1973 New Haven Register article “Bowen-Peters Carry the Message”

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Bowen-Peters Carry The Message

By MARSHA B. COCHRAN

"I won't dance, don't ask me," go the lyrics of the song. However, this is not a typical reaction from students at the Bowen-Peters School of Dance. 62 Orchard St. When asked if they dance. Their most recent request has come from the National Federation of Music Clubs. On Saturday, the school's 30 member group will represent Connecticut at the Federation's Annual Convention in Atlantic City.

The school's founders, Ken and Angela Peters (Angela's maiden name is Bowen) sit in their comfortable New Haven home attended to the daily demands of four-year-old son, John, and discussed the problems inherent in the Atlantic City western "First of all, there's the expense. It costs $400 to charter a bus. And besides, there's room and board. We have 24 dancers and six drummers. That's a lot of people." Angela, 38, explained, "But we're going to do it. Somehow.

And chances are, they will. For if past experience is any indication, the Peters seem to have a knack for making things happen. However, if they feel that the Chambers of Commerce in Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven, requesting information from the feasibility of a friend's project. The late John Mitchell, a community worker in New Haven, responded to their inquiry with a tour of the school's premises and even suggested an appropriate spot for the school's first location, on Dixwell Avenue. Ken Peters, 40, recalls a quick conversation with Mitchell. "I said to John, 'We're going to make Bowen-Peters a household word.' He just chuckled and said, 'Good luck. Ken.' But in a sense, we've succeeded in doing just that. You ask anyone in the black community today, 'What's a Bowen-Peters?' and they know."

No Easy Feat

Turning the school into a household word was no easy feat. For the first five years of the school's existence, Ken and Angela received no salary. During summers, they both took on odd jobs. Angela worked in various offices, while Ken did janitorial work. The trained, machinist, in Boston, Ken discovered it was impossible to find similar work in New Haven. And for awhile he was a door-to-door salesmen who gave his buying customers brochures on the Bowen-Peters School of Dance.

One aspect of Bowen-Peters' reputation involves Angela Peters' strict discipline and attitude. As chief dance instructor, Angela has found that a "behavioral dictatorship" is essential. "I love the kids. And it's because I love them that I always demand a little bit more from them than they're used to giving. My own training was basically ballet. Therefore, I have ballet as the basis of my teaching. I've required of all students. And this comes as a shock to a lot of them who are just used to drifting through everything. They must be punctual, neat and interested in learning. Gradually it gets through to them that I'm fair and honest. Classes run from September to May and it's always interesting to note that around November we have about 25 per cent drop out. They simply don't want to put out the necessary effort. And then in February, when they see how well their friends are doing, they want to come back."

Total Experience

But it isn't all hard work. The Peters see their school as a total educational experience utilizing the dance as a means to personal communication and development. They've tried to make a school as well as a community. And the school is not restricted simply to dance instruction. Angela spends almost as much time and effort correcting her students' grammar, giving personal advice, and suggesting new clothes and hair styles. Ken, who serves as the school's financial director, is also in charge of the percussion instruction. While still in Boston, Ken had supplemented his machinist income by playing professional drums. During his career, he's backed up such famous performers as Diahann Washington and Paul Anka.

Ken believes that the Afro-American culture serves as a substructure for the black man into the world of art. And the fact that two years ago Ken was struck with multiple sclerosis had no effect on his teaching. "We do all we can to draw young boys into the school. Many are on total scholarships which require them to do maintenance work around the building. For those who aren't on scholarships, their monthly tuition is less than what we charge the girls. The boys get a sense of belonging, a sense of being from our outside friends about going to a dancing school. We have separate classes for the boys and girls because the girls are so afraid of moving in front of the girls. But gradually they learn that dancing is not a sissy's sport. It's required that the girls begin their lessons with ballet. But they can go on to jazz or Afro. And the drums are their greatest incentive. It's very important for them to realize that what they're doing is different from the girls. And they just have some real dance experience. They know that they can take part in their school's annual production and great strength and endurance to be a good dancer."

Communicate

But the Peters' ultimate aim is not limited to dance or music. In working with the students, Angela has discovered that art can serve to communicate to others about what is happening. They've also maintained a school of drama. "Many of the kids are hostile at first. They have so many defenses against really touching each other or allowing themselves to be touched. The best way to handle that is to remove them out of their defenses so they can see something. And the dancing really helps to open them up. There's no focus here. We're a cohesive unit. One week you might have the lead, but next week you're back in the chorus. We're all working together to do something beautiful. It's respect for the art, ourselves and each other that is important. Not individual recognition. Most people think that their talents are impossible to work with. Parents come to us with their children and say, 'Here, you take them. I can't afford a thing.' But we've found that if you're honest and fair, they'll come to expect it. And you give them something to really strive for, well then they'll work like crazy. Dancing is our form of communication. If you were singing and I was your audience. Or if we were actors, we'd have opened a drama school. Because we're really concerned with turning out young students who are capable of great dances. What's rewarding is to see some gain confidence, or to watch someone finally have a sense of themselves as a student. That's what we want to produce here at the school. People.

The current enrollment at the school totals 159. Of that number, 30 are selected to participate as members of the performing group. This, as Angela points out, gives the students an immediate and very possible goal. Other incentives are provided by trips to New York to see such professional productions as Alvin Ailey and the New York City Ballet. Another important inspiration is Tom Larry Ferrell, a young graduate of the Bowen-Peters School of Dance who went on to dance in Pearl Bailey's "Hello, Dolly" for two years on Broadway. Ferrell is now back in New Haven dividing his time between teaching in the New Haven school system and at Bowen-Peters.

The Peters refer to their school not as a school but as a family. "We've been together for 15 years and it's been a constant experience for us. People come and go. But it's not the same. People.

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