

Announcer: Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers, and members of the Hancock community, as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new, and even have a little fun along the way.

Dr. Kevin Walthers: Welcome to Hancock Conversations. I'm Kevin Walthers, Superintendent/President here at Hancock College. We're celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the college by visiting with current and former faculty, staff, and community members who've had a large role in what we do here on campus, and how we're changing the odds for our community. Today we're fortunate to have with us three generations of the Allan Hancock College dance program: Agnes Grogan, who was founder of the dance program, Dianne McMahon, who taught at Hancock from 1981 until ... I'll have to remember 2019, '18? somewhere in there. And, Jesus Solorio, who is the newest of the group and has been with us for about five years as a full-time faculty member now. So welcome to all three of you.

Agnes Grogan: Thank you.

Dianne McMahon: Thank you.

KW: So, let's start with Agnes. So, you started in 1965 when buildings D and F were brand-new. Tell us what it was like getting the dance program up and running back then.

AG: Well there was no space, you know, we had no space. There was the stage, the gym floor, but the gym was being built. And there was Joey Wilson's nursery school that had some space in it, which we used, but if we did locomotive movement across the floor we had to go through a doorway from one room into the next, and so it was not an easy thing to try to teach dance in such unfriendly kind of venues.

KW: What kind of dance were you teaching back then?

AG: Well, modern, we taught modern, there was no ballet. I didn't have enough ballet background to write the curriculum, but I did in modern, so I wrote that curriculum. And we instigated the modern dance program. And then later, we hired Linda Baden, Linda Heber, Bayden Maxwell, who had a great

background in ballet, and she helped develop the ballet program. And Dianne had a background at Stanford Mills, I think, that's a very strong dance – Mills, right?

DM: That's right. That's correct, Agnes.

AG: And so, the dance program grew, and it was a support for the theatre. Donovan Marley was building the theater program at the time. Walt Conrad, who was our president, was very favorable to the arts, thought they brought something to Hancock, and to the community that was lacking. So, we had great support to do our thing.

KW: So, what did modern dance look like in 1965? I'm mean, I'm sort of picturing the girls dancing on Laugh-In?

AG: Yeah, no, no it did not. Well, it came from Martha, from Martha Graham. And I had studied with her in New York, and taught her style of movement to the colleagues. It was wonderful, a great time, a lot of acceptance, a very supportive president and Donovan Marley, who was building the theatre program. So, he needed choreographers, and that was me. I had a great ride at Hancock.

KW: Yeah, and your legacy still continues through the dance program and through the foundation. So, we're grateful that you're still pretty active in the community. So, you brought in Dianne?

AG: Well, I brought in Linda, I brought in Linda, Linda Maxwell, first, I think. Dianne, didn't she precede you?

DM: That's correct, Linda was before me. Yeah, you and Linda worked together before I got there.

AG: Right. And then Dianne came, and we had a great ride, didn't we?

KW: So, Dianne, when you got here in '81, you know, what was the dance program like when you got here in '81?

DM: Again, modern, and at that point ballet was very prevalent. It was a strong program in ballet and modern, and jazz. That point, our student population was much, much smaller, maybe in the couple hundred range. And I can remember doing the very first concert, the Dimensions in Dance, and Linda, who was my partner at the time, said, "Dianne, I'm really embarrassed. We only have 50 tickets sold for tonight and nothing for the rest of the week." So that was, you know, like my part, here we go, but we've made it through that. But classes were limited in terms of curriculums, so we quickly started putting more together in the early '80s, and continuing on into the '90s we were allowed to do, that's when hip-hop was coming on. Wasn't until the '90s that we put Folklórico in the program. So, we just continue to keep building it. And it was super supportive and our numbers just kept rising. In those days, there was no repeatability. So, you know, kids take classes over and over and over, you could do the concert multiple times. I can remember a dance concert that had about 110 kids in it, that was our largest ever. Pretty unbelievable in terms of the numbers we had on stage, but it worked, it was fabulous.

AG: It was a very, very encouraging time for the dance, I think.

KW: Well let me transition over to Jesus, here. So, this is year five or year six with us?

JS: I believe it's five, Dianne correct me if I'm wrong ... '14? 14, '15, '16, '17 ... Six years!

DM: Including part-time.

JS: Yeah, including part time, yeah.

KW: So, so tell us you know, Jesus came in and I was the one who hired you here. And so you know what I remember from that time about your dance style is the, you know, you're more of a commercial popular is what I would call it. That's probably not the right academic term, but it brought a little different focus that I think the students really liked. So, talk a little bit about the changes you brought. I mean we're kind of going in 20-year chunks here, really 18 to 20 years.

JS: No, actually I came in at that time, before I even thought about Hancock. I've always passed it through on my way from Paso Robles to L.A., and I'm more of a commercial-based dancer, but I trained in ballet, and hip-hop, jazz. And the reason why I'm actually here is, I blame it on Ben Reyes, who was actually my instructor when I was growing up, and he's actually still an instructor here at Hancock. And so, it was funny because he invited me to come and teach a master class. Within, while he was teaching his regular courses. And so, I had no, no, how do I put this, I had no plans to be here at all. And then in walks Dianne into the studio into my class with her glasses, as she always does. And she's like, "Who is this guy? Who does he think he is?" [Laughter] And I was thinking the same thing. "Who is this woman, with her glasses, staring me down? Who does she think she is?" I'm just here teaching my classes and I'm gonna move on. And so, I did. And then I got a call from Ben, if I could come back and teach, and I just told them that I had a show, one time, that I sell scripts. And then I got a call from Dianne, and said, "I'd like to set up a meeting with you and talk about your show." And that's how I got started here, after that meeting, and Dreamcatcher, and I started teaching all the sudden, as a part-time instructor, in 2014.

AG: A long time ago.

DM: Yeah.

KW: So, let's go back and think about, you know, your favorite memory of, maybe your favorite show or your favorite choreography that you did while you were here. And we'll let Dianne start, the other two of you can kind of think through what you would think that is.

JS: Yes, I would have to say for me would be a show. My favorite show is "Dreamcatcher," which is the show that I wrote. And the reason why it's so special, it's because it was the first-of-its kind for Hancock dance program, and it was a complete scripted show. And it was memorable because it used every one of our students' talents, so from singing, acting, to dancing, to acrobats, everything that you can think of. I tried to use every single student's talents and abilities, other than dance. I think that's one of my most memorable ones, in 2015. Dianne?

DM: You know, for me though, obviously, there were so many over almost 40 years. They all had something different and special that they all brought to them, as well as the students and the choreographers that we had, bringing in lots of – again, I'm not going to pinpoint any one – but I'll give you an example of a fun time we had. I think it was in the '90s when we had about 100 students. And it was a piece of choreography of Linda, and it was, I think it was something like rollerblades. Well, she had

almost every kid in a pair of roller skates, and we were skating all over the Marian Theatre stage, down the bottom, if you can remember that, how steep those were, and backstage. And I'm just amazed, I still think about how no one got killed. And we had no restrictions in those days, Agnes? Kevin?

AG: We did whatever we wanted to do.

DM: Yeah, we did whatever we wanted to do! There was no safety committee. We had ... sometimes we had rope hanging from the ceiling and I remember PCPA saying, "Are you crazy? How much weight is going to be hanging from there?" Oh no worry, we're just gonna hold it at the bottom. In the meantime, we're climbing up, like we think we're little Cirque de Soleil dancers, you know, climbing the rope.

AG: Oh, my goodness, I do remember that.

DM: So, we have some really, really fun, interesting memories. But you know, it was a time when we could do almost anything. It wasn't like, not to say anyone was following us around, but it was just, those restrictions just didn't exist. No one said, "No, you can't use that structure, it's wobbly, and you're sending the students on it and it's 15 feet in the sky." It's like, "Okay, why not."

KW: So, speaking as the president, I'm saying what we're really saying is, no you can't use that structure, that might kill a student or break their arm.

JS: Correct. [Laughter]

AG: We didn't think about that.

KW: So, Agnes. What was your favorite event or memory from your time as a dance instructor?

AG: Well, when we finally moved into the dance studio, my God, it was a Hallelujah day. But before that, to try to teach dance, especially locomotive movement in Joey Wilson's nursery school, you know, that

was not the easiest thing to do. To start in one room, have to go through a door for doing locomotive movement – did I already say this? Seems like I already said this. Anyway, not having a space of our own and then the stage, we taught dance on the stage of the gym, which also was used for wrestling. So, there was all these mats, all around that we had to keep moving so that we'd have space to move. And I remember Earl Frounfelter, of days past, was in one of my classes, and I remember that kid running up the side of the wall. So, it was a difficult time, but there was lots of energy, and lots of support from the administration, and Donovan Marley was there and so he needed choreographers. And that was me.

KW: Yeah, and so for folks who are listening, Donovan Marley was the founder of what we now know as PCPA, Pacific Coast Theatre. So, what a great partnership that turned out to be.

AG: It certainly was.

KW: So, let's look forward because all of you have had a hand in the new fine arts building. And just to the south of where I'm sitting, there's giant Earthmovers and what we used to call steam shovels, what do we call those now, back hoes? And they're digging and moving and getting ready to build that new fine arts facility. How great is it that we're going to actually have a better place and a dedicated stage where you can go do the performing arts and not be in conflict with our friends, our programs over in PCPA?

AG: Well, there's always been a lot of support from the top down, from the administration down, and the fine arts have always been strong. They started under George Muro, if you remember George Muro, and he welcomed all aspects of the fine arts. And you know, the PE department didn't want me, they thought if I came and started a dance program, the PE department would become a dance program, which wasn't at all true. But, so, you know, George Muro said "Come, come to us." And that's where dance should have been anyway, in fine art. So, it's had a wonderful ride, I'm very happy to have been a part of it, and look forward to many more concerts in the future.

KW: So, Dianne, you spent a lot of time on the committee's planning for the new Fine and Performing Arts Complex. What do you think? Have you been over to see the dirt being moved around yet?

DM: No, I haven't been over recently, I watched you online when they did the first dig, but I haven't come over to the campus, in the last few weeks. Let's see, I'm most excited, I'm, well actually, a little on the sad side because I had hoped, many times that I was still gonna be there to see this all happen, but that's okay. You know, we have a new generation of faculty and students and they will enjoy the size of

this new space. I think Jesus, myself, with Linda, Larissa, we all put some comments in, and these spaces should be state-of-the art, they should be incredible. I think you're going to be drawing students that you would have never thought you might have had from different areas because of it, what we're doing. We are going to be offering a fabulous new space. I mean, if it all goes well, it should be really lovely and, you know, the possibility of being able to use the music center, the new theater. A little for all performances as well, will be great.

KW: The hall's gonna be fantastic. Go ahead, Dianne.

DM: Going back on Agnes. Agnes, I used to teach in the dance studio, D-10 at the time, now it's D-118, and then we would go over to the gym stage as well. And then the other spot was, Kevin, this is another spot we use to use, it was called the E building, it was where the Little Red Schoolhouse was. And it was a barracks building, and right now that's probably where Community Education building is. It was a barracks building there where we taught. And when we didn't teach there, one of my first semesters, we needed a space for rehearsal, we called the local mortuary, and we used the space there. Yeah, and the Jewish church, I forget the name of it. And the Vets Hall.

AG: Any place that would let us move. They were very generous, they were very generous.

DM: Oh yeah, we rehearsed on carpet. So, going forward, what people have to look forward to. They have no idea what we did in the past, which is fine. Looking forward to students enjoying this new space and having lots of classes, absolutely.

KW: I think we need to.

AG: I need to say that the direction that the dance program has gone, is a tribute to those people, like, Linda, and Dianne, and Jesus, who have kept the classes strong and the interest generated in the student body to take those classes. I mean, I'm an old lady and I'm thrilled at seeing this program continue.

JS: Thank you.

KW: Yeah, it's an exciting time for the dance program. And one final topic I wanted to get to, just to see if, think of a favorite student or a favorite success story that you had while you were here. And we'll start with Agnes. Let's let Agnes start on that. Agnes, if you remember a particular student or group of students.

AG: Well, if you're a teacher and true to the art, then all of your students are pretty important to you. I remember very well, because it was a local girl, and there was a woman in Santa Maria, whose name was Marjorie Hall, and she had ballet classes going in Santa Maria. When, if that was a very unusual thing, and I contributed a lot of the success of the interest in dance in Santa Maria to Marjorie Hall. And then of course, to the colleagues, and the support we had from Walter Conrad, who always was a great supporter of the fine arts, and George Muro, who accepted us, and the PE department, who threw me out. Anyway, it was a wonderful ride, I must say.

KW: Dianne, do you got some student recollections?

DM: I do I mean I have, of course, many, many, many, and this one would probably be within my first six years, maybe. Her name is Lisa Estrada. She was a local girl, went to Righetti High School, and her claim to fame is she became a Los Angeles Lakers Cheerleader, back in, I think it was about '88 – '90. When she auditioned and got that position, which we know is huge when they have those cattle call auditions. But she's continued with the Lakers, she's now in charge, I think the vice president of facilities of their new facility. But she was one of those ones at Hancock when she stepped on stage it didn't matter that she had near flat feet, and never took a ballet class in her life. The style and charisma that came out of that girl's body was probably once, you only get one of those once in a lifetime, and she was one.

KW: Awesome. So, Jesus, you're fairly new at this, but you got anybody that will probably stick with you?

JS: I do, actually. I think it's during the time that Dianne was actually here, also. We have a pretty big group that left to L.A., and they went and joined Disney, and one of them, a cruise ship. And then there's Elijah, who I was able to get him an interview with my old agent agency, and he got signed and now he's dancing all over, touring with singers, doing commercials, the VMAs. He, I think he recently, what did he do Dianne, recently? Elijah?

DM: He did something with Travis Scott, who's a big hip-hop artist. I mean, my son said, "He's the number one guy."

JS: Yeah, yep. And then recently I think some of our students were actually contacted, because we came up with an agreement with Royal Caribbean to hire them to do backstage work and from then, move on to be performers, and unfortunately COVID hit. And so, everything was stopped and, and they're not accepting our dancers, but there's a little connection that we had and some of our dancers were actually contacted, and were given a foreword to an interview, and to be hired. And, unfortunately, I guess, again, but I think that those were my biggest successes so far, that was the group of students while Dianne was here, Dianne and I were together.

KW: So, it's a good transition because we are doing this in 2020, and no conversation in 2020 is complete without a discussion of how the pandemic is impacting. So, right now we're actually as we tape this, we're in the middle of the fall dance show, and tell us how you're how you're still offering dance classes during the time of the pandemic.

JS: All of our classes are offered virtually, we are hoping in spring 2021 to be hybrid. So, face-to-face, and virtual, so half and half. And at the moment we just finished, or no, we just opened last night for "Dimensions in Dance," it was our virtual viewing. And I believe it was a really big success because our students and our faculty took it to the next level with video and editing, music, and dancing, using the elements and what was provided for them in this pandemic. So, we did what we could, and I believe it was a very successful outcome for our show, and I give kudos to Sydney, who is the new assistant professor in dance with me, here at the dance program, and she directed. This was her first directing opportunity and of course it was during the pandemic. And I think she did a phenomenal job and it was very successful.

KW: So, I didn't get a chance to watch it last night, but I'll be tuning in tonight. I'm excited by it and I'm grateful for the legacy you're carrying on. So, as we wrap up, I want to thank each of you, because you're all leaving a legacy, even Jesus, and I'll get to that in a minute, and we've got, you know, Agnes, the impact you've had, and our foundation is now one of the largest foundations in Santa Barbara County. I think we're actually in the top 10 right now, for our endowment. And, you know that's not necessarily directly part of the dance program, but.

AG: Right. Important part of the program.

KW: Yeah, and we have a lot of scholarships and the Promise program is based there. And then, you know, Dianne like you said almost 40 years of running the program, and it was more than just a job for you guys, obviously, and to go above and beyond and to do a multi-day show, you know, every

semester, and not just the evening shows for the parents, and the friends, and community show up, but yet your shows during the day for the elementary school kids. And, you know, I remember last year we had just loaded in the spring show, "Dance Spectrum," for the elementary and junior high school kids, when the world started closing down, and we let that one show go, and we were right in the decision-making process and the kids were already in there. And so, on the upside our students had a chance to perform a couple of shows before we had to close everything down, and it was safe for that group, at that time, and you know we're looking forward to the time we can get back. And, you know, the final thing on Jesus's legacy which, even though he's only been with us seven years total, and five years a faculty member, we mentioned earlier when we hired Jesus, yeah, he came from industry, and he didn't have a degree, and I challenged him to get a bachelor's degree, and he agreed to do that. He agreed to do it. He had a kid in the middle of all of that and he's still finished it. And I think, Jesus, I don't know that you understand how important that is to our community and what an example you're setting for a community that's a primarily a working class, Latino-based community, to say look, we can do this. And then, even in five years, your legacy is set as an example for our community and I can't be more proud of the fact that you finished that program just like you said you would, and you're doing a great job.

JS: Thank you very much.

AG: Congratulations.

DM: Yes, Congratulations.

KW: We're going to close out in just a minute, let each of you just, well we'll start with Agnes, but we'll have each of you give us an idea of, you know, answer an A & B question. Tell us your favorite dance style, and then let us know if there's a dance style you would like to see come back. So, Agnes we'll start with you. What's your favorite dance style and is there is there some kind you would like to see come back?

AG: Well, it was modern. It was modern dance and I got that, I had had some ballet, but I went to New York and I studied with Martha, and talk about an impression. And a style of movement unique only to her. And it just grabbed me, grabbed me until I came back and talked Walt Conrad into ... I was in counseling because I had a degree in that area. Personal, pupil personnel or something. But I talked him into letting me start a dance program. Anyway, and the rest is history, and congratulations to all the people who followed, like Dianne and Linda. Anyway, it was a wonderful ride and I'm very proud of it.

KW: That's awesome. Perfect, thanks Agnes. Dianne, what's your favorite dance style, and is there anything you'd like to see come back, not just in the classroom setting but just in a general dance-type setting?

DM: Okay. So, I started out, mine were ballet and modern. Those were my strong areas, had to filter on and add into other styles as I was teaching at Hancock, but that would have been my strongest point, until the college gave me a sabbatical and I went to Spain to study dance, and then I fell in love with flamenco. And I brought flamenco back to the college in 1989, and then, ever since then, was really early '90s we started the Folklórico program. So I think what I'd like to see come back, not that it has gone away because we're still teaching folkloric dances, but I'd like to see someone have a sabbatical and bring in other styles, maybe something like I did with flamenco because it attracted so many people at the time and it was so new and energetic, that it brought in more students and I think it brought in more community members. So which one is it going to be, I'm not sure, but I, for me, I would love to see more community-based classes that would work in the social dance area, ballroom, cha-cha, salsa. I think that would be fun. I think we would gain a lot of people if you can bring that one back.

KW: Awesome, Jesus? What's your favorite style?

JS: Yes, oh mine, actually, it's a recent style, contemporary dance, I used to be more of a jazz dancer, but I really enjoy contemporary dance. A style that I would like to see come back is breakdancing. I think it would be great for the community because I saw in a parking lot, a break dancer with cardboard on the streets of Oak Park in Paso Robles, which we call the ghetto, which is no longer the ghetto. But Dianne, to answer your question, yes, we are, in the commercial dance certificate that was just approved, we have ballroom in there, so we're slowly getting in there. And I would like to bring what's called Afro-Cuban salsa, so that'll open the door for more of what you want, Dianne. [Laughter]

DM: What I really want is to come see that breakdancing class. [Laughter] Like, I want to kill myself in the breakdancing class. There's gotta be some restrictions.

JS: You're brave, Dianne. [Laughter]

KW: Yeah, we're not, we're gonna put an age limit on the people who can spin on their necks and their heads.

JS: You got it.

KW: Our insurance doesn't cover that, so. Well you know, the legacy of Hancock is great in the arts. As a community college, you can't really have a comprehensive community college unless you have the arts. And Agnes and Dianne, you know, you guys go right up there with Bob and with Nat Fast in building a legacy, not just for this college, but for the whole community that appreciates.

AG: George Muro, too. George Muro was very instrumental in broadening the fine arts department at Hancock. He's a wonderful artist in his own right.

KW: So, we're fortunate to have that legacy here at the college, and I feel like we've continued to support that. We've actually expanded the faculty in the last few years and the new facility, it's just going to be transformational when we look at what's going to happen for our community. So, thanks to all of you for taking some time out of your day, it's been great talking to all of you. I don't get to see you nearly enough during the pandemic times, but I hope you stay safe out there. And thanks again for coming.

JS: Thank you for having us.

AG: Very enjoyable, thank you.

KW: All right, you've been listening to Hancock Conversations today with our guests Agnes Grogan, Dianne McMahon, and Jesus Solorio. Three generations of Hancock College dance instructors, professors. Thank you for joining us and we'll see you on the next episode.