

Interviewee: Karen Jean White
Interviewers: Megan Chan and Samantha Minieri
Date: November 19, 2010
Place: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Samantha Minieri



Abstract: Karen Jean White was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1948 and currently resides in West Boylston. Dancing since the age of four, Karen has devoted her life to the art. Finding babysitting to be a dull job, she began her own studio in her basement at the age of 13. She now owns the Karen Jean White School of Dance on West Boylston Street in West Boylston where she has been for 39 years. In this interview Karen elaborates on her career in dance and those who have impacted her life. Growing up in a loving home, she is extremely grateful for her childhood. Karen reflects on the importance of her life choices, such as those with whom she chooses to surround herself. She also emphasizes how religion influences her life, as well as the importance of having her family; whether they are related, friends, or her students.

Megan Chan: We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics/community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with Karen Jean White. Thank you for your help with this important project.

Samantha Minieri: So the first question is what is your full maiden name?

Karen Jean White: As given, Karen Jean White.

MC: Where were you born?

KJW: In Worcester, Massachusetts.

SM: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with? Family background?

KJW: Right, on my father's side we're directly descended from John Quincy Adams. So my Aunt Dot was in the DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] in the late 60's (___?) the 70's and I really didn't wanna identify that because the DAR didn't always have a good connotation to it. But we definitely have a genealogy from that, we have that at home in the tree. But my mother's Swedish and her parents were born in Finland and they met on the ship coming over here, Ellis Island. But they were in a Finnish community in Sweden so you know it was pure Swedish. That's all they knew was Swedish but it was actually located in Finland, Sweden...

SM: Wow

MC: Wow. So have you lived in Worcester your whole life?

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KJW: I have not lived in Worcester at all. I live in West Boylston which is a suburb. I'm just seven minutes away. Right but it's part of the greater community.

SM: Have you always lived there? Have you lived in multiple areas?

KJW: I've lived in other places for a short period of time, but basically my main residence has always been West Boylston. I started teaching there when I was 13 at my house. And then I studied, of course I studied dance all the way along and in Boston and New York. I actually started studying dance in Worcester to start with. But I've lived in Jacob's Pillow in the summers. I've lived in Cape Cod but I basically travelled all around but I've basically kept the same residence, yes.

MC: Do your other family members live in the same area?

KJW: Yes they do. Yes they do.

SM: What difficult transitions did you go through in moving from childhood to adulthood?

KJW: That's a good question, I never thought about that one. I don't think, I don't think I had a lot of difficult transitions. I was pretty much very fortunate to be brought up by parents who were available to us all the time. My father worked the night shift at a sheet metal company, (___??) machine here in Worcester. He taught at a Worcester trade school as well. He was part time, he filled in a substitute teacher there, when his teacher, cause he was a graduate of Worcester trade. He is, you know, that's his background in sheet metal. And my mother was, it was the old fashioned days, my mother was home. She was there 24/7, you'd get home and she was right there saying how come that grade isn't a little bit higher, you know. And she sewed and cooked and took care of everything and she was a good financial planner, so that we were already, always pretty set. She was the one that decided with my dad to drive me to different schools, especially ones in Worcester. Then when I was eleven, my Worcester tap teacher said there was nothing left for her to give me, to bring me to Boston to audition for Stanley Brown, which my mother came home and said to my father, "Well Honey wants me to bring her to Boston to study" and now my father said, "Go ahead." So off we went to the Combat Zone [in Boston], where all the dance schools are. And my mother used to drive me down every Monday for four hours of classes. I had classes there and as well as Berkley School. I had jazz piano there. I had classical piano from a teacher in Worcester, Mrs. Donatello-(sp?) and we were pretty much -- I say my great aunt used to call us the hot house roses because my parents, it was just two children and we're very close but we're a very small family, but we're basically pretty focused on what we were doing. We weren't distracted by a whole lot of stuff or junk. So we were pretty fortunate, you know, to enjoy our life, our family, our school. We loved our schools and we went to church every Sunday and we loved our neighbors and we were, you know, very blessed in many ways. So pretty good. So I think I really had, I think probably the most difficult thing was when I graduated from high school from West Boylston, it was a very small class, 88 kids. And a lot of our teachers -- we had a teacher, English teacher, who came here to work in the beginning

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of the (___??) department, Dr. Ronald Alkind-(sp). And at that time the school was very small, still is very small, but it was trying to decide whether I should go to college or keep my dance school, which I had started in this location on West Boylston Street, where I've been for 39 years since. But before that I taught in my house. It was hard to give up something I had been studying all along to just put that aside and say ok now I'll go to school. So I was thinking, well I was accepted at Clark, I figured I'll just apply to three local colleges, there were no dance schools per se. If you studied dance you went to study with a noted teacher, you didn't really study, you didn't go to college to be a dance major the way a lot of our students do now, (___??) dance they operate everywhere as a, you know, because so many people have some kind of dance, they do dance teams and things. We didn't do that, it was an individual study. It was always ballet or tap or jazz, it wasn't, even then jazz was newer. There was no such thing as this other stuff so it was pretty pure. But trying to just talk my parents into seeing how I wasn't gonna go to school right after I graduated cause I had the, you know the, I was accepted and so forth. But I didn't have the motivation to do it that way. I wanted to go right into it, to continue with my school and to make it grow more and I would go to school part time, which I did. So I went to Clark at night, did a lot of courses, which was fun.

MC: So when you graduated from Clark, what did you see as your options?

KJW: Right well actually I did not take my degree from Clark; I finished at Worcester State College because I was not able to take any education course at Clark. It was all, it was philosophy, I took the philosophy courses, I took the biology, I took English, I took, I had Harriet Carson-(?) Silver for an art workshop. I took a lot of eclectic, wonderful things, I took public speaking, all kinds of things, psychology which is their big thing, I had three psychology courses. But then I, during the day I figure well I've got to finish, I've got to pull this in together for some kind of degree so I applied to Worcester State College and I finished there in 1976, or 77, I don't even remember. It was 76 or 7-but I was just going, so I did student teaching in West Boylston and I put it towards an elementary education degree. So I do have that degree. But I didn't use it per se in the school.

SM: What support networks and mentoring have been important to you?

KJW: I would say, I would say, hmm...I would say my parents, of course. They were strong, very self-reliant kind of people, tremendous, if anything, workaholics, so [laughs] we won't put that. But if anything it's the fact that you do the priority and you do your work first and then when there's extra time then you think about F-U-N. That's not a priority, it's always about what you're doing and then what you should be doing kinds of things, you know. And that's how we were raised at that point, you know, and I think people still are but there's a lot of people that aren't raised that way. And so I think it's a great asset because that's the way the world works. People are not interested in carrying you around. They want to see what you can contribute, you know, and you have to find out what your particular niche is to contribute. And also I think my faith has been very crucial in helping me and continues to drive what I do day after day. I think when you're teaching and so many professions it should be in any work it's what you are contributing to other people and at the same time you're growing.

MC: So how did you get into dance?

KJW: Oh my mother brought me for a class I guess when I was four in Worcester and it was a big class on Main Street, some teacher on Main Street, and I don't even know what her name was except that it was up like the third or fourth floor flight up in the old building. And it was a big group. My mother brought me for several weeks at a time, brought me, and every week my mother didn't know anything about dance but she would sit and she would, parents were allowed to watch it, every week they would do something different. And my mother thought well that's a funny way to learn' cause if you're gonna do something different every week how is a four year old gonna understand, remember anything basic, which is key. It's repetition, you know, you have to, if you're gonna learn skills, you need to use them over and over in different ways and that's how they become part of your muscle memory. Obviously you know yourself, so she thought I don't think that's a good school so she left there and found a different school. She took me to a private tap teacher, Reggie Walley, who was kind of like, he was well known, in Worcester area he was a musician and a dance teacher for years. But I went there to study privately, my brother studied too. We practiced every day after supper in our tap shoes on the kitchen floor and then we outgrew the kitchen and my father built a platform in the basement so we could practice. It wasn't just a block, it was the whole basement and he gradually did the whole basement over and that's what became my first dance studio, where I had, cause I babysat once and said this is not for me. You know people just stay out all night, you just sit around and wait for three dollars isn't worth it, you know just sit and wait and wait. It's like ridiculous, you know how that can be. So anyway I started, my teacher in Worcester was very supportive. Her name was Honey Felicetti, it was Ellen Felicetti. She had a big dance school on Front Street, down town Worcester. She must have had 400 students if she had one, she has a pianist and we were there a million hours a week. And I actually got to assist her cause I was tall and you look older. And I got to assist her when I was 13 and 14 and I taught some ballet classes for her' cause I was the only one who went to an outside school for ballet cause it was all tap. And she was great. She had me doing, tying shoes and bringing kids to whatever and she had me doing things at the desk and everything. She'd say, "Here take my pocketbook and empty out the drawer with the tuition." I mean it was like, very, it was a very big school but it was done in the old fashioned way when the pianist would sit there with the sheet music stack and, of course with tap, and she was a very good pianist so she would just know all the temps and all the timings and the rhythms and so she would accompany and everything was great. It was nothing, there was nothing technology. There was no buttons, there was no beeping, nothing, it was just all pure. Total unplugged, which is heaven when you have the right musicians, you know that yeah. So it's totally heaven. You ask them to do something and they just do it. So it's really great.

SM: Yeah it does sound great. At my studio everything is very, there's a lot of technology and there's nothing like that anymore.

KJW: No no I know. And if you go to New York, if you go to the real schools, if you go to Julliard or you go to Alvin Ailey Center now you got drummers and that's what I got to have in the summer when I went for classes in New York was drummers. Four drummers at a time in the

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Clark Center. And that's before the Ailey school actually was established because James (___??) and Thelma Hill who actually worked with Alvin Ailey, they taught in this part of, it was a West Side Y where I took class in there. And there was real live drummers, everything was all live music. I mean it was live, you think you died and went to heaven. And you know you can keep all the can stuff. I mean that's what we use, we use can stuff. You do too. Otherwise you have to have good musicians, you know. And where I, you know, it's hard to get musicians like that.

SM: So how important is this work to you? Like what does it mean?

KJW: It's been the focus and the great love of my life. It continues to be only its changed colors now. It's in a different venue because I don't dance as much now. I teach but I don't dance as much. I don't demonstrate and move as much. I chose, when I was 13, I could see what this was gonna be from my dance teacher who was married. I saw her being, expecting babies and still teaching and sitting on the chair and up and down of the chair while she was expecting. And her mother was good enough to help her raise the children. The father, her husband was working too so he wasn't available and I always felt well gee I don't wanna have a family like that because you have to pawn them off on someone else. And again it was a time when you were still able to think about the idea of maybe doing one thing at a time instead of what my mothers had to do, my dancers at the studio for years now they have to run around like crazy (___??). Work work work, go pick up the kids. They're a cab driver [buzz] pay pay pay [buzz] run run run and you know they all try to do everything with quality. And that's the whole key. So if you decide you can't do everything, they used to say oh you can do everything you want. You can, well you can but can you do it with quality and it's up to you, know what I mean. What are the benefits and if this life person that you have is really a - I think so for me I always was delighted to see the kids come. I love children, I love working with them. It's being in a laboratory every day and being in a situation where things are - you're exploring and being in your own venue you can do that. You're allowed to explore, you know, through the arts, which are the greatest things, you know, in the world I feel, you know. And what makes us human, truly human so I think it's, have no problem with saying no to being - I was married once for about a year and it was a very bad experience because it was someone who was probably the last one in the world you would ever wanna be married to. But you know it was a time, I don't know what I was into the idea - was think well I guess you know with having boyfriends and stuff and decided this was - I guess this is the one but it wasn't right and so it wasn't meant to be. And so many people do continue in these things and then they keep having more, they have children and then I never wanted to perpetuate that situation. You'd see the little face growing up older and older and still that same person and you're still fighting on the weekends who's gonna have so-and-so and all that and I don't go for that. I don't think that's my place. It's hard enough for people - so much of that you know, and it's so sad because nobody wins. So I thought well I think maybe I'll just concentrate on what I was doing, you know. So it's kinda neat to be able to.

MC: So how would characterize the personal and professional costs of your chosen path...

KJW: Yes well I would say you have to say no. You have to say no to Saturday - people going to football games on Saturday or staying out late on Friday nights because you know you have to

get up early on Saturday morning and go and take class or teach class or both. So it's a matter of cutting out a lot of maybe individual people considering individual freedoms or partying or having a great time; it's the greater good. It's looking down the road a little bit further, you know what I mean. It's not that you don't love to have fun and do things too, but you say well I can do that on another time because this is most important. We have to – and again, you have to say no, have to learn what matters most to you and focus on it as much as you can.

SM: What are some of the benefits that you get?

KJW: Yes the benefits are huge, huge. I think – trying – being privileged enough to have what skills that you have, your abilities, your opportunities and be able to take those in and hopefully turn them back into something in a good form and give back again, it's a tremendous, tremendous blessing, tremendous gift of living because the purpose when you get up in the morning is why am I - what am I gonna - what am I doing today is the purpose and God only gives us one day at a time so we don't, we don't need to worry about too too much beyond that otherwise, of course we have our plans, of course we have to focus to a degree but it's like knowing who you are and being able to learn who you are and what it is that makes you unique. You know, so that's pretty – so the benefits of that are good. It's a lot of peace of mind eventually. You wrestle with a lot of things, of course, for many years. I mean but that's – life is one wrestling match after another and your set of problems and through those you hopefully grow and hopefully become a better listener, a better observer.

MC: Have you been involved in volunteering anywhere?

KJW: Well yes we do a lot of, I would say this, for me this is always kinda I think my community work. I've been – when I was a younger dancer and were taking, I was going, umm taking class and studying I belong to Dance Masters America, which is a certified dance teacher organization and I was very involved with that for years. I've been a member since 1972 and we would have master classes. I don't know if you went to take master classes from your studio. Ok well anyway we would have teachers in Boston or Medford in different, Chapter 5 is our local, the local chapter to New England and it's a nationwide organization and Charlotte Klein, who was a very well-known Worcester teacher, she's one of the top one in Worcester and other Worcester teachers, members of Dance Masters. We would go and take classes to extend our abilities and our knowledge twice - it would be once a month. So I would spend Sunday afternoons and sometimes part of Sunday morning as well doing that. And then another meeting would be the Dance Teachers Club of Boston. We do that every month too. So, during the school year, you know, but so I didn't get involved in too – I mean I didn't work in a soup kitchens or anything like that but I've always had a great need to bring my dancers to the nursing home shows. We do nursing home shows and local things and community things, senior residences and we still do. We did one last Sunday up in Lancaster and the thing is with that is live performing, we grew up dancing probably every week – dancing – I grew up –my Worcester teacher would take us around every week. We'd dance a veteran's home or we'd dance up in Rutland, we danced on Shrewsbury Street for some politicians particular fundraiser, hospitals, a lot of things so you get to practice your dance but dance is a performing art and if you don't perform you

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don't get the experience and the confidence developing it. So we used to do that but we still do that. I call it old dolls and new dolls and it's one of the greatest joys of all. Teaching and being able to bring – I have students right through adult students who dance with me, little ones and their parents of the little ones. Oh they love it and this is great because to see the human interaction that goes on, the happiness, that's just key so it's really great. People that can't move and then they're watching other people that can, particularly the small ones that are so fresh and live. It's all live again, unplugged, well you have your tape recorder, but other than that it's all live. It's really neat.

SM: What role has religion played in your life?

KJW: I'd say religion has been very strong in my life. My parents brought us to church, as I say we were baptized and brought up in the Lutheran Church and we were one of the founding, one of the young, one of the first families, well – a very small church in West Boylston, Christ Lutheran Church that was founded in our town which is very small, it's only like 7,000 people now in West Boylston and when they were going to build another church it was kind of like thinking well who's gonna go to this cause we were already over-churched but its key and it continues to be key. I take care of my mother, who's seven years chronic pain now, she's 91 and I take care of my dad as well too. But he's physically good but in a house, so our house, so I do that during the day and then I do my business – well I'm always doing my business in my head, you know how it is with dance. But I teach in the afternoon/night so that way and Saturdays so I'm able to do all that. So now without the faith, without faith I don't know how people can do anything, especially when illness comes and things that aren't so rosy. And there's so much out there that tells you that you need to plug in to what the culture wants you to be and it's just a dead end street, let me tell you. So you need to just be happy with who you are and I think your faith underlies that key cause God makes you free to be who you are, I believe.

MC: How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

KJW: Well we have been very blessed and we were never sick and were always very healthy. We were very – we didn't have anyone with a chronic illness or anything. But the last seven years have been, have been very difficult because my mother has trouble walking and she's not bedridden but she's in and out of bed all day long. She had broken her femur seven years ago this month; she had a spiral fracture here [points], rotated at midnight, fell on the floor and she had – the year before she had a total hip replacement and she has four different issues in her lower back so to sit on ice – she sits on ice on and off all the time. There's no drugs for chronic pain so you pray for the soldiers and their families and chronic pain and, because there's really nothing for that. So the thing is with dancing to be strong and healthy so that you're blessed enough to do that. Thankful, you know. Some people are, a lot of people are.

SM: How do you define success in your life and had this definition changed over time?

KJW: Oh, big time. That's a good one, yeah. When I was a younger teacher I thought I wanna have the biggest dancing school, you know cause kids always think that way. I wanted the

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biggest dancing school in the area and that will make it, you know it will just be dynamite, that's all I want. And that's, I felt, and it was for many, many years. Probably because through the 80s I still had 300 students myself and I was doing all the teaching. It was just like a machine, go go go go go. And it got to be, and I used to think every once in a while, my goodness I wish my classes were smaller because that students in our area, we had classes 14, 16, 17 kids, 18 kids at a time and so you would maybe wanna become a little bit more personal. You might wanna have a minute to talk to someone. It's always like oh gotta keep the ball rolling, gotta keep the ball rolling. So in a little bit later I had different student teachers who worked with me and I had one, who was very, actually also, she was like a little sister to me, she became a ballroom performer. She was on – her name's Pam Chapman, was Pam Knox-Chapman, and she was a ballroom dancer. She left my studio to do that and she was on the PBS, you know the championship ballroom and she turned all around competitive. Yep. Beautiful dancer. Beautiful. She was always perfect size, beautiful back bend, great extension, and she became very involved with that. But she also used to teach dance with me too and, but then we decided that that wasn't gonna be the one. And then I had another teacher, Karen Patterson, who was a young teacher. She was one of these girls that you would have, she was born a teacher, you could tell. She had authority and she had desire and passion and she was very articulate and she knew what to do. And so she student taught with me in the studio and actually taught some classes and I had her teaching some little ones. She was great. She ended up becoming the assistant principal of Mountview; it's a middle school in Holden, that's where she is now. So anyway, she was a born teacher and she still teaches dance sometimes for another teacher. I don't have her because I had Karen but before Karen started with me, I had another student teacher who was studying with me since she was six, Terry Boylard-(?) Parretti. She's the other one in the article, I'll tell you about her. And she's really like my dancing daughter number one and still teaches with me and she was on full scholarship in UMass in the dance program for three years. She went to Worcester State College and then she got into UMass she decided she wanted to go for full dance degree and she did. And so when she graduated I asked her if she'd like to come and teach with me full time and she said yes. So she's been with me now for 20 years as of this past recital. And her daughters, yeah, she's got a beautiful husband and two children and her daughter Julie is a junior at Burncoat and she's a wonderful student. She probably wants to do something with medicine, science, or math. She's very, very strong in those areas. But she dances three or four times a week too. So anyway I loved having Terry come in because now - but it was painful because at first I had to cut half - I took my whole enrollment and I cut it in half and I gave her half and I had half. And I used to pace in the little room even and in the small studio while she was teaching and I was like what do I do now because she's teaching. I was used to always, you know you're always leading, you're always the one with the mic and then you have to share it. And it was, it's been such a blessing because then as life goes on and you're not able to pound and do what we call the heavy meaty jazz classes and I do some but I'm not able to do – I'm not jumping as hard because I've had a few injuries in my feet, you know, my feet. My knees are pretty much gone although I still dance all the time anyway. As you get, from 40 on up, you start, things start even before that things kinda fall apart. At any job has something. People that work at computers they get headaches all the time, so it's up to you what you want. [Laughs] Because there's no perfect you know.

MC: That'd be my brother.

KJW: Yeah you know. Do they – am I telling the truth? So they need (_____???) and they need massages, which we do all the time you know on each other's backs and knots and you know. Yeah.

MC: How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life?

KJW: I think, I think I'm very content and I'm very happy. I think I probably should have taken more chances different times. But it was like I don't always look like way down and say well how come that has that I might even, I had students that competed in different dance teachers, different competitions we did. We're not a school that underlies a lot of that. I don't know if your school is where you danced but a lot of, most of the schools are because it's a big, big money making thing. And it costs so much to talk people into taking more and more classes. Well maybe they can't really afford it and are the arts all just about making money and earning plastic trophies in the window? I think not. And it's sometimes people they dance once a week and they love it dearly and they do it till they graduate and when they graduate we still celebrate them on stage at the show. It's important you know. It's the commitments you make so you know that way, I think people have to, again, you could, you can always make money maybe or maybe not. But is that the most important thing. Say again you've got to keep looking over what makes you happy, what makes you tick and what's going on with this, you know. Do you see the good coming or do you feel good about it in your heart. And you gotta listen to your conscience, not what the society's telling you because it's very confused out there. They don't really have a lot, too much of anything to contribute. You know, in a lot of ways, you know. I'm sure you've heard that a million times.

SM: Do you feel that you have a legacy?

KJW: I think...Oh I think that's a beautiful question. Gee...I would hope so, in a way. Gee that's a hard question...I hope so...

SM: No I think you do. At least from what you've been saying about how much passion you put into everything that you do I think you definitely will. I think your students will remember you, your teachers will.

KJW: I think so. They seem to. You know I get, we get letters. And they come back and the grandmothers come back and we do (?) which is great. But I think, yeah I think that it should continue. But I think the opportunity that you have in this country particularly are incredible. And as women we really need to hang onto those can focus on that rather than the next model, next top model. [Laughs] You know. [Laughs] Hello [Laughs] it's important yeah.

MC: If you could pick one thing, what would be the source of meaning in your life?

KJW: Ah, well...I think having your family, your most, you know that your family is fortunate enough to have good connections with your family and knowing when you need them they are there. Whether they're family members that are born, you're all born in the same family or it's your sister in law or it's your dancing daughter number one, whoever you need and they're there. I think that's key and I – people really need to do that because your friends become your family and you can pick your friends and not your family but so that's important. Take care of one another because when people do become old and situation change because it's gonna happen cause life is a circle and it's gonna always, things change all the time.

MC: Awesome.

KJW: Is it good?

SM: Thank you.

KJW: Thank you very much. Oh that was great. Thank you.