

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Marjorie Witt Johnson

PERSON

Johnson, Marjorie Witt

Alternative Names: Marjorie Witt Johnson;

Life Dates: March 18, 1910-July 19, 2007

Place of Birth: Cheyenne, Wyoming, USA

Work: Cleveland, Ohio

Occupations: Dancer; Dance Instructor

Biographical Note

Dancer, social worker, dance instructor and daughter of a Buffalo Soldier, Marjorie Witt Johnson was born on March 18, 1910 in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Her father, William Henry Brown Witt, served in the United States 10th Cavalry under Colonel Charles Young at Fort D.A. Russell. Growing up, Johnson lived in Taylorville and attended Corllett School. Johnson transferred to Churchill School, Cheyenne Junior High School and graduated from Cheyenne High School in 1929. That summer Johnson's mother, Pearl Melvina Pryor, took her to New York City where she saw her uncle Hayes Pryor perform with the Lafayette Players. High School history teacher, Eldridge Hubbard helped her gain admission into Oberlin College in 1930. Her education was donated by Cheyenne's Women's Club and the Searchlight Club. At Oberlin, Johnson was introduced to modern dance by Margery Schneider, and she was influenced by the work of Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham.

Graduating from Oberlin with a B.S. degree in social work in 1935, Johnson served as a dance counselor for Camp Chippewa where she developed a talent for working with inner city girls. She formed a group called the Playhouse Settlement Dance Group. Eventually they became the Karamu Dancers as part of Karamu House. The group gained notoriety and was selected to perform at the 1940 World's Fair in New York City. Johnson, building on Grace Coyle's study, Democracy and Group Work, taught the girls modern dance by incorporating their own life experiences with oral history and music. Among her notable dance works are "Barbeque," "Tea Time," "Braham's Rhapsody in G Minor," "The Sermon," and the underground railroad play, From House to House, which was performed in Nigeria as Lati Ile' si Ile'. Two of her notable students are Royce Wallace and Roger Mae Johnson. In Atlanta, Johnson inspired Morehouse College student body president, Michael Babatunde Olatunji to play his drums in public.

Johnson has been celebrated by the City of Cleveland and numerous other organizations for her more than 70 years of service in promoting arts in education. Recently, Karamu House showcased *Daughter of a Buffalo Soldier*, which was directed and choreographed by Dianne McIntyre.

Johnson, who was married to the late actor, Bill Johnson, has a daughter and is still active as a community activist, role model and innovator in Cleveland. She is the author of the book, *Moving Images of Courage*. Johnson passed away on July 19, 2007.

Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on March 22, 2006.

Related Entries

Cheyenne High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Corlett School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Churchill Public School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Cheyenne Junior High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Oberlin College [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Case Western Reserve University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Karamu House [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Choreographer

Bellefaire Orphanage [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Social Worker

Atlanta University [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Professor