

Oral History Interview with Beatrice Davis-Williams

Conducted by Kamilah Thurmon

for the DC Oral History Collaborative
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Twenty-seven minutes and three seconds
(Note: this transcript is part three of a three-part transcript)

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Biographical Information: Beatrice Davis-Williams is the founder and Artistic Director of The Davis Center.

Description: In this interview, Beatrice Davis-Williams discusses her upbringing in Philadelphia, her early influencers in dance, being a student at Howard University in the 1960s, and being the only African-American to achieve the highest level in the Cecchetti method. She recounts establishing the Davis Center, ballet instruction for her students, loving her students, the trials and triumphs of having a small business in the District, and having a business on Georgia Avenue in early 90s. Davis-Williams also talks about her 50-year legacy and service to the DC community, how she wants to be remembered, and her Woodridge neighborhood.

Kamilah Thurmon: Okay. My name is Kamilah Thurmon and today I'm speaking with Ms. Beatrice Davis-Williams. Today's date is September 5th, 2019. Ms. Davis will be discussing her life growing up in Washington, DC, how she developed her interest in dance, and navigating her career as the artistic director and founder of The Davis Center. In addition, we will chat about the impact The Davis Center has had on the DC community. This is part three of our interview. And so, Ms. Davis, we were talking about 50 years. Do you have any ... No, not even that. Talk about the awards you've gotten, and accolades, because you've gotten quite a few.

Beatrice Davis-Williams: I have received numerous awards, which I'm highly grateful, appreciative. I guess they continue to give me support on my journey. Encouragement that I'm moving in the right direction, and what I do is important.

KT: Any of the awards stand out? Like do any of them mean a lot to you when you received it?

BW: Well, one in particular. The Living Legend Award. It was like family. A lot of effort was made to contact everybody I knew and everybody came, and I received recognition from folk from all across the United States, for that award. Prince Charming was there of course, and they asked him to speak, and I had to step on his foot, because he's always funny. But he started out by saying that when most people get married, the wife takes the husband's name, but in this case it didn't work. So that was one moment there but I've always seen that one as opposed to I got the Whitney Young, the Urban League, huge award, but it was huge. The only thing I was allowed to say was thank you. They came prior to it and interviewed me and videotaped me and put it up on big screen. So in the essence of time, because it was a fundraiser, and that's legit, that's legitimate. All I could say was thank you.

KT: Okay.

BW: One of The Davis Center parents, I asked him if he would help some of the children go. The tickets were \$250. So if he gave me \$2500, and it enabled to give some of the tickets were \$125. So it enabled 20 of the students to attend that event, so they could experience that situation on that occasion. So, you know, small, big, you know, all of them mean the same thing, that the job's getting done and they appreciate my efforts, and that's why I do my work over here for my children, because I want them to know.

And the more I listen to them, and they tell me and said. "We was always who's going to get this award and who was going to get that award." I never knew that all of that was going on. I was too busy trying to find the awards, you know. But I remember a funny thing that might have happened, in terms of awards.

[5:06]

One year I said to the students, I said, "What do you want for awards this year?" They said, "Ms. Davis, that stuff you've given us is nice, charm bracelets, sterling silver charms," and they said, "but our mothers won't let us wear it. It's still in the boxes like you wrapped it." I said, "What do

you want?" They said, "We want a trophy." I said, "A trophy?" They said, "Yes, so we can put it on the mantel for everybody to see."

KT: Yeah.

BW: I said, "Oh, you all just saved me a whole lot of money," because I was trying to find different and unusual things for them., but they wanted a trophy. And then I asked them about the food. They said, "Ms. Davis, the food is nice, but can we have some regular food?" "Sure, you just saved me another \$1000." And a little girl came to me, she's like eight years old, she says, "Ms. Davis, this is the best food ever." I had fried chicken and meatballs. I made it.

KT: That's what I'm saying, I don't know how you don't laugh at these kids, because I would laugh.

BW: I did laugh. I was like a trophy? So that's why I do trophies, and that's why I make sure all of them get a trophy.

KT: Oh, you didn't do trophies initially?

BW: No.

KT: Oh. [crosstalk 00:06:34].

BW: I might have done them, but only for special awards.

KT: Oh.

BW: Now, they were getting, like I said, charms and I found all kind of unusual things, ballerina banks and just ... One year I found little mirrors, with a little ballet slipper.

KT: Oh, that's nice.

BW: Girl said, "My mother won't let me use it."

KT: So it's just sitting there? No, I get it because when-

BW: I mean, [inaudible] so we can put it on your mantel so everybody can see it.

KT: That's where we have ours for Kayla and Saani.

BW: Yeah.

KT: And their certificates are on the wall, too, so that they know. All right, Ms. Davis, what does the future hold for The Davis Center?

BW: We're working on that. Of course, I've been through a lot, and I'm better, and I feel like my teaching is getting better. Dance teachers can grow. I analyze what's going on with the body. I'm getting more flies with the honey than the vinegar. And I was immensely proud this past year, 2019, [the] little recital, with the quality of the students' work. Very pleased with the quality, and I'm after more quality here. Sometimes it gets lost, I think because times have changed, I keep going back to that, we've got a different population, and so trying to push for the quality with what we're doing, how they perform, and it has to affect them emotionally, it has to affect them emotionally, you know. Can't fly through the water like a hippopotamus, you've got to fly through the water like a fish.

So, it's a different feeling, gives you a sense of, I think, accomplishment. I went to a concert sometime ago and all the dancing was fast, and I had a former student teacher sitting beside me, she said, "No variety." So, I like to see difference. When I try to put on a show, if I choreograph all the dancing, they're going to all look the same so I have to bring in other people, other flavors, you know, then I clean the dances up. It's my job to clean up your dances. It's my show, my vision.

[10:19]

KT: What was the best show you think you've done?

BW: Oh, The Lion King. Lion King was off the charts. It really was. A lot of people involved, a lot of help, and I lost my mind. I lose my mind. My husband said [inaudible 00:10:35]. I spent it all on the costumes and the this and the that for the kids, you know? I mean, I lost my mind. There's no secret about it, I lost my mind.

KT: How many shows was it, two?

BW: No, we did several. We did UDC, we did two, maybe four or five shows because at that time we were able to do shows for school children, as a dress rehearsal performance, to be straight.

KT: Oh, that's nice.

BW: Yeah.

KT: It was grand?

BW: It was grand. The set, everything was off the chart.

KT: Then you lost your mind?

BW: I lost my mind. I had tremendous help.

KT: All right, so now, I'm ready to kind of wrap this up with you, and we're going to kind of talk more about like lessons you've learned in life. This is more for the grant but describe where you live now in DC, and your neighborhood in DC.

BW: Oh.

KT: Just loosely, you don't have to give addresses.

BW: [crosstalk] I live Woodridge section of Washington. I've been here since 1983, and I like it. I'm not going anywhere. I like my house. I'm comfortable here, you know? I haven't really considered moving after my husband died. It's my home. I've been told I'm going to stay here, so, I hope that works out well. You know, as long as I have my health, I've been fortunate to get to the lift. Sometimes I find myself upstairs and the lift is still downstairs, but I've got good neighbors, people who look after me. It's been good. I've never been a person to jump in and out of folks' house. My neighbor across the street, I went to Cuba, she called me, I was gone three weeks, she says, "It's time for you to come home." I said, "I'll be home tomorrow."

KT: She knew you hadn't been around for a while.

BW: Yeah. I said, "Okay, just be there when I get home." She said, "I'll be at the airport."

KT: Oh, that's good, though.

BW: Yeah.

KT: That's good.

BW: I had gone away for three weeks, trying something new that didn't work, when I went to Cuba.

KT: Oh, really?

BW: Yeah. So, one of my life's lessons, but what have I learned?

KT: Well, wait a minute, let's do DC. When you think of DC and your neighborhood, what do you want out of this neighborhood is someone was listening to this like a hundred years later, what would you want to see this neighborhood be?

BW: Actually, I would like to see more camaraderie. You know, my neighbor talked about doing a block party, something like that, just to bring us together periodically. It's quite different from when I came here, racially. But it has been a good experience, it's been a good experience. What else can I say about the neighborhood?

[15:05]

KT: This is a nice neighborhood.

BW: It is. The Uber driver told me, said, "This is an expensive neighborhood." I said, "I wish."

KT: It is now.

BW: Yeah. That's maybe why I won't leave.

KT: [inaudible] Right now, you already kind of said this but who would be like the biggest influence in your life? And what lessons did that person teach you?

BW: Well you know, my parents were, as a matter of fact. The philosophy part, family, although it's been narrow. It been narrow, because they were always there. They were always there, and they laid a good foundation. They laid a good foundation. My father said, "You fall down, you get up, " you know, because the challenges are always there, but I would say my parents. My aunt, she believed in me. My Aunt and god mother, she was. And then you go back, go back through the journey and you look at your students because it wouldn't have been a journey [without] the students, and you see how they've grown, what direction they went in, and you hope that they have been able to follow their passion to some extent.

KT: What are the most important life lessons that you learned, like what's an important life lesson that you've learned or you might have even passed down to others?

BW: You have to listen. You have to listen to people. You have to learn how to read and understand people, so that you ... You don't want to be offensive. You want to be able to be supportive. I mentioned the young lady that came to me, I had to sit there and think for a minute, what do I say? How do I go about this? How can I help her, because she came to me for help, so that's important. I think I've learned how to put a smile on people's face, because they think I'm funny, they think I'm crazy.

KT: I think you kind of are.

BW: But they smile, they said, "Here come Ms. Davis." I was in the store, a couple of students ran over, "We knew it was you, we saw you with that fur piece on your head."

KT: I've seen you with that fur piece.

BW: They're always picking on me.

KT: I've seen it. Do you find they pick on, Ms. Davis, because you always come right back.

BW: You know I didn't realize that for a long time.

KT: What?

BW: That I was quick.

KT: Oh, you are quick.

BW: Yeah, it's funny because I really didn't know it.

KT: You didn't?

BW: I did not know it.

KT: Yeah, you're quick.

BW: I was in a relationship, he said, "She's always quick after mine," I didn't know it. I said, "I didn't know."

KT: [inaudible] Looking back, what advice would you give yourself in your first year of teaching or when you were opening The Davis Center?

BW: Wish I had known what I was doing. And I'm hoping to address that. I decided I was going into business. I didn't know a thing about going into business. I had been in business a couple of years and the police showed up on Saturday morning with a summons for me to go to court because I didn't have a license.

[20:02]

Well at the time that I opened the business, you didn't need a license. Nobody told me after that I needed a license. So I had to go through a whole lot of rigmarole and I had to use a lot of strength, inner strength, to make it through that situation, because once I got everything done, and I went to the office where I had to turn everything in, I ran into some opposition, but God was there, and the employees' supervisor was behind a glass wall, right where I was, and I didn't know it, and when he got tired of hearing the foolishness, he sent for me. I explained to him what my situation was, that I needed a license that day because I was due in court Monday morning, this was Friday afternoon. So he looked at the employee and asked her the status of my papers, and she put her head down and said, "Everything is in order." He said, "Come back in an hour." She didn't want me to have it, and he heard her. He heard her. I asked her, I said, "Is there anything you can do to help me?" And she told me, "No." And I turned to leave, and one of my sisters came by, and she said, "Come back, the supervisor wants to see you."

KT: I always wonder about people like that, what is the point?

BW: You know?

KT: What's the point? You kind of already did this, you said this a little bit but connect dance with life instruction and work instruction, how do you feel like learning dance helps you in life? Just if you're learning it, how does it help you with getting a job, you know what I mean? And you talked about it with discipline, so maybe you-

BW: Well, so what I just said before, it took tremendous, what's the word I want to use? I mean, I had the self-confidence but I had to restrain myself because I was ready to go across that counter, take care of a little business. I have told the children, I've said, "You have body

language. You have got to learn how to use your body language." You know, you can look at somebody, and I've done that, know the situation, I said, "I don't think you want to do this right now." I ain't had to open my mouth. So you learn how to control, to control. You learn when to speak and to be quiet. You know, it just teaches you how to be with people, how to be with children. And as they travel the world, I mean, going to Russia, people were nice to me. They went out of their way, really, maybe because I was different, but people all around the world are the same. They want the love and the respect and all. So, if you learn to respect people, and I think the other thing that has the same consistency to this, is you evolve in your teaching skills, evolve in your teaching skills. And you learn how to have fun.

KT: Last two questions, how do you want to be remembered? What do you want your legacy to be?

BW: How do I want to be remembered? As somebody who cares. And that you understand that I used my passion to dance to at least help you along the way on your journey. Somebody who cares. I think Sanai understand that.

[25:16]

KT: Last question, what is your hope for the girls that have, the thousands, that have walked through your doors, what's your hope for all of those girls and boys?

BW: Well, yeah, I want them to be successful in whatever direction they choose to go, you know. I hope that the school of knocks is not too hard. I hope they know how to, you can always tell the ones that don't listen, recognize when you're in trouble, go get you some help. That's another thing that I told my girls. I've been adamant about that. Find yourself in jam, go talk to your mother, she's your friend. I want them to be happy. I can not say that I'm not, you know? There's no way in the world where I can say that. No, I can't. And I keep saying that, awesome parents and an awesome husband, and all these children, they make me smile. They make me smile, make me cry, and smile.

KT: Make you laugh. All right, Ms. Davis, you did an excellent job. Don't get up, yet. Thank you so much for your time. Stop that.

[27:03]