible eye — she was *such* a coach, and talked about both the qualities of dance and the phrasing. I mean, she really was an amazing coach. That was all of her teaching, that coaching and repertory, coaching and composition, and she always did that, even as Chair, but when she became Chair, she put her skills toward administration, and in that way, she also became the coach/mentor of the faculty. And that was one of her huge gifts to all of us — certainly to me, who was going to be the next Chair after her — and had *no idea* that would happen! But she coached our *strengths*. And she pushed all of us to try harder in our challenged areas *and* to continue to do professional development in our areas of strength. So, she really was remarkable in that way that she brought to Ohio State that eye and that passion for teaching — whatever role she was in. Speaking of her teaching, she was so passionate about dance education: it was because of Vickie Blaine that dance certification became available in the state of Ohio. I remember she spent most of her Fridays focused on dance education and getting certification in dance through all of the hoops that it had to go through. So, you know, she was just... a *bulldog*. A *worker*. If she wanted something to happen, if she thought it was the right thing — because she was also ego-less — it was just, if it was the right thing to do, she would go for it, and build the troops around her, in front of her, behind her, on her sides — and *make* it happen.

CF: Would you care to revisit the conversation about how Labanotation was deployed as a common language and what that meant for the department?

KB: Right. I had spoken about Vickie's composition classes and the weight qualities, and how she drew a lot from Rudolph Laban. We actually had two experts in Labanotation, and then another in Labananalysis, which was remarkable. *No* institution had that depth in Labanotation. And one of the things that was so brilliant about that is that Labanotation, the reading and *writing* of dance really resonated with the academy, with academia. They can see — you know, dance is so ephemeral, and to be able to put it down on paper, and to be able to analyze it — that really was something that was extraordinary and Ohio State was known for it. It was Helen's vision, and then Vickie's implementation of some of that Labananalysis work.

CF: You certainly talked about the weight qualities as being important to Vickie, and also about the way in which her weight studies curriculum — her composition curriculum — became legendary, not just here, but in the field.

KB: Right. We talked a little about Vickie and her composition classes and the weight studies she had everyone participate in. I can't tell you how many students have gone on and utilized that material as they have become professors from Ohio State. And it's interesting — last year I had an opportunity to go to an administrators' conference, and it was only for dance Chairs around the country: out of maybe fifty or sixty people at that meeting, I think there were fifteen that were from Ohio State. And I would have to say that the majority of those people — *all* of those people had studied with Vickie — and the majority were still utilizing the weight studies that they had studied so deeply and so engrained in their bodies with Vickie.

CF: I don't know if these things go together, or not — they don't have to — but you had spoken earlier about Vickie as a very politically savvy leader, and we also talked about — well, you tell *me* if these should be de-coupled. We talked about Helen and then Vickie really operating in a sort of male universe here in those days...

KB: Yes, I talked to Helen — Vickie and Helen and I used to get together fairly frequently all of these years — until Vickie became bedridden, and then it was just Helen and me, who would talk about the past, the present and the future of Ohio State Dance. And when Helen would talk about her role — you know, I was always asking her "What was it like? You were one of the few women..." Now remember, she had come out of Women's [Physical] Education, so she had been surrounded by a lot of women. But once Dance became a department of its own, she was in the College of the Arts, and I would say that all of the rest of the chairs in the college and all of the Deans were all male. And so how, you know, how did she manage that — or was that a burden? And I don't think Helen felt that way. I think that she found allies, and when she needed something, she went to certain folks — all male — and they, *along* with her — championed a particular cause. I think Vickie did the same thing: there started to be more women when Vickie was Chair — but not many — you know, then there were two of them. One of my favorite stories with Vickie was there was always a man's table — a man's administrators' table — in the faculty dining room. So, Vickie and I would go to lunch to talk about the department, where we were going in curricular issues — or whatever — and we go into the Faculty Club one day, and she said "We're going to sit over there" — and I was like "*Whaaaaa?! (laughing) That's the 'Man's Table!'*" And when we sat down — I don't think there was eye-rolling, but there were certainly some deep breaths taken — and then very graciously, everyone was so nice — but that's how Vickie went at it. *Directly*. And so they thought it

was the most normal thing in the world, that she would be there: she was an administrator, they were administrators. And so they thought it was the most normal thing in the world. And that's how she broke through barriers. She just assumed: "I am your equal." And I think the other thing that Vickie always did, and something that I learned from her: *Be prepared*. She was always more prepared than most anybody else at a meeting.

Early on, I can remember my first foray out from the department — Vickie sent me to some meeting to represent her. And I walked in the meeting, and it was all men. And I came from this beautiful — to *me* — you know, all women's [department] — and there were men faculty members, too — but you know, women in leadership — they were just very strong. And it doesn't mean we were all, you know, singing "Kumbaya" and patting each other on the back for how wonderful we were, but there was a sense of collaboration and teamwork and "We're going to do this together" — and there's a different energy there. There was a *different* energy. So I walked into this meeting and it was all men, and it took my breath away — and, I like to say, *not in a good way*. But, you know, of course they were gracious and fine, but you know, I was the "odd man out" — and *felt* it, but guess who was the most prepared? Because Vickie Blaine made *sure* of it. And so, you know, it *was* a different time. It changed dramatically, you know, ten years later. But Vickie was so politically savvy, and she knew who to talk to. Vickie worked long hours...she would work well into the day and into the evening, and then she'd work more, into the night. And some of that work was calling people and saying "What do you think of this particular thing — or that issue?" She would never make a mandate, but she would gather the troops around her to support an idea. She was *smart*.

CF: Why don't you talk about the role — or the seed really — planted by Helen, in terms of making a department that was geared towards training artists rather than geared toward training teachers — you know, the Margaret H'Doubler approach versus the...

KB: Right, right. I think the other thing that made our department stand out — many have copied much of what we have done over the years — which is great. But I think early on, and it continues to this day — Helen wanted our students to be connected to the field, so we weren't insulated. She didn't think, "Okay, they can *only* be taught by their teachers here" — and you know, *this* small world. It was very much "Know what's going on in New York, know what's going on the coasts, know what's going on nationally and internationally" — and she did that in a variety of ways. She did that by bringing in guest artists. And sometimes people would stay for five weeks; sometimes they would stay for three years. So she had a variety of models for bringing in guests. And then, she also toured, had our students go out, and she — *and* Vickie — they both did international touring with our students. And that's *back*! I see that now our students are going to Costa Rica and Brazil — and getting a broader sense of the world — and that was *absolutely* in Helen's vision.

CF: Do you want to say anything more about how OSU is perceived outside of Columbus, outside of the university. In the state, in the nation...

KB: Unlike many other academic units, academic fields, we in Dance, we're not usually *rated*: our programs aren't usually rated in *US News and World Report* and other such publications. But in the late '90s, we — the field — internally, did a ranking. And I have to say that Ohio State came out as the top *overall* Dance Department in the country. (She pauses, laughing): I think we're still using that data! But as I've gone to meetings — as the Dean of the College, I got to not just go to dance meetings but to go to meetings where all the arts fields were represented, and the Department of Dance at Ohio State was and remains one of the top programs in the country. And I say that

without a lot of data to back it up, but it's always been a gem in the universities: a gem in the universities.

CF: How about a little bit about your time as Chair, following these two women? And, in what ways you continued their legacies and in what ways you pursued your own?

KB: Right. So, it was Helen's birthday — maybe...I don't even remember *which* birthday — at that time she wasn't always telling her age — but it was Helen's birthday and Vickie's retirement, and it had just recently been announced that I was going to be Chair. We had about 150 alums at a party, and were all just so happy to celebrate Helen and Vickie, and all of a sudden the attention turned to me, because I was introduced as the next Chair — and I think the blood drained out of not just my face, but my whole body. Because everyone was looking at me like, “Okay! You're going to do it — you're *it!*” And there was just so much history, and so much expectation that we remain, you know, a top, top-notch program. And I think it was only then that it hit me what a privilege and responsibility this was. But happily, together as the faculty — because many of the older faculty were retiring, and it was all the people, you know, in my age group —and *together* we continued on, and I think we continued well, and we marched forward and we did it as a group, in a lot of ways. So the very first thing that happened when I was Chair was that we were able to get a Departmental Teaching Excellence Award. And that award was — now, it would be considered a small amount of money — even then it wasn't a huge amount of money —but it was \$25,000, but \$25,000 that was *annual* rate. So we were going to get this money forever; it was put in our budget and it was always going to be extra. And what we did with that money was that we leveraged it. We got this money, what were we going to do? What's the future of this department? And we focused on two areas: one was technology, and one was expanding our multicultural curriculum. So with these little bits of money, we put \$15,000 towards this, and we went for grant after grant after grant until it was hundreds of thousands of dollars. And we did the same thing with the multicultural thread. And so those two threads were begun on kind of the first day — well, the first quarter that I took over being Chair, they were the things I nurtured in my five years as Chair, and they've blossomed under everyone else's leadership. So those were kind of the expansions in my time.

CF: Would you talk a bit about your initiative to expand the department's elective offerings, because it's my sense that you really pushed for that — and what that has meant in terms of educating the audiences of the future.

KB: Right! In my transition from Chair to Dean, it was a time in the university when the university started looking at budgets differently, and so without getting too much into that, every dollar that you got was attached to a credit hour. Well, in the Arts, we do a lot of basically, either in one-on-one teaching, or small-class teaching, so we were not going to benefit from that kind of budgeting, that budget model. You put that with the idea that we wanted as a department to reach more students. These students who take — who earn minors in Dance, who take more elective classes in Dance — they are our audience members, they are the citizens that we are helping to create, helping to shape. So during that time, in the Dance Department, we really started to look at reaching more students, and we had a wonderful professor, Candace Feck, who spearheaded the Dance Minor. And as a result, we're reaching *hundreds* of more students, in much deeper ways, than we would have if they just took a single class — students who loved to dance but weren't necessarily going to make it their profession — and we have a thriving, robust Dance Minor, and more dance elective classes than ever before.

CF: Okay, let's leave that. Helen, Vickie, OSU. Do you all (to VDC team) have anything?

MDB: I really enjoy hearing you speak about your performance work...

KB: Oh — with me and Vickie?

MDB: Yes!

JC: I agree!

CF: Thank you! Yes, let's revisit that as well. Your partnership with Vickie outside of the...

MDB: ...on the stage.

KB: Yeah! So, when I was just talking about budgeting moments ago, it reminded me —it went through my head, that Vickie and I for twenty, twenty-five years have performed together — and often our material was our jobs. It was also personal life: you know, we talked about women's issues, we talked about divorce — and parenting — and children and — *and* we talked about *budgeting, restructuring, reviewing, re* — you know, *reimagining, redoing!* [She's quoting here from one of her collaborative performance works with Vickie Blaine.] And we had so much fun, going into the studio, week after week, year after year, and making something that usually had something comedic in it — and you always wanted to finish with a big tap number! We worked together so well; we were just on the same wavelength in our aesthetic, in our humor, in our caring about getting material out there that people of all ages, but often *women* of our age, could relate to. And we toured that work — and, again, here's the nice thing: we went out and visited with so many of our alums that invited us, and so it was just a beautiful coming together of our professional and personal lives — *and* our creative lives. It also kept us *remembering* what it's like, to go in the studio, our whole lives. It was just last year — two years ago, that we did our last dance. And in the dance was a piece about Vickie's Parkinson's, and so in one of the questions in the dance, I said "Well, how are you?" And she said, "Well, I've got Parkinson's." So, deep, long pause, and I'm like "What are you doing about it?" And she was dancing. She was moving, she was doing exercises, she was doing everything she could, and she was really able to keep going because she kept dancing. For a long time.

CF: Thank you.