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Jane Baas: Student to Professor, a Career Dancing on East Campus

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WMU Professor Emerita Lee Honors College and Department of Dance Jane Baas

Thursday, January 5 at 5:00 pm

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Cassie: Okay, great. I'm recording now and we can talk about whatever you'd like. If you have specific stories you want to share, feel free to do so. I do have some questions prepared in case we hit a wall or if you need any prompts. I'd be happy to read them off. But first, let's start with-

Jane: Why don't you start with one?

Cassie: Sounds good. Okay, I'll just have us start first with your name and then your connection to WMU for the transcript.

Jane: Okay, so my name is Jane Thornberry Baas. I started as a freshman at Western in 1974 as a dance major and continued on to get a master's degree in dance here. After that, I got a teaching job at Western. Then I went to graduate school in Ohio before returning to my teaching job at Western.

I had a 39-year teaching career here at Western, serving as a professor in dance and as the chair of the Dance Department. For my last couple of years, I was the associate dean of the Lee Honors College.

Cassie: Wow. I guess we should probably start with just the beginning of your time at Western. So, the time that you were a freshman here.

Did you grow up in Kalamazoo? How did you come to WMU?

Jane: So, I grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana and decided that I wanted to major in dance. There weren't a lot of programs back then, so I started touring them. I went to Ohio State before coming up here to Western.

I watched a class taught by Clara Gamble, who was a professor of dance then, and she absolutely blew my mind. She was an amazing teacher. That's what made me decide to come to school here from Fort Wayne, Indiana. I came as a dance major and the rest is history. I never really left Kalamazoo except for when I went to graduate school.

Cassie: Okay, wow. So, it was all because of a professor and dance instructor that you watched that you decided on Western?

Jane: Yep, she was incredible. She was doing handstands and flying across the room, and she was so motivational. I knew I wanted to study dance with her.

Cassie: Did you study with her?

Jane: Yes, and then we became colleagues. So we taught together. I still see her, she's still alive. She's 94, and I still see her regularly.

Cassie: Whoa, and how would you describe her as a person?

Jane: She is rigorous, funny, and highly skilled physically. She was the first female black belt in the United States. She was very impressive and an incredible choreographer. She was very creative and funny, as well as smart and inspiring.

Cassie: Do you remember anything about the other instructors at Western during your time there?

Jane: Sure. Another one was Wendy Cornish. Wendy Cornish is no longer with us; she passed away in 2020. She primarily taught choreography and dance history and was the director of the dance company I was in. She was at the university for a long time and I also taught with her. She was chair of the department for about nine years.

Loretta McCrane was also there, but she didn't stay as long. Wendy and Clara were there for decades and they were the heart of the department. Other people came and went, but they were the core. I was very fortunate to have them as mentors when I became a faculty member.

Cassie: How would you describe the dance program at Western while you were a student versus when you were teaching?

Jane: Well, the reason I came to Western was because it valued three of the forms of dance equally. Most dance programs at that time were either modern dance or ballet, and never the two shall meet. Western really valued ballet, modern, and jazz dance as well. So, it was sort of a tri-focus, which was unusual at the time. We were one of the first programs in the country to do so. Almost everybody followed us in offering multiple forms of dance and not just focusing on one anymore. It was kind of like a family, a very supportive environment, not dog-eat-dog like some places. Over the years it has become known, but when I came it was an unknown program and not well known at all.

It was housed in Walwood Union, East Hall and Oakland gym. You had to run from one class to another up and down Oakland Drive to get to your classes, usually sweaty. It was interesting, especially in winter. The studios were in three different buildings at that time because dance had separated from physical education in 1972. I came in 1974, so it had only been two years as a separate department when I arrived.

I remember the last final exam I gave in Walwood Union. They were getting ready to shut it down and the Dalton Center had just opened on our main campus. We still have that studio. When I walked in to give my final exam, there were three pigeons flying around the studio. So, there was no way I could give that exam. I had to give credit for it somehow and refigure the grades without the exam because pigeons were flying around and there was poop

everywhere. It was awful. Public safety came up but didn't know what to do about it. It was really something.

Obviously, it hadn't been very well maintained after we moved over. Then they decided to renovate and did a beautiful job. They kept all the classic woodwork and redid it all. The whole top floor, where I don't know what's in there now, maybe research, was beautifully redone.

That was the ballroom. And a whole huge was open and that was where the dance studios were, on the second floor and below was a cafeteria.

We would go down between classes to have coffee or a bite to eat. There was some business unit on the second floor at the opposite end of the building. I don't know if it had something to do with one of the early computer things. East Hall was used for lots of different things. There were some business stuff there, we were in there, and there were some art students in there. It was like wherever they didn't know where to put something, they put it in East Hall. Oakland gym still belonged to women's PE and we just had one big room in the basement.

Cassie: Did you live on campus then?

Jane: Yes, I lived in Valley 1 in the Valleys. It was an interesting trek. Fortunately, the bus system was in existence, but if you had to walk, it took about 40 minutes to get to class from there.

Cassie: Yeah. What are some of your earliest memories on both East and West/Main Campus?

Jane: Well, way back then we used to do our annual dance concerts in Miller Auditorium, that was really the only thing we did on West Campus in terms of dance.

I was in the Honors College and had a number of classes on West Campus. I was also an English minor, so I had a lot of classes in Brown Hall and some in Sangren. Those were most of the buildings I was in.

The theater was only the Shaw Theater and some very small offices. There weren't any classrooms there. We did an annual concert in Miller Auditorium until it became too expensive.

Most people don't know that Miller is a separate entity and an auxiliary enterprise. You have to pay rent to use it and it got to the point where we couldn't afford it anymore. So, we stopped doing our concerts there. Fortunately, when we moved to the main campus in 1982, we had a studio theater in Dalton and sometimes did concerts in Shaw Theatre in the Theater Department. But Miller was too expensive.

I remember my very first time on that stage and looking out and how big that that place is. I mean, my goodness, looking out from the stage is huge. I don't know if you've ever done that, but-

Cassie: Yeah, my graduation.

Jane: Yeah, right, it's huge.

Cassie: Yeah.

Jane: So that was really something. I actually don't like dancing in a place that big. I much prefer being closer to my audience, but that was what we had at the time. And what else do you need to know?

Cassie: Let's see. Do you remember anything about the buildings on East Campus?

Jane: Well, yeah, what do you wanna know? Let's see. East Hall was a little down on its heels at the time. They did a beautiful job renovating that building as well.

Cassie: Yeah.

Jane: Is that where you're located?

Cassie: Actually-

Jane: No, no, you're in the archives.

Cassie: Yes, the archives are at the Zhang Legacy Center, that's by the state hospital now.

Jane: Right, right, right, I've been there.

Cassie: But I do some of the interviews out of-

Jane: So East Hall was, probably, it just wasn't very well cared for.

Cassie: Right.

Jane: The building was kind of down on its heels. Lights would burn out and not get replaced. I don't know, it just wasn't high on the list at the time. I mean, there were roaches in the studio down there. I think what happened was that a lot of the art students who had studios there would eat in their studios and attract that kind of insect population.

Cassie: Right. That's creepy.

Jane: It was pretty gross.

Cassie: Yeah.

Jane: We just had a little studio downstairs with a wood floor. I remember the cockroaches in that place.

Cassie: And you said you were also in Oakland gym, right?

Jane: Right, it was, gosh, it had linoleum floor, it was terrible. The studio was big, really big. It was long and narrow. The riflery range was directly underneath it. Did you know there used to be a shooting range down there? I don't know if it's still there or not. I haven't been in Oakland gym in forever.

Cassie: No, it's not still there. I did read about it, though.

Jane: Yeah, and so we had this big, long, skinny room that was above the rifle range. We never really heard the guns though, so they must have been scheduled at a time that didn't conflict or whatever. I don't know, maybe they weren't teaching it there anymore.

The surface wasn't great for dance because it was a cement floor with linoleum on top. It was terrible, actually. The ballroom was so much better with its beautiful wood floor and huge space. There was also a little tiny stage which we didn't use for performing, but we would sit on it while watching people use the space.

Cassie: Wow.

Jane: That was a gorgeous space. It was a shame to see that cut up into little cubicles, but, anyway, it was a wonderful place to be. It's so pretty, it was so pretty, with trees. Even though the buildings were older, West Hall and North Hall were still there at that time. There were a lot of business students on that campus, as well as students from the speech pathology department and other health and human services departments. The business library was in North Hall, so business students spent a lot of time there. It was a mix of people.

Cassie: So, what did a typical day look like for you on east campus?

Jane: I tried to schedule my classes so that I would only have West Campus classes two or three days a week, maybe back-to-back on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Those would be my academic courses, and the rest of the time would be spent on East Campus.

Dance classes were considerably longer; you were in class for double the amount of credit. So, if it was a two-credit class, you were in class for four hours. That's the way it works. Think about it this way: we paid for two credits and got four hours of instruction, or three credits and got six. It was a pretty good deal. We spent a lot of time in the studios dancing and creating.

Usually, I would have a technique class in the morning - modern, ballet, or jazz - and then some sort of other dance theory class like history or kinesiology. In the afternoon, I would usually have another technique class or choreography. I tried to schedule my dance classes first and then choose my academic courses based on what fit into those blocks because it was too much of a hassle to run back and forth between East and West Campus.

Prospect Hill is a significant walk.

Cassie: Yeah, it is and I had just one or two more questions for you. I'm wondering what do you think during your time at WMU either as a student or as a teacher, what do you think impacted you the most during your time here, whether it be a person, a place, or an event?

Jane: Wow, well, I think the teachers that I had were the most impactful. Clara Gamble was the first woman I saw when I came to the school and she made me want to come here. She was my technique mentor and I think of her as a goddess. She was so generous with her feedback. I aspired to teach like her.

Wendy was my administrative mentor; she could organize anything in the blink of an eye. I learned a lot about administrative tasks from her, like how to schedule and do faculty loads - all those things that most people don't see because they're behind the scenes.

Those two women were probably the most impactful for me. Another amazing thing was that right after I first started, we had a group of faculty that included Wendy and Clara, but also some younger faculty around my age. We had a sense of esprit de corps. Everyone was always willing to help each other; we worked together and nobody was afraid to get their hands dirty. If something happened, someone else would step in. It was a really hardworking and supportive environment, and we had fun doing what we did. There was a real connection between the seven of us.

As time went on, some people moved on while most of us stayed. We lost two faculty members to death during that time period and that was very hard.

One of our faculty members died of AIDS in 1994 and another from that group of seven died in the early 2000s from brain cancer. We had some pretty tragic losses. That group of people who worked together was really remarkable. After we lost those people and others came in, it was never quite the same again.

But it was remarkable; we accomplished a lot. We did many collaborative works with other units in the college, including major productions like operas and musicals. We worked together with people from other disciplines like music, art, and theater. It was a period of real creativity and everyone sparked each other. It was wonderful.

Cassie: Well, were there any memories that you wanted to share, any last thoughts that we didn't touch on?

Jane: Ending up here was one of the greatest gifts of my life. It was the best decision I ever made. Obviously, I stayed here and never left; I'm retired and still here. It has given me a very rich and fulfilling life. I'm very grateful to Western and have established a scholarship in the theater and dance program to thank them for all they did for me and to help other students.

The great thing about it is that I can meet with the students. We meet for breakfast and I go to see them perform. It's really fun.

Cassie: Yeah, well, well thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today. It was so nice to meet you and get your story and if you wanted to share a photo to go with your story, either a photo of you during your time here as a student or one more current, whichever you'd like, email that over to me, that's completely up to you. We don't need a photo, but if you would like one included, maybe when you're a student or something like that or when you were teaching.

Jane: I'd have to look and see what I've got. I'm not sure I have anything from back when I was a student, I might have, I'll look.

Cassie: Okay, all right, well, let me know and then I'll let you know when your story is up on the website so you can go see it.

Jane: Okay, thank you, take care.

Cassie: Yes, you as well, I hope you have a good rest of the day.

Jane: Bye.

Cassie: Bye.