

VDC Interview Transcript
Karen Bell.1, former OSU Chair and Dean
10.7.16
Total Time: 49:45

OSUDance
316 Sullivant Hall
1813 N. High St.
Columbus, OH 43210

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

KB: Karen Bell

CF: Karen, we would love for you to speak to Vickie's role in the development of the department, and in that regard, you might talk about her continuation or evolution of Helen Alkire's work.

KB: Well, I think Helen, as we all know, was the person who dropped the seed for this department, but Vickie, *soon* thereafter — in the fifties, was a student in the department, and then she did a little bit of work in New York, and came back to be a faculty member right beside Helen as the vision was starting to be implemented. And so she and Helen, I think, walked hand in hand as they developed this department, as they chose faculty members for the department — and the people that they chose were *extremely* gifted artists, as well as educators. Teaching was really important to both of them and working with students was important to both Vickie and Helen, and so the people that they chose were, you know, tops in the field. And *then*, they had this crazy idea that dance is *more* than technique, repertory and performance — and that they really wanted our students to have that breadth of experience that included history, that included education, and production AND one of the few places that included dance notation. That dance notation piece — and then later, movement analysis — was something that gave the department — gave us all — a common language. And Vickie *particularly* embraced that. And again, Vickie was just a huge piece in the creation of the vision for the Department of Dance. Helen was chair — in 1968, she made it happen: the Department of Dance became its own *bona fide* department out of Physical Education. And then she chaired for another many years — I think until about 1982, and then Vickie took over the chairmanship. Though she was just the second chair, Helen had started this dream in the fifties — Well! Even in the thirties, when she was a student, she had this dream. So Vickie, then — I would say one of the main things that she did — and she did many — including leading dance education certification throughout the state of Ohio — that was one of the big things that she did. But for us, for the faculty, Vickie was an incredible mentor and she reframed the whole idea of research in dance for all of us. Creative work was our research; scholarship, of course, was some of our research — and she worked with each one of us and brought out the best in everyone and helped us all find a path and be more articulate about what we did, what our strengths were. So she had a huge impact, not only on students — we know her composition classes are legendary and people nationwide teach what Vickie taught — but her mentorship of faculty was significant, not just for us individually, but for the field — because she also was a mentor in the field — other Chairs would always be in touch with her about “How do you do this?” and “What do you think about that?” and she wrote probably more letters of evaluation for faculty members that were going up for tenure, going up for full

professor, than anybody else that I know — and we at Ohio State write a lot of those letters. But, you know, Vickie was a mensch!

CF: Susan Hadley was talking about — just to stay with the idea of Vickie investing in the Laban material — Susan was talking about the weight studies in particular, and what role that has played in shaping what's come to be known as the OSU State dancer in the field. Would you talk about that contribution a bit?

KB: As I mentioned, Vickie was legendary in the field for her composition studies and the weight studies, so she talked about strength and resiliency and lightness, and I used to say to her, “Vickie, you're our best technique teacher!” And it's funny, because I just saw Vickie ten minutes ago — and one of our faculty members came in and said, “Vickie, I've been thinking of you all this semester because I am teaching technique through the weight studies.” And Vickie was so pleased to hear that, and to know that her work in weight, and in resiliency — you know, how you develop phrase material is being taught today at Ohio State in new ways, in new forms — but it still has an impact on how people are moving! And our students are going all over the country, and teaching and performing, and they have been touched by the Vickie Blaine compositional weight studies. So, you know, it's remarkable — I feel like I should stand up and do the weight studies, so you know what I'm talking about! (laughter) But I won't!

CF: Let's see, we talked about her impact in terms of composition, and the weight studies, in particular... you had previously been talking about her impact in leadership around the country. Would you speak to that a bit?

KB: Vickie as a mentor, a mentor of faculty and a mentor of Chairs — both internally and externally, was astounding. She had a humility about her that allowed her to look at all of us — whether we were faculty or Chairs around the country — and look at our individual strengths. She wasn't ever looking to make somebody in her model, but “Let's see what you do, what you do best and how to nurture that.” How to help each of us be our authentic selves — but then to also stretch. And she was just so supportive, and in that support, she gave each of us confidence to be ourselves, and to work hard, to take risks — and to enjoy it. Both of us talked daily about how much we loved our jobs. We loved our jobs as faculty members; she loved being Chair. Later, you know, as I came after her, she was the biggest cheerleader; I might do something — and nobody would notice, except you'd get a little note from Vickie Blaine saying “Brilliant!” You know, “Right on!” And we got confidence from her! I think that helping people with their confidence helps them to be their best. And she knew how to do that. And, do you know another thing? She was so serious — I mean, she was very funny, and loved humor and loved jokes and all that, but she was so serious about dance, and her love of dance and her passion for dance — and she took *your* passion seriously. I don't know...there was just something that was so sincere about her deep love of dance — and her ability to see *your* deep passions and make the best of them.

CF: I'm aware— this is off-topic, really — that we're talking about her in the past tense because we're talking about her when she was Chair, but it's feeling sort of ominous at this moment, isn't it?¹

¹ At the time of this interview, Vickie had been confined for some time to an assisted living residence with full-time nursing care, due to advanced Parkinson's disease. As it happened, within a little more than two months, Vickie died (12.26.16).

KB: You never know about Vickie – I counted her out a couple of years ago, and, you know, she is not ready. And she's still *present*. Spends a lot of time in bed — and eating, her favorite thing.

CF: Well, you were talking about her ability to be a mentor, and to sort of find the strengths in the people she worked with to bring them out in the service of dance, but I'm wondering – and I had asked Susan Hadley about this regarding Helen: Helen entered this university as a faculty member in the forties — a man's world. And I imagine that Vickie inherited a *slightly* more diverse faculty and university...

KB: (gestures with her fingers to signify a very *small* amount)

CF: But the point is that she had some battles to fight. And I wonder if you could talk about how she met those struggles or if she's commented on that, or what you've observed...

KB: Right. So first of all, Vickie in a man's world: I was very young and so I had a lot of contact with her as a faculty member and you know, Vickie had wanted me to help her with some curricular things, so I had a lot of contact with her, pretty much from the beginning of her time as Chair. So, one day she said "Let's go have lunch at the Faculty Club." Well, we go to the Faculty Club, and there's the administrator's table — and let me tell you, the administration table is *all male*. And Vickie says "C'mon, we're going to go sit here." And I'm, you know (laughing), completely horrified. And down we sat, and men's eyes popped, but I don't think they rolled — and they were quite polite — but I thought, this is Vickie – just going into the man's world, not asking for an invitation — but, you know, being part of the team. And she had a *number* of mentors in the university, and I think this is was one of the things — and I think Helen did the same thing — you find people in the university that are open to new ideas and innovation, and you make them your friends — and she was excellent at that, both at the college level and at the central level. And if she couldn't get help from one place, she could get it from another — and she had no problems going directly to the top. Because she had people there that she knew, and they knew what a good job she was doing, they knew how hard she worked, how smart she was, and what a reputation the Dance Department had, they were willing to help her do just about anything.

CF: I remember her as very politically savvy.

KB: *Very*.

CF: And I remember when she — I can't think what year it was — but she had the Dance Department recognized as a Center of Excellence...

KB: Yes.

CF: — it might have been the *first* Center of Excellence on the OSU campus. Would you speak to that?

KB: I don't remember the details particularly well with this, but an example of how highly esteemed Vickie was and the department were — you know, you can be highly regarded as a leader, and you're not leading a particularly great vision — but she's leading a grand vision in a department that is nationally recognized and has been almost since its inception — and she made sure people knew that, and so when it came time to bestow honors or to write a grant, the department had the

acknowledgement that they were excellent. As a matter of fact, we were designated one of the first Centers of Excellence inside the university. And as Vickie was leaving the chairship, we went forward with — this was the first...oh boy, I wrote the grant... department...we were a Center of Excellence, and then there was a departmental excellence award — and we were the first department in the university — there were two departments who got the first award, and we were one of the two. So, we were already a center of Excellence, and then we got the Department of Excellence award — and with that came money — and it increased our annual rate, and that means it increased our operation funds from then until now: that was an increase that was permanent — it increased our permanent base budget. We were then able to leverage that money, and that's when we were really able to move forward in technology and with a broader multi-cultural direction in the curriculum. And these were all because of relationships that had been built by Helen and by Vickie, that I got to take over — and great things happened. And then, when there was a little extra money, we knew “Okay, now's the time to go for it!” Because it's all up and down, up and down. And Vickie was *so* politically savvy with all of that.

CF: One of the things I notice, having watched the department through Helen, through Vickie, through you — and now onward, is its great proclivity to *honor* its legacy.

KB: (nodding in agreement).

CF: Would you speak to that?

KB: You know, I don't know if this is — sometimes you wonder — you know, we are a mostly female department...we are — most of our leadership has been female. Not all, but most. And I see the *best* of women's qualities coming through in our department. And some of those qualities are collaboration...we root for each other, and I think we all know that we stand on each other's shoulders. And that's, you know, an easy thing to *say*, but here in the department, you see time and time again the honoring of Helen, of Vickie, of our legacy — and it is a beautiful, unusual thing to see any place — and sometimes, particularly, in the university. We all want to think, “I did this!” and “I was there!” It's not so much like that — we all get it, that it is because of the people who came before us that we are such an extraordinary department — inside and out.

CF: Would you speak a little bit to the reputation of the department outside?

KB: So, it's interesting — I think as all of us became Chair...I mean, I came to Ohio State in 1980, and I *knew* I was coming to a fabulous dance department. But I don't think you *really* get it until you go to some national meetings, where you're there, sitting around the table with all the other chairs in the country, and somebody asks a question, and every eye turns to Ohio State: “What would *you* do?” and that's because of what Helen and Vickie represented, and the knowledge that they came with, and the good ideas that they had to offer, and, you know, Ohio State was and is very important in the national scene. Helen was at the beginning: she was one of the founders of the National Association of Schools of Dance [NASD] and the Council of Dance Administrators [CODA], where Vickie followed up on the Executive Committee, and served as the Treasurer. They were *very* important to these national organizations. I'm sure if you talked to our new Chair, Susan Hadley — she would acknowledge that she was a little blown away [at the latest CODA meeting] — like, “Ohio State's really *doing* it!” So, it's quite a legacy, both internally *and* nationally.

CF: You received the Alma Hawkins Award recently at one of these large conferences. Did you see other Ohio State people there?

KB: Last year, I had the privilege of going to the National Association of Schools of Dance conference and the Council of Dance Administrators conference — and at those conferences, I was blown away by how *many* administrators, how *many* people from Ohio State are chairing departments of dance around the country. There were, I think, at least fifteen of us that are leading programs! That's maybe fifteen out of fifty or sixty people — it's not an insignificant percentage. And (laughing) they all looked mah-velous!

CF: Having been Chair yourself, following Helen and then Vickie, would you point to certain landmark achievements of the department?

KB: Obviously, Helen taking the department from the Women's Physical Education Department to be its own autonomous department in 1968 was huge. And I think it was in the seventies that, in addition to the BFA, we then started the MA. It was in the eighties when we instituted the MFA, and then obviously the PhD in 2010, or something like that. Those are *huge* things in academia; as you know, we were growing as a department, and we were growing our research to move in those directions, the MFA being the terminal degree for performance, choreography — for the making of work — and for the PhD, we also have an emphasis on making — but really delving into the scholarship of work. So those, I think, are big moments. I think some other big moments were bringing in dance notation early on, so we all had that common language — and *another* thing that dance notation did for us: we had these faculty members, who were always looking to the future and looked, in this case, towards technology, and what could technology do for both notation and movement analysis. So now we have technology — notation has brought us technology, and now we are able to shift and use technology in multiple ways throughout the curriculum, and throughout our creative work, throughout our scholarship. So that happened in the late nineties, we were able to get a technology lab, we were able to get a technology faculty and staff and have this whole new arm of the department. You know, I think of Helen planting the seed and the mighty oak grows, and the rest of us are constantly fertilizing, and pruning and sometimes grafting, and the department continues to thrive — through ups and downs, and highs and lows. But — great gardeners, great gardeners!

CF: Has Vickie ever talked to you about her biggest accomplishments or the things that she's most proud of?

KB: I asked her that in the elevator today. It's hard for her now with Parkinson's to be articulate about these things, but she is very proud of dance education certification being instituted throughout the state. I think she is proud of the way that she was able to nurture faculty and to have mentored all of us. She absolutely lit up today when Susan Petry said to her "I am using your composition class as inspiration for my technique class." I think she's very proud that that composition curriculum that she created continues to be used both at Ohio State and throughout the country.

CF: Something that Susan [Hadley] mentioned earlier is the history begun by Helen in this department of bringing in artists from the professional world. That's certainly something that Vickie continued.

KB: Yes!

CF: As did you, and as the department continues to do.

KB: Yep.

CF: You've mentioned the national conferences where you see leaders of other programs — where does Ohio State fit in that regard?

KB: I think that one of the things Helen started with bringing in visiting artists — that Vickie continued, and probably even expanded was — and it continues today — was incredibly important to the education of our students in a contemporary field. Helen and Vickie always wanted to be current — as do all of us. We did not want to live in an academic bubble and think that what we were doing was *the* most important thing and was the center of the earth and the center of the field. We wanted to know what was going on on the East Coast, what was going on on the West Coast? We wanted to know, we wanted to help our students be current in dance. It was also a way for Vickie and Helen to network — I can't tell you how many students have gone on and worked with some of our visiting artists, but it was also a way for *all* of us — faculty and students — to keep current.

CF: I wonder if you'd like to talk about ways in which the department has changed to meet the needs of the time. I think technology is one example, but maybe there are others. I'm also thinking of the moment when Helen took the department from PE to the College of the Arts, how the College of the Arts then disbanded and we became part of something else — those sorts of patterns. Would you like to talk about that at all?

KB: Well, you know, I have my own issues with some of this stuff.

CF: Yes.

KB: But if you look, the university is *always* changing; it needs to be a dynamic animal, and we have gone from Physical Education to become our own department, to be in one college, the College of the Arts, to now being in a College of Arts and Sciences — and it's this dynamic infrastructure of change that makes things happen! So I think it's interesting now that we're College of Arts and Sciences and we have our PhD and Dance is a particular kind of work — we are makers, we are doers, we are experiencers, but we are also more involved in interdisciplinary kinds of thinking and we're looking at dance through a variety of lenses, and it's kind of interesting now that we're in the College of Arts and Sciences, where we have this broader basket, and maybe that makes it easier for our students and faculty to work together — and if that's the case, great.

CF: When do you remember the outreach into elective offerings beginning?

KB: Well, even when I came in 1980, we had pretty robust elective classes for the university student. That was further expanded a decade or two later so that we created a robust Dance Minor. There's a woman named Candace Feck (she can't help laughing as she says this, since I am the one talking with her), who spearheaded that, and Candace, you know, really helped to make that happen.

CF: Well, I was thinking — actually, and I might be wrong about this — that I recall the elective program being originally made up of studio classes, and then expanding into more scholarly coursework.

KB: I think there was always that one [History] GEC that Angelika Gerbes taught...

CF: Of course.

KB: But definitely, I think the elective classes did morph into expanded course offerings, and then morphed into the Dance Minor.

CF: In what ways did Vickie — or anyone leading the department — expand outreach into the community?

KB: I think both Helen and Vickie were very strong in having students perform outside of campus. When I came in 1980, we had a dance company, University Dance Company. Vickie led that dance company, and those students not only performed here on campus and worked with the visiting artists, but really had a robust performance experience. They then took that work, and modified it, and took it out to the schools, in the Artist-in-the-Schools program — and they reached scores of schools every year, bringing dance to those places that didn't always get to see Dance. Though we no longer have a dance company, more of our students now get to work with the visiting artists, more of our students perform on the grand stages, and once a year, we do something downtown in the city, and I think it gives students a different kind of professional experience, to be working off-campus. Now, we bring thousands of local students to these performances, and they get to experience a beautiful big theatre with incredible high-level dance performance and choreography. In other words, we've always had outreach in the community; it's just taken different forms. And now, students are also going to other countries: there's outreach in Costa Rica, and Brazil — and it's just fantastic in terms of experiences for the students.

CF: Do you have anything to say about the way in which Ohio State sits in the larger landscape of dance in Ohio? Connections to other departments, further outreach, or...

KB: There's a lot of good dance in Ohio, and good dance programs. Oberlin being one. Ohio University. We work a lot with Ohio Wesleyan, with Kenyon College, with Dennison [University], with Kent [State University] — many of those places, where faculty members have gone through our programs, which in turn *strengthens* the connection — but there have been times when, if you wanted to bring visiting artists into Ohio, there have been times when we would all go in on it together. Or we would take students up to Oberlin [College], or Ohio University would bring students to Ohio State — so there's really a nice reciprocal connection with universities throughout Ohio's dance programs. There are a lot of *wonderful* dance programs in Ohio.

CF: I'd like to ask you a little bit about your own years as Chair, and as Dean of the College of the Arts. One way to approach it might be to think about Helen's foundations for the department, Vickie's, as you said, expansion of that vision in some cases, and then your own evolution of those ideas. Would you want to talk about that a little bit?

KB: Yes, and I kind of touched on it. I mean, what happened when I became Chair... As I became Chair, I was building on greatness, and two Chairs that came before me that were pretty beloved. So

that makes the task easier — it's daunting — but it makes the task easier, because you're building on health, not dysfunction. And so, when I came in, it was a time in the university when the university was pretty healthy, that there was some money for excellence, that there were grants that could be gone after. And because I was coming from this place of health, this place of already acknowledged excellence, we were *cooking*! And we were able to get grants that helped us build the technology area, and grants that helped us build the multicultural aspects of the curriculum. It was a heady and exciting time; we were getting faculty lines, we were getting new staff, we were getting operational support, we had this new laboratory, the technology lab. That was *not* the norm! It's not the norm now, because things are tight again, but that won't last forever, either. The other thing is we made some big curricular changes in my five years in terms of adding and changing. So many of our students were coming in with strong modern dance background, starting in the late nineties, the mid-to-late nineties. And therefore, we had to have opportunities for them, and that's when we shifted from having a dance company that was a select number, to having open auditions to allow students an opportunity to work with *all* of the visiting artists — so there was kind of a time then where everyone was being lifted up. And I remember sitting around the table — we were a relatively young faculty — I mean, I was, I guess, a relatively young Chair, and I saw us — we didn't exactly get gray together, but matured into our leader selves — not just the Chair, but *all* of us as the faculty. It was kind of a beautiful time, to see that happen — not without hardship, not without... You know, change is hard. And so that's something that you have to manage, and deal with. I went to a meeting when I was first Chair, and I said to another Chair, "Boy, I've had a lot of headaches." And she said, "Oh yeah, those are the Chair-headaches." And I thought back and I thought, you know, Vickie always had — whenever she'd be on vacation, she'd have a Chair-headache! The Chair job is one of the hardest jobs in the university. I've had many different jobs in the university now, you know, including the Dean job, and the Chair job has its unique rewards and its unique hardships — because you're in the middle, trying so hard to do right by the faculty, and to do right by your students — and sometimes you have upper administration saying "Yes, but now we're shifting to this model," or "Now, you have to watch your budget" — and you are the interlocutor, and... mm-hmm! It can be a very challenging job! So I'm here to say "Be nice to your Chair!"

CF: Well, having retired, you've also seen the department from the outside: we're in a new building, and I'm just wondering how it looks from the other side — and perhaps, what you think is next for the department.

KB: I have been retired for almost six years; before that, I had been away from the department for seven or eight, so, you know, my view is pulled back — and now pulled back again. I am the biggest cheerleader for this department! When I see the opportunities that our students are getting — to do international work, to work with the incredible artists that we bring in, both as faculty and as visiting artists, I am so pleased, and *so* proud. Vickie and Helen and I used to get together fairly frequently, several times a year, and have lunch — or cake — and talk about how things were going in the department. And always, always the three of us were pleased about the trajectory, and the leadership, and the work that the faculty were and are doing. And I think, you know, Helen was about innovation, Vickie was about taking risks and understanding your climate, and that's what's continued in our department. We have savvy leadership. And we have outstanding, outstanding faculty — the other night I was looking at television, and there was Mitchell Rose's film — and there was our faculty member, Bebe Miller, starting it off — and it was going out on PBS, all over the country. I just feel really, really proud.

CF: (turning to film team) Anything else you'd like to ask about Helen, about Vickie, about the department, about anything?

KB: I'm proud, and it's not even about getting any credit — or anything like that. You just know I had *one* little thing to do with that, and that was because Vickie helped me do this, and Helen helped her do that, and I cheer-leaded for Susan, and it's such a... I don't want to say family — everybody always says "Oh, we're just like a family" — but interlocking parts, both as leaders and as the faculty.

Part 2

CF: I remember a lot of Vickie's choreography. You and Vickie had a great partnership, not only as fellow chairs, but as performers. Would you like to talk about that?

KB: (She laughs): Oh, no — not really (facetiously). Vickie was a wonderful choreographer, and she was one of the main choreographers for the University Dance Company. It was in the early nineties, I think, that she and I saw a piece by our graduate students, Jane Franklin and Toby Bingham and they did this piece in Expanded Arts with Professor Hebner, who became Vickie's partner, and it was hilarious and it was all kind of about your inside/outside voice. They'd go along and be talking, and then one of them would just go into a giant scream — and so Vickie and I thought "Oh! That's the perfect piece for *us!*" So we changed the content and made it about administration and Vickie would say — the very beginning was, "Karen, can you come in here and help me?" and I'd say, "Sure, Vickie!" as I tap-danced in while I was screaming my guts out — you know "Aaaagggghhh!" (she mimics a scream) and the whole piece was this inside/outside contrast, very polite — but really, internally screaming — and that was the first piece that we did together, and then for the next twenty years we created work together; the last piece that we just did together — well, the second to last piece that we just did together was *Heel Talk*, and that was a piece about administration, middle management — and wearing the right shoe. I, of course, was a fan of the high heel, and Vickie thought that was ridiculous and we should all be wearing comfortable shoes and sneakers. Well, our very last piece was after Vickie had been diagnosed with Parkinson's, we were both wearing boots at that time to be stable as possible, and it's called *Boot Camp*, and she revealed that she had Parkinson's. I said "How are you doing?" And she said, "Agh — not great. Got Parkinson's." And I'm like "Ooh, what are you doing about it?" And basically, tap-dancing — she was still exercising and doing everything she could to move and keep it at bay, which she did very well. We ended the piece with a grand tap dance, which she could still do, and that was the end of our collaboration on stage. When we're now in the privacy of her own home, we "float" together, now and then, but we had a great partnership together: a lot of our work was about the work that we experienced inside the department, inside a university — *and* inside our homes — being mother, being divorced, being in relationships — and we always tried to bring a spark of humor. You know, I think our hallmarks were humor and tap-dancing — we always finished with a big number.

CF: I wonder if you would like to expand on that at all, just to talk about your belief in the importance of integrating your personal — or inside — life with your partnering and your professional development — and maybe about the importance of your belief in continuing to be makers, even as you were administrators.

KB: It was very important for *us* to be makers as we were administrators... Vickie was Chair, I think I was Associate Dean there for awhile — our administrative lives have gone back and forth — you know, back and forth — we both have done a *lot* of administrative work, and it was so important for

us to do creative work along the way. You know, sometimes administrative work is so bureaucratic, and a bit of a grind — *mostly not* — most of the time, it is very creative and problem-solving — but it's still not *always* a lot of fun and Vickie and I would make time for studio work — and you know, they say as a writer, “Do what you know!” — and what we knew was this administrative work, and what we knew were our lives as women, and so, we brought those things into the studio and we got to make fun of them, and have a ball! It was the best time! Vickie and I worked so closely together: I was the “right-hand man” for many years in the department, and we worked closely together in the studio on our creative work. Never did we ever have a cross word, an argument — there was just something about our energies: we loved what we did, we loved each other, and we got to do so much of it together —it was great! Lucky people!

CF: We were lucky to be part of it, too.

KB: Yeah! Man! You don't get that! I mean, aren't you always mad at *somebody*!? (She laughs) We were never mad at each other!

CF: I'm glad you had that...

KB: I have my days and my moments, believe me. Some days I just can't walk in there [where Vickie is currently living and dealing with Parkinson's], but I'm still always glad to see her.