

Boone dedicated to improving community, lives

Founder of youth program strives to help others, especially women and teenagers.

By Lauren Miller

Praise music plays as a dancer moves gracefully across the stage. Her long white gown flows around her like water as she twirls and leaps to the words of the song.

For Wanda Boone, founder of Durham Together for Resilient Youth, this liturgical dance has been an important part of life since she began performing in 1990. She enjoys dancing for her faith and sharing that with others. Boone says she has now danced in at least 50 churches around North Carolina.

"Dancing is my place of escape," says Boone. "A new dance is created, and I am renewed."

Dancing might be Boone's favorite activity, but this is just a small piece of her life. She stays busy with her work in the community, including involvement in many organizations.

In addition to founding Durham Together for Resilient Youth (a program helping teenagers fight substance abuse), she works with VetCorps VISTA (a program for veterans, particularly in the National Guard), she is one of the co-founders of the East Durham Children's Initiative, she is the crime and safety committee chair for the Northeast Central Durham Leadership Council and she hosts a television show called "Woman to Woman" on Durham's local channel 18. The show focuses on helping women with self-esteem and making sure they do not fall prey to depression.

She is also a pastor along with her husband, Earl Boone, for the non-denominational church, At His Feet Ministries International, located in Brighton Square.

"It seems like a lot," says Boone. "If it weren't for the volunteers that work with me, it would be impossible."

This much involvement in the community has come with many hardships and obstacles as well, such as disagreements. When facing these hurdles, Boone says she keeps her eyes on her grandmother's example and success.



Wanda Boone and her husband, Earl Boone, in their office in Brighton Square, after discussing her role as the leader of Durham Together for Resilient Youth. T.R.Y. is a program that helps teenagers of Durham avoid substance abuse. (Staff photo by Lauren Miller)

Her grandmother, Maude Boseman Richardson, was asked to teach canning and crocheting to white women from the 1930s to 1950s. "If you've seen 'The Help,' that just did not happen," says Boone.

"It was [this] example that I kept me eyes on as I continued to face opposition and prejudice in my path to where I am now, and which I'm still on the way," adds Boone.

Being this involved in the community also takes a lot of motivation. Boone says her motivation comes down to her experiences as a child. However, she did not initially know this.

"It took a long time before I realized what my motivation was," says Boone. "I feel like I just worked to be working because I felt that it was right, and that still is the truth, but I realized that there was something deeper."

Boone says that "something deeper" included the hurt, the disappointment and the difficult way that she grew up.

This New Jersey native lived in a household with an abusive alcoholic father. She says she experienced abuse firsthand and then recovered in later years.

"That was the thread that made me really care about women and women's issues and also substance abuse pre-

vention," says Boone.

Boone says she also finds motivation through other ties to her friends and family, especially in relevance to the VetCorps VISTA program.

"We've had friends and relatives who have been in the military, and coming home was difficult for them," says Boone. "And my husband is a Vietnam veteran, and we met when he first came back from Vietnam. I saw firsthand how difficult that was for him. So, that's why I [work with VetCorps VISTA]."

Boone and her husband, Earl, will have been married for 41 years in May. They have three grandchildren and three children, Kimberly, Darian and Darryl, ages 25, 32 and 34.

In addition to raising these three children, the Boone family fostered three children in 1974. Boone says these children saw their mother shoot and kill their stepfather, so they came to live with her and her family for a year.

"They are great, wonderful people. We found that we did parenting better than anything else, so we became therapeutic foster parents in the middle of raising our own," says Boone.

Before raising a family of her own and moving to Durham in 1971 when

her husband decided to attend North Carolina Central University, Boone lived in Teaneck, New Jersey.

"It was a lovely place to grow up in spite of what was happening inside my home," says Boone.

She recalls how there were only two other African-American families living in Teaneck at that time. However, she never experienced any racial prejudice.

"It was a very diverse community," says Boone. "It was actually the first city in the United States to voluntarily vote against segregation, so I'm very proud of where I grew up."

It was also while living in Teaneck that Boone discovered her passion for dancing. "As a little girl I watched Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers," says Boone.

"I remember being seven years old and seeing a ray of sunshine coming through the clouds and landing on the lawn. It was the perfect spot for me to sing, 'Heaven, I'm in Heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak, and I just can't find the happiness I seek...until we're out together dancing cheek to cheek.' I imagined that I was dancing with Jesus."

"Dancing and singing became my escape from the abuse. Even when I could not make noise I could sing to myself and move ever so quietly on my toes or see myself leaping and twirling to each verse."

Boone graduated from Teaneck High School and attended Englewood School of Nursing in Englewood, New Jersey.

She says she became too involved with the patients, visiting them too often, so she decided to pursue a different career—the ministry.

Her husband attended Faith Bible College, and she read everything he had available. "I guess we both kind of went—it was two for the price of one," says Boone, laughing.

Boone says ministry and her faith are two things she values the most in life. The third, equally as important to her, is her family, despite hardships.

Her mother, Carrie Johnson, received a master's degree in education at a time when women did not receive master's degrees. Additionally, she says her father, Oliver Johnson, Sr., was a senior divisional director for national distillers.

"They were before their time—fore-runners in terms of what African-Americans were doing during that time, so I'm very proud of their accomplishments," says Boone.

After moving out of her parents' house to Durham, Boone says she became the first African-American to work outside of the kitchen at Duke Hospital and also one of the first African-American senior research specialists at the hospital. She was following in the footsteps of her parents' accomplishments.

"That is unbelievable to me," says Boone. "Without really intending to, I might've paved the way for a lot of people, especially women, and made it possible for them to have the positions that they have."

After working at the hospital, Boone found a job in the Research Triangle Park area. She worked there until she lost her job in 2002.

"I said to [my boss], 'well now I can do what I was created to do in my life,'" she says, laughing. "I had no idea what I was talking about; I had no plan, but I said that, we hugged, and that's when I founded Together for Resilient Youth in 2003."

She added with a smile, "It's been an amazing journey."

While reflecting on the work she has completed, Boone says, "I am not one to shirk my responsibilities. I do believe that I'm doing what I was made to do... that in spite of the persecution, in spite of the non-recognition, in spite of the difficulties, of which there have been many, I find great reward in doing what I was destined to do."

With the help of her work, she wishes to eventually see children in a healthy, safe, drug free community. She also envisions women who are empowered to "do what they were fashioned to do."

"I'm realizing now that my piece is a small piece, but it's a necessary piece, and I'm happy with that," says Boone.

Like Boone, each hometown hero adds a small piece to the whole—a little choreography to the entire dance—and each little piece counts. With Boone's dedication to fulfilling her vision, as well as the dedication of others in the community, this "dance" in Northeast Central Durham is just beginning.



At left, Wanda Boone sits in her office in Brighton Square, looking through a pamphlet about At His Feet International Ministries. Boone and her husband, Earl, are pastors of an At His Feet International Ministries Church, also located in Brighton Square.

ONLINE

<http://www.at-his-feet.com/>

<http://www.durhamtry.org/>

Right, Liturgical Dancer Wanda Boone performs her favorite dance, Ribbon in the Sky, with her group Dancer4HIM4Ever at the Arts Council. (Photo Courtesy of Wanda Boone)

