

VDC Interview Transcript
ŽIVILI/Christina Providence
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KEY:

CF: Candace Feck
CP: Christina Providence
JC: Jessica Cavender
JD: Jane D'Angelo

CF: I'm curious to hear how your membership in ŽIVILI began.

CP: It's a really good story, actually. I was an undergraduate in the Dance Department at Ohio State. It might have been 1994. Mark Morris did a piece with ŽIVILI, and I was a budding Mark Morris fan at the time. I went to see the show, and after the show, I went backstage to try to meet Mark Morris, and I heard this incredible sound coming from backstage – it was like singing that I had never heard before, and I was following the sound of the singing and I went and found where it was — and I now know it was ŽIVILI, singing for Mark. And this was after — actually, I've got the story wrong because this is before they premiered the piece, so it would have been when they had just engaged him because I remember they were singing for him and they hadn't yet worked together. And I was struck by that, and just had to figure out what that was, and figured it out, asked around, and figured out what was going on. Then in 1995, I auditioned for the group and joined them.

CF: Talk about the audition. What were you required to do?

CP: I barely remember. I do remember that it was a pretty big group of people, and they gave us some steps to do and some lines to sing. I was about nineteen or twenty at the time, so I had just been in auditions for theatrical staged performances and dance opportunities. I had not auditioned for a folk dance company — and I found it to be really fun, actually, because I love the dancing-with-people part, and the spirit of dancing like ŽIVILI danced. Again, it was a combination of things I had never experienced before — I had done folk dancing before — you know, at weddings — and I had done stage performances, but had never experienced the two together. So I just remember it being a lot of fun and also having that sort of “Did I get the part?” excitement and wanting to have the opportunity. But I don't have a clear memory of exactly what it was like; I just remember the dancing and the singing and the “Did I get the part?”

CF: How long did you have to wait to find out?

CP: I *feel* like it was just a couple of days. I think there was — and I could be wrong about this — Pam and Melissa would know more — I think it was just an audition and then a call-back and then a day or two, and then we found out.

CF: I wonder if you could say just a little bit more about the “dancing-with” that you experienced with ŽIVILI.

CP: Oh, yeah! It’s funny, because so much of my memory comes from what I appreciate now, and I think at the time — I *appreciated* it; I just didn’t have a sense of perspective — I didn’t treasure it the way I do now. It was just fun! But, you know, in ŽIVILI, we’re holding hands, we’re dancing in circles, we’re screaming and yelling, singing, *flying* across the stage. I remember one piece, *Dajčevo*. It was like nine or ten, maybe twelve minutes long, *high energy*, could barely catch your breath even a couple minutes in — and singing the entire time — and every single time we performed it with that high energy of performance — *every single time*, I just felt like I was going to pass out! And having your company mates holding your hands — actually, we were holding each other by the belt — and just swinging you around the stage — that feeling of “we’re all in this together,” and having fun, even though we felt like we were going to pass out — *that* feeling, I think, still carries me — through some of my life! Just having had that experience and knowing what that is, and looking for that, you know?

CF: A great metaphor for life!

CP: Yeah.

CP: Hanging onto each other, flying around...

CP: Just throwing each other across the stage! (laughing)

CF: Between the time you had this crazy experience at Mershon and heard the singing and saw something happening that you were curious about — and the time that you auditioned and joined the company, had you looked into it, had you done some research, did you know what you were getting into?

CP: No, I was not that kind of kid!

CF: And you *were* a kid!

CP: I was a *kid*! I was nineteen or twenty, yeah! I was just like “I want to do it, and I’m going to do it.” There was also a piece of it that — I think I was a junior in college, and I was starting to think about what am I going to do for a career in dance? And at that point (she laughs), it was clear that I was not going to dance for a ballet company. I still thought maybe I would start doing the audition-and-apprenticeship route for concert modern dance. But I knew that I wanted to get paid to dance. I wanted to be a professional. Also, I was considering that I might be staying in Columbus. At the time, we had BalletMet, Stuart Pimsler, and ŽIVILI: those were the three ways to get paid to dance in Columbus. So it wasn’t entirely a strategic, logical decision; it was sort of like, I heard that sound, I wanted the thing, I found out that it was a thing I could do, I found out that it was a professional

opportunity, and I just said “Let’s try it,” and they pretty much just brought me along the rest of the way: Pam and Melissa and the rest of the company.

CF: How long did you stay?

CP: Total, it was about seven years. The last couple years in the company, I wasn’t strongly performing in the company — I did a little help in the background. So I performed with them ’95, ’96, ’97, we did the tour, probably did some work with them in ’98, maybe ’99, and then my sort of day-job career was starting to accelerate. Oh yeah! I got married in ’99, and so my life was starting to shift, and the company was starting to gear down — I think the funding was getting harder to come by, and Pam and Melissa were starting to make some decisions about how they wanted to move forward in their own work... So, I just remember...I think it was probably about five years of performing full-on, and then a couple of years of supporting the company and then doing a few things with them.

CF: What do you remember about coming *in* to the company? You had gone through the audition and now, I guess, you came to your first rehearsal ...Who *was* the company? How *big* was it? What was it *like*?

CP: (Laughing) I barely remember! Let’s see, I think there were thirty of us performers. And there was a generation of performers that left right as I was coming in that I never knew very well. But I think the company stayed around thirty at that time when I came into the company. And we had an apprenticeship program such that there were maybe six or eight of us apprentices our first year. It might have been two years — I think I apprenticed for somewhere around six months or a year. That would be a detail to check with Pam or Melissa because, of course, they know. So, it was around thirty performers, including musicians. We rehearsed in this room [Ohio Theatre] and also next door.

CF: Did you know anyone else in the company?

CP: Sue Kenny. I think she was the only one. She was one of my best friends, and she was my roommate during my sophomore year of college. She and I were dance majors together.

CF: She had already been in the company?

CP: I think we joined at the same time. Yeah.

Oh, I thought of somebody else. Stephanie Kemper had danced with them. I think Stephanie was the link — between hearing them and wanting to get in. Because I remember she did the Mark Morris piece. She was a couple of years ahead of me at school, and she was close friends with Sue. So I knew “Steff.” She may have left the company the year that I came, because I don’t remember dancing with her. I think she graduated and moved, but I believe that she was the bridge.

CF: Was there a company manager at the time? I know that Loren Bucek had served in that role at one point. Was there somebody besides Melissa and Pam?

CP: I think they traded roles. They had some sort of senior members that helped out — if there was somebody, I can’t remember who it was...I remember Lilly Badurina did a lot of work, supporting

them. But I don't think she was a manager; she was just one of the "old guard," helping things keep moving. Yeah... I can't think of a manager.

CF: Were you asked to sing and play an instrument as well? Or to dance only? It was such a multi-faceted company...

CP: I was just asked to sing and dance. Yes, all the dancers sang. We all sang. I didn't play an instrument well enough at that time. I would love to go back, because now I play a few things enough that I could ... (she laughs). I'm thinking that would be really fun – sometimes more fun than flying across the stage so hard you pass out!

CF: Maybe you need to revive the company!

CP: It would be great if we got back together.

CF: Did you know when you entered the company that this big tour to the former Yugoslavia was going to be happening?

CP: No, none of us knew – it was a big surprise when that happened.

CF: Can you talk about that?

CP: I do not remember when we were notified. But the tour itself happened in 1997, which was shortly after I graduated from college. Pam and Melissa had gotten support and were planning this big project. And again, I had *no* frame of reference for this — *none!* So it sounded like a *great*, really fun thing to do. Right? (She laughs, recalling.) That was basically what I thought: "Great! I get to travel and it's going to be fun!" That was the extent of my twenty-year old comprehension — so they got us together, and we had some classes: some cultural literacy classes, a little bit of language work, a lot of rehearsal to prepare the pieces. And then we all hopped on a plane and flew to the refugee camps in the former Yugoslavia. And traveled on a bus for two weeks. We started in Hungary and... again, I don't remember the route so clearly, but they will. We started in Hungary, we went through Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia, and we had our last performance of the tour in Sarajevo. We were performing primarily in the camps. First, we would do a show for the residents of the camps, and then usually at the end of the show, they would come up and start dancing with us and we would party for a while.

CF: I cannot imagine what your twenty-year old self experienced or thought... and what you saw.

CP: Yes. It took years for me to understand it. I mean, I can't say I understand it now. I think it was a lot of just taking it in without processing it, at the time. For me, what I did get in the moment were a couple of things. I hadn't traveled very much outside of the U.S. at that point. So, the first was just a really fundamental understanding of how — I mean this is going to perhaps sound "cheesy," — but how *much* people have in common, everywhere. Up to that point I had only seen war or refugee camps or even people overseas — I mostly had only seen them on TV. And I never had any kind of concept — it was a purely intellectual concept that that could be me, or that could be my family. Up to that point, purely an intellectual concept, and meeting those people, dancing with those people, and, you know, falling in love with those people — I really experienced how much we had in common, and how much they had to offer me, you know, in my little place — and how much they

had to offer to the world. So, that was formative. The other piece that was really impactful for me was the power of dance! Again, I thought dance was a theatrical performance on the stage! And I thought it was something that if you wanted to do it, you trained for years and only the best got in and everybody else bought \$50.00 tickets (if they were lucky!) — and of course I knew that, you know, you dance at weddings, you could go to the clubs and dance — but the two never met in my experience until I *saw*, firsthand — was in the *middle* of people dancing — I mean (deep sigh) to go *in* there and think that I — not even of that culture! An Italian American, with a mom from the southern U.S. — white as can be — could go in there and presume to perform their dances for them (she laughs) and to be welcomed and appreciated and thanked and received — *that* was incredible. And then to see how the people of our audiences and the people that we met — I mean, they weren't just being gracious; they really appreciated what we were doing! And to really register how important the dances are and that they do not live on if somebody doesn't do them. So the opportunity, and the honor of being somebody entrusted with that (deep exhalation of breath) was big! Again, it is still landing with me. There is so much more that we do with ourselves and our art and our bodies and our communities when we dance together, there's so much more than I *ever* realized at the time. And especially in our culture in the U.S. there is so much more than — even you and I, who are so immersed in it as our life's work — *still*, there's so much more.

CF: You said that it's still landing. It was a *lot* — going from Hungary to Sarajevo and places in between, meeting people, rehearsing, probably dealing with some glitches in the schedule here and there, maybe some difficult living circumstances — I don't even *know*...

CP: Mm-hmm.

CF: You said it's still landing, but you must have been also changed in some ways that you were aware of immediately when you came back.

CP: Mm-hmm. Let me think about it for a minute.

CF: Of course.

CP: First of all, we were *very* well taken care of, so there was almost no hardship. I remember one of our first meals, they served us a dinner with chicken livers in it, and I was like (dismayingly) “Eww! Chicken livers!” And somebody had to whisper to me — I don't remember what they said — but somebody said something to convey to twenty-three year old Christina how much work these people had gone to in order to serve us those chicken livers, and “You damned well better eat your meal!” *That* was the level of hardship! Very little hardship — we were really well cared-for. I think what hit me at the time and what surprises me is that it was so much less about ... it didn't really up my empathy level all that much — it was much more about my sense of *possibility*. I'm remembering another thing that happened when we went to Sarajevo: we came into town at night, we rode through town on our bus, and we were performing for a Home for the Abandoned Elderly and at an orphanage. We were crossing town on the bus, we passed the Holiday Inn that was the place where all the reporters would hang out, and then the snipers, and it was a big landmark for the war, I remember registering that. And then we drove by the place where they were building the stage for us to perform on that night, and they were *just* starting to build the stage! And I think the stage — again, I don't know how accurate my memory was, but it was a good six or ten feet off the ground; it was a big stage — and they were starting to build it and by the time we performed that night, they had the whole stage built, with almost like a clamshell — I don't know what you would call it, but it had a

cover over it. They built it in a day! And they were building all over town — this was a year after the end of the war — when we drove through or even just woke up that morning, you could hear saws and machinery and drilling and just the noises of construction all over town. They were beginning to rebuild the city, and to see almost like *resiliency* — yes, the resiliency of people, resiliency of culture and just the *literal* rebuilding process. After I got home from there, I realized how much could happen, if we wanted to...and if we have to.

CF: You answered this in a way, but I wanted to know — if any — what ethnic connections you had to the group, to the dances, to the culture.

CP: Yeah, *none*. She again laughs: It was a professional dance opportunity. I'm Italian.

CF: In what ways would you say that sense of possibility — that sense that anything is possible if we need to/want to/have to — seeing a country rebuilding itself, seeing people dislocated and yet being generous to you — in what ways is that working for you now?

CP: I think the biggest piece is feeling — the word that is coming up for me is stewardship. Because it's more than responsibility. It's not that it's a *duty* to pay it forward; it's that I *want* to pay it forward. I received such incredible gifts from people you might say had nothing to give, and yet clearly they had a lot. So now I feel a gigantic sense of gratitude — I was too small of a person back then to get that. But now I feel that gratitude and want to pay that forward. And I also feel galvanized about... “Don't tell me it's not possible — because I saw it!” You know?

CF: I see! I'm sorry I zeroed so quickly in on what I imagine might have been one of the bigger landmarks of your time with ŽIVILI — but what about other tours or just life in ŽIVILI, both before and after that tour?

CP: Yeah! So there are two images that come up for me when you ask me that. The first is getting up in the mornings — we would do little regional tours in Ohio or in neighboring states — and we would get on our bus at 5:00 in the morning over by the Buggyworks Building.¹ And so the first image that comes to mind is having my pillow and my water bottle and my giant costume suitcase, and getting on the bus at 5:00 in the morning and sleeping, and going to some small town with an amazing old vaudeville house or some kind of theatre, and setting the work in the theatre, then taking a break and eating dinner and going out and performing. What a really cool way to experience a lot of small towns in the area. So that feeling of just getting up really early and getting on the bus — that's a big piece of it. And rehearsing: I think we rehearsed at first Tuesday and Thursday nights and mostly all day Sunday, and fitting that into my schedule as a person who mostly all the time had a 9:00 –to 5:00 job, now I recognize the level of commitment that we made to show up for rehearsal

¹ By the late 1800s, the Columbus Buggy Company was a thriving business, and grew to be the largest manufacturer of buggies in the world. By 1913, after an attempt at manufacturing electric cars, company had gone out of business. Since that time, the buildings have had many different uses until 2005. Currently, it is known as The Buggyworks, a residential and commercial property located in the Arena District of Downtown Columbus, a renovated historic warehouse that contains 68 urban loft condominiums and live/work units within walking distance of Nationwide Arena, Huntington Park, The North Market, Goodale and North Bank Parks.

that we made, and at the time, I had no appreciation for the additional work that Pam and Melissa and other members of the company were putting in. So what an all-consuming commitment and passion that was – and how everybody made it happen because we loved it. So that’s the rehearsal process. And then, again, I get this image of the theatres. Both the small regional theaters that we were in and then the big theatres — getting to perform at the Ohio Theatre and the Capitol Theatre and just having the opportunity to be backstage and get to know the crew. You know, at the time it was my job, so I didn’t make a big deal out of it, and now I realize that not everybody gets to do that. So, it’s a lot more fun in retrospect (laughing) — but it was actually really cool.

CF: Are you saying that you each were responsible for your own costumes? You took them home and brought them back for performances?

CP: Yes. It was a lot! We had anywhere from probably five to ten full costumes each, with layers and layers and layers and jewelry and headscarves and elaborate make-up and different shoes for every piece. This was *my* recurring nightmare — getting on the Živili bus with the wrong suitcase or something; missing a piece was always the nightmare. Because everybody had the exact same costumes: if you missed your necklace, it showed. We had to iron them — we got them dry-cleaned, some of the pieces we could wash, and we had to iron them before every show.

CF: Those were *heavy* costumes!

CP: Yes, heavy. It was fun, though. I loved the costumes! I loved the dress-up part of it.

CF: I imagine that you needed a whole separate place in your lodging to house them!

CP: Well, they lived in the closet, and then we all had to have the biggest suitcase that you could buy. I think on the refugee camp tour, we may have taken two suitcases; I think we had to have one costume suitcase and one other suitcase.

CF: It seems it was such a strong experience of community. Are there lasting friendships for you that emerged from those years?

P: It was [a strong experience of community]! Sue and I are still close. I have not talked to the other company members in years, but some of us are friends on Facebook. I lost touch with Carmello — he was a friend of mine, and driving over here [for this interview], I was thinking “I wonder where Carmello is and what he’s up to? I’ll have to check on that.” So I have lost touch with most of them, and it’s another reason why a reunion would be kind of fun. I also think there was a community around Pam and Melissa, and I was a little bit of an outsider to that. They had families that they had known for years, especially in the Croatian community — and because I wasn’t in the Croatian community and I hadn’t known them for years, I missed out on some of those deeper connections. Oh, but something cool did happen — when I was in grad school, which was about ten years after I joined the company. It had been a few years since the company had wound down, and I did one of the pieces for my grad project, and I wanted to play the drum in the piece. So I got in touch with Tom Katrenich, who was one of the musicians. He let me use the drum, and he got some musicians together. We recorded the piece, and I got to play the drum. So that was cool.

CP: I knew you in grad school and I have no recollection of that. Where was I???

CP: Yes, it was *Dajčevó*, the one I was talking about.

CF: Is there perhaps something that you'd like to say that I haven't asked you? Something obvious — or not obvious — about your time with ŽIVILI, or what it meant, or how it sat in the landscape of dance in Ohio at that time — or anything at all you might want to discuss that hasn't come up?

CP: I have to say *I'm* curious about that. Because I feel like my sense of perspective is...I have an idiosyncratic perspective on that. I know that for me it was a much bigger deal than I realized at the time, both in Ohio, and in my sense of the *field* of dance. I *really*, really had concert modern dance on a pedestal! And I would say that my understanding of dance has gone like this (she makes an inclusive, expanded gesture). I love concert modern dance! But the value that has really stayed with me and that translates more directly to more people I know is the value of dancing with each other. So I don't know where it fits into the landscape, I don't know where it fits into our awareness right now, but that's where it sits in *my* awareness: that dancing for ourselves and dancing with each other and dancing in community are huge for me.

CF: Beautifully said! Do you recall being aware of the folding up of the company? And whether you had feelings about that? What do you see as Part B — maybe it's a whole other question, but thinking about what you just acknowledged about its value, what do you think about ...what fills that gap that is left by the departure of ŽIVILI?

CP: Nothing fills the gap! At the time my feelings were — you know, I was so young, and my feelings were changing all the time, so it was one more of a lot of changes. So I didn't get it, and even now, of course, all good things come to an end. So I think the timing of the ending was what it was. Pam and Melissa let us know that they were moving on, they had other things that they wanted to do. And part of me was that *I* had other things that I wanted to do, and I couldn't make it to the rehearsals anymore. So it was a little bit of being let off the hook, for me. And I think that a lot of the "Old Guard" had sort of retired, so I think it was time for the project to come to an end. I wish that there were something rising up to...nothing could take its place, but I wish that there were more of a swell of the other things. And I think that — you know, the arts scene, or the dance scene now in Columbus — there is some amazing stuff going on. So maybe the swell came from new growth and new work that needed to come through...I don't know exactly what the specific reverberations were from ŽIVILI. I'm curious about it.

I don't know how much this fits into your project, but I do think that there's something here about — and I probably already suggested it — but what's happening in our world now — immigration and taking care of refugees and valuing the human worth and the creative potential that individual human beings have, so that if we were in touch with our own worth and the creative potential that each of us has, we might have a little bit more respect for the work that other people do. I think there's something there for dancers, and for artists, and for leaders in the field about helping people get in touch with their own human value, but also the value of the creative process. Each of us truly has something within us, and I think that to be able to serve that purpose requires us to get in touch with our own *value*. I see it in the administrators, in the high leadership of the field, but there's also this sense that the people who are really in leadership in our field are working their butts off. It looks really hard; I mean, there's tremendous love and passion there, but it looks really hard. I think there's something about supporting and cultivating the sense of leadership in younger people, and the sense of value that we have as creative people, as artists, as dancers — that we could be doing something at every age in terms of leadership and supporting our leaders, supporting our mentors

— whether it’s administrators or researchers, you know...I think as a student, you get the sense that you’re there to get the “A,” or do what you’re told to do. But I think there’s a whole flip side to it. I know that now, as a leader. There’s a whole flip side to it, where as leaders, we get support from our students, and I don’t know that the students and the younger people in the field really *get* that. I think that we could do more with our students, we could do more. I kind of rambled there with my answer, it wasn’t a very well-fleshed out idea, but...

CF: Thank you so much! You’ve actually given us a lot to think about.

CP: I really have such a deep love for all of this, I’m very grateful to be a part of this — and I have such a deep love for Pam and Melissa, so just getting to reconnect with that feels really good — so thanks so much.

I guess I also want to say for the record how different my perspective is, having access to the internet. It’s a very different way of living in the world, a very different perspective.