
Using art to heal troubled, broken communities

FROM THE DIASPORA DR GLENVILLE ASHBY Monday, April 11 2016

JOANNE KILGOUR DOWDY is Professor of Adolescent/ Adult Literacy at Kent State University, Ohio, and the author of several seminal works, including Readers of the quilt: Essays on being Black, female and literate; GED stories: Black women and their struggle for social equity.

In the past decade Dowdy has emerged as one of the most visible and influential voices in education. She hails from a close-knit family in Port-of- Spain and speaks nostalgically about her parents and time as a student of Newton Girls' School. "Both my parents were renaissance people," she says. "My dad, Lennox, was an Olympic weightlifter, painter and sculptor. One of my earliest memories of his work was a bust of the then mayor of Portof- Spain, Edward Taylor. My mother was a secretary in the Prime Minister's office. They were special in the way that they applied themselves to various artistic efforts with very successful results." Dowdy views a well-rounded childhood education as essential to the growth and maturity of a people and nation, and never misses an opportunity to pay homage to the teachers who shaped and channelled her talents as an artist.

"They were committed and gave a tremendous amount of time and energy to improving my ability in dance and drama." She concedes though, that talent while an indicator of success, "isn't the sole criterion." She speaks about discipline as a "credential," and as "an unfailing signal" that is present in the most revered and accomplished artists of the day.

A prolific writer, Dowdy believes that many writers and poets in Trinidad and Tobago and the diaspora are challenged by lack of opportunities and their inability to devote more time to honing their skills. She believes that Caribbean writers living abroad could suffer another disadvantage, explaining that, "you do not have the leisure of being informed of situations on a daily basis, and you have to rely on your 'blood memory' to recall instances and people who are particularly meaningful to you." She calls it, "living outside the physical landscape of their inspiration." She elaborates, "When you live in a foreign land, the sounds and images around you are not those that quicken or excite your pulses." Dowdy invites discussions on creativity and how best to awaken dormant abilities in young people.

She refers to "seamlessness" when describing inspirational and imaginative dance.

"In a class, a dancer who executes a routine effortlessly, purely improvising, makes me immediately think of creativity.

And in a class where a teacher is working with students, thinking, testing, interacting, really moving between pieces of information, and making decisions on the spur of the moment, with the dizzying speed of a humming bird, that is also seamless and creativity in action." And while she acknowledges that the role of government in the fruition of a nation's artistry is vital, she is admittedly torn over the degree of assistance warranted.

"Would artists prefer to struggle on their own and not be dependent on monetary assistance and the binding ties that come with it? At one point do they feel that their independence is not for sale? Who decides the right amount of sponsorship? I believe that these are areas worthy of research." Dowdy is deliberate, even reflective as she speaks about the obstacles still facing artists.

She bemoans the worn stories coming out of Trinidad and Tobago regarding environmental conditions that pose extreme challenges for aspiring dancers, and calls on officials at the ministerial level, cultural elders and the private sectors to address these concerns.

At present, Dowdy is actively involved in a private scholarship foundation for young dancers.

"My idea was simply to provide one young dancer with the bare necessities of dance shoes, professional photographs, a professional DVD production for auditions with professional schools, and the honour of being recognised for progress during training in three forms of dance." Dowdy maintains that disaffected communities can benefit from clearly defined artistic programmes, in particular, oral tradition and story-telling, and the counsel from elders who have devoted a lifetime to the cultivation of their innate gifts.

She lauds the indigenous artwork of Eintou Springer and her daughter, Dara, who conducted workshops with her students in Ohio and in the wider community.

She advised young people to seek out their elder. "A child has to learn early on that every art has a body of

