

## Arts and Entertainment

# 'Grown folks' raise funds for black college tours

by Zach Kelly

Most high school extracurricular clubs are awful. It's true. Kids usually join them because they think their membership will look good on a transcript, and end up spending most of their time either playing cards or being ignored by lazy administrators.

This, in theory, would be a pretty sweet deal if it weren't for the fact that we put very little faith in our teenagers who, in fact, are in these clubs because they actually want to do something.

Elaine Richardson, Penn State associate professor of English and linguistics professor, picked up on this about four years ago when her daughter, Ebony, ended up getting the short straw as a part of State High's Respect Committee.

"All the committee was interested in was involving more kids in the group, which is fine, but ignoring the kids' interests in race and heritage," Richardson explained, leaning back into the haphazard foliage of her small office, the walls adorned with contemporary rappers and stacks of books flooding the desk.

The Respect Committee, made up mostly of students of color, was getting no respect. But ah, the beauty of high school clubs: You can always just make another one. And so

"It's the community's way of saying that they're making an investment in these kids, and that cultivates a real self confidence in the students."

--Elaine Richardson

an African American History club was formed, starting with a modest 15 members and working its way up to 30 by this point.

Somewhat reluctantly, Richardson spearheaded the group, providing multicultural forums for the kids to engage in during meetings, and establishing fund-raising events (spring dances, multicultural talent shows) to promote the group's greatest focus: taking the students on tours of famous black colleges.

The most recent fund-raiser, and one that has remained Richardson's baby from the start, is Grown Folks' Night, which rode again Sept. 29.

The event, which boasted good food, good drink, and most importantly good live music (featuring none other than "Dr. E," of course) was held at the VFW, hosting a delightful mash-up of all different ages and colors, starved for some fun off the beaten path and more than happy to support a willing cause.

"People my age, in their late 30s and 40s, want to still go out and dance and party and

listen to good music," Richardson explained, describing part of her inspiration for Grown Folks' Night. "People like soul music, but unless you have connections in this town, it's hard to get something like that going."

There is a vaguely melancholy look about the usually energetic Richardson when she talks about her frustrations regarding getting different kinds of music integrated into State College's nightlife.

This can most likely be attributed to Richardson's past, where she got started singing, as so many do, in the church and later in Cleveland, that city where rock and roll resides in its glass pyramid right on the water. After a few bumps and rough patches, she found herself in graduate school at Michigan State University.

"There were no places to perform in Lansing, so I focused on songwriting," she said about the time spent getting her Ph.D.

The songwriting paid off, with a friend of Richardson's successfully working her

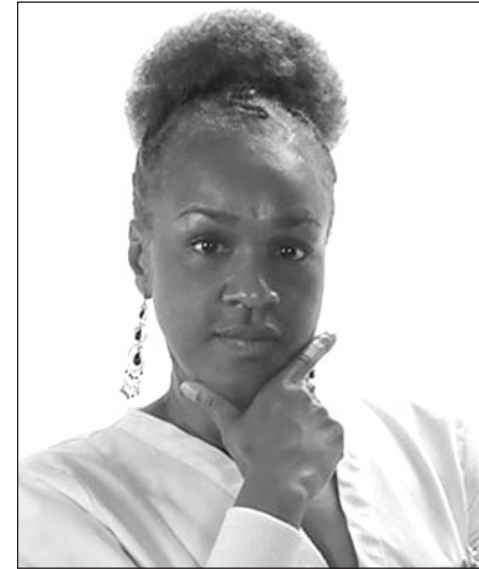


Photo provided

Elaine Richardson organizes an annual Grown Folks' Night to raise funds for students to explore historically black colleges.

recordings on the daytime soap circuit. The tuned songwriting talent would pay off later too, specifically at Grown Folks' Night years later.

Once at Penn State, Richardson shifted her focus for a bit, but still kept writing. She published *Hip Hop Literacies* in 2006, a look at how African American oral tradi-

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# Paul Taylor brings romance to the local stage

by Ann Van Kuren

## REVIEW

Festivity was in the air at Eisenhower Auditorium on the evening of Oct. 11, the opening night of the Center for the Performing Arts Dance Series, "Body Language." It seemed a little like old friends coming together to celebrate what they have in common. The audience was filled with the community's dance enthusiasts and newcomers interested in the language of movement. The Paul Taylor Dance Company returned to State College to appropriately inspire this audience with movement.

The Taylor Company presented three works in this program. Because Mr. Taylor, at 76 years of age, is still creating approximately two new pieces annually for his 52-

Master choreographer Paul Taylor, at 76, is still creating an average of two pieces per year for his 52-year-old dance company.

year-old company, its repertory is extensive. Each time one sees the company, one is likely to see something different, and also to see the many facets of Taylor's creativity and master skills as a choreographer.

One can also get a historical perspective of modern dance in general, as on the Oct. 11 program featuring works debuted in 1971, 1985 and 2002. The opening piece in the evening's performance was the beautiful and liltingly romantic "Roses," first performed in 1985. The piece begins with the lush music of Richard Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll" and five man-woman couples onstage leaning lightly into each other, the

women all in black dresses and the men in sleek gray.

It is a series of duets that flow around each other—one or two couples begin and then blend into the stance of the others while a new couple catches one's eye. Always the women glide lightly, delicately across the stage, curved arms and torso fluidly intersecting with their partner, both swaying from the hips in typical Taylor movement style, the men and women harmoniously complementing each other, old-fashioned courtship coming to mind.

One begins to relax and appreciate the beauty of Taylor's work even if the compa-

ny seems slightly to be warming up. As the piece appears to be ending, Taylor presents us with a little surprise: One more couple enters the stage; this time the woman is dressed in pure white. This pas de deux, danced by Lisa Viola and Michael Trusnovec, was eloquently performed in sublime lighting by Jennifer Tipton.

As this couple moved to an adagio score by Heinrich Baermann, they were just slightly more ethereal, heavenly and pure in their romance—one recalled the five couples that had come before, still settled in the background, and now thought of them as more of the earth, the real, the present, while this couple in front was the ideal of romanticism that exists in our dreams, hopes and the nostalgic past.

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## Halloween fun for all ages



Photo by Suzan Erem

Hal and Natalie Hallock led this year's Halloween Costume parade in State College. The Hallocks were also involved in the Haunted Granary in Lemont and have been seen at Homecoming parades and other local festivities. The State College Area High School marching band, each section decked out in its own costume theme, stepped off right then followed by hundreds of children, adults and a few dogs in costumes ranging from pirates to princesses and chickens to Lego building blocks. The State College Lions Club handed out prizes after judging in 10 categories took place at Memorial Field.

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tions can be traced up through today's current hip-hop music.

"Even though there are stereotypes in the music," Richardson said, referring to society's perception of hip-hop music and culture, "these are the same stereotypes we have been seeing since minstrelsy. There's an intellectuality to it."

But it's this kind of synthesis of forward thought and embrace of music that makes something like Grown Folks' Night something to prick an ear up at. Wrangling friends and players from her Cleveland days, Fleshcoat (Richardson's band) featuring Dr. E. took the stage at the local VFW this year and had a ball.

"We turned it into the Cotton Club!" she said.

Doing numbers by Aretha Franklin, Anita Baker and a few tunes from Fleshcoat featuring Dr. E.'s new disc, "Coat of Flesh" (featuring quite crisp, stripped-down neo-soul instrumentation held together by Richardson's unpredictable, salt-of-the-earth vocals), the Grown Folks had their own kind of forum, one without the kids.

But the good times, as they usually do,

had a fundamental core.

"It shows the importance of blacks getting a higher education. It's the community's way of saying that they're making an investment in these kids, and that cultivates a real self-confidence in the students."

Thanks to such investments, the students have previously visited Lincoln University, Howard University and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s alma mater Morehouse College. Next spring they'll be doing it all over again thanks in part to the money raised by the Grown Folks.

"The group gives kids a wide spectrum of ways to express themselves. Not all these kids are professors' kids. Here, people expect that kids get the highest SAT scores, but different kids need different cultivation. Otherwise they can have their spirits broken."

The tours have proved successful in several ways, with two of the students from the club enrolling at schools the group has toured. In other perhaps more important ways, the program has provided a way for the community and the students to open up a dialogue about the importance of minorities in higher education.

Set to James Brown, of course.

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"Book of Beasts" was the earliest piece choreographed among the three on the program. Set to music by E. Power Biggs and his pedal harpsichord, this piece had an entirely different flavor and texture from the one that came before it. Romping and playful, full of fun and folly, the cast seemed to be a troupe of traveling players in medieval Europe, lightening the mood of the audience with their vignettes. The beasts were illuminations from ancient manuscripts, brought to life, who ruled the world of the play with their antics, fierceness or noble air. The text (the remaining cast) danced in servitude to their wishes.

Exquisite and highly striking in emotional impact was the final piece, "Promethean Fire." Taylor's entire company of 16 fluid and strong dancers fill the stage with their powerful presence as they move swiftly, crisscrossing, circling to create a form, then snatch and run, crystallizing into another formation, then steal away again. One dancer is raised in supplication above all the rest.

Dancers cling to one another as they are spun diagonally across the stage. At another time women are tossed up and caught in a press straight overhead, arms curving upward. Later the company members become the flames of fire reaching to the sky before they crumble down into a pile, out of which two dancers arise to continue dancing in an intimate duet of embrace and support. This couple seemed truly connected physically and spiritually.

To conclude, the entire company dances again, forming a new, more symmetrical order, uplifting as an ode to the enduring human spirit. Taylor's integrity and artistry, together with Tipton's stunning lighting and Santo Loquasto's elegant costumes, fulfill on the orchestral arrangements of Bach organ music.

Upcoming performances in the "Body Language" series include "Classical Savion," featuring tap master Savion Glover on Feb. 8, and Sydney Dance Company on March 22.

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Sunday, Nov. 5, 2006

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