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

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# Bowen-Peters Carry The Message

By MARSHA R. 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 they dance. Their most recent request has come from the National Federation of Music Clubs. On Saturday, the school's 30 member troupe will represent Connecticut at the Federation's Annual Convention in Atlantic City.

The school's co-founders Ken and Angela Peters (Angela's maiden name is Bowen) sat in their comfortable New Haven home, attended to the gentle demands of four-year-old son, Jomo, and discussed the problems inherent in the Atlantic City venture. "First of all, there's the expense. It costs \$400 to charter a bus. And besides that, there's room and board. We have 24 dancers and six drummers. That's a lot of people," Angela, 36, 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, however difficult, happen. For example, in 1963 Ken and Angela decided they wanted to open a dancing school. Still living in their native Boston, they heard that there was a need for such an enterprise in this area. So, they wrote to the Chambers of Commerce in Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven, requesting information as to the feasibility of such a project. The late John Mitchell, a community worker in New Haven, responded to their inquiry with a tour of the city. He even suggested an appropriate spot for the school's first location on Dixwell Avenue. Ken Peters, 40, recalls an early 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 that 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 factory and janitorial work. A 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 salesman who gave his buying customers brochures on the Bowen-Peters School of Dance.

One aspect of Bowen-Peters' reputation involves Angela Peters' name. She is the only female. As chief dance instructor,

Angela has found that a "hegemonic 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 in ballet. Therefore, I use ballet as the basis of my teaching. It's 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 20 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 social as well as artistic commitment. 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 Dinah Washington and Paul Anka. Ken believes that the Afro-percussion lessons serve as a subtle way to ease young Black men into the world of art. And the fact that two years ago Ken was stricken with multiple sclerosis had no effect on his teaching. "We do all we can to draw 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 lot of teasing from their outside friends about going to a dancing school. We have separate classes for the boys and girls because the boys 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, like the girls, they begin their lessons with ballet. But they can go on to tap, 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 boys have some real dance

experience. They know that it takes perfect physical condition 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 as much between artists as it does between artists and audience. "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 tease them out of their defenses so they can see how absurd it is. And the dancing really helps to open them up. There's no star system 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's important. Not individual recognition. Most people think that teen-agers are impossible to work with. Parents come to us with their children and say, 'Here, you take them. I can't do a thing.' But we've found that if you're honest and fair, they'll come to respect you. And if you give them something to really strive for, well then they'll work like crazy. Dancing is our form of communication. If we were singers, we'd use song. Or if we were actors, we'd have opened a drama school. Because we're really not concerned with turning out a mass of great dancers. What's rewarding is to see someone gain confidence, or to watch someone finally have a sense of themselves as people. That's what we want to produce here at the school. People."

The current enrollment at the school totals 150. Of that number, 30 are selected to participate as members of the performing troupe. 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 groups as Alvin Ailey and the New York City Ballet. Another important inspiration comes from Larry Ferrel, a young graduate of Bowen-Peters who went on to dance in Pearl Bailey's "Hello, Dolly" for two years on Broadway. Ferrel is now back in New Haven dividing his time between teaching in the New Haven school system and at Bowen-Peters. Sharon Smith and Lucretia Moyer, also graduates, complete the teaching staff.

Angela, who choreographs the dances, conceives their formats and designs the costumes, observes that for the most part, the Afro classes are the most popular. "They just

put up with the ballet because they know it's good body training. I create the Afro routines based on West African traditions, mainly because I haven't had an opportunity to learn any East African dances. But I try to allow the students some freedom of expression in them. I've gotten most from Africans or people who've seen them performed in Africa. Some African Yale students have come and taught us chants and dances from their villages."

Angela Peters describes the students as coming from a wide spectrum representing the entire New Haven area. While the younger students must be at least six years of age, there is no one too old to attend classes. During the years, there have been several mothers and grandmothers in the school who have consistently proven themselves willing and able to learn to dance. There have also been some white students, Angela explains, who the Peters found particularly dedicated and interested. "In my opinion it takes a lot more courage for a white person to go into an all black environment than vice versa. Black people are expected to go to white schools because it is automatically assumed that white schools are better. But what reason would a white person have for going to a Black school? It would be hard for them to convince anyone that it is simply a better school, even though it may be.

And besides the teasing they get from their white friends, they are subjected to a kind of initiation here by Black students. I didn't even know this was going on until one white student casually told me about her 'initiation' three years after it happened. I really admired her for not quitting, for sticking it out and not running and complaining to me. I could really dig that."

The Peters believe in spreading their knowledge and experience around. This month, a participants in the Hartford Visiting Artists program they'll conduct a 3-week-long introductory course on African dance, music and costumes. And recently they took part in similar demonstrations at Wilbur Cross High School and in Bethany. But the highlight of the Bowen-Peters Academic year takes place every June with the annual dance and music concert. The Peters prefer to call it a concert rather than a recital because it is not the kind of event at which each student comes onstage and does a two-and-a-half minute routine to the everlasting gratification of his parents. Rather the Peters have tired to stage a total, professional evening's entertainment.