

**Bridgeport Cultural Arts Center Project, Bridgeport History Center****Interviewer: Michelle Blacksmith****Interviewee: Wendy J. Bridgeforth****Date: June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016**

**Q:** Where is the interview taking place?

**Bridgeforth:** The interview is taking place in the Bridgeport Main Library, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Cultural Conference room [*sic* Community Room].

**Q:** Wendy, I'm interested in: how did you first hear about the Arts Center?

**Bridgeforth:** Well, really it was the ad in the paper. I was attending Silvermine College of Art in New Canaan. Unfortunately, it closed and I was looking for a job and as a matter of fact my mother pointed it out to me. I got my stuff together and went down there for an interview which I have to say was very unusual and I still was kind of naïve and basically I was shocked about the interview. They asked me if I had a Porsche and I said "A Porsche? What is a Porsche? No, I don't even know what a Porsche is." But it was a very different kind of interview than ones that I had been in before and I met the rest of the staff there and I found them so avant garde, I can't think of the word, and I was just floored with the interview but it made me comfortable because it wasn't a standard kind, it wasn't so strict and being a woman of size I was self-conscious thinking that they weren't going to hire me anyway. So we went over the stuff and they were impressed that I had attended Silvermine because it was a well-known college, small art college and they would ask me about it and certain things so that made me comfortable because I loved Silvermine and attending the classes there and everything like that. It was the questions from some of the people that I knew, that I was acquainted with and they were acquainted with too, and they explained the program and what it was all about and I thought this program was very unusual because there are not many art related programs in the city of Bridgeport. And I was so impressed and I went home thrilled and excited and I said "They'll never hire me, they'll never hire me!", you know, and later on I found out it was down to me and a gentleman, but they said I was more in need and I could relate to the community or the people that would be coming through the Arts Center.

I look back on it being fortunate that they overlooked my size, which I was self-conscious about, and it wasn't that --they liked what they saw and the work that I presented and that I did work in a few art after-school programs in the city of Bridgeport. So from the day I walked through that door and the day I left, I always thank God that I was working there. I consider it the best job I ever had in my life and so does everybody else. You can't even think of a place that--it was so original--there is no way you can duplicate it; it was original. And all the things that happened in that place,--it started on Main St. in Bridgeport--and then later on it moved to Gary Crooks. But at that time I had left to go to Hartford Art School in Hartford, but I came back and there was an opening and I was re-hired.

But it's just the crazy things that we did and with the kids and they just couldn't believe us and sometimes I would sit back with the kids and I couldn't believe it also and since I was the

youngest one on staff it just blew my mind. But it was a creative atmosphere and we used anything and everything we could get ahold of and we used it for something. And I remember one day Ben Johnson, who was our director, and his brother Jerry --Jami Ayinde, came back with a wooden shelf that Wallgreens had thrown out, because the Arts Center was around the corner from Wallgreens, and I just looked at them: who would pick up stuff from the street?! Oh, we need a shelf in the backroom for our storage and there were two of them and they went there and got it, brought it upstairs and it was needed and it suited the purpose, but it was just the idea and I said, "I would have never thought of picking up anything off the street." I'd consider it garbage, but like I said it was needed and it worked.

**Q:** And that was very fashionable, to go riding around neighborhoods and seeing what people had left on the streets.

**Bridgeforth:** Exactly.

**Q:** Wendy, I'd like to go back a little bit. You said so many interesting things and you mentioned your education at Silvermine. Now, prior to that, where were you educated? Where were your elementary and high school?

**Bridgeforth:** Ok, I went to McKinley School, Newfield School, Lincoln School. My high school was Harding (Warren Harding High School on Bridgeport's East Side) and that's where I graduated from in '70. And so from there I went to Silvermine College for Art, which was also an unusual place because that was in the middle of hippie-dom. And here I am coming from an urban background and seeing hippies on TV, but they were actually there at Silvermine. It was a great place. It was like in the midst of nature which was great. There was a small bridge and a stream and there were so many places that we went to to draw from and it was just a perfect site and I was told that at the graduation previously--that one of the graduates came in as Lady Godiva on a horse. They were--I was so--you would think it would have prepared me for the Arts Center, but I still was in awe and I still was fortunate that I got a scholarship from the College--that I was there attending that school.

**Q:** And what years did you attend Silvermine?

**Bridgeforth:** Unfortunately, only from '70-'71 because Silvermine had financial problems. I remember seeing on TV of the year previous that they were out hustling in New York, getting money, panhandling, getting money to save the College. But, unfortunately, I only did one year, our class didn't complete a second year because they ran into the same problem again and were unfortunately not able to save the school. Every time I said Silvermine, they'd say "You went there?!" cause it was one of the top ten art colleges nationwide and I just couldn't understand with a board that they said the people were pretty wealthy and that they weren't able to save the college. So it closed down. Everybody was sad, they did their best but I'm glad I was able to have one year there.

**Q:** Judging from the schools you've named, I am imagining that you had an East End (Bridgeport neighborhood) experience growing up and so you had the East End experience you had the Silvermine experience, which you have talked about as being a very bohemian or hippie

kind of experience. Were you living at home while you were attending Silvermine? Where were you staying at?

**Bridgeforth:** No, I was living at home, my mother took me there every day. The East End experience, they had that neighborhood paper *Harambee* and it was Terry Miller, as a matter of fact, Terry, Mr. Miller, was the one who took me to Silvermine. All my friends were going to UCONN and I was still--I filled out an application but I never actively pursued it and I used to do the graphics for the *Harambee*. When they found out I could draw, they said "Wendy, do this, this--" and I tried it and they took it and published it in the newspaper, and so Mr. Miller asked me, "Well, are you going to college?" And, you know, I said, "Oh no, I don't think so" and he said, "What do you mean you don't think so?" And I said, "Well, the ones I applied to are far away." And there was one in New Canaan but I had just never thought of the concept of "getting a ride" there or if my mother would take me and I didn't think I had a decent portfolio. It was a lot of things and since it was close, Mr. Miller said--and I received the letter that "we want to interview you" but I wasn't going to do it--Mr. Miller said, "I'm going to take you to that interview. You put all your best stuff together." So when I told my art teacher, she said, "Oh, Wendy! That's a good school! Let's get this together!" So we got it together and we went to the interview and I swear Mr. Miller was just talking for me but they were looking for students to come in there on scholarship and fortunately I fit the bill and that was one of the best days of my life and I bless Mr. Miller from this day because he said, "You're just too quiet, Wendy! You gotta speak up cause your art speaks for you and you do well and you have to speak up, but I'll speak up for you!" which he did because I was like "yes, no" and so Mr. Miller says "She's great, she's just shy!" And I was fortunate to attend Silvermine. I also attended Housatonic Community College, which had a great art staff, great teachers, so I benefited from Housatonic Art Program in between attending Hartford Art--Hartford Art was a good place also--so I was fortunate to go to three great schools.

**Q:** And what years did you attend Housatonic and what years did you attend Hartford?

**Bridgeforth:** Let's see, I think I attended Housatonic part-time from '72-'74 and Hartford Art in '75 and I decided to go back to school because I wanted to learn about the computer graphics and I graduated from Gibbs in 2008. Another place that closed down. I'm trying to think, Am I a little jinx or something like that? But I got my Associate's, I finished and got my Associate's from Gibbs and I enjoyed taking the computer graphics class and it was just great and the teachers were good and when they heard that I attended Silvermine---it was the same thing--and he said, "Oh, you're old school!" where we do the basics, I learned how to stretch a canvas, I learned how to cut the wood to make the stretchers and gesso and all of that and when there was one project we had to do and design a CD cover, I actually constructed it and he said, "You're the only one that did that." And they did it flat and it was fine but I actually did it in 3D and he said, "You know some people don't have that skill because they don't come from the old basics. It's nothing wrong with it, with the new basics, but it's nice to have both of them together." I enjoyed Gibbs College also.

**Q:** I want to go back to your discussion of the interview at the Arts Center. Do you remember who interviewed you?

**Bridgeforth:** Oh yes, it was Ben Johnson, Bill Collins, Pat Melvin and one more person, Jerry Johnson (Ben's brother).

**Q:** Let's talk about the kinds of things that you did at the Arts Center. What kind of art did you teach? What did you learn?

**Bridgeforth:** Most of the things I did was arts and crafts but we did the drawing and the painting and we did a little bit of everything that we could do or that we had the supplies for or the space. Later on, while I was working at the Arts Center, we got another person on staff which was Richard Stamats and he had this thing with polyurethane and this was a new kind of varnish so what have-you, so we were doing a project and using this varnish on everything that day and all of a sudden the firemen burst into the Arts Center, and they looked at us and we looked at them and he said, "How long have you been here?" And we said, "All day" and he said, "What are you doing?" and we said, "Oh, we are doing our projects, we are varnishing them and everything." And then he said, "You're not sick?" and we said, "No, why should we be sick?" and polyurethane at that time was new and he said, "The fumes of the urethane you're using has gone through the whole building, everybody is sick, we have evacuated the building and you're the last room!" We were fine because whatever the air system was, it circulated through the whole building and we were fine, we were just humming, working along, joking and laughing and we had to leave and we had to put the polyurethane away and he told us that if we ever used it again it is better to use it outside. But the following day all the people in the office building were glad that they got a day off! It was so funny, they came and congratulated us and said, "Oh, thank you thank you!" some of, most of them did not suffer from the fumes too much because they left immediately so that was one of our funny things that happened at the Arts Center.

**Q:** So was that was the Arts Center when it was downtown?

**Bridgeforth:** Yes, downtown!

**Q:** You mentioned a number of the skills that you came to the Arts Center with, like the ability to stretch canvases and to do those technical kinds of aspects of things, the nuts and bolts things that artists need to know. Did your students get to learn those things?

**Bridgeforth:** Oh, definitely because we finally bought rolls of canvas and stretchers and we taught them how to stretch the canvas and everything like that so it was the basic, they didn't buy it at the store already stretched, they knew that if they bought some raw canvas to the stretchers that they could stretch it themselves. So we showed them the proper way to do that and the mixing of paint, what they got into. We had one student, Leonardo Drew, he was a very good draftsman, a very good drawer and later on he got into painting and his work has gone different places. Also, another student, Larry Porte (sp?), and he was just like a hippie himself and both of these people came from Bassick High School. And there was another one, David Davis, who came from Bassick who was also good and Jose Seaborn--there's a whole bunch of kids that have gone through there and some of them, we offered music too, and there was a combination of the two, and a lot of kids got the advantage of what we were able to teach them. And it was funny at times when the student had behavior problems, we'd say "You guys gotta go, you're out for a week or a couple of days--" and they never said anything to their parents and they would come back and say they were sorry, we only had one student that complained to their parent:

“They said I can’t come back to the Arts Center until such and such time and I didn’t do nothing!” And the parent came and so and then there were the kids that didn’t want their parents to know that they got suspended from school, we took them back to school cause we were strict about their schooling and doing their homework. We would have them doing their homework sometimes before they started on their art work and they knew they could ask us, “Could you take us back to school? I really don’t want my mother or parents to find out.” And we knew the parents should know but we figured they were sincere and it wouldn’t happen again and most of the time it didn’t happen again. But they knew that we respected them and that we would take them back to school and say nothing to their parents as long as they didn’t repeat the same thing again. So we covered quite a few bases there and we helped girls who got in trouble, not trouble but, you know, into certain situations and they were--Pat was good for that, for talking and talking about women’s rights, women’s bodies, she was excellent when it came to that and they knew they could go to her and talk to her about it cause she would tell them you shouldn’t allow your boyfriend to just do certain things--so that was covered and that was needed. We were very helpful to quite a few girls on that point.

When we went on trips it was like a cultural shock for them, when we went to different places, but they enjoyed it and they just couldn’t believe certain things and I understood how that was so besides being creative, teaching the paintings, the steps, the color mixing and using this and that we helped the students that came in there. They knew that they could talk to someone and when someone got in trouble a couple times we had to go to court with them to be a character witness for them so we covered all bases and I think that was unusual and unique in itself.

**Q:** I’d like to talk more about the character of the Arts Center because the history of it seems to show that the Arts Center went beyond visual arts, music, photography and those things to address social issues, maybe even emotional issues, certain political issues. So would you talk a little bit, elaborate a little bit about that sort of impact that the Arts Center had? Specifically, one of the things that I’d like to know first off, Wendy: was--is this by an agenda design, like was this the mission of the Arts Center? We are going to serve and this social service kind of function or do you think it happened organically?

**Bridgeforth:** It happened organically. We were concerned about the student and when the students said, “I really don’t want my parent to know”, it came along with the package. It was not part of our mission statement, our mission statement was to teach the arts, but you couldn’t ignore that we were situated in back of P.T. Barnum (low income housing complex) and that aspect came through at the Arts Center where we were socially involved with the students and their problems because Mr. Ben Johnson and Jerry grew up in P.T. so they were trusted to be approached, they knew that they could approach them. They also knew that they knew their families and they knew that they might keep something away from their families if it wasn’t detrimental, but if it wasn’t then it was something that the student could promise to correct on their part and they would do so--but it just happened. “What is your problem, what is it? And we’ll keep it confidential and try to help or you need to-- ” you know, we stressed on the need to finish school and some of them didn’t but afterwards they went back and got their GEDs . And I have encountered many students that have gone back and always seem to remember the Arts Center and would name everybody, the whole staff: “How’s Mr. Johnson? How’s Jami? How’s

Ms. Pat?” And they’d say, “Oh, I remember you saying that ‘we need to go back, we need to go back’.” And a lot of them did, so that was good.

I’ve run into places where one of my former students is a nurse and that made me feel good and I was a police commissioner for the city of Bridgeport for thirteen years and one of our hearings when we were taking a break, one of the officers came up to me and she says. “I remember you-- Ms. Wendy from the Arts Center!” And I said, “Oh my God! That was such a long time ago!” And she ran down the list --“how’s Mr. Johnson, how’s Ms. Pat?” and everything they would name everybody on the staff --“How’s Ralph, and they would just go down the list. “And how’s Rich? I know he’s out in Colorado, he’s still there?” and that was nice. No matter where I went, eventually I would run into one of my students and I realized how much of an impact we were and all the “I remember when you helped me and you didn’t say nothing to my parents.” And it was good to see.

I worked as a custodian for the city of Bridgeport for twenty-two years and one day these workers came in and had to do painting or something and this guy came up to me and said, “I remember you from the Arts Center.” And I looked at him and realized I did remember him and he was in Doug’s [unclear] program with the real problem students and I would have never thought that he would become a working man. “I’ve got a family and kids, I’ve been doing this for years--” And he was good at his work. He was one of the students that we thought no matter what we could do for him he was lost, we couldn’t even see the possibility that he would be a viable citizen because of what he experienced and the background of his family and everything that was going on, and it was just so constant for this poor kid and to find out--I had to tell them: “I saw so and so” he had a nickname and they’d say, “Not him!”

This one time he went running out in P.T. with the fields, picking up weeds and coming back to us with the weeds, and we’re looking at him-- and then Ben said, “Let’s draw these weeds.” And the kids were looking at him like: *Are you crazy?* And Pat got a vase with flowers and water and we sat up there and drew weeds. But this kid--I would have never thought--and it was good to see, it really was--that somebody worked out. And it doesn’t matter for those who have a great family life or those who had a bad family life that they’ll turn out well and that was good to see that student because he was chronic. It’s a terrible thing to say but it’s good to know that he came through it all and was a family person.

**Q:** One of the things that I notice you talking about encountering students that you had in the program, that a good number of them are not artists or at least not professional artists or commercial artists. So would you talk about the importance of art in a child’s life whether or not he or she is pursuing a professional career in the arts?

**Bridgeforth:** The experience that our students went through was very important to them. I ran into one and she said, “Ms. Wendy, you don’t remember me, I went to Columbus School and we walked to the Arts Center--” --that was the one downtown-- and she says--I can’t remember, I forget what the project was-- but she said, “I still have that project, my mother was so proud that I made that and I was proud of what I did!” And she had good memories, all the kids I’ve encountered outside who have not gone into the field but--or they went off into another sort of field that involved the arts. And those that were musicians, those that were musicians got more

into it but the others that haven't they just remember doing in and those who have gone back to school, I ran into one student and he said, "I had to take an art class and I got scared but when I got into the class and what we had to do, all my experience from the Arts Center came back and it was great and I felt good that my time at the Arts Center came to some worth, some serious worth, I started taking more art classes." And some are late bloomers and I probably don't know all of them but no matter who I run into, their experience at the Arts Center is memorable and they said, "I enjoyed going to the Arts Center, I remember that time you kicked me out but I came back, didn't I?" And I said, "Yes, you did!" And it's just they enjoyed it so much and they're sad that there isn't one for their kids. There was one time Rich put something on Facebook and they'd talk about the fun they had and wished that there was a place like that operating now and it's a shame that it had to fold up.

**Q:** What impact did the Arts Center have on you?

**Bridgeforth:** Well, it gave me more confidence since I was so self-conscious, too sensitive. And I started to believe in myself and my work. I did my work and sometimes I questioned when somebody asked me to do something and I would think: Why? I thought what I did was all right, but the start of it, the beginning of it, was with Mr. Jackson and Mr. Miller at the *Harambee*. And it slowly built up my confidence. I did well at Silvermine also and we had to go through a ritual where at the end of the semester you take all your work, the work you have done which you thought was your best work, and you hang it up in the room and it's like putting your soul out there and you sit there with your teachers and the whole faculty and they go through your work and criticize and it was just like: *Oh my God!*

This was totally different because I didn't have to talk about my work or explain about my work or what I was doing and it was an alien concept, I was just doing what I was supposed to do and through schools, all the schools and classes I attended through grammar school, high school, it didn't ever-- you got criticism if you do your tests and everything, but to put your work out there and not just your teachers but the other instructors in the school took a look at your stuff and it was very--I was so full of emotions thinking they were going to hate my stuff and I'd burst out crying and I just sat there and all of a sudden I realized I didn't think about what I was doing and there was a point to what I did but I never had the opportunity or thought that who would be interested and why should I have to explain something, and I did think: *Why do I have to explain this, my work is explanation enough.* But I realized you do have to explain it, you do have a philosophy of thought or an idea and it was the first time that I was expressive about it and that I surprised myself about--that I did have thoughts about what I was doing from one point to another and that was a solid experience. If I had to do it again, I was more confident but it's still scary and I suppose its okay to be scared cause, like I said: you're putting your soul out there and you see your own growth. And once I got into the art history and the artists and their thoughts and everything like that, I realized that all artists go through it. And I didn't think there were any black artists really and when I went to Silvermine, I got the books and found out other black artists, what they had gone through and all this kind of stuff so it was eye-opening and going through that critique, which it was and it made me grow and realize that sometimes you do have to explain your work to people, it's not self-explanatory.

Going to the Arts Center made it more poignant, it was a point of what I was doing and --which was good because sometimes when a student is doing something and you ask them what their goal is and what they're trying to do, are you trying to show something, explain something-- and it was the same thing. They didn't know they had to do that: "Oh, I'm just doing this painting because--" -- such and such. "Well, why are you using these colors?" Or: "Why is this so dark? Why are you feeling this way?" And having them explain themselves, they realized--and when the next piece of work they did, they thought about the thought process more and what they were trying to do and express and color is important. And I realized that I was in that place where they were at and when I went to Silvermine, it was another step of growth from my urban experience in Bridgeport. And going to Silvermine, which was totally like, it was just a ghetto girl seeing another side of life and my fellow students, being one of the few blacks there, so learning that was there and the support that I received and teachers recognizing that I was withdrawn, and with that critique they had a chance to pull it out of me and that was great, it was a great thing, character building for myself and my work.

**Q:** Can you reflect on what impact or influence you think the Arts Center had on the community?

**Bridgeforth:** Well, I think some of the parents were glad that their kids were at the Arts Center, for one thing. A lot of parents at least once or twice we'd see them and it was like: "What's this Arts Center?" They would call and come by to just see what was what and then they knew that their kids were safe and what they were doing and they'll let their kids go to the Arts Center. When something was coming up or a project, fair or something like that, they would come to us and say they needed certain things or if the students could display their art, we want people to see that there is creativity in the poor areas and we want the people to see what you're doing and since we were under the ABCD (Action for Bridgeport Community Development) umbrella, there was one fair during the year where we'd display our work.

But we displayed at different places. I remember quite a few times we had shows here of the work that the kids did and at the Arts Center and one time, we also brought in different people: Ralph (Williams) was in charge of music--quite a few musicians that came through--and we had the comic books, most of the kids started drawing comics and we had two instructors--one was Dick Girodono, he was the editor in chief of *DC Comics*, and Frank McLaughlin, they both lived in Stratford and he did *Flash*--that was one of the top comics that were out there at the time with *DC Comics*. This grant, when they came, it was a six-week program, even I, even though I was involved in the arts, I was ignorant about the culture of comic books. I knew about reading them and it wasn't my favorite but the idea of the comics and what was involved, it was a whole culture that people are in and that it wasn't just the silly ones or serious ones, they also did comic books that were, what's the word, like the one Constantine, that became the movie. I heard about that when I had this job at this chemical color plate where they did 80% of the color work for the comic books. And that's what I was doing and I found out about Constantine from the pages that we had to color, I was a colorist, and there were other hard comics that were out there and I had no idea of this until I took that course too, and it was everything--it was broken down to the person who would ink, the person who would pencil in the images, the person who would determine the colors, everything and I didn't realize all the aspects behind it. But the students



that came in, a lot of them were aware of that background, and they followed certain people 'cause they'd ink a different way and all that kind of stuff. That was one of our top-- our best programs that we brought in. As a matter of fact, there was a woman who had brought her son who was a comic fanatic from Westport and she parked her car there and it was a Porsche and I said, "Oh, that's a Porsche!" But she said, "Am I safe? Can I park this car here?" And we told her that as long as she was here and parked at the Arts Center, she'd be fine. "They'll come and look at it--because a lot of them know what a Porsche is--and say, 'Oh, there's a Porsche parked in the Arts Center parking lot--' but no one will bother it because they know you're in here in the Arts Center. Besides we're going back and forth looking at it anyways."

But I realized the extent and how the comic book industry is entrenched in American culture and I used to dismiss it, I thought it was a nice learning source to learn how to start drawing and everything, but I found out there was much more involved than I even thought. It basically started out as a political statement so the comic books there that are political statements-- so that was one of my great programs besides the jazz musician program and we had belly dancing-- (LAUGHS) that was really interesting--and we brought other programs in when we got money to invite people to come in.

My first experience with weaving, a grant, this woman came in and taught us weaving, and that was great and what was unusual was that the boys seemed to be better at it than the girls even though at first they said, "Oh, this is the girly stuff." So we said, "Oh, no--men have done weaving in different cultures." And we showed them that in Africa and South America, the ponchos and kempti cloths--and that those cultures men did the weaving and they did very well. That was a great course. I learned a lot from the instructor, I'm sorry I forget her name, but I was able to, when that program was over, I was able to have classes and do that. So that was great about the Arts Center--they brought all these different courses in. That belly dancing class, Ben's mother, she was eighty, she was in there doing the movements and everything.

So we had programs that would invite the community in and those who were interested in it and found out they had different interests, like the belly dancing and the culture behind that and everything like that--so very good learning activities through the programs that we offered at the Arts Center.

**Q:** Earlier in this interview you mentioned trips that you took with the students. What were some of the places that you went?

**Bridgeforth:** One of the places, The Athenaeum at Hartford, and we went there six weeks in a row and every day we had to be enthusiastic about it because we saw this already and I remember one kid had pointed out a painting and it was based on the Greek myth of the Goddess Diana and the Moon Goddess and it was something like she shot somebody with an arrow and the kid said "Well, why she did she do that?" and I knew the story, I forget what it is, but because of this and so and so, and he said, "That's not a good reason for her to shoot him, who does she think she is?" And I said, "She was Diana the Moon Goddess." (LAUGHS) And he said, "It doesn't make sense to me."

We went to the Peabody Museum and the mural there was ironic--I had a painting class by the artist Zimmerman who painted the mural in the museum and I didn't make the connection until I was still working at the Arts Center, I told them I have a painting class/course by this guy named Zimmerman and Rich said, "Oh, Wendy--he's the guy that painted the prehistoric mural at the Peabody Museum!" And I said, "Oh wow! That's really fantastic!" And I approached him and he said yeah he was the one, and I said, "Well, I admire the mural." So he told me thank you. And I said, "We brought our kids--" and explained about the Arts Center, and he says, "Oh, that's really interesting! And I'm glad they received some joy from visually looking at it." And I said, "Oh, they did they really did!" And we would just go to a park and pack a lunch, which was an opportunity for them because most of them hadn't even been out of P.T. (P.T. Barnum Apartments) and some of them had gone to Seaside (Park) but the idea of going somewhere different and seeing how things are done was a pleasure for them. Sometimes it was like they would stand there, I remember we were at the United Nations and they were seeing all these people and they'd all group together in like a cone and think that it was totally different and for them to see another world, that there's another world outside of P.T. You know P.T. is their world and that was it and they were uncomfortable about it that's understandable because that's new and if they had more exposure they could adjust accordingly but they think that oh this happens outside of P.T. And we say, "Yeah, this happens outside of P.T., there are a lot of things out there-- "

And you don't wanna say narrow vision but it is in a way because you haven't been exposed to anything and that their whole world is P.T. and that's it. So when they go someplace, it was a great experience for them, and it opened a lot of eyes that they were able to branch further. But, you know, there were those who say that "it's nice to visit but I'm going back home-- " So those trips were, for me they were great and for the kids they were great, we would visit the galleries and they would say, "Oh, I was in New York yesterday with the Arts Center. Mr. Johnson and I saw this and I saw that!" And it was great for them to broaden their horizons as much as we can and that was the point of a lot of the trips. We tried to make sure that we had two a year because they were costly but that was a good thing for the kids and they enjoyed it.

**Q:** Wendy were you at the Arts Center until its closing?

**Bridgeforth:** I'm trying to think. No, cause that's when I went to work for the Color Plate with the comic books. No, I wasn't there for the closing but I was still there back and forth volunteering and stuff like that.

**Q:** So when you think back to that time what do you think was the reason for the closing of the Arts Center?

**Bridgeforth:** Oh, the National Endowment of the Arts, they cut their funding, it was like one of the first things they cut. They said they had to cut the budget and one of the first ones to go was the national endowments of the arts and it was sad. We never had to worry about trying to raise money and we were told that we had to make some fundraising ventures and well we were uncomfortable with this because we never had to do it but if we wanted the Arts Center to continue we realized that it wasn't just us but a lot of other Arts Center's that were endowed by

the National Endowment of the Arts and it was just unfortunate that they cut the arts so they struggled through and we were able to survive that and I can't remember when it closed down but funding became less and less and we didn't know how we could get the money to do so and that was it.

**Q:** Do you think that Bridgeport would benefit from a re-opening or recreation of the Arts Center?

**Bridgeforth:** Oh definitely, I think so, a lot of people see this place as a not encouraging where the arts are concerned and I see the changes that have been made and I think that it is fantastic, people's opinions and I look at them "Well why do they have this here and why do they have this there?" and I keep on saying that Bridgeport is a desert where the arts are concerned and this is encouragement but "I don't understand this or like this sculpture that's over here, what are they painting here, nothing but graffiti" and I said yes and no but "graffiti has a history, too" and I remember working with a police officer who was trying to get the graffiti artists to do their work on buildings that are sanctioned to do so and not to destroy the building by their art and to find places for them to do their work and that was the first time that I understood about graffiti and the certain terms for it and I was telling them that it was a different form but that this was different and someone's creative vision, you don't have to understand it so much but you should appreciate the creative process because it is not something that they would view as non-essential and I said that person put their heart and soul into that piece of work and there's a reason behind it and if you saw that artist they would appreciate if you would come up said "I really don't understand why you did this and that and why did do that, why did you use these colors and everything" and I said Bridgeport is trying very hard to become more conscious of the arts and I am upset about the Barnum Festival because they took out the art show that they used to have every year and I look forward to that.

When I was attending Housatonic our art instructor told us that we had to submit a piece for the art show of the Barnum Festival [small interruption in tape] and the class I was taking, the teacher insisted that we submit a piece of work and like I said I didn't want to do this and neither did any of the students, this was my first jury exhibit and you submit your work and they look at it, criticize every piece of work and pick the ones they wanted and just eliminate the others. Naturally, I'm scared and I said I didn't want to do it or submit my work and any way, I'm working at the Arts Center and then Ben called me and he says oh Wendy, there's a phone call for you there's one of the jurors from the exhibit" and I said "Oh they're calling me to tell me to that they aren't going to use my painting" so when I called they said "Ms. Bridgeforth, we want to tell you that your painting was chosen" and I said "Oh, you want me to pick it up?!" "No, we want to tell you that you're painting received an award" and I said "Wow?!?! Thank you very much" and she got exasperated because I was being negative and taking it well --and oh, you mean my painting is going to be in an exhibit and yes it is and I said "Well, thank you very much" and I hung up and she called back to tell me when the exhibition is going to be and hopefully you'll be there and all that and it was my painting I called *The Black Madonna* and it said an original and fresh statement and original genre and doing a black Madonna has been done through the ages and in different ways that Madonna has been presented. As a matter of fact, I don't have that painting because somebody borrowed it and I would hope to get it back one day and maybe I'll put the image on Facebook and maybe I can get my painting back because that

was the first award I ever received for any of my work and my mother was so proud. She was telling everybody “My daughter put a painting in the Barnum Festival art show!” “Barnum Festival has an art show?” See nobody was really even aware of the art show and I think it’s unfortunate that they took it out and all the activities of the Barnum Festival.

So that experience was great and Rich, who taught photography – I wanted to teach and learn but he insisted that I be in the class just like everyone else and I said well wait a minute I’m your co-worker, why can’t I go in and out as I wish and he said “No, you are going to be in the class just like everyone else and do the assignment” and he was another one. Sacred Heart was having a special photography recipient for the Bicentennial and I submitted a black and white and I won third prize so that was special, too. So the things that we had to do on a learning scale and the music students playing in a band and playing certain affairs, Ralph would bring them along to play their music and this was exciting for them that they are playing with an audience and not in this room with each other but they’re out in a group like a band and “We’re playing with Mr. Williams ‘cause, you know, he has a band so we are good enough to play with him like we are in his band.” So those were good experiences.

**Q:** So as you reflect back is there anything that you would like to say about the Arts Center that you haven’t already said? Any other memories that you’d like to share?

**Bridgeforth:** It was a fun environment and everybody who walked through the doors found it a great experience and I have never heard any negativity about the Arts Center. I remember one person, she worked on the other half of the building, she worked for a program that put in windows and she just happened to walk down and open the door and she just looks around and goes “oh, what is this?!” She was floored that this program was at the other end of her building and she didn’t know it. She came everyday on her lunch break and before she went to work and she came at the end of the day because sometimes even though the doors were closed we would hang around at the end of the day and at times we did have programs at night and the kids would come. Another thing that they would come for was that we made a big pot of spaghetti, I forgot about that. We made a big pot of spaghetti.

**Q:** Now was this downtown? Or at Gary Crooks?

**Bridgeforth:** No this was at Gary Crooks. There was a kitchen which was great and some people asked “Why do you need a kitchen?” and we’d say “Oh well, we might have to cook something.” And that was a course and when we did Kwanza, Jerry Johnson introduced the Kwanza and the different days and cooked the different foods and that kitchen came in handy all the time. One time on the other end of the building their refrigerator broke down and they were going to come and take ours and we said “No, you’re crazy, you can’t take ours we’ve got the kids’ lunch in there and our lunch and we cooked the food for them and where are we going to put our stuff?”

So the kitchen was a viable force in our program also and people who walked through there, some came in like Kempton Thompkins, he came for a visit and he would start painting and one time he surprised we went to a Lynx affair at Rachel Robinson’s estate home in Stamford and he sold a painting and he was just so proud and there were people who came in that older people thinking that they couldn’t get into it but we encouraged older folks that came in to be creative

and they would try their hands in it and if they didn't like it they didn't like it but they liked the process of the creativity and that was fine.

Some of the older ones got into it more and the musicians that we had there did some work so it was the feeling of it and the woman that came to the Arts Center crocheted, her mother crocheted but she never thought anything of it and then she realized that it was a craft and she taught a couple of students basic stitches and what to do so walking through those doors was like going to another world and you go outside and say "Well, this is in the back of P.T. and this place is going on here and operating and doing wonderful things and it was the best job in the world and a few of us went to New York for one of our greatest students, Leonardo Drew, which is ironic and he was great and on the walls of P.T. they would put Leonardo Drew a picture and that's how great he was, his work is fabulous.

There's Larry Voytek who worked with Rauschenberg and he thought it was the greatest place in the world. And he was attending Notre Dame and he left Notre Dame to go to Bassick so he could be closer to the Arts Center and his parents were upset with him! It was a wonderful experience that I would take with me for the rest of my life and we all talk about how great that place was and what it did for us and what it did for the people who walked through those doors. And it was just a blessing and I'm glad that what brought that AC together and how long it survived --it was there for a purpose and so if it's ever able to happen again I think it would be good because you also serve the educational system because we took classes from the schools. They were transported to the Arts Center and it was like Waltersville, McKinley School and we taught them art as like an extracurricular for them and there was one teacher that was upset that her class was chosen over the other teachers that had been there before and she thought it was totally unnecessary "Those kids don't need to know art, they need to study their academics." And her philosophy was right, she was a tough teacher, but even she turned around and she saw the benefit of it and so we changed people's minds.

We changed their concepts, the kids' concepts and what you can and can't do and the surprise of the things you make and your creativity and if you're not into the arts you can create something else and different things you see on a daily basis. I say even the way that you dress is creative. The way you dress is fine and you can think of different styles and wearing things different ways and in different colors and one day if you dress this way and don't like it but then you get older and you get your own money then you can dress the way you want to and we told them about the style in different ways like even a chair or a cup and somebody thought of that and one of our adults took a ceramics class and you know her. Katie Moore? She did the ceramic cup of a breast and you can drink out of it! The kids were shocked! And she was shocked that she chose that to do but it was everybody loved it and she made a whole bunch for people who asked for it and that gave people a different perspective of something that is so totally avant garde and that it is a piece of art and for those that went through the Arts Center and know what I'm talking about they know that they enjoyed their stay there and meeting the people who came through those doors.

**Q:** Thank you!

**Bridgeforth:** You're welcome, this was great!

