“Dance, with Class” newspaper article on Bowen-Peters

Janet Koch
Dance, with

By JANET KOCH
Staff Reporter

The springiest oak dance floor in New Haven — some say on the East Coast — is built upon two-by-fours laid over a concrete floor where firetrucks once parked at 388 Dixwell Ave.

"That floor is the talk of professional dancers everywhere. You can dance on it for days and never feel a strain or a shin splint," a tall, regal woman declares, gazing around the mirrored main studio at the Bowen-Peters Cultural Arts Center.

Angela Bowen has a soft spot for good floors.

It was almost 20 years ago when she founded her school in a tiny storefront. There were 14 students then. She taught them dance, and her husband Ken taught conga drum. The classes grew larger and the reputation flourished in New Haven and beyond.

In 1978, with 368 students and a long waiting list, Bowen-Peters moved from a crowded Orchard Street studio to the old Dixwell Avenue firehouse, bought from the city and transformed by architect John Mathews.

That same year, three factories closed and the Olin workers went on strike, Ms. Bowen recalls.

"We tried to keep as many of the kids on scholarship as we could.
We almost closed, ourselves," but squeaked by with community support and grants from the New Haven Foundation and the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, she says.

Today there are 130 students, and Bowen-Peters is pursuing a grant that would allow it to decrease its tuition from $28 a month to $20, to attract those financially squeezed families back again.

The school has received unusual publicity lately, not because of its cultural contributions, but because it requested an abatement of the hefty payment-in-lieu-of-taxes it originally agreed to give the city on the firehouse. Some members of the Board of Aldermen became embroiled in a vituperative argument over the issue.

Eventually that financial burden was relieved, but the school still shoulders a $100,000 mortgage for the renovations. Ms. Bowen is optimistic but philosophical about the future.

"Someday we may not have this beautiful building, but there will always be a Bowen-Peters," she says. "When I first started out with Elma Lewis, all she had was a five-room apartment to teach in. We stretched our legs on the mantelpiece and did our practicing holding onto little wooden folding chairs. She turned out the best dancers before she had a mirror on the wall or a bar to hold on to! All that's really needed is a mind dealing with a mind. If we have a space, you will learn to dance."

Ms. Bowen is a graduate of the Elma Lewis Dance School in Boston and majored in theatrical arts at Emerson College.

Her students are all required to take two hours of ballet instruction a week, in addition to the tap, jazz, modern and African dance they may want to pursue. The atmosphere is "family oriented," and the older students are expected to share their knowledge with the newcomers, she says. Five teachers now do the instructing while she administrates, but she admits she "misses the kids."

The performing arts have never ceased to prosper under the B-P aegis, despite the economy.

The annual Bowen-Peters spring show is scheduled for June 12 and 13 at Fair Haven Middle School. Demand is increasing for the young performing troupe, the Bowen-Peters Dancers, with its repertoire of Afro-, Caribbean- and Haitian-influenced dance. Graduates have gone on to Alvin Alley, Dance Theater of Harlem, the Connecticut Ballet, and troupes in Germany and Japan.

The school is negotiating with Yale University to establish a community theater group, Ms. Bowen says, and has also sponsored workshops with the Afro-American Cultural Center.

This month, Bowen-Peters will go into public schools to audition boys for scholarships. "We always need more young men," Ms. Bowen says.

As the sixth of seven children raised by a widow in the Roxbury section of Boston, she says the arts are vital to youngsters growing up in harsh economic circumstances.

A tall child who slouched, she was sent to dance classes to improve her posture, and discovered a world she never dreamed existed.

"Kids are often told that things will be different for them when they grow up and make a name for themselves. But what is there for now? Where is beauty, life and hope right then? Dancing changed my life. And if you can do that for others, no matter how paltry a living you make, you're very, very lucky."