

JIM KIEHNE: Here we are on Thursday, July 29th 2021 and another interview in Tapestry Folkdance Center's History Project. We're focusing on the early days 1983 to 1999, Marshall U to Sabathani.

I'm Jim Kiehne, here with longtime dancers and volunteers and, not incidentally, husband and wife team Terry McGibbon and Nairy Digris. How are you guys?

NAIRY DIGRIS: We're good, Jim

JK: Welcome! Hey, let's talk about how you got into folk dance, and talk about those early days as dancers and volunteers.

00:38*****

TERRY MCGIBBON: Well, let me start with saying that I started briefly at Saltari, and went a few times and I went on vacation, came back, and found out it had closed. And so I said "oh shoot."

But I had gotten on a list, a mailing list and got the notification that yes Saltari had closed but Tapestry was starting. So their first class was in January of 1984, the first Friday in January, and it was a beginning class taught by Pat Gladchild.

And I jumped in with both feet, got totally immersed in folk dance in general. I think I was at one point probably going three or four nights a week to various Israeli and Contra and English and International.

I got involved in volunteering probably within the first six months or so, started opening and closing; got recruited for the board for a while -- for a couple of years -- was president for a little bit about the time we had gone nomadic and were looking for Sabathani, and then we got into Sabathani. And I've been Friday-night dancing pretty much ever since. I got into teaching sort of in the late 80s after taking the class from Ron Wallace at the old Tapestry at Marshall U, and got involved in teaching, and the music. My love is international. I liked the other forms, but I always wander back to international.

Okay, That's me. Nairy?

JK: Over to you.

02:43*****

NAIRY DIGRIS: Well, back in the late 80s somehow I had probably asked and had gotten on the mailing list and I've been getting all the letters, announcements about Tapestry and the different programs and everything else, and at the same time I was raising a couple of kids and going to school and I just had absolutely no time so I called them up and I said, save your penny, don't send it to me now. Don't send me anything until I'm done.

And as soon as I was done I called him up and I got back on the list that I was like, took my brave self, and took myself down to Tapestry one

Friday night, and I remember specifically who was sitting at the admission table but Jim and Linda, and they were so welcoming!

What a bunch of friendly people, because when I left that night I remember, Linda telling Jim "Why don't you just go down with her to make sure," you know (and this was at Sabathani and I can see why!) It's so great a bunch of people, and this whole crowd of people doing dances that I had not seen before and so I really loved it. This was back in 1989 actually August, that I started so next month it's going to be 32 years for me.

I've always been at Sabathani, up until Tapestry got its own place and I've been there [the new place] since then.

So I really enjoy it. I have made wonderful friends, I think. Of course I met Terry. Terry and I met, again thanks to Linda and Fiamma in those days they somehow got us together to dance at the what? the Waltz Marathon.

TM: Waltz Marathon. They set me up!

ND: And so, I have really enjoyed it. I've enjoyed the friendships, I've enjoyed the education, the music, the learning, and it has been an opportunity for me also to get into more Armenian dancing which is my, of course, my natural background, origin and everything, and I was able to learn a lot of Armenian dances and then I like Jim was saying you know volunteering. I got into volunteering. I could see Terry opening and closing at the end of each session running around like mad and nobody else there. And he took me back home -- he drove me home often enough, so I'm just hanging around, I might just as well do something; I can't stand around watching somebody work. So I started helping with opening and closing So that was fun.

And then, then I got into volunteering for admissions and became admissions coordinator, and volunteer for over 20 years. Just a couple of years ago I said, Okay, that's it, That's enough somebody else can take over the reins.

So that had been fun. Also, I was able to, I believe, two fall workshops, to facilitate bringing in a couple of Armenian-focus teachers, one of them was Arsen Anoushian back in the early 90s.

And then, we were able to bring Tom Bozigian, in 2006 for a weekend workshop and those were fun for me. I enjoy all the workshops; all the international workshops. Well -- certain ones not as much and I don't attend but others are just great. Absolutely fantastic. So now I've become an Armenian folk dance teacher on Zoom because of thanks to call it.

Before that I used to take turns and teach Armenian dance. I could teach some of the other dances, but I feel that a lot of people around me who know every single one or a lot more dances than I do as far as the International circle is concerned, but, you know, why not concentrate on Armenian and make sure that culture is not forgotten.

So I'm, I'm proud and happy to do that because it's an education for me too; I have to dig into a lot of stuff to get to, to know things better before I open my mouth and try to teach something,

(laughter)

And I have been in contact with a lot of people so that's how it's been going, we've been really enjoying it and...

07:11*****

JK: That's great, now you you were doing Armenian dance of course, well before you got to Tapestry.

ND: I did but it wasn't choreographed stuff like we do at Tapestry and if you go to any other Armenian club or group where they are not specialized in folk dancing, they just do the very simple Armenian dances via de Halay, via just like a simple 123 left left left type stuff.

So, the simple dances but not the choreographed dances that we do it tapestry or any other folk dance place in the country where they have, you know, cities and clubs and communities that do international folk dancing and like Terry said, that's what I like to do. I mean that's what I go to Tapestry for mostly. The other [dance nights] are great but I'm not really interested so I just stick to Friday night Tapestry. Yeah I did Armenian folk dancing before. But not as much.

08:10*****

JK: I'll bet you did! Terry, so you've got into teaching, but maybe expand on that a little because I know there was that Ron Wallace class and then it went on from there. How did that all work?

TM: Well, Tapestry and Ron, for whatever reason, decided to offer a class in how to teach folk dance. And I was one of I think five people I think, Linda took that class I took it.

And it was... Oh boy, I don't remember it was kind of at the tail end of Tapestry's existence at Marshall U, at the end of that then we were kind of nomadic. We were at People'Center for about nine months, we wandered to a few other places. Then we got into Sabathani, and it was at Sabathani where I did my first solo teaching, which was a.. umm, a semi-disaster as far as I'm concerned. I didn't do terribly well, but I learned a lot since then, getting into the, the folk dance teaching.

One of the things that got me into it is that, well, if, if I want to dance... It's a very selfish interest, both from the standpoint of of working with Tapestry and, you know, working on myself, if I want to dance, I need to have some place to dance and some people to dance with. I support tapestry because that gives us a place to dance. And people to dance with, I teach and get people, hopefully involved and interested in dancing so that they can come and dance with us.

So, you know, from that standpoint it's a little bit selfish on my part because then that gives me the opportunity both of having a great place to dance at Tapestry, and people to dance with. So, there you go.

10:31*****

JK: There you go. Now I seem to remember you winding up co-teaching on a regular basis, with Charlie Rusnacko; was that the case?

TM: Actually, it was Charlie and Ed [Stern]. In the early, early 90s we're doing Friday nights from September through May as kind of a teaching session, a progressive easy dances to start, little harder dances in the mix.

And at some point, Charlie got involved in, maybe it was the Czech group at the time and he just didn't want to do it [any longer], and I told Ed, oh, well, I'll co teach with you.

So I did that for, I don't know, six, seven years? Maybe yeah, five years I don't know some, some length of time it was, where the idea was that the first part of the teaching, half hour so, would be easy approachable dances. The second part would start to ramp up.

And hopefully over the course of September through May there would be a progression of teaching, so that people would learn a lot of different steps and ways of dancing so that... And I like to think of it as a dance vocabulary. You learn letters which is right and left, maybe up and down and in and out. Then you start putting them together in words.

123, pas de Basque, step close step. Those are the words. And then you put the words in the sentences you have: two pas de basques, two step close steps and whatever. And as you learn these things, the more you learn the easier it is to learn the next part.

Like you're, like I said, it's like language to me. And hopefully that extends its way into my teaching.

12:55*****

JK: Yeah, yeah. Well you've been both, you've been going to workshops, getting into this I mean, I'm kind of getting at where the material comes from. And international workshops?

ND: The material you mean that is taught, right?

JK: Right, that's done on Friday, that's taught. New material.

ND: That, that comes down to Friday night to me now.

JK: Right.

ND: Well, specifically for me for the Armenian workshops that I mean we have had like I said two here as far as I know, since I've been around, and we have attended others out of state, and I have used that material, whether we've bought CDs or Terry has videotaped and brought the material

home that way. I made sure that, you know, I learned those and then teach them to Tapestry.

There are some pieces that I have, if they have been a little more complex and more showy type pieces that I have learned, I've tried to keep some of those to the Armenian dance ensemble which I lead, our dance group here in the Twin Cities, and we do performances, and I've added on to some of those choreographies and have taught them too, let's say, and we will perform them.

But most of the dances I've tried to bring into Tapestry as much as possible. Also, because there are some teachers that are specializing in Armenian dance whether they are Armenian or not. And people whether it's in Minnesota or people that we know from other states have attended them and have brought them to their groups to teach. I have learned from some of those.

I mean, take for example, this Covid year. It has been a good thing, as far as getting together with people on Zoom, especially for folk dancers. I mean for over a year we've seen people on the Zoom, dance with them that are out of state that we would not have seen if it weren't for the workshop.

We've met people on Zoom that we would have never met before had we not gone to their state, but I also have picked up a bunch of Armenian simple dances that I did not know about, that were not done here, that are not done here so I'm planning on bringing those to Tapestry, and in fact I'm teaching those on my [own] Zoom session once a month. So there are brand new dances like I said earlier, I'm just doing Armenian because there are a lot of people will do all the others.

Just trying to concentrate on Armenian stuff.

15:34*****

JK: Sure. So, Terry who have been your favorite international teachers aside from the Armenian. Who were role models.

TM: The, the all time, absolute favorite is Yves Moreau, who unquestionably is probably one of the best liked, and capable of the mostly Balkan, Bulgarian style but he started to branch out to bring in Bretagne dances and some Romanian stuff. Canadian, French Canadian of course,

As far as others, I'd have to kind of think about that little bit.

I've learned a lot from Bozigian. He has a, he has a rather interesting style of teaching. He's a little bit, well, probably because he does know a lot; he comes across as "I know a lot." Kind of a, you know, always a personage but he's, you know, he's good and he's a good teacher.

17:00*****

ND: Lee Otterholt is another one that I really liked, really, really good. I mean, some of them have got ways of teaching that are really more

appealing than others. I'm very detailed myself, and I like people who are or who works that way. That's my personal feeling. I like Lee Otterholt too.

TM: The nice thing for Tapestry is that for many years we've been able to bring in [international-level] international teachers, from, you know, Romania, Bulgaria, Scandinavia. With Lee, his wife taught Hawaiian stuff.

And we've had the opportunity to learn from some of the masters. And we've kept a lot of those dances. But like Naïry was saying, with this Zoom thing, and even before that, you know, a certain amount of the dances are second and third hand learning, which is okay with the caveat that you didn't get everything that the original teacher talked about, or said or showed in the dance.

So it's like recording something on tape. The second, third copy you make, they start to lose a little bit. And hopefully, I keep my sources as close to original as possible. If I can't be from the original I'll go back to someone who definitely was there at the original and watch them.

19:10*****

JK: So, reflect a second if you can cast your mind back. We had just heard that the University is kicking us out of Marshall U because they need it for their film library. What were your thoughts at the time?

TM: That was, yeah that was an interesting time. I think I was at a board at that during that transition period.

And it was a feeling of, well, the bureaucracy and the, you know, this big governmental body has struck again against the small, you know, little struggling arts organization, and it put us in a position of doing a lot of running around and finding places where we could dance; church basements, church gymnasiums, you know, in and near the old Tapestry.

We ended up finally locating a place in the, the name is going here... the People's Center, over in the West Bank, that we got a lease for; had a little office in there, could use the gymnasium. We had to move our equipment in and out from the third floor on the rickety old elevator. That was fun.

But it was a, it was kind of a challenging time.

People looking all over the place for someplace we can, you know, kind of find some reasonable permanent roost. And I can't remember his last name but Dick, worked for the St Paul public schools, came up with Sabathani.

And people, you know, got there and they were willing to write us a really good lease, that really benefited tapestry, more so than Sabathani [was benefited], so we jumped at that. We jumped at the chance of having this place that we could develop programs and pretty much be sure that we had a place to dance for at least 10 years, assuming we made it that long, which we did.

So, once we got to Sabathani, things [like] the pressure of places to dance and venues and where are we going to be next week, disappeared and we could relax and actually focus on developing Tapestry's programs and developing the whole concept. So that was an interesting period of time.

22:13*****

JK: It was. Well, you've been basically the technician, the equipment and recording guru for kind of forever. So the move to Sabathani was a plus. At least we didn't have a rickety elevator.

TM: Yeah, that's true.

ND: Plus, how about digitizing all those tapes. That project!

JK: Well, that came a little later of course but. Oh my gosh.

TM: Yeah, at some point, I don't, I'm not sure why but I suppose just because I kind of liked it and I had the expertise and the equipment to do it, I took over just maintaining the old tape collection.

And when people would come in, teachers would come in with new dances, I would kind of ask them to present them in a, in some kind of a standardized format. That didn't always work.

[For example] Sandy Lipsky was a, uh. He came in with some really interesting recordings that had minimal information about them and weren't terribly clear, had to work on those a lot.

Other people came in, beautiful recordings, they could just translate them into Tapestry.

And then as...

ND: Charlie would come with records, and Ed too.

TM: Yeah, there were records that I digitized, or I recorded.

But then, as people started moving into the digital world, we were faced with the decision, well how do we do this. Are we going to go CD, are we going to go mini CD. I know Paul Collins in Chicago, got most of his collection on mini CDs at one point.

That would require additional equipment, it would require you know, recording it, so we kind of said nah, mini CDs weren't the right way to go. We'd maybe just do regular CDs.

But then at some point, it started just going into the full digital "play it off a computer", which is where our collection is now. Bob Anholt was really instrumental in getting a lot of the early parts of the collection digitized and in.

And then, Bill Klatt found a fellow in New York, that had digitized just a pile of folk dance stuff, and was willing to sell us about 5,000

digitized dances, videos, dance descriptions on a hard drive for 150 bucks and we just jumped at it.

And that basically, really jumped started our collection of digital stuff

25:30*****

JK: so yeah, true. Remarkable in a way though, that basically from day one until digitization when we're at the new building, was cassette tapes. It was [cassettes] all the way.

TM: Well I most of that came as a result of Ed and Rolla, at Saltari, doing all of their stuff on cassettes.

And while we didn't just take their collection and use it. People made copies of their stuff and made it, you know, a tapestry cassette tape collection. And we kept building on it until we got up to, oh, I think we were at 900 and some odd individual cassette tapes.

And then we decided to go digital,

JK: so someone -- that would be you -- had to keep track of all those.

TM: Well, yeah. Well, Excel spreadsheets and things were were a real help and, you know,

26:42*****

JK: So part of what, to me, Tapestry... the kind of, I don't know spirit of the thing, part of it happens after you leave the building, that is you go out for pizza or whatever. Remember the early days of that.

TM: Oh yeah.

ND: I participated in some of those. That was fun.

JK: What was it, I can't remember the names of the joints in Dinkytown...

ND: But the one, oh that's Annie's. Annie's Parlor in Dinkytown but then there was the other one in Uptown.

TM: That was also Annie's. The first one was the pizza place in Dinkytown...

JK: Rocky Rococo.

TM: Yeah, Rocky Rococo. We probably at that time we were all, much, much younger, and much spryer. And we would probably end up our dancing at somewhere around midnight or so and Rocky's was open until I think two in the morning.

So a bunch of us would just head over to Rocky's, and order pizza and play games, or just have conversation.

We did that actually until basically it was Rocky's until we got moved out of of the old Marshall U building.

ND: No, no I had gone with you guys to Rocky's, and I never made it to Marshall U. I was always it's, I started at Sabathani.

(minor quibbling)

JK: So, but part of what welded the community together back then and probably still does is these off-campus, as it were, gatherings.

TM: Right. And, and, I think, to some extent, while the late evening stuff isn't quite as strong as it used to be, other get-togethers of the International folk dance community outside of international folk dancing and outside of (?) still occur.

And, you know, it's a way of all of us, keeping connected as individuals, and not just as people who are dancing at Tapestry.

ND: Well because I mean when you're dancing at Tapestry the goal is to dance. I mean especially, some people say that I'm here to dance, not to do any conversation.

So if a couple of people are standing there talking, enjoying their conversation, talking about something else, so a dance, a piece of music comes up that you really want to dance to, nothing wrong with you know you're saying "sorry, I gotta do this dance" and you just cut the conversation off and you go in to dance.

29:55*****

ND: It really is not, I mean some people do take time to just sit aside on the sideline and talk and discuss a few things. Oh, I gotta tell the story about a couple of guys who kept disappearing at Sabathani

TM: Ohhh. Who could that be.

ND: Well that's because you guys were always into technical stuff; Terry and Jim. That was that was that happened at Tapestry. May tell that story, Jim?

JK: Sorry I asked. (laughter)

ND: Okay, so the first time it happened. We were just kind of shocked and looking, Linda and me, Linda for Jim, Nairy looking for Terry and looking throughout the gym and we come to each other, Linda and Nairy, "have you seen Terry?" "No. Have you seen Jim?" "No. Where on earth did they go?"

We're looking in the hallway, we're looking in the other small room. Finally we find them, I don't know what kind of a closet this was, an electrical closet or something big enough for the two of them to be stuck there and work on some either wiring or, I know we didn't have computers like we do now at that time so we can't blame the computer.

They were working on something, the two of them so the big joke remained. "Linda and I found Terry and Jim *in the closet*. Next time they disappear? Let's go look in the closet again." It's their favorite place to hide to probably stay away from us, right?

But anyway, so that was a good joke.

TM: and we still haven't come out of the closet, right.

ND: Well there are bigger closets to hide in now at Tapestry. When we go back we'll figure that out.

JK: Yeah, good times

ND: But, like I was saying earlier, we don't have time to stand around and talk, so we do have these gatherings otherwise, that we get together and that's really fun because you get to know the person better; otherwise "No, wait. Okay, wait a minute because I will do this dance, I'll come back to you." And that person has gone already and you forgot what you're talking about.

32:00*****

JK: Well, volunteerism, you talked about it quite a bit, but volunteer is in your blood. Both of you.

TM: That's, yeah that's true.

JK: Swear to that. And how important is it for the organization?

ND: Oh, it's very important I don't think Tapestry could run if it weren't for all the volunteers.

JK: Yeah.

TM: You know, for most -- for most organizations that are trying to do something for, you know, for the public, if there were no volunteers, they would struggle a lot, either from a financial aspect or from the aspect of being able to put programs on.

ND: Or continue to exist.

TM: Right. And that is not limited to small arts organizations. I do a lot of volunteer work for the Minnesota Historical Society, who relies heavily on volunteerism. And the major reason that volunteers are very important to an organization, and any organization, is that it shows a level of support, and a level of cost efficiency. If you know, if you're looking at bean counters, that shows that the organization is trying to be lean and mean.

And as, as a result, organizations that have money to give to other organizations look at these organizations like Tapestry and say, You guys are really trying to be very fiscally responsible, you're serving a, you know, a good part of the community, we will give you some money.

We wouldn't have wood floors, or we wouldn't have had wood floors as soon as we did at our new building at Tapestry, had it not been for a bunch of volunteers who put in lots of hours to get that building ready, we wouldn't have been able to get some of the grants for teaching had there not been a, you know, a volunteer presence when the grant writers wrote grants. So volunteerism is really, really important.

34:38*****

JK: Yeah, agreed. Listen -- further thoughts on your part on what's most appealed to you, about Tapestry or anything else comes to your head here?

ND: I think to me like I said earlier, it has been a fantastic education for me. When you listen to pieces of music that are from so many parts of the world, and you start to recognize them and recognizing them after a while, not only the music but where it's coming from.

I think that has to be a plus in anybody's brain, just occupy certain kinds of space that you wouldn't get, otherwise I mean you could sit and... I mean I love geography, and I could sit and look at a map and study cities and this and that but when you are listening to the music and dancing and realizing the different steps that you can do to this piece of music.

I think that's great. And that's not the only thing I think that together with the friends, people who go to Tapestry have been mostly people who are there because they want to... they want to learn, they want to meet people, not necessarily meet people like go to a bar you meet people and that's a different kind of a meeting, this is different; this, you all have the same goal. You want to go there and dance, and the friendships that have been created, I believe in Tapestry to me have been very important.

36:15*****

JK: Well, you have both been a huge part of the lifeblood of Tapestry all these many years. I'm sure it gratifies you; I know we all are very thankful. Really appreciate your sitting in for this interview. Thanks guys.

ND: Thank you, Jim

TM: Thank you for for doing this. And this process of oral history is one that's long overdue. Because a lot of the people that would have been really good are gone.

JK, ND: They're gone.

TM: And once they're gone you can't get their thoughts any more.

JK: Yeah, exactly. Well, again, thanks; I'll sign us off now; and see you dancing!

TM: All right, sounds good, Jim. Thank you.