

Reflections from the Director

The Hamilton Hill Arts Center



February 20, 2017



The recent death of my grandmother, Mrs. Cunningham, the founder of the Hamilton Hill Arts Center and my installation as the interim director, have given me much to think about.

I grew up at the center. As an infant, the hum of the pottery wheel and the rise and fall of children's voices sang me to sleep as my mother taught while I rested in her kanga. Baby Gramma was my nick-name because I looked just like her and when I was too big to be on my mother's back, the sides of Nana's large wooden Director's desk became the walls of my studio. With paper, scissors, tape and crayons, I formed works of art, my own interpretations of the rich colors and movement of the paintings and carvings that filled her

office, the gallery and the walls of the classrooms.

My family never believed in coloring books; my grandmother believed it stifled creativity. They didn't spank either. When you were angry or sad you were handed paper and crayons and told to work it out. Similarly, in the Center, local black artists put their heart, their love, fears, rage and hope in their work and claimed space in a world that told them they didn't have one.

I sat on Ms. Val's lap at age three while she taught me to make lanyards. At fifteen years old she already delivered that powerful

combination of kindness; comfort and authority that still makes every kid that walks through these doors feel certain that they are her family, that they are safe and loved.

Mr. Harvey with his puppet room that I longed to be old enough to get into, instilled within us an unstoppable imagination and creativity. With his go carts, inventions and strange snacks, he inspired us not only to dream of things we had never seen before but cultivated within us the courage and joy to pursue them.

Wandering through the black library named for my great grandmother I heard the arguments of young men discussing the merits of Martin and Malcolm, passionate about the transformation of their world.

Too young to be in the Puppet room or to involve myself in the big kid's conversation in the library, I would go and pester Mr. Louis in the photography room, a tiny room that is now a closet. Every nook and cranny of this Center was filled with adults who volunteered their time to transform their community with whatever gifts they had.

In the gallery we gathered around to watch the older kids give puppet shows about Rosa Parks that had us holding our breath and laughing, that had our minds and hearts whirling.

On Saturdays I would join the other little ones singing Funga Alafia as Mrs. Sue Dean instructed us how to dance down the line while her brother Danny led the drummers and the older dancers caught their breath.

The Burundi dancers, the adult class, was led by Omoye Cooper, her Sons have drummed for us over the years. Recently she stepped in to be Executive Director, to keep the Center afloat when it appeared to be sinking. She came, as family does because despite the hardships and financial shortfalls, she wanted to keep the dream alive. We are so grateful she did.

The Center was my home and I knew everyone in it was my family. My Grandmother taught me that the black community was my family, that it was our duty to take care of and support each other. If a black movie was showing, we had to go see it whether we liked it or not, to show the powers that be that black movies had value and to affirm our right and ability to express ourselves. She taught me that all black cultures were works of art to be celebrated.

When my daughter was born, and I began to think about what kind of world I wanted her to grow up in, the Arts Center immediately came to mind. I knew that by volunteering at the Art Center, I could help to create an environment that would help her to thrive.

First, I supported Ms. Val as her assistant, while I was there I saw the need for a youth group.

My mother, Miki Conn was now the director. This time it was Imara who sat under her grandmother's desk as my mother taught me to write grants. The first one I helped write was for the youth group. I loved the youth group, I loved those kids, and they will always hold a space in my heart.

My grandmother passed this Christmas Eve. Two days later I was at the Center for Kwanzaa. Margaret Cunningham didn't want a funeral, she wanted a memorial, where people could remember her as she was; she wanted to be celebrated, not mourned.

We will have a chance to celebrate her and my grandfather, Dr. Cunningham, on June 3rd between 3 and 7 at the Unitarian Universalist Society in Schenectady. I look forward to seeing you there.

At Kwanzaa and in the days after, a few stepped forward to help us bury our grandmother. Jim Kelly who has worked maintenance here for over 40 years and Zorkie Nelson one of our drummers stepped in to help us carry her coffin. Minister Parsons agreed to say a few words; Jennifer and Larissa Tucker sent her off with a song and Zorkie played the talking drum.

As we walked back to our cars, Minister Parsons mentioned that he was the one that paid a dollar to buy our building. His grandson was in my youth group; I spent a lot of time talking with him and I think of him often. Jennifer and Larissa's mother was my grandmother's office assistant. Their brother Cecil and I used to run around the Art Center together. He drummed with the Center for a long time and I still see him at Juneteenth every year. Mrs. Val's mother was on the board of directors and did anything she could to keep us afloat, from cleaning and caring for the kids to fundraising and event coordination.

The Arts Center is 49 years old now. There are more Art center families than I can name. Our mothers and fathers, grandparents and great grandparents gathered up with love, their hopes and dreams, creativity, tenacity and all of the gifts they had and built this for us. It is now our turn to do the same.

I've heard a lot lately how much I look like my grandmother, what a blessing that is, how she looks through my eyes, how I should be like her and follow in her footsteps. I know that those are shoes I could never fill, but this is not just my legacy, this legacy belongs to all of us and together, I know we can love this Center back into the vibrant cornerstone of our community that it once was.