

## VDC Interview Transcript

Pam Young

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**Key:**

CF: Candace Feck

PY: Pam Young

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC team)

*As the team has been setting up, Pam talks about how the founders ran the early days of the Cleveland Modern Dance Association: a mimeograph machine in someone's basement, a separate, dedicated phone line for CMDA -- quite an unusual step to take at that time — at Miriam Glazer's house. She notes how difficult it is now to really imagine those times ('50s and '60s) — including the difficulties for women with children to consider working or taking class outside of their homes...*

CF: As a segue from our interview with Lillian Weisberg just now, perhaps we might open by discussing her achievements as a founding member of what is now DANCECleveland.

PY: Well, I think that having this love of dance, and this driving desire to want to pursue the opportunity to dance — and there weren't those opportunities; they were few and far between — and then finding this community of women, all of whom, for the most part, were at home...I mean, Kathryn [Karipides] was working, but mostly these were women who had children. I think Miriam [Glazer] had five children. These were women who had lots of children, and yet if it weren't for dance... they will talk about how in many ways, it saved their lives, coming together to have that dance class — that it revived them, it inspired their creativity — it was a game-changer! And then the idea that this group of women, without really having an understanding of what it would probably take, decided "We better have an Association! Sure, let's go ahead and create a real organization." And through thick and thin — and there were definitely thick and thin times — I mean, when the school closed, Ann Ennis and a couple of people had put a grant in to the Cleveland Foundation, who said "Alright. If you want some help, you need to go in to The Ohio Theatre that's being restored. There hadn't been anybody using these theatres. "If you're willing to move in there, we may be able to help you. But Cleveland Modern Dance Association is kind of a clunky name. You need to change your name; we'll help you with that, we'll find somebody to help you create a new brand identity, and you need to create a set of performances in the new Ohio Theatre." Well, this went from feeling like something they could manage to something that was enormous! And it *was* a leap of faith. And they will talk about, you know, putting a Marley floor into a rental truck and driving it down to the loading dock. You know, these little women, driving the truck! Whatever needed to get done, they got it done. And they made partnerships, they were smart, they had great intuition about it — and it started with a love of dance, and I think that's what's driven the organization forward through all these years.

CF: You had already established associations with Cleveland Ballet, with Dancing Wheels, and I think you grew up here or nearby...

PY: Mm-hmm.

CF: What was it that you found at CMDA that lured you? When did it come on to your radar, this group? Maybe it was there for a long time before you became Executive Director...

PY: Mm-hmm, yes. I grew up here in Cleveland Heights, and I had been in Architecture and Design. When my children were born, that was a pretty large occupation: you could get a client call, and the next thing you know, you were working eighty hours a week. I mean, my schedule when I started was 8:00 am to 8:00 pm, Monday through Saturday — and 8:00 to noon on Sunday. So I had half a day off, and no vacations and no holidays. We worked because we had a client, which was not atypical, and so finally I said “Enough!” So I moved into the non-profit sector, was very fortunate to move into Public Art, which had a lot of similarity to Architecture: things were built in the built environment, design review — these things were somewhat familiar, and I took an Acting Directorship position, and realized I loved the non-profit sector. I had been a volunteer with the Orchestra, I had been a volunteer with a number of organizations, and so I went back to Case [University] in Arts Management and then moved into Development, and worked with a number of organizations. I was on the Board of DANCECleveland when it hit one of those very thin times. The Executive Director moved to New York, sent everybody an email — not everybody even *had* email, because this was 2002 — that he was not coming back. So the Executive Committee really took a look at what was going on: the organization was running a deficit, there were dance companies coming in, there was no one to manage it, the new season needed to be curated, and nobody really knew what to do. They called together the Board and said, “We have a crisis.” Well, I had done crisis management. I had been a consultant to the Children’s Museum when the tensile roof fell in with a snowstorm. And so, for whatever reason, I had the time, and I said, “Let me go in the office — give me two weeks. Let’s see if we can’t find a road map through this.” — Because they had put a motion on the table to close the organization. I said, “You know, it’s been here for [at that time] over forty years. It seems like we should be able to find a way forward — but if we can’t, we can’t.” So they tabled the motion, I pulled together the smartest people in the room — which is the way I work — and we did find a roadmap forward. Inch by inch and, sort of, footstep by footstep, we moved forward. And then they said, “Do you want the job?” And I said “Yes.” So here I am.

The times that I worked in development at Cleveland Ballet and Cleveland Dancing Wheels — Dancing Wheels had been Cleveland Ballet/Dancing Wheels; I had been working with them, so then when I left Cleveland Ballet, I went full-time into Dancing Wheels. I worked for [Cleveland] MOCA, I worked for a number of organizations in development. So I would say that I think that having a strong association in the Cleveland community and in fund-raising helped bridge the sort of troubled waters that we were facing at that time, because I knew the funders and they knew me. And they were not *happy* the organization was having problems! Immediately there’s a red flag on you that “I’m not going to give you money,” but then on the other hand you can’t survive if they don’t! But the relationship was already there, so it allowed us a little bit of trust.

CF: As you took over the organization as Executive Director, what were you seeing specifically as its strengths and its challenges? This is 2003, yes?

PY: I would say quite frankly the fact that it had such a long history, and there were so many people on the ground, sort of rooting for it — it had been presenting really strong seasons and had begun to build audiences around. Cleveland Ballet had closed its doors, so there wasn’t a large dance

company in existence. At Playhouse Square, we were a resident company because we were one of the first organizations to go there; they were sort of in a wait-and-see attitude before they were going to jump in and start to present dance on their own — they really were hoping that we would be able to resurrect. So we had that — and there were strong partnerships, strong colleges and universities and dance students; there are many dance studios in the community. So there is sort of an ecosystem of dance here. Clearly one of the issues always around any part of dance is that a ticket purchase doesn't cover the cost of a dance performance, so having additional funders in the community is really important, and they kind of went through the tough times with us. We also built collaborations; strong collaborations are really a hallmark of our history, as well. So Cuyahoga Community College, continuing with Cleveland State [University] and with Case [University] — all of those important partnerships allowed us to create a strong financial model, which has resonated and carried us forward.

CF: Can you speak a little bit to the strong alliance in the organization between presenting and teaching? Is there still a teaching arm of the organization, or is it only a presenting organization now?

PY: Well, we always call ourselves “A Presenter and More,” because we do a lot of things. We do have free master classes; it's really key for us that we continue to offer classes with the dance companies that we bring. We feel that the possibility of professional and pre-professional dancers to have those opportunities is key. We also have a curriculum-based program called “Read to Learn/Dance to Move,” which is in preschool and kindergartens, and taught by local teachers and dance educators — so education is really clearly a key tenet of our organization. We have our performances, and we surround those with a full range of educational activities: we do a pre-talk with the Artistic Director, so there's this sort of filling in the gaps for a lot of our audience members with information. We create written materials; we often hire dance historians to do that. We send them out to all of our subscribers, and we put them in the playbill, so that people have an opportunity to read more about each performance. We do post-performance Q & As — we do all of those kinds of activities. Further, we commission new work — because we feel it's a part of the responsibility of a presenting organization to help advance the artform of dance. If a dance company, a dance-maker, a choreographer — the next Merce Cunningham — creates their masterwork, and nobody presents it and nobody sees it, then it's a rehearsal; it's not a performance. If a tree falls in a forest and no one's there to hear it, you know... So as a presenter, we are part of a larger system of dance being created, dance being made, dance making it to stage. We have worked for the last four or five years through a feasibility study to help launch the new National Center for Choreography, which is in Akron, so there is the opportunity for new work to be created here, a great opportunity for our audiences and for people in the community to see how dance gets made, and how difficult it is. We — almost every season and twice in this coming season — are providing additional time and space in Cleveland for two dance companies to create new work. We have Jessica Lang coming; she has a new piece and we'll give her additional time in the theatre. And we're bringing a company from Cuba back in the Spring; they're going to be given space at Cleveland State [University], a choreographer will be brought here, and they are going to be creating a new piece here. So, you know, we do an awful lot to help dance *make* it — for dance to become created, dance to be moved to the stage, and then for dance to be presented. We commissioned a piece last year with Camille A. Brown called *Black Girl*, which is now touring around the country; we found the seed funding — \$50,000.00 to help launch the creation of that work, and we gave her three residencies here to help that work become created. So we are immersed in lots of different places along the dance continuum.

CF: Miriam Glazer, one of the original presidents of CMDA is still on your Board, and at the same time, I imagine the Board is now composed rather differently than it was in the days of those early meetings of the group in the church basement. Talk about your hand in that, how that has occurred. You mentioned — and I'm specifically interested in — how various universities are partners, but you must have other important partners in the city as well.

PY: We'll, we're still a resident company of Playhouse Square, so that is probably our most important partnership. We have created several different models: we're in the University of Akron in the Fall, where we bring a company, and they teach class there for a full week of residency and then we have a performance, and the university is our partner through all of it, including the performance; we have co-presenting and collaboration partnerships for performances — for example, we have Dance Theatre of Harlem coming later this season and we're co-presenting with Cuyahoga Community College; we have Ballet Biarritz coming from France — Playhouse Square is actually co-presenting them with us; Alvin Ailey comes every three years, and Playhouse Square is actually the lead organization bringing them, and we partner with them, as opposed to them partnering with us. So we have many different types of partnering and contractual relationships. Back in the day, as a grassroots organization with a group of people who did everything — you know, stuffing envelopes, setting the dance agenda for teaching, having a studio, and then trying to curate seasons and doing it all — it also fell on their shoulders to fund, and it was sort of the same group of people for a very long time. When the organization hit some turbulent waters in 2001/2002, our Board had been fairly stable in terms of the same group of people — people who had known other people who said, "Oh, I know so-and-so; they should come on the Board." And we found that, you know — quite frankly, it looked like the East side of Cleveland, people who all knew people from dance or from master classes, and it didn't reflect either the diversity or the breadth of our community. And so one of the things we tackled first was that I brought two people to our Board, who were charged with taking a look and putting together a trustee process for us. Number one was we determined and voted as a Board that we wanted our Board to match the diversity of our audiences and of the art that we bring. And so now we have people from Akron, from the East side, the West side, the city of Cleveland; we have a very creative Board — a lot of people who have dance in their backgrounds, but are now in corporate life: we have lawyers, we have marketing people, we have finance people — so that the board members can inform the process and also participate in the process.

CF: Can you talk about that huge infusion into the organization that occurred when you captured the National Center for Choreography at University of Akron?

PY: You know, a lot of times, I think, in the non-profit sector — and *maybe* it's indigenous to dance? — you're just in the right place at the right time. We were meeting with a funder, talking about our Akron residency — and it's always a really interesting meeting when you meet with the Knight Foundation. Their previous arts officer would walk in and you'd get (she snaps her fingers in rapid succession) like, twenty minutes: "*Okay, how did it go? What are you going to do? What are you looking at doing? Okay. Thank you.*" Stand up, and you walk out! I mean, as soon as he stands up, you're done. He would just *fire* questions at you. So I was done, he stood up, and I was putting my coat on and he said, "Well, do you have any big ideas for Akron? Do you have any *big* ideas?" And I said, "Well, actually, I do!" And I started talking about the idea of a National Choreographic Center, and how in the United States there is only one, at Florida State University, there's only one national center for choreography; *France has nineteen!* I talked about the idea that it's almost impossible to get work done in the United States, that there are many places where there *are* no dance studios — but the

University of Akron built seven state-of-the-art studios, predominately to house Ohio Ballet and Ohio Ballet closed their doors before the building was even open, and the studios sit for the most part empty during a good portion of the day. I talked about the opportunity to take a look at how the facilities could — starting there, and looking at all of northeast Ohio as a footprint — be mined here. Because we have research capabilities, dance capabilities, facilities, theaters — we have black box, we have lighting, we have costume capacity, and we have all of this *here!* And I told him that I believe that the second national choreographic center could be *here*. And he looks at me, as I'm putting my coat on, and he goes “*Sit down! Talk to me about this.*” So, we spent another twenty or thirty minutes, and he said “Give me a white paper,” which I did. And from the white paper came several meetings, and he said, “What we need is a blue-ribbon panel.” And so we brought Doug Sonntag from the National Endowment for the Arts, and we brought Jodee Nimerichter from American Dance Festival, and Jennifer Calienes, who was the head of the Maggie Allesee National Choreographic Center at Florida State at that point, and we brought three choreographers who had already had residencies. We gave them tours, we showed them what was there, we gave them information about all of northeast Ohio. We talked about what a national center might need, and what was the need across the country. And then we had a big public event, so that the public could come in and hear about this, as well. And everybody was fairly “thumbs-up” that we should really take a look at this, including the administration and the university. So the Knight Foundation said “We will give you funding for this feasibility study,” and “We don't want to be the only funders.” So [The] Doris Duke [Foundation] also offered some funding, we had some pilot residencies, we put together a whole team of people — and we spent three years: it was my full-time job, on top of my full-time job. And then, when we were not quite done with the process, we got the phone call from the Knight Foundation that they were very impressed with the work that had been done and that they would fund a \$5,000,000.00 fund to be the backbone for this new National Choreographic Center. And so we have now hired our first Executive/Artistic Director and the Center is in the ramping up phase. So, it's there and it's real, and it's all happening!

CF: And your responsibility for that, besides launching it? Is it under your aegis?

PY: It's not under our umbrella; it's its own 501c3. We as an organization had the vision, we had the idea, we led the feasibility study — and up until Christy Bolingbroke, who is the first director, gets here on November 1<sup>st</sup>, we have done all of the work to get it started. We have gotten its 501c3, all of its definitive documents, DANCECleveland will always have a presence on the Board, as will the University of Akron, and so we've been very, very involved.

CF: I know that, in terms of commissioning work — there was Jawole Willa Jo Zollar... Was that 2006/7?

PY: I believe that's right. Jawole with Compagnie JANT-BI — we commissioned that work. But the organization had commissioned work all through its history. They've either had debuts of work... Trisha Brown, for example — we have the Midwest debut of a significant piece of hers; they had worked with Liz Lerman and commissioned a work; they commissioned a work with Gina Gibney — so there had been a long history of commissioning, and we really feel that that's a significant part of what we need to do going forward, as well. We are in the process of raising commissioning funds for a piece that we'll have in residency here later in the year.

CF: What next? What's your dream? I mean, you've got this National Choreographic Center established. What's the next thing for DANCECleveland?

PY: Well, the Center, for me, in that vision was a piece of the puzzle. The Center allows us the opportunity to meet new choreographers, to help advance the form — because we're looking at helping new, young, emerging — or even established — choreographers create new work and have time and space to do that — and money to do that. It allows us to bring audiences into the *process*. You know, a good portion of what we do with our presenting — a *good* portion of what we do with our presenting — is to build audiences. And building audiences is really going where audiences are — both physically as well as that sort of education process: “*What is dance? Why should I come here? What am I going to get out of this? What should I know?*” So, a seasoned dance audience member — we have to communicate with them in one way; with somebody who has never been to dance, we communicate in a completely different way. And so, as we have really dedicated a lot of our time to creating audiences for dance and are having some level of success with that, the Center is one more step in that process. It gives somebody an *insider* view, allows us to get inside that creative process, as well. For us, last year, during our 60th anniversary, we tested a lot of different, new ideas: we had dance in places inside and out; we had dance over at Cleveland Public Theatre, we were outside at Cain Park, and in a lot of different types of venues, which allowed us to present a broader, sort of segment of dance. You know, it's very hard in the proscenium theatre — our main theatre is 1,000 seats. We are, I will say, very fortunate: in Playhouse Square, we have everything from a fifty-seat black box to a 250-seat expandable, contractable, moveable theatre, two five hundred-fifty-seat theatres, 1,000-seat theatre, a 2,500-seat theatre and a 2,900-seat theatre! So we have a range of opportunities to present dance across a number of platforms. Some dance needs more intimate space. And so for us, having works-in-progress in black boxes, taking dance out of doors, taking a look at sort of creating a really exciting and fresh approach to presenting, is the next thing on our radar. And then, I think, for us also, I think the idea that as work is created, there are sort of those early-stage research creations, the mid-stage which is sort of rehearsing, creating new work, testing new ideas — but late-stage residencies and post-premiere residencies are almost unheard of in the United States. An artist, you know, in Theatre, will rehearse in the theater for weeks! For dance, at the premiere, they'll get four hours for a tech rehearsal, and it's often the first time the choreographer has actually seen the work with the lights and the costumes! And they're going “Oh no, we have — you know, we have some work to do here!” Well, if we could give an artist two or three days in the theatre, where they could actually rehearse it on stage — or after the premiere, where they've sort of seen it, they could have that kind of residency. We have the space! So now, it just always comes down to money — and to me, if we can figure out how to get it done, then we can get it done. We'll find the way to get it done.

CF: You've been with the organization in this capacity for thirteen years. I'm curious about how you characterize the slices of your “pie”: presenting, education — how do you divide up all the tasks, given your mission? I guess I'm curious about this both now, and going forward with your dream list.

PY: Well, I'd say that the presenting portion of what we do is what we're best known for, and our annual series is what people — how they come to DANCECleveland. Our subscribers, of course, dearly know who we are, because they buy from us. We also have our own ticket office, and so the business of what we do is very important. For people who buy a single ticket, they often don't even know who we are — because they're buying a ticket to, say, BODYTRAFFIC — at Playhouse Square — presented by DANCECleveland. *We're* kind of invisible until they get to the theatre, so we do an awful lot of work trying to get our brand, what we do, to make people aware of who we are — again, that's part of that audience development. Audience education and dance education clearly take a great deal of effort in our office. We just did a workshop for high school students and their

parents, so they have a better sense of “You think you want to be a dancer, but what are your chances? Let’s get real. And then, here are some other things you might want to think about, where you’re in the field of dance, but you may not be a dancer onstage.” So there are options or new things to think about, or how to prepare to go to college, or prepare to audition. We are always working on some level of professional development. If I had to say, as far as the effort of our office, probably 50% of it is in the presenting, and the other 50% is distributed over all of those other aspects — those really take the bulk of our staff work.

CF: Would you talk about the “Read to Learn/Dance to Move” initiative?

PY: It really was an interesting thing when we presented The José Limón Company at our fiftieth anniversary, there was a book about José Limón, called *José: Born to Dance*, and we approached the Young Audiences<sup>1</sup> here and said you know, there would be an opportunity to engage a dancer, and to share this book, and what would be the age group, and how would we do that — and Young Audiences wasn’t really that interested. But it seemed to me that there was an opportunity. So I talked with a funder and they said, “You know, we’re really trying to look at more early education.” So I worked with a dancer/dance educator – she had been dancing with Verb [Ballets], her mom was a curriculum specialist in early childhood language and arts, we looked at the education standards for the state of Ohio, and began to look at what would a curriculum look like. We have books that have some level of dance: *Giraffes Can’t Dance* — it’s about finding your own inner voice, and we have one that’s got this sort of great rhythmic thing, and it’s a little bit on, sort of, hip hop, and one that’s about scarves and color but it’s really about modern dance. And so we go in, and we do a lot of exercises with the children to get them ready to sit quietly, we read the book, we ask a lot of questions, we have a lot about the vocabulary and the literacy of it — what are the new words — and then we talk about the beginning, the middle and the end — and then we get the children up and they create the story, they create their own dance, and then we have half of them sit down and they perform for each other, so they learn how to be an audience as well.

The classroom teachers are amazed because students who come into pre-K (we do the pre-K slightly differently from the kindergarten) come in with different levels of knowledge (some of them can read, and so on), but none of them have really ever had dance. So they come at this together — and particularly children who are on the spectrum, who sit (she draws her arms and hands close to her body and face) kind of closed-in, and at some point in this class, they begin to open up (her arms drop away from her face). I mean, we’ve had students about whom the teachers will say, you know, “She really doesn’t speak in the class at all,” and then we’ll go around and we’ll say, you know, “My name is Pam,” and we’ll clap or something. So, we’ll go around the circle and they’ll all do this child’s name for her, because she doesn’t speak. Well, all of a sudden, we did the one with scarves, and we handed them out and she said “My scarf is blue,” and she stood up and began dancing and everyone in the classroom was just looking at her — they had never heard her speak before, they had never seen her move. She came out of it, she was joyful — and we said “Keep the scarf! Keep the scarf.” And the teacher said, “I wish I had known in September!” I mean, here it was; it was the key that unlocked that for her. But every time we do the program, there is some child for whom this is the key that unlocks for them. So it’s really a wonderful program, and then at the end we give every child a book of his or her own to take home. And we offer this for free in the city of Cleveland schools, and for the most part, this is the first book that many of them have ever had.

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<sup>1</sup> This transpired during the 2005/6 season. Young Audiences is now the Center for Arts-Inspired Learning

And they get to write their name — “My name is \_\_\_\_\_. This book belongs to \_\_\_\_\_, and they have the book to keep.

CF: We’re running short on time, but I’m curious now about your background. You are not a person who grew up as a dancer...

PY: No.

CF: You’ve had an arts passion, I guess, that has driven your choices for much of your life, but you got involved with Cleveland Ballet, you got involved with Dancing Wheels, and now you’re very involved with DANCECleveland. Talk about your journey, because you’re definitely walking the walk and talking the talk *now!* What happened there and how did it develop?

PY: Well, you know, I grew up playing piano, and I think if you have art in your life, you become sensitized to art across every platform: going to the art museum, going to the orchestra, singing in a choir... Dance wasn’t on the high beam of my attention, and when I became a fund-raiser, moving to Cleveland Ballet, they had a grant and government fund-raising position open. I believe the business background, the fund-raising background, allowed me to be the right person to move into this position at the time — and it’s been amazing. I mean, it’s been an honor and a privilege. I now serve on the national Board of DanceUSA, I have been the Chair of the presenter’s council for a group of national dance presenters — and I’ve had to *learn*. I’ve had to clearly rely on those presenters; I was on the phone on the way here today with a presenter, asking me what I had seen about a company that we’re both looking at. So, I think the business background allowed me to step into this, and I stepped into it not knowing how to curate a season — *Who* are these dance companies? *Who* are the funders, nationally, that fund dance? I had to get through a pretty steep learning curve! And thank goodness for all of the people — because dance, you know, it’s a wonderful group of people! I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who’s in dance who isn’t...oh, generous and kind, and wanting to be helpful in whatever you can do; if you can build more audiences for dance, then you can build more audiences for dance for everybody in our community. So we’re all here together kind of doing the good work. That said, if the job were open today, and I didn’t have dance in my background, I doubt that I would be hired. So it was just that they needed someone with more of a business background. I’ve encouraged people on my staff to go and get degrees in Arts Administration, because having a Dance background, or a Marketing background with a Dance minor, I think it’s really important to sort of see the bigger business picture. We’ve seen too many organizations fail! I mean, in the 1990s, there were over twenty stand-alone, dance-only presenters in the country. Today there are about eight. And that’s because this is a tough business — a tough thing to be able to *run* as a business!

CF: From your vantage point now, where do you see audience development in the future? I wonder particularly about the competition between a live artform and digital delivery of education and entertainment.

PY: Well, there’s an article coming out this week in the *Wall Street Journal*, that dance audiences are down 20% in New York City. And a lot of that, I think — I reflect on an article I read in the *New York Times* earlier this summer that you come in to work on Monday and people go “How was your week-end?” And people stop to think, “What did I do? I went home, I put on my sweat suit, I talked to my friends on Facebook, I ordered food in, I watched Netflix, and I vegged.” Because work has become a lot more difficult, the days have gotten a lot longer, and we get to the week-end, and we

can just be at home, and have that moment of R & R — and not feel like we're alone because of the connections people have through Instagram and Facebook. We have to battle that to get people to come out: You have to come, you have to put on clothes, you have to... and how do we think about it going forward? You know, if you get a ticket, you have to park, there is a lot of cost associated with it...and so it is a battle! It may come to a point when live performances cease to be — and wouldn't that be a sad thing? I mean, I think we can all see the sadness in this but, you know, you could probably ask ten people in their twenties, thirties and forties, "What was the last live performance you went to?" and it probably hasn't been in the last two or three months. You know, when was the last performance you actually bought a ticket to and went out to? So how do we combat that? That's — you know, that's *big*...

JC: I was noticing the other day that one of the fliers at the Wexner Center says "Break up with your couch."

PY: Oh! I may have to steal that! You know, it's really hard: you're tired, you go home, you have a glass of wine, you can put your feet up, and you can choose what you want to watch! You can binge-watch some series on Netflix, and (she laughs) feel like you've had a great week-end! And I'm there! I mean, I'm there, too — I have to say!

CF: Thank you so much.

PY: Thank you!