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Mattapan's tap legend Dianne Walker wins prestigious fellowship

By [Rochelle Ballin](#)

November 26, 2008



Mattapan's Dianne Walker goes by many names. Some call her Lady Di. Her students refer to her affectionately as Aunt Dianne. Admirers sometimes call her the "Ella Fitzgerald of Tap."

Thirty years as one of the greatest tap dancers of our time has earned her all these monikers. Last week, it also earned her a \$50,000 grant as this year's recipient of the Rose Fellowship from the United States Artists Foundation.

"When people take the time to acknowledge your work, just to let you know that you are on the right track, I can't tell you how meaningful it is to me," Walker said. "When I got the phone call from Katherine DeShaw, I just sat back and the tears just started to roll down my face. I thought of all of the men and women who shared their talents with me."

"I was not feeling very hopeful and optimistic about the future period, especially the arts. To get this phone call and to have the outcome of the election in my favor, all come about at the same time it's perfect."

Walker currently works as the artistic director of the non-profit corporation, 'TapDancin' Inc. in Mattapan. The organization exists to produce events "from educational to performance opportunities for young dancers" and pass on the tradition of tap to the younger generation of Boston's dancers. Some of the money she received from the USA Foundation will go towards projects that will help earn more recognition for the program, including a website.

"I have lots of projects that have been sidelined because I don't have the money to do a lot of the multimedia projects that I would like to do," she said. "This money affords me to work on projects like that."

Walker has worked with legends and she has taught the next generation of legends. She is the gap between pure tap and new age, hip-hop infused tapping culture.

The path to greatness is never a straight line and for Dianne it was no different. She was one of the many children of the 1950s who contracted polio. At two years old, her mother enrolled her in tap dancing classes in an effort to help her daughter strengthen her legs. Dianne showed an aptitude for tap and in 1959 she appeared in Finian's Rainbow at the North Shore Music Theatre.

Her father's relocation to Edwards Air Force base when she was 10, however, put her training on hold. Her family returned to Boston when she was 17, but tap wouldn't return to Dianne's life until 1978 when she was 27. It would be in the form of Leon Collins and the Piano Factory on Tremont Street.

"I met a man by the name of Willy Spencer at the Prince Hall Masonic Temple in Grove Hall," she recalled. "When I told him how much I enjoyed dancing, he told me that I should go and meet a man by the name of Leon Collins."

In 1978, she had already been married, had two children and was working at the Solomon Carter Fuller Mental Health Center. But once she met with Leon Collins she knew that dancing would never leave her life again. She spent years under the tutelage of some of these great dancers living in Boston, including the late Jimmy Slyde and the Nicholas brothers. She has shared the same stage with Bunny Briggs, Gregory Hines and Sammy Davis, Jr.

"The dance is actually taught in an oral tradition. It is taught from one to another in a one-on-one tradition," Walker said. "Many of these great dancers took us one on one under their wings. I was fortunate to have studied with both Leon Collins and Jimmy Slyde and I don't think the training gets any better than that."

It is a tradition Dianne has passed on to the younger generation. By her count there are "technically five generations" of tap dancers alive. Among the many of her students is Savion Glover, whom she met while she was the only woman in the "Hoofers Line" in the 1989 production of Black and Blue - alongside some of the male dancers that belong to the first generation of tap greats.

"It's amazing to me that many people are interested in tap dancing," she said. "When I became interested in the '70s it was just a handful of people who happened upon some of these great tap dancers. Most of these people who revisited the dance were middle-aged women who had decided to put their shoes back on."

In those days, there were two major tap groups: Hoofers and the Copasetics, both of which Dianne worked with. They were responsible for the revival of the tradition in the 1970s and 80s.

"Dianne is a trailblazer," Katherine DeShaw, Executive Director of the United States Artists Foundation, said. "She is the last of the great Hoofers."

"I can't tell you how pleased that I am to be considered as one of the pioneers in the resurgence of the dance," Dianne said. "I take that very seriously because it was one of the most fulfilling projects in my life because I never thought I'd see the day that so many young dancers were interested in jazz and tap dance."

Winning this year's Rose Fellowship was a huge honor for Walker, who rose to the top of an applicant pool that included 362 nominees.

"A panel of five experts met for a day and selected a finalist," DeShaw said. "It was a younger panel this year for dance and they wanted to bring to light traditional tapping and honor Dianne's legacy as a teacher."

Dianne still remains grateful for the dancers who spent their time teaching her the trade. Now that they are gone, it's a little bit harder to enjoy the good times.

"Each time we had to say good-bye to anyone of them, it rips a little part of your sole, S-O-L-E," she said. "But they left me so much and I feel so full of their life and their love and their legacies that I have much to do and that helps me to move forward and continue to share their legacy with the young dancers."

Right now, Dianne is on hiatus from the show Souls of Our Feet, which resumes in January. Recently, she was invited to become a member of the second generation of Silver Belles, which is an all-female version of the Hoofers. She will be joining Deborah Mitchell, Karen Calloway and Mercedes Ellington, granddaughter of legendary Duke Ellington.

Through it all, though, there is one thing that Dianne says allowed her to continue dancing all these years: her education. She holds a masters degree in education and has taught at several different universities.

"Having my degrees made me more comfortable in taking risks because I had a Plan B. It allowed me to hang to dancing longer than I would have, if I didn't have them."

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