



Linda Houston-Jones (left) is exuberant about the success of the organization she founded.

Filling A Need

Ashanti Cultural Arts Celebrates 15 Years of Enriching Young Lives

BY LEON M. RUBIN

It's a familiar mantra in the business world: "Find a need and fill it." In Linda Houston-Jones' case, the need came to her first.

Fifteen years ago, Houston-Jones was teaching school in Fort Lauderdale and also owned a health and wellness company that offered facilities where people could come to train and exercise.

"Some of the adults asked if we had anything for their children. I investigated and found there was a lack of programs for kids except in the traditional art forms, like ballet," Houston-Jones recalls. "Programs in drumming, modern

dance and African dance were almost unheard of, and there was very little for underserved children in diverse communities."

She decided she would create a not-for-profit organization to fill this void, but she needed resources. Fortunately, she had a ready solution: "I was a teacher at the time, so I got three checks at the end of the school year. I took that money and incorporated," Houston-Jones says.

The rest, as they say, is history – or at least 15 years of it. Ashanti Cultural Arts is marking its anniversary this year with several events

that focus not only on the growth of organization, but also on the young people whose lives it has touched. "Then and Now" is the theme of the observance, which includes an Oct. 7 celebration at the African American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale and several December performances of Ashanti's signature production of *The Chocolate Nutcracker*.

"Our October event will highlight our 15-year history by featuring students who attended our program when we started," Houston-Jones says. "They will perform or speak about where they are now. We also will show



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-- Ashanti Cultural Arts Mission Statement

videos and some of their pictures from when they were children.”

Given the scope of Ashanti’s programs and the number of individuals who participate each year, it’s a safe bet that Houston-Jones had a difficult time narrowing down the list of potential stars to share the spotlight. Ashanti, which draws its name from a royal tribe in West Africa known for its cultural richness and diversity, has expanded greatly over the years.

Serving the Underserved

Houston-Jones explains that the organization provides a variety of programs to enrich the lives of youngsters as well as adults through instruction in dance, music, drama, theater and rhythmic drumming. Ashanti is dedicated to providing outreach programs for what she describes as “the underserved and the not-so-privileged” found at inner-city community centers and other locations throughout the county.

“As times and needs changed, we were able to change,” Houston-Jones observes. For example, it became clear early on that Ashanti’s classes served as a deterrent for juvenile crime. “The time they were spending with us at Ashanti was

keeping them out of trouble,” she explains. “To be able to take classes for free, we required them to stay out of trouble at school and show us their report cards.

“We have now added a literacy component,” she continues. “To support the Sunshine State Standards, we’re using the arts to teach literacy. We’re emphasizing FCAT skills through the arts. Our organization is not just a place where you come to learn to dance and play music. We’ve taken it a step further than that.” She estimates that Ashanti’s programs directly reach approximately 1,000 people each year – to say nothing of their families and friends as well as the audience members who delight in their achievements.

One key to Ashanti’s success has been its decision to operate without permanent studio or classroom space. Instead, it truly reaches out into the parts of the community where the needs are greatest. “There are more than enough facilities that are available and looking for programs,” she says. This year, Ashanti is collaborating with Broward County Parks and Recreation, the Broward Cultural Division, Broward County

Libraries, including the African American Research Library and Cultural Center, the North Broward County Links and the cities of Fort Lauderdale, Lauderdale Lakes and Sunrise.

During the summer, Ashanti provided cultural programs to more than 15 summer camps from Deerfield Beach to Hollywood in collaboration with the Children’s Services Council. Other frequent partners include the Broward County School District, the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, Hispanic Unity, the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs.

Collaborations are Key

Collaborations have been a key to Ashanti’s success from its beginning, Houston-Jones notes. She credits much of its early progress to a support system provided by the Broward Cultural Division and ArtServe Inc. – the Fort Lauderdale-based not-for-profit that offers business and administrative support, educational programs and office space to grassroots arts and cultural organizations in Broward County.

“I was a founding board member of ArtServe,” Houston-Jones says. “We

moved our offices there when they built it. I went to workshops and seminars to learn how to write grants and do marketing. It was a core place for me to meet other people from not-for-profit organizations and funders. They were my stabilizer.”

Houston-Jones, who has lived in Fort Lauderdale since 1974, seemed destined to have a career in the arts. She was born in Lakeland, Fla., and grew up in Daytona Beach. “I was artistic in my genes,” she notes. “I loved it as a child when I’d go to the theater. I liked classical music. I liked the arts. It’s something that’s been in me.”

Her adult life has been infused with culture, as well. She was married for 29 years to the late Emridge “E.J.” Jones Jr., a well-known jazz musician. Her daughter, Jemilah, is an Ashanti alumna who now teaches school in Fort Lauderdale and is the organization’s artistic director.

And then there are what you might think of as Houston-Jones’ “surrogate children” – the countless youngsters who have blossomed and flourished through their involvement in the program. She mentions Stephanie Allen, who started as a third-grader, went on to be Miss Junior America and is now a radio personality in Jacksonville.

There’s Dorian Holmes, who remembers being terribly shy when she took her first ballet classes with Ashanti. The first solo dance she performed “was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” she recalls. “That piece validated the fact that I was an artist; that I was a dancer.” She went on to earn a graduate degree in dance from Florida State University and is now building a career as a dancer, working in local theater and dancing with Jubilee Dance Theatre in Fort Lauderdale. She is also choreographing a children’s show and making plans to go to New York.

And there’s Tiffany Lewis, who joined the program in middle school, went on to graduate from Bethune-

Cookman College and is now a frequent substitute teacher at Dillard School of the Arts in Fort Lauderdale. “I was 12 when I became involved,” Lewis remembers. “I loved singing and dancing. That was my world. Any time I had after school, I’d go to Ashanti.

“Linda and E.J. were like a mother and father to me,” she continues. “They always pushed me to do better and expected nothing but the best from me. I wish I could still participate!”

Testimonials such as these are extremely gratifying to Houston-Jones, whose mission, from the beginning, has been to ensure that no child or adult should be without a dream – and that no child or adult should be denied the opportunity to participate in the arts.

“That’s why we do it,” she says simply. “I really had no idea from where we started that it would take off to where we are now.” ★

Leon M. Rubin is editorial director of Cultural Quarterly.



The Chocolate Nutcracker: Familiar, and Yet Distinctive

Ashanti Cultural Arts’ signature holiday production, *The Chocolate Nutcracker*, arose from the realization that the traditional *Nutcracker* ballet didn’t relate to diverse communities, notes Linda Houston-Jones. “We wanted to do something where diverse kids could feel comfortable,” she explains. “It’s based on *The Nutcracker*, but it incorporates African and modern dance, African drummers and stiltwalkers. It’s the story of a little girl whose sister brings the doll back as a gift from Africa. When she goes to bed at night, she has dreams that take her to Africa today.”

Performers range from children as young as four to adults.

Rehearsals began in September for the production, which is in its fifth year. It will be performed Dec. 9-10 at the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center in Fort Lauderdale and Dec. 17 at the Sunrise Civic Center Theater. For information, call (954) 792-3700 or visit www.ashanticulturalarts.org. ★