

Afro One: Dancing To The Beat Of African Culture

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Staff

Last fall students in Dr. Sonja Stone's Afro-American 67 (AFAM 67) course wanted to create more cultural and educational outlets for African and African-American studies at the University. Under the tutelage of Stone and with the assistance of Black Cultural Center director Margo Crawford, the group, that later became the African Studies Club, went on to bring many culturally enlightening programs to the university. Among them were Kwanzaa, an African-American holiday based on seven principals, and Afro-One.

Afro-One, based in Willingboro, New Jersey, is a dance, drama and drum company that was founded by Patricia Reid-Bookhart 16 years ago. Donee Thomas, who was not only one of the students in Stone's class but who later became the African Studies Club President, studied with Afro-One for 15 years.

When the Club decided to bring Kwanzaa to the UNC last year, Thomas thought that it would be a good idea to ask Afro-One to perform. And when Afro-One and the Kwanzaa celebration bedazzled and excited the university community, Crawford thought it would be a good idea not only to continue the celebration, but also to have Thomas incorporate Afro-One the community.

They decided on starting a Chapel Hill chapter of Afro-One that would teach Kwanzaa and African dance to the African-American community at UNC and would help prepare them in participating in their own Kwanzaa celebration to be held this summer. Thomas was chosen as the instructor for this Chapel Hill chapter.

"Donee was an easy candidate [for the Afro-One teaching position]. Not only is she a beautiful dancer, but she knows Kwanzaa," said Crawford. Thomas has also been teaching dance for about six years. When given the opportunity to teach here, she said she jumped at it, to give others a chance to experience the same thing she did while growing up.

"It's educational. It's social, and it's a form of exercise. I was hoping to give others the chance to have the same exposure," said Thomas, who was persuaded into Afro-One at a very early age by her mother, said that Afro-One gave her an outlet for culture that some children do not have. Thomas continued that most children do not have one main place to go for cultural identity.

"I am very lucky to have had Afro-

One in my life at a young age. It gave me a sense of who I was. African dance has its own expression. It's something you can't explain, it's very free. It's almost like a form of therapy for me."

Afro-One-Chapel Hill, like the original Afro-One, patterns its style on West African technique. The class, with about fifteen members, is a part of the BCC's Artist-in-Residence program. It meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 4 to 5 pm, in Teague basement. Thomas said that the class is taught on a beginner's level.

"I'm very pleased with the students who came out to my class. They're excited and they're serious. That's all I ask—just interest in African dance."

Thomas' class is evolving as an African-American dance company, being the sister organization to Afro-One-Willingboro. The class will perform at this year's 7-day Kwanzaa, and do a routine with Afro-One-Willingboro.

Jackie Chadwick, the artistic director and choreographer for the Opeyo! dancers, is also member of Thomas' Afro-One class. Opeyo! is a sub-group of the Black Student Movement (BSM).

"I joined because I like African dance...I thought I could learn a lot from her (Thomas) and it helps me to teach Opeyo!" Chadwick choreographs the African dance steps that Opeyo! does.

Melvin Farland, a senior from Beulaville, NC, said he joined because Thomas dared him and because the technique is different. Farland said that he likes the atmosphere that is formed in Thomas' class.

"We're getting to know each other on a spiritual level," he said.

Kendal McDevitt, freshman from Asheville, NC, said that the main thing she liked about African dance was the musical beats.

"I like it when we warm-up. She (Thomas) just turns on the music and we just do it. With dance, you can't think too much, especially with African, because it's from the heart."

When asked if African dance was difficult to learn, Patrick Thomas, freshman from Raleigh said, "It's really fast. The moves themselves aren't hard. It's the speed that makes it interesting, fun, and challenging."

Chadwick added that she thought it was important to show different types of dances that African-Americans can do.

"You know how some people have this idea that black people only know how to boogie. It's good to show that we can do different types"

When asked why we need cultural



outlets like Kwanzaa and Afro-One at UNC, Thomas stated that Kwanzaa is an important holiday, and although new to a community like ours, it should be widely celebrated.

"It's for us to celebrate our African-American culture that is based on African culture. We celebrate the similarities," Thomas said.

Thomas' Afro-One dance class was equally important. "It's a very symbolic thing to me. I think it's important to preserve every part of our culture because so much of it is being lost," Thomas said.

Thomas said that for centuries, African-Americans have been estranged from Africa, and have been forced to accept American ways. Kwanzaa and her Afro-One class are just two ways to proudly identify with Africa.

"We have to hold onto where we

came from, because we're not totally accepted in this white world," Thomas said.

Another important thing to remember is that identification with our African heritage does not necessarily promote hatred against whites.

"It's not at all a rebellion against the white world. It's for us. It's something for us to hold onto," Thomas said. "We know all about the white world. We've been forced to learn about everything in it. Nowhere, no how do they have to learn about African-American culture. Events like these greatly enhance perceptions of what African-American culture really is, and where its roots lie."

Thomas encourages interested dancers to sign up for her Afro-One class next semester and for everyone to attend this year's 7-day Kwanzaa celebration, and for all.