2020 to the 1970’s college days

I was attending a social event a small group outside with social distancing. I met a man who works in make-up. He told me he was from Texas and had been in NYC for a few years. I asked him if he knew any of the Cogdills. Dr. Jack Cogdill was the chair of the Drama Dept at SUNY at Fredonia. It was a pleasant surprise when he stated that Karon Cogdill was his drama teacher at Booker T. Washington performing arts high school in Dallas. There is an article in The Atlantic Magazine which lauds her 40 years of dedication at the high school. It confirmed everything I remembered about her father being dedicated to giving students what they would need to survive in this business. It was as no surprise to me that she was committed to that school and devoted her life to giving her best to all her students. I would like to thank her Dad for what he gave to me. Looking back to the 1970’s it was a time of turmoil and so was I.

In spite of my emotions and political situation at that time I was able to protest and use theatre as a tool for change. I wrote a blues song for the farmers in western New York who were striking against Welch company and other big fruit conglomerates. I was able to protest against the Vietnam war and Black causes.

Several students formed an independent study with the focus on the works of the Living Theatre and Augusto Boal. We also demonstrated in a protest with the local farmers. We were warned by the Dept that we were not allowed to participate because it was not sanctioned by the University. I considered the actions as Good Trouble.

At that time the only thing I knew was that I loved theatre. Under Dr. Cogdill’s program we had to work in all aspects of theatre, technical theatre, costumes, box office, publicity, house management as well as stage management and acting. Dr. Cogdill taught theatre history and his favorite expression was you drop your pen you lose 100 years. I was a dry sponge and I soaked up as much as I could. I located Karon Cogdill through the performing arts school in Dallas. I dropped her an e-mail and she responded. We both were so surprised. How often In life are you able to reach back and make a connection with people who gave you much more than you realized. But I am grateful to have this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks to Karon and her Dad.

Before I started college I had worked in business as a sales rep and cost accounting for a major tool and die corporation. I was the first Black to work in their office. I returned to that job after serving in Vietnam from 1966- 1967. I grew a goatee and was told by the VP it was not allowed. I resigned on my birthday 4/10 1970. I decided to go to college and major in business at SUNY Fredonia. I lived in the southern tier of NY State in Waverly a small village of 5000 people. I was the only black student in my class from kindergarten through 12th grade. My eldest sister was a music teacher and was my first black teacher. I played the cello from third grade through high school. The only theatre I had seen was a road company of Oklahoma and an all White minstrel in Blackface.

I moved to Buffalo with my sister in the summer of 1970. I explored the Buffalo cultural scene and attended a performance at the African American Cultural Center of Zoo Story and Soul Gone Home. It was the first Black theatre I had attended. I was so enthralled I signed up for a free acting class. From the class I auditioned for a play and was cast in Metaphors by Martin Duberman. I enjoyed the rehearsals, performances and the people. At the end of the summer I attended Fredonia as a business

Major. At the end of my first semester I was sure that any of my fellow classmates would be more than willing to have me shave. They were offering a theatre intensive over the summer and I was more than happy to throw my hat in the ring. They were casting Androcles and the Lion and guess what just in time I was cast as the slave. We toured Western New York for several months and had several performances on campus at Rockefeller Center concert hall designed by I.M.PEI.