

UHCL Oral History Project

Interviewee: Janis Stockman Simonds
Interviewer: Shelly Henley Kelly
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Transcriber: Shelly Henley Kelly

Kelly: This is Shelly Henley Kelly and today is Tuesday, July 24, 2007. I am in the Bayou Building and I'm speaking with Dr. Janis Simonds about the UHCL dance program.

[Before pressing record again, Jan Simonds mentioned that she does not hold the PhD, and is not addressed as "Dr. Simonds."]

Simonds: I was hired – it was because at the time Dance did not have MFAs when I was in school. When I came here, I was already at the University of Illinois, I was already an Associate Professor with tenure prior to coming here.

Kelly: I apologize.

Simonds: People always assume that I'm a doctor, but I have a masters and three years of professional work in the field.

Kelly: That happens sometimes. Usually I like to start these with just some basic personal background information questions. Can you please tell me your full name?

Simonds: Janis Lee Simonds. Janis Lee Stockman Simonds.

Kelly: When were you born?

Simonds: November 17, 1936

Kelly: Who were your parents?

Simonds: My parents were Thelma and Robert Stockman.

Kelly: Where were you born?

Simonds: In Janesville, Wisconsin. I started out living in Milton, Wisconsin.

Kelly: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Simonds: I have an older brother, Bob, or Robert.

Kelly: How many years older is he?

Simonds: He's eight years older. He's in Connecticut with his family.

Kelly: Where did you go to school?

Simonds: I went to high school in Madison, because we had moved up to Madison. My parents moved up to Madison primarily so that my brother and I could easily go to the University of Wisconsin. I went to high school in Madison and I went to the University of Wisconsin, which has the oldest dance program in the United States. They just had their... Let's see it was 1926 when the first dance major in the United States was formed, was developed. So the University of Wisconsin had a premier dance program. It was a very wonderful opportunity for me to be able to go there.

Kelly: When did you begin dancing?

Simonds: Well, I don't know. I think I started when I was very, very little. I always danced. I would dance down the street. I would dance everywhere. At the time that I think I started, my mother put me in classes at a little studio—we lived in Janesville, Wisconsin—she put me in classes in a little studio with sort of the normal ballet, tap, kind of thing when I was quite little. I think I was a cabbage in my first recital. My mother decided that that was not probably the appropriate training. She changed me to a modern dance teacher who was a graduate of the University of Wisconsin program and who was teaching classes for children in Janesville. I loved those classes. Then, we moved up to Madison when I was twelve, I think.

One of the first things my mother did was to march down to the university. She arranged an appointment with Marge H'Doubler—Margaret H'Doubler—who was a pioneer. She was the head of the dance department at the University of Wisconsin. A pioneer writer, and thinker, philosopher about dance. My mother had this appointment with her about her twelve year old budding dancer. They had, at that time, classes for children on Saturday mornings, so I took those. I started at the University when I was twelve, dancing. Then went through. My early training was all in modern and was very creatively based. So was the early training at the university.

Then between my junior and senior years I went to the American College Dance Festival, which is a big dance program. At that time it was in New London, Connecticut. I was able to study for a summer with the best pioneers in modern dance in the world. Among them, Jose Limón – the company I later performed with. I studied choreography with Doris Humphrey, who was one of the first choreographers to write about dance, a book, and so forth. I was very fortunate to have that kind of early experience.

Kelly: You said you went to the school in Connecticut between your Junior and Senior year. Was that junior and senior high school or junior and senior college?

Simonds: No, junior and senior college.

Kelly: Your mother seemed to have had a very early interest in your dance, especially modern. Do you have any ideas why?

Simonds: No, I don't. She always encouraged me. She was not at all a stage mother. She'd been a teacher, elementary teacher. She was not at all a dancer herself. She simply found avenues for me. We didn't have much money. It was not a wealthy family. I was sort of a child of the Depression. My folks were hit very hard in the Depression. As I said, we didn't have a lot of money, but the opportunities were there.

Kelly: What was your father's occupation?

Simonds: He was a plumber for the University, which maybe was the inspiration for my signature piece with the plumbers helpers. I don't know. He set up and designed lab equipment at the university. Every once in a while I would run into him when I was a student there. It was interesting.

My first two years too, I was in a special program called Integrated Liberal Studies at the university. That is a wonderful Liberal Arts - General Education where again we got the best professors. Craig White, one of our professors here, when he was working on his PhD, was one of the assistants in that program – many years later of course. It's a premiere academic liberal arts program. So I took those Liberal Arts courses and then on top of that I

took the dance courses – the anatomy and physiology and all of that, that I had to have. Then I had a teaching certificate as well.

But probably the most marvelous thing, it's a small dance program. We had a group of very talented dancers, who were in the University dancing at the time that I was. There were five of us who went to New York after graduation, who had danced together for years and years. In fact, the summer before we left for New York, right after we graduated in May, we spent the summer and we would give each other technique classes and we produced a full concert. We choreographed a concert and produced it ourselves just in the dance studio at the University. They did a big spread on us [in] the *Wisconsin State Journal*, which is the newspaper. The photographer had wonderful pictures of us. Then a year later he followed us out to New York and did a follow-up study on what we were all doing in New York.

Three of us, of the five, ended up in the Jose Limón Company.

Kelly: Who were those three?

Simonds: Sally—she goes by Sarah now—Sarah Stackhouse. We called her Sally when she was in school, but now she's Sarah. She has been a principal with the Limón Company. She stayed with the company for years and she still teaches. She's taught all over the world and does workshops. She sets the Limón pieces and so forth for them.

The other one is Joan Taliaferro Hartshorne, who left New York probably maybe a little bit before I did, because her husband is a professor in Cleveland. So she went back there to be with him. She continued on in dance in Cleveland.

A fourth one was Claudia Gittleman. Claudia did not go the Limón route, she went down to Greenwich Village and that area. She studied with Alvin Nikolai and Marie Lewis. She danced some in the Marie Lewis Company, and she is a writer. She's taught for years at Rutgers, taught dance, and she's a writer. She has books out on dance.

Then one left and just got married and we've completely lost track of her. The four of us lived together. It was kind of fun. That was the first year that we were in New York, we lived together.

Kelly: That must have been really exciting.

Simonds: It was fun. We took one class together, all of us, on Saturday mornings. The rest of the classes, our work schedules and time schedules were different. But we took that one class, we all took. That was a jazz class with Daniel Nagrin. [coughs] I'm probably going to end up coughing here.

Kelly: That's okay. I want to go back to college for just a moment here. Who were some of the faculty that you took instruction from at the University of Wisconsin?

Simonds: Well, Louise Kloepper was the primary person. Some theory courses – rhythmic theory and that kind of thing from a woman by the name of Mary Fee. I was president of the Orchesis, which is the student dance club. We brought in a lot of masters classes. We had kind of an influx of New York professionals who came.

Kelly: Any particular ones stand out in memory?

Simonds: Well, I remember Daniel Nagrin did, whom we later studied with. Lucas

Hoving, who was in the Limón company, came through. There were a lot of them, but those are the ones that kind of stood out.

Kelly: Okay, and then what was your official degree?

Simonds: It was in Dance Education, my bachelors.

Kelly: So what was the impetuous that led to all of you going to New York.

Simonds: Well, New York is the center for dance. At that time particularly, there really were not centers or opportunities for dance elsewhere. I might not have had the nerve to go to New York just by myself, but it was fine with having the support of the other dancers. So it made it possible for me, I think, to have the nerve to go.

Kelly: Did you have a job or other employment or schooling when you went to New York?

Simonds: I had a job. I had a dance teaching job out on Long Island. I taught at a high school on Long Island three days a week. I had arranged it. I had interviewed for it at Wisconsin at one of the teacher job fairs, I think. I had just persuaded the principal of this Long Island school that he needed a dance teacher and he didn't need one all the time. He needed one part-time, because I figured I could get by with a part-time job.

So I would get up really early in the morning and I would have to be at Times Square at seven in the morning, waiting for a ride. This other teacher lived I think in Greenwich Village and we lived on the Upper West Side, so I would take the subway down to Times Square and meet Henry. We would drive in his car out to the high school. Then when I would get back, then I would take classes at night. On the days that I didn't have to teach, I would take a couple

of classes. That was the first year. Then at the end of that year, I think is when I got into the company. But of course the company only paid when you were actually performing. The last two years I was there, I taught at Barnard College and moved by myself to a building that was a Columbia-Barnard faculty building.

Kelly: So how did you get accepted to the Jose Limón Company?

Simonds: I took classes there. That was basically it. I took classes. So did Sally, so did Joan. The three of us took classes at the Limón studio.

Kelly: Is that where you worked with people like Merce Cunningham?

Simonds: No, because Merce Cunningham he's a different dance artist. No, I worked in conjunction sort of with Limón. I worked with Pauline Koner, who was his guest artist for years and years and years. She sort of auditioned me to be her assistant at the American College Dance Festival at New London, Connecticut. Her teaching assistant. She was teaching a course called Elements of Performing. I auditioned. Unfortunately, I also auditioned against my good friend Sally. For some reason she chose me to do it. I did that, and Pauline, who was sort of the lead female in the Limón Company. Anyway, there was the conjunction there. So Jose asked me to be in a piece that they were doing at Connecticut, at the American College Dance Festival. That's sort of how it all evolved.

Kelly: And then Doris Humphrey.

Simonds: By then she had probably passed away. She passed away, I think it was in the Spring of [19]59, which would have been my first year in New York.

[Editor's Note: Doris Humphrey died December 29, 1958.]

I worked with her that one summer in Connecticut, as a student. She asked me to be an understudy in the Passacaglia, which was a wonderful piece that Jose Limón used in his concerts. So I got to perform it much later as well. But I studied choreography under her, which was wonderful. But she passed away. She had been Limón's ... I don't know if mentor is the right word, but when he was choreographing a piece, he would always have Doris Humphrey come in and critique it and help him with the choreography.

Kelly: Like an Artistic Director?

Simonds: Yes, in a way she was. Going back a generation there was the Humphrey-Weidman Company and Jose had his early training in the Doris Humphrey-Charles Weidman Company. So he came from that company. Doris had arthritis very bad and it was probably in an era prior to hip replacements. Because when I was studying—that was my summer between my junior and senior year in college—when I was studying with Doris Humphrey, she would be sort of brought into the studio with a cane and she sat. She sat the whole time, but she was very verbal. And she had Ruth Courier, who was in the Limón Company, as her demonstrator. It was almost as though Ruth was her body at that point. She could have Ruth do things that she could explain and so forth.

Kelly: Did I read that Steve Paxton was also in the Limón Company? Is that where you met him?

Simonds: Yes, I met Steve. We did a duet. We danced together in the Limón Company that first year in 1959. He and I also danced in a piece that did not turn out to be a very successful piece of Pauline Koner. We had a duet in that piece. So that's how I met Steve. Then many years later I brought him to Illinois when I was head of the department there. He went off then into much more avant-

garde kinds of things. He then danced for Merce Cunningham for quite a few years. Then he started this whole movement of it's called contact improvisation. He's a real forerunner of that.

Kelly: Which leads me back to when did you study under Merce Cunningham?

Simonds: I studied with him, I think I took classes with him when I was that first year in Connecticut as a student. Then I would continue to study with him, although Jose Limón was not terribly thrilled with his dancers going down to take class with Cunningham. But the Cunningham technique is wonderful for building strength. It's a very different kind of feel for the body than Limón technique. Limón technique, which is built on Doris Humphrey's technique, is very organic and breathy and kind of natural. If you start a movement going one way, you'll finish it.

But with Cunningham, it's a little bit more in some ways like ballet in that the center is a little more secure. The arms and legs go out and you change direction quickly and you go here and you go there. But Cunningham's choreography is probably quite "avant-garde". He often works by chance. His partner was John Cage, the avant-garde musician, so it was a whole different aesthetic in terms of approaching choreography and approaching movement. So I worked with him and when I was teaching in Illinois, I went back summers and studied with Cunningham. But I never performed with Cunningham.

Kelly: How long were you in New York with the Limón Company?

Simonds: Just three years.

Kelly: And then what happened?

Simonds: Then I had the opportunity to go to teach at the University of Illinois. I'm not a natural New Yorker I think. I was ready to make a change. The University of Illinois, at the time that I went there, dance had a good reputation, but it was still in Physical Education. When I went there we were battling for quite a few years to get out of Physical Education and into Fine Arts, which we eventually did. But it was not an easy struggle.

Kelly: One of the pieces that I read as I prepared for this interview said that you had started the dance program at the University of Illinois.

Simonds: No, that's not correct. I was the first Head of the Dance Department. They don't call it Chair, they call it Head, of the Dance Department when it became a department that was separate from this dance program that had been there for years in Physical Education. I went to Illinois in 1961 and then in 1968 I became the first Head and I organized the structure, so that it was a separate department. The impetus for that was that we had a brand new multi-million dollar arts center at Illinois, called the Krannert Arts Center. That was really the impetus. We had a – and they still do—a large dance studio in that building which, when we moved in they had assured me was going to have a resilient floor, which dancers of course have to have. I had taken over and become the Head sort of mid-stream, so I hadn't been involved in the architectural plans.

We walked in and it was a beautiful floor. It was a huge beautiful studio. Beautiful floor, but it was the kind of parquet floor that you might put down in a dining room. It was hard as rock. We had one rehearsal in there and we said we can't do this. So we did not accept the studio. They had to go in and go into that floor with pickaxes and spent a lot more money to get us a floor—we watched this one going in – that had sleepers and actual springs. The next floor was very bouncy and wonderful to work on, but it was a struggle.

By the time I left, which was in [19]71, we had 125 dance majors, 100 undergraduates and 25 masters students. Then I had a faculty of about twelve. A few of those were part-time.

Kelly: That's an impressive size.

Simonds: Yeah. It's probably smaller now. We started auditioning, but we were not terribly selective. They have become much more selective I think. Of course they have the MFA now too that they're offering.

Kelly: Did you get your Masters while you were also up there at the University of Illinois?

Simonds: I did. I got my Masters at Illinois. When I started I had taken some classes at Teachers College Columbia, a couple of classes. I took quite a few classes at the University of Wisconsin in the summers as I was teaching at Illinois in the winter. In fact I taught Advanced Technique one summer at Wisconsin. Then I took graduate classes. Not really in dance, but in those particular classes I think I took some art history and some literature and television production, which I loved, and other things. Then I transferred those to Illinois.

Kelly: So why did you leave the University of Illinois in 1971?

Simonds: I got married. [Laughs] I got married. We married in [19]69 and my husband was a graduate student at the time. He finished his PhD in [19]71. There was no job for him in Champaign-Urbana, so we ended up in Houston.

Kelly: And who is your husband?

Simonds: Chuck, or Charles, Simonds. He got his PhD in Geology at Illinois. Then we came down here in [19]71 when he got a post-doc at the Lunar and Planetary Science Institute in the old West Mansion. We thought we were coming down here for two years and we're still here. [chuckles]

Kelly: So what did you do when you knew you were moving to Houston?

Simonds: [Laughs] The first year we were here was a very rough year for me, very rough.

Kelly: Where did you move into Houston?

Simonds: We moved halfway in between NASA and town in an area called Meadow Creek Village. We rented at first. Meadow Creek Village is off of Richey. There's a little pocket of nice homes in that area. Then I put on I don't know how many miles on my car that first year, because I was going everywhere to take ballet classes. Then I connected with Mary Martha Lappe who had been at the University of Houston teaching dance. She was organizing the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. She asked me to be dance consultant and teach, choreograph there, which I did for seven years, I think.

Kelly: What was the Houston dance scene like in the early 1970s?

Simonds: The modern scene was rather bleak. There was not a lot going on at that time. I think it kind of escalated and grew. Mary Martha Lappe at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, and Roberta Stokes, who is a good friend of mine... I had actually met her when I was at Illinois and she and her husband—her husband was getting his PhD at the University of Indiana. Somehow, I think they came over and we met.

So my first year I was taking a Master Class, an Alvin Ailey Master Class, and Roberta was watching it. I was feeling very lost and unrecognized and she came up to me and said, "Are you Jan Stockman." And I said, "Why, yes I am." She recognized me and we've been good friends ever since. That was in [19]71.

She formed a company, she had a company in Houston. She taught children at CAM, the Contemporary Arts Museum. So Roberta, and Mary Martha, and a man by the name of Ferrell Dyde, who had a very active company, and Joan Karff. We were kind of the old-guard of modern in Houston. Now prior to us was a young man named Buddy Gerganis, and he did some things with modern. He brought people in from New York and so forth, but then he kind of disappeared. I don't know what happened to him. The dance scene has become much more lively.

Kelly: We had the Houston Ballet...

Simonds: The Houston Ballet. For a while James Clouser was the Artistic Director of the Houston Ballet. James is a ballet person, but he's very creative and very innovative, and he's also a modern person. He taught some at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. He and his wife Sonja Zarek had visited when I was at Illinois, so I had met them. He asked me to choreograph a piece for the Houston Ballet. This is while I was teaching at the High School. I'm trying to think what year that was. It must have been about [19]72. Let's see, our daughter was born in [19]73. You have to go to when your children are born to figure out what happened. She was born in [19]73, so it's probably [19]74 or [19]75. [19]75 probably.

He wanted me to choreograph a piece and he wanted it to be 22 minutes long or so. And it had to have a theme about the moon. Of course my husband was involved with doing research on moon rocks. We were very excited about

moon landing, and the Apollo program and all at that time. Jim Clouser arranged for me to collaborate with Mike Horowitz, who is a composer at the U of H campus [University of Houston]. He did kind of an electronic score.

We collaborated also with a sculptor who built a frame that was kind of a jungle gym. It could be put together and taken apart, not easily, but it could be. It was about fifteen feet high. It was high. It didn't look just like a jungle gym; it was to simulate the Lunar Lander. So we have this very tall sculpture, which was difficult to find a place to put it to rehearse with it, and to choreograph on it. But the "astronauts", who were members of the Houston Ballet, were discovered up in the Lunar Lander and then they came off of it. They danced on it for quite a while and then they came off of it.

Unfortunately it was just prior to videotaping of any kind, so I have no videotape of that piece, which was too bad. Interestingly, Denise, she was Smokoski, now Denise Williams, was one of the soloists in that piece, and she still teaches at the High School for Performing and Visual Arts. I had her out here at Clear Lake teaching Ballet for us for a while. The connection kept going. I did that piece also for the Chicago Ballet. And James Clouser was the one who really started the dance program here. He was here one year.

Kelly: There was a question somewhere that popped into my head and then left. But were there any other dance programs at the universities in Houston?

Simonds: No, there were not. There still are not. Karen Stokes is the daughter of my friend Roberta. In fact I was Karen's first modern teacher at the High School for Performing and Visual Arts. [Karen] is the head of dance at U of H now. She's in theater. They're trying to get something going. It's not what I would call a full-fledged dance major at this point. But they could at least do that because we no longer have dance here. But no.

Kelly: So there wasn't any place.

Simonds: No, and there still really are not. Both the community colleges, Houston Community College-Central and San Jac South [San Jacinto College] have dance programs for those two years now. But they didn't at the time that we were there.

Kelly: Do those lead to a degree?

Simonds: No, because they're just freshman, sophomore.

Kelly: Then they'd have to have someplace to transfer into.

Simonds: Yes, unfortunately we're not here, so they can't do that.

Kelly: So when did you first hear about the University of Houston at Clear Lake City?

Simonds: I'd heard about it. We knew that the university was coming into existence, because we lived kind of in the area. I would come down some the year that James Clouser was here. I did come down to some of the performances. He's a very charismatic person, so he had managed to have quite a few students, who I think had been up at TWU [Texas Women's University] and who transferred to study with him. Of course then he left to form his own company. Then he suggested me and I interviewed for the position here.

Kelly: Who did you interview with?

Simonds: Well, I taught a class. I remember that John Snyder was there and Gretchen Mieskowski was there. Peter Fischer and Cal Cannon. Cal Cannon was the Dean at that time and Peter Fischer was the Program Director or whatever his title was. Those were the people primarily that I interviewed with. I taught an

open class so they could see me teach. At that time we didn't have what later became the Developmental Arts Building, so we were teaching on the stage and using the balcony railing for the bar. Sort of teaching wherever we could.

Kelly: That must have been quite a sight to have them out there regularly using that bridge as a bar.

Simonds: Yes, there are a lot of the charter faculty who remember that and always liked to have the dancers up there working away and seeing them, because it gave a life to the university that it doesn't have anymore. Unfortunately.

Kelly: What made you decide to come here?

Simonds: At this time I was teaching at the High School for Performing and Visual Arts, but I was not teaching full time. My children were little. Right at that point I was offered a full time job at the high school, at the same time that I was offered the job here. I work best with university level people, so I ultimately decided to stay here.

Kelly: What did you envision for this program when you first started?

Simonds: Well, I probably was thinking along the terms of Illinois, because that's where my background was in academic teaching and building a program. I instituted having dance technique every day rather than not. And ballet as well as modern, and the theory courses and the performances and so forth. We were all kind of feeling our way at the beginning to see what could be developed. Dance takes such a dedication on the part of the students, and prior training on the part of the students, and a willingness to do that much work knowing that they might not have a job when they got out at the other end. Our masters degree was under the Humanities, but it was at that time almost all dance. They did performances, choreography, for their project. I,

over the years, had some wonderful, wonderful students, who were very well professionally trained, a lot of them.

Kelly: How many students, on average, would you have.

Simonds: Probably fifteen to twenty. So in some ways it almost would feel like a company, because it was a small group that was together from nine in the morning until into the afternoon every day. We worked only in the mornings I think on Friday. We did a lot of performing in the schools. We went to every local elementary school, besides our two big performances at the end of each semester. We did a lot of performing around Houston. We participated in the American College Dance Festival. They always did very well there.

Kelly: For a dance student here at UHCL, would their day or week have been made up similar to other students?

Simonds: Our students probably spent a lot more time here, because the classes met for a lot more hours. They had to meet the other requirements like Advanced Writing and Basic Text. The majority of their courses were dance courses, just as right now the art students--visual and applied art students--are primarily art courses. So they tended to spend probably more time here.

Kelly: When did you form the Dance Collective?

Simonds: I think that was right away. I think we just decided to call it the Dance Collective.

Kelly: It just sort of naturally evolved?

Simonds: Yeah.

Kelly: When did they build the Developmental Arts Building?

Simonds: Hmmm. Now I'm not quite sure whether it was the second year I was here. I came in [19]77. I know that in [19]77 and [19]78 we were in this building [Bayou Building]. I think it was during [19]78-[19]79, during that year, that we moved in.

Kelly: How involved were you in the design and development of that building for the dance program?

Simonds: I'm trying to remember. I know that I was involved with working on the flooring. [chuckles] And I remember that when we moved in, that was a large very tall studio and we needed to get more light in there, which then they did. And we needed to put up sound boards, because it echoed. It drove us all a little crazy at first. Other than that, I don't know that I had that much to do with it. It was a beautiful studio, a large studio.

Kelly: The satellite theater was also over there?

Simonds: Um-hmm [affirmative].

Kelly: And were your offices in that building as well?

Simonds: No, my office was over in the Bayou Building. So after I would finish teaching I would come back over and do whatever I had to do in the office or go to meetings or whatever.

Kelly: The Developmental Arts Building was special because of the solar panels that they had on the ceiling.

Simonds: Which I don't think ever worked. [Laugh] They were supposed to work, but

as I remember it now, it's a little vague in my head– this is a long time ago now we're talking --but I don't think they ever really worked.

Kelly: I'm trying to remember if I heard properly that someone said it used to flood or they would leak. I don't know if that ever affected your...

Simonds: Yes, we would have pails here and there on the floor. [Laughs].

Kelly: How many credit hours a semester were you assigned to teach?

Simonds: Well, I was assigned to teach three courses like everybody else, but as the arts are now, I taught a lot of hours. I would sometimes get a guest coming in one day a week to do the technique, so they didn't have me every day. I think I probably taught four days of technique, an hour and half. Then I would do choreography, and I would teach repertory, which involved my developing pieces on the students and so forth.

Kelly: What kind of support did you have from the administration?

Simonds: [pause] Well, I'm trying to think.

Kelly: We can take it one administration at a time if you need to.

Simonds: [Laughs} Yes.

Kelly: Let's start with Dr. Neumann.

Simonds: They were proponents of the Arts. They being Selma and Dr. Neumann. They probably would be more amenable to Ballet than to a Modern-focused program. But most all of the university level dance programs are modern based or contemporary based, rather than ballet based as their main thrust.

Cal Cannon, was the Dean at that time, was always very supportive actually. We were over in a separate building and when you're in a separate building and it was such an intense heavy teaching load, heavy rehearsal load, that we were probably a bit isolated over there from this building. We didn't have that must to do with them. Which may have exacerbated the fall, except that we had to go because Theater went.

Kelly: Everybody seems to have a Dr. Neumann story. Do you have a particular recollection that you'd like to share?

Simonds: I did not hear this first-hand. I mean I wasn't there at the time. But I think I heard Selma Neumann tell the story that when Dr. Neumann came down the first time to this site, to see where the university was going to be built, they took him—because there probably wasn't a bridge at that time—they took him by canoe on the Horsepen Bayou here. The canoe tipped over and he fell in. So, I think that was his introduction to UHCL. He came kind of dripping home to Selma talking about this wilderness into which we were going to build a university.

Kelly: That was new, I haven't heard that one.

Simonds: You haven't heard that one? [chuckles]

Kelly: No. I saw an article that said the B.A. in Theater Arts, dance program, was approved by the Coordinating Board in 1980 and that at the time UHCLC was the only campus in the UH System to offer a dance program. But I know that UH has dance at their central campus.

Simonds: Okay, they had dance for years in Physical Education, and it was not a dance major program.

Kelly: So ours was the first and the only dance major program.

Simonds: And they still don't really have a full dance major.

Kelly: Who were your co-workers in those first days?

Simonds: I had a lot of part-time people and adjuncts. I always had adjuncts. I never had another full-time dance person here. But I had Ferrell Dyde came out. Sonja Zarek, who had been married to James Clouser. Sonja is this marvelous Renaissance woman who does everything from composing to accompanying dance classes to teaching kinesiology and teaching dance history. She was with me for a long time, doing the theory courses. We had various people teaching ballet throughout the years, among them Denise Smokoski Williams from the Houston Ballet.

Later on, she was Paula Jones and now she's Paula Sloan. Paula was really my assistant, but she went through her bachelors and her masters here. Then stayed on. She taught ballet. She also assisted me with the company and was a big help for quite a few years.

Kelly: What were the two big performances that you would put on at the end of each semester?

Simonds: Those were repertory dance concerts. I would choreograph some. The masters students generally would have a piece, so we'd have some of those on it. And we often had a guest artist. I brought in some of the top professional performers, usually soloists. For instance Bill Evans, who is very well known around the country as a performer. Sometimes he would do a tap piece, because he's a modern dancer, but he's also a wonderful tap dancer. Which my son just thought was wonderful – watching this man tapping.

My children, by the way, sort of grew up helping at the university. My son, when he got big enough to pull the curtain, that was a big... For years he had to hand out programs, but then he graduated to pulling the curtain, and that was a big moment for him when he got to be able to do that.

Our daughter, one year when she was in high school, we hosted this big American College Dance Festival here, with 450 dancers and faculty from all over the West Coast. She was the stage manager for that. We had a very elaborate system, because we did either four or five... we must have had five different performances. Because you would have an adjudication performance, a judging performance, for everybody. Then you would have two galas. Anyway, we had a lot of performances. That was very elaborate with these facilities to have to figure out how to get people warmed up and ready, each group. That was her responsibility, which she did very well. So they kind of grew up with helping with it.

Kelly: I guess I should ask you how did you juggle motherhood being a full time professor.

Simonds: The nice thing was that we had moved down to the Clear Lake area, so we live close. There were a few times when if they had a bad cold or something and they couldn't go to school, but they weren't deathly ill, I would bring them with me to dance. They would sit in the corner and draw things and watch the dancers and get spoiled by the dancers. That didn't happen often, but it happened a few times. I think my son was three when we started here. So they were in school for the most part. I would have some after-school care for them until I could get home. We managed.

Kelly: What year was your son born?

Simonds: He was born in [19]76 and our daughter was born in 19]73. Of course she's a dancer and choreographer.

Kelly: Let me go ahead and change the cd over.

[End of CD 1]

Simonds: You had asked me about the performances at the end of each semester. Those were very well attended. We would have one, sort of our dress rehearsal, during the day, and we would open it up to school groups and nursery school groups and so forth. We would have five hundred people, young ones, in the Bayou Theater. That was always exciting, to see the theater filled with young ones. They always liked seeing it. We had good audiences. We would do two performances, usually two nights of the concerts. I still have people. Our last concert was in [19]92 and I still have people saying, "Oh I miss those dance concerts at the University. It just hasn't been the same." It's gratifying in a way and sad in another way.

Kelly: You mentioned that Dr. Neumann was very supportive of the program. When he left and Dr. Stauffer took over, he sort of shifted the focus of this campus. What was his attitude toward you and the dance program?

Simonds: I'm really not sure. I think that they probably attended. I've forgotten actually. We did not cost the university money. I wasn't having to go to the President and say, "I need \$10,000 for this, or I need \$5,000 for this." Our needs were pretty simple and we were essentially self-supporting with what we would take in with our concerts. So I did not have that much to do with President Stauffer, frankly. In terms of other kinds of support, the Deans that we've had throughout the years have been supportive in that they would attend the concerts, but that's about all.

Kelly: What was the buzz on the street about the dance program at UHCL, in the dance community.

Simonds: In the dance community? In Houston? Oh I think we were very well regarded, because we always participated in the Jewish Community Center Dance Month and in Houston dance gatherings. There was a contemporary [coughs] We had a modern dance council that I was involved with. [Laughs] I might be losing my voice. [Coughs]

Kelly: It's not that bad. How would you recruit your students?

Simonds: We had some advertisements in Dance Magazine. Let me cough.

[Recording paused]

Simonds: We had some ads in Dance Magazine, and we would send out flyers. A lot of it was probably word of mouth. But we got some from Portugal, we had one from Portugal and one from South Africa. People would come to study with me. I had a certain reputation at that point. And from out of state too.

My last performance where I performed, one of my Masters students, who was almost my age, she herself was a professor at a college in Florida. She was here getting her Masters, which she didn't have at that point, and she choreographed a piece where the two of us were in it, along with some other people. That was kind of fun, to try to get back into some kind of performing shape. Early on I had done a solo. That was early. [chuckles] I don't think I had performed since.

Kelly: Tell me about some of your choreographed pieces.

Simonds: Probably my most famous is called "The Big Piece," which we talked about

the other day, which is a kind of a montage piece, which I first choreographed the first year I was here, because I had kind of a strange group of dancers, who had varying amounts, levels, of ability. So I put together this piece. The ending section of it is what has seemed to have been my lasting legacy, which is called the “March of the Plungers” and uses plumbers helpers and J. Philip Sousa. It’s kind of a fun piece. I did a piece called “Of Inner Origins” with original music that was composed by two percussion faculty at San Jac Central [San Jacinto College]. I always liked that piece. It was a very lyrical piece. As a matter of fact I just this past year set that on the High School for Performing and Visual Arts.

The last piece I did here was to the music of the Carmina Burana and that’s a kind of a well-known piece of music and it’s big. I had always wanted to tackle it. It’s been choreographed by other people, but I thought well this is my last chance to choreograph here. I had a wonderful group of dancers. The very last group of dancers we had here was particularly strong. Ironically. I think I had seventeen people in the piece. It was a kind of for me almost a protest piece, almost a piece of mourning for the loss of the dance program. The piece ended with a man, a wonderful dancer, James *Aubaugh*, who is tall and thin. He’d been a choreographer at the Galveston Outdoor Musicals. He was lifted by the dancers at the end and lifted up almost in a Christ-like pose, as though this is the dance program.

Kelly: That must have been particularly stirring. Leading into that then, when Dr. Goerke came as President, he found himself faced with some tough financial decisions.

Simonds: Right.

Kelly: Prior to the Theater program review, because it’s clear that that’s what led to

the loss of the dance program, had he expressed any interest or support in the dance program at all?

Simonds: Again, they would attend dance concerts. I remember that we were asked to do one of those Lunar Rendezvous fashion shows, which we did. He was in it. He was one of the models in it. That was right about the time that he was making the decision, I think. It was unfortunate, but life goes on.

And in some ways, UHCL is not the right place to have a dance program. When you get right down to it, you need to have a four-year institution, because it takes years to develop and it takes more resources than we really had. It's just probably a miracle that it lasted for fifteen years.

Kelly: Then why do you think UH central didn't pick you up and develop theirs?

Simonds: Good question. [Laughs] I don't know, but they did not. Dance there was still very much a part of P.E. and it was very much a P.E. orientation at that time. So they didn't. I don't know how much you want to go into since [19]92, but I have ended up with a second career here that I've enjoyed very much. In my old age I've had more troubles with my knees and with arthritis, so actually trying to teach technique would have been difficult for me for the last few years. On the other hand I love administration and I love doing what I've been doing with our faculty, and working with the adjuncts and hiring them and working with the full-time faculty to help them develop their programs. And our administration here, particularly at this time, is excellent. I'm talking about the HSH [School of Human Science and Humanities] administration.

Kelly: With Bruce Palmer as the Dean. And what has been your official role here since [19]92?

Simonds: Well, not since [19]92. I taught a little bit at the U of H [University of

Houston]. I've been teaching a course called Arts and the Child, which is teaching elementary school teachers how to teach creative dance and creative drama to children, which is rewarding and fun and important. I mean I think it's important, because I think that elementary school teachers need to incorporate creative work in their classrooms. I just last week ran into a former student of mine in one of those elementary classes who is teaching kindergarten or first grade, and she's using the materials and the things with her students. That has some worth too. It's a different kind of teaching.

I also taught a course called Body Awareness. I enjoyed that course a lot. It was basically an improvisation course with helping people get in touch with moving and expressing themselves through movement. It was actually cross-listed with Psychology because it had dance therapy kinds of ramifications or applications. I taught that for several years. I would have students who were getting degrees in Psych or business or what have you. Not dancers. I would have a lot of men in the class. Those students who were able to kind of deal with it and get rid of their inhibitions, or whatever, to move enjoyed the class. I think got a lot out of it.

There were always problems with that class that dealt mainly with the fact that we no longer had a dance studio by that time. So we were on the stage for the most part. That led to problems because we always had to have a floor down, it was always cold, it was dirty. So I finally said I'm not going to teach this anymore.

I don't even remember what year I became the Director of Humanities, and I was the Director of Humanities for one year. The Director of Humanities does things to promote the Humanities degree per se. I did that for one year and then I became the Chair of the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts, which was much more – well, I enjoyed that kind of administration. I think I've been doing it for nine or ten years, something like that. Quite a long

time, under several Deans. For the most part they've been wonderful to work with. I think Shirley Paolini was the Dean when I first started. She was wonderful to work with. Ellen Grossman was the Associate Dean at that time. I respect both of them very much. They're very intelligent and hard working and were very helpful and very supportive. The administrative team has always been marvelous. Hilary Karp, who's been Division Chair as long or maybe even a little longer than I; the Division Chairs and the Team have always gotten along very well.

Kelly: How do you get along with the rest of the faculty, being an administrator now?

Simonds: I think it probably took them a little while to wonder out what this dancer, choreographer was going to do with them. But they quickly took – I think it didn't take too long for them to realize that I consider my role one of helping them facilitate what they were doing. The faculty have always been very supportive and I feel close to all of them. They said very nice things at my retirement, so what can I say?

Kelly: When you were faculty, and not administration, did you participate in Shared Governance?

Simonds: No, I did not. Shared Governance I don't think really had emerged when I was with the dance program. I was so busy with the dance program that I didn't have time to do anything else. And after the dance program left, I must admit that I went through a period of time that I was pretty bitter about the experience at the University. While I continued to teach here, I was not that involved. So I have not been on a Shared Governance committee and I've been a partial administrator. The Division Chairs were sort of halfway in between faculty and administrators. We're kind of in that Never-Never Land. The Division Chairs now only teach one course per semester.

Kelly: How have you stayed involved in dance in the Houston community?

Simonds: I go to a lot of dance concerts. I attend a lot, and that's primarily the way in which I've... I've been on the...what do they call it now? It used to be the Cultural Arts Council of Houston, now it's Houston, Harris County or something; the Grant Reviewing Board. I'm not on it right now, but I have been for quite a few years. That kept me sort of abreast of what's going on. But I try to get to as many as I can. Once we lost our program, I moved my choreography to working with other groups. I did a lot at the central campus, U of H [University of Houston]. I worked with the High School for Performing and Visual Arts. I worked with Stephen F. Austin [University]. I did one piece at Lamar [University].

Kelly: I'm going back now to the Theater program review. The papers you donated to the Archives have a very good trail showing, at least on paper, what was going on. And of course if you look at Dr. Zophy's book, you've got his very personalized opinion, expression, of what was going on. I know from your paperwork that you served on that Theater program review. What inclination did you have at that time that they were going to cancel that program

Simonds: There had been mutterings about it for quite a while, but unfortunately at the time of the budget cuts, we had an Associate, I think we had two, visiting faculty members heading up the Theater program. They were not tenured, or not on tenure-track. That fact, coupled by the fact that the Theater program was expensive, made it extremely vulnerable. One thing I am quite—I'm still bitter about—is that I, as a full professor who had been here for years and years, was notified that the program was indeed cut by the visiting Associate Professor giving me a telephone call. He had been called, but I had not been called. So I was upset about that. I'm still upset about that.

Kelly: Who was that?

Simonds: The visiting? Frankly I don't remember his name.

Kelly: Was that Mac? [Mac Graves]

Simonds: Maybe it was Mac. Yeah, it was probably Mac. He was the one who had been notified by the Acting Dean that the decision had come down.

Kelly: Now the Dance Program was under the Theater rubric and that was how it had been submitted to the Coordinating Board. So by cancelling the one side, it by default affected yours. I've noticed that you haven't mentioned Theater, per se, in discussing the Dance Program. To what extent did you have any connection with them?

Simonds: The connection came in the technical aspects. We didn't have a lot of connection with them in terms of courses. But the lighting director was very important with our concerts. Sallie Pate, who was their costumer, she was tenured. She was a tenured Associate Professor. She lost her job as a result. She would help us occasionally with costumes. As a matter of fact, Sallie was very kind and has come back and taught as an adjunct for us in the Arts and the Child class. She's told me however that this fall semester is the last one she's going to do for us.

Kelly: Do you know what they did with the costumes and the sewing machines and the other equipment that they had?

Simonds: I don't know what happened to them, no. I didn't know it at the time, but I heard that in terms of the floor in the dance studio, which was this beautiful hardwood maple floor. They came in with buzz-saws, people did, and took

sections. One of our faculty members, who is in Chemistry I think, told me not too long ago that her kitchen floor is made up of the dance studio floor.

Kelly: Wow.

Simonds: Yeah.

Kelly: They renovated that DAB [Developmental Arts Building] into the Delta Building shortly after cancelling your programs.

Simonds: That's right.

Kelly: Oh my goodness.

Simonds: [laughing] Yes. Yes.

Kelly: What all is involved in cancelling a program of that nature? What could you do to prepare?

Simonds: Not much. We had one year after we were notified to sort of get the students out who were in the pipeline, but it was not much of a year.

Kelly: How do you place students? Do you help them look for another program similar or comparable?

Simonds: Because our program was not a four-year program, most people were close to finishing. So we finished them out. Those who were here we finished out as best we could. It was sad.

Kelly: When you choreograph, do you write notes?

Simonds: I do, no one else could figure out what they mean, but I have notes. Yes, I have a lot of scribbles.

Kelly: I thought of that as I was going through your papers and noticed that your graduate students had turned in some papers in which they had described what they choreographed and how. It made me wonder, the performances that you've choreographed and have used more than once, do you have to go and personally teach the choreography...

Simonds: Yes.

Kelly: ...or is it something written?

Simonds: Now with video, for instance the Of Inner Origins piece which has been done by several different companies; that piece the kids at the High School learned off video for the most part. Then I would go in and refine and give them work on phrasing and interpretation and so forth. It's not easy to learn from video, because you have to reverse things. It's a trick. Even my daughter, who's a choreographer, does that with her own pieces. I never did know my own pieces, because I would move through it and choreograph part of a thing, but then I would put it on the dancer and it then was theirs. So I never did learn whole pieces myself.

Kelly: Just a few last follow-up questions here. How do you see the University has changed since you came here in the beginning?

Simonds: Well, I think something has been lost. Maybe something has been gained too, but I don't know. One thing that has changed that is wonderful is that now when you walk down the hall and you see students in classes, not everyone is white. The complexion of the campus has changed. That's wonderful. That's a great sign of growth, in my opinion. I think in the early days, Cal Cannon

was such a forward thinker in terms of promoting the arts. We would have the Judy Chicago exhibition and Mel Chin did this big water wheel thing in the Atrium II which created quite a stir. The dancers were dancing in this building and so forth. So there was excitement that I think has been lost.

Now in the later years, enrollment has grown and our faculty now is getting younger, which is good. Actually not as much. HFA [Humanities and Fine Arts], my faculty, have remained really very stable, and we haven't had as many young ones come in. We're getting a few more now, but as Bruce Palmer keeps saying it's not going to be long before a whole bunch of people are going to be leaving the University for retirement, because we've all gotten to that stage. So it will really change.

Kelly: I think the majority of the charter faculty still here are in HSH [School of Human Sciences and Humanities], so that will be a big turnover.

Simonds: It will be.

Kelly: Have you noticed if UH-Clear Lake has had any traditions or touchstones over the years? Anything you might consider a tradition?

Simonds: Alfred Neumann used to call the Dance Program their traveling football team. [Laughs] I loved the tradition that we no longer have, probably because it's just too big, where we used to have the graduation ceremonies in the Atrium and it was beautiful. They were beautiful in there. I know that we probably would have to do five ceremonies or something, which might be a little wearing. That's a tradition that I don't know what's going to happen with graduation.

I think this University has a lot to offer. I think our faculty is wonderful. Our faculty is dedicated. They're scholars. Their main concern is their students.

Unlike some of the big universities where people are research-oriented, our faculty are concerned with our student's education and how they're growing. Hopefully that's not going to change. Hopefully it's going to stay a small enough place that students will feel that they're not lost in a big environment. That this is some place where they can get individual attention. That they can go to their professor and get help.

Kelly: Is there anything else that you'd like to add before I close up for the day?

Simonds: I don't think so. I never dreamed when we lost the dance program, I never dreamed that I would be here another fifteen years. I could have retired several years ago. The only reason I kept working was because I enjoyed the environment. I enjoyed the faculty that I worked with. I enjoyed the administration that I worked with. It's been fun, as well as hard work, but fun. I felt I had something to contribute to them. In the end, it's been an interesting career, and now I have to find something else to do with my life. Go on somewhere from here.

Kelly: Do you have any immediate plans after this summer?

Simonds: Well, I've joined a gym. I took yoga this morning. I haven't had time to work on myself for quite a while, so even at this advanced stage with my replaced knees, I'm finding that it's fun to begin to get into some kind of shape. And then I'm a scuba diver, and my husband and I are going down April 4. We love to travel. We're going to Northern Spain in September. Our daughter is in Australia, so we're probably going to go to Australia. So we love to travel and we take care of our grandchild, our grandbaby, every once in a while. I'm still searching for other things to do at this point. I'm still helping my replacement to figure out how to do this job. I'm hoping I'll find enough to do. Thank you.

Kelly: Well, I thank you very much. It's been a delight talking to you.

Simonds: I wish you luck with your next interview.

Kelly: Thank you.