**Phyllis Weikart: Helping Others to Succeed**

by [Rick Townsend](http://www.ecmma.org/members/profile/920) on Sep 6, 2014 [No Comments](http://www.ecmma.org/blog/parent-connection/phyllis_weikart_helping_others_to_succeed#comments)

It was 1996, and I was a first-year college instructor teaching an aural skills class. I was leading a rhythm drill, and the students were rocking left and right to the macrobeat while patsching microbeats on their thighs. A boy named Jason, 6’4” and nearly 300 lbs. was having difficulty with the physical motions, so I eventually invited him to stay after class for some additional practice.

I had attended a Gordon certification workshop the previous summer, and at one point Dr. Gordon had described a 10-step sequence designed to help children develop necessary coordination skills for such activities. Dr. Gordon reported that he had learned the procedure from a friend, a movement specialist from the University of Michigan named Phyllis Weikart, after which it had become a regular part of his presentation. So I walked Jason slowly through the ten-step procedure.  After only 10 minutes, Jason was rocking and patsching nicely. With tears in his eyes, he told me that he had never before been able to perform such activities with his classmates. This had been a source of frustration and embarrassment his entire life.

I made a point to teach the 10-step procedure to the entire class, and I have used it ever since with my aural skills classes. There are always students in my college classes who, like Jason, lack the coordination skills to move to the beat. Unbeknownst to her, Phyllis has been helping my students now for over 18 years – and I am certain that she helps countless other students through teachers who she has never yet met.  (who or whom?)

**Hall of Honor Inductee**

This is why I was so delighted when the ECMMA board of directors decided to induct Phyllis Weikart into the ECMMA Hall of Honor this past June at their biennial convention in Atlanta. She was kind enough to attend the convention to accept her award, allowing all in attendance a chance to get to know her personally. I was especially delighted when she agreed to participate with me for this interview at her Brecon Village home in Saline, Michigan.

**The Interview**

We met in a quiet alcove, and talked for over an hour. Her conversation was filled with pedagogy and movement philosophy, although she retired from The University of Michigan in the mid-1990s, and I found myself taking more notes for use in my methods classes than for this article. I could see why Dr. Gordon always spoke so highly of her. I could have stayed for hours.

Of her time spent with Gordon, she states that “He just didn’t realize how much simpler he needed to go. One thing at a time - then put it together.” Sounds like Music Learning Theory, doesn’t it. And Dr. Gordon admits that before meeting Phyllis, he had just not thought to apply the same concepts to movement during rhythm activities.

**Movement and Music**

Phyllis teaches us that movement is the base for musical comprehension and understanding – for using music, because anytime we do anything except sit and sing, we are moving. She states that if we do not understand the sequential basis for our movement, then we will be jumping around too much pedagogically.

But not only music, she explains. Movement is the base for many things – physical education, sport and game, math, language, helping the understanding of all academic subjects – movement can be brought into play in teaching each of these endeavors. Asking five children, for example, to group themselves into as many pairs of combinations (1+4, 2+3, 5+0) can be much more beneficial for learning than merely showing the concepts with objects or on a board.

When asked if she had worked similarly with other disciplines besides music, she stated that she has worked with math and language concepts with movement in elementary classrooms and in elementary teacher workshops. Music teachers, though, have kept her busier.

Her early work with music came when she asked Sue Lawson, an elementary Kodaly music teacher in the Ann Arbor, Michigan public school district, if she could come to one of her music classes and work with students. (It was second or third grade.) Phyllis was aware rhythm instruction often involved, as she states, “going to the rhythm of the words for young children. OH, I just cringe when I see this. It destroys the beat!” she says adamently. Her early work with the schools and with gifted and talented teen-agers at Phyllis and husband Dave’s summer camp expanded to Phyllis’ eventual development of a folk dance curriculum, and to her widely acclaimed teaching strategies for folk dance.

Her folk dance teaching methods are now available to all of us from *HighScope Educational Researth Foundation* on a user-friendly set of CDs and complimentary instructional DVDs. I use this series every year with my early and middle childhood methods classes, and it is always a highlight of their year.  HighScope Foundation is a highly respected early childhood learning center in Ypsilanti, Michigan, which, through the years, has developed its own branded early childhood curriculum and instructional materials – including a movement and music curriculum (*Education Through Movement: Building the Foundation* founded by Phyllis).

David Weikart, Phyllis’s husband, with Phyllis’ assistance, first started the HighScope Camp and Conference Center in the 1960s and David founded the *HighScope Educational Research Association* in 1970 and remained as the President into the 1990s. Phyllis became involved with early childhood music and movement through her involvement with the HighScope Foundation, where she served as movement director during that time frame. She also presented a series of workshops and conference sessions during those years, and taught as many as three, 2-week workshops every summer for hundreds of music and movement teachers. Her influence is still felt worldwide, as most of the current generation’s early childhood movement specialists reference Phyllis’s influence in their own contemporary publications and practices.

**Expanding The Mission**

I asked Phyllis to explain what, deep down, motivates her to develop and maintain such extensive work in movement. “It is all in the interest of helping children become successful,” she said. And it is not only about children, but people of all ages. She also discussed aesthetically sensitive infant and prebirth movement practices that involve a mother or caregiver patting or moving in aesthetically sensitive, expressive ways.

And at the other end of the spectrum, she developed adult programs, citing that she could not help everybody unless she also tried to help the adults – just as I was able to do with Jason in my college class. She reports that she has developed ways to help people who are uncomfortable with their bodies to get more comfortable with their bodies.

Phyllis and her oldest daughter, Cindy, teach movement and exercise classes at Brecon Village.  Cindy’s class is entitled *Exercise to Music.* Cindy teaches the class three times per week.   Phyllis participates and substitutes for Cindy  when necessary.  Some residents exercise both seated and standing behind their chairs, while others stay seated throughout the class. They are taught warm-up and stretching activities, and they perform simple movement patterns sitting and standing. In addition, Phyllis solos with a Sunday evening session titled *Moving to Music*. Anybody who wants to come is welcome.

**Coda**

I always come away from these interviews with a heightened sense of the richness that is available to us in our retired teaching population. Speaking with Phyllis was one part friend making, and one part personal seminar. Many of the great leaders who have brought us to where we are today are available and willing to continue to share with us in this same manner. We must never hesitate to ask for their wisdom. There is usually a wonderful story to be told.

I hope to see Phyllis again, and I especially hope others will make their way to her door to gain from the riches that she has to offer – both personally and professionally. It is we who are enriched by our efforts to engage our retired teachers.

She told me that she was deeply gratified by her induction into the ECMMA Hall of Honor. But it is also ECMMA who is honored by her induction. This is the way it is supposed to work, isn’t it?

Following, you can see the interview that Jan Vidruk held with Phyllis at the end of the ECMMA Convention in Atlanta. Enjoy getting to know both ladies.

[Jan Vidruk Talking With ECMMA Hall of Honor Inductee, Phyllis Weikart](http://vimeo.com/99596528) from [Rick Townsend](http://vimeo.com/ricktownsendvideos) on [Vimeo](https://vimeo.com).