

Angela Bowen, Dance Teacher and Gay Activist, Is Dead at 82



Angela Bowen teaching a dance class in the 1980s. She later became a passionate voice on lesbian, black and feminist issues. Credit...Virginia Blaisdell

By [Neil Genzlinger](#), New York Times July 22, 2018

Angela Bowen, who in a varied and influential life was a dancer, a dance teacher, a scholar and a passionate voice on lesbian, black and feminist issues, died on July 12 in Long Beach, Calif. She was 82.

She had had Alzheimer's disease for a number of years, her wife, Jennifer Lynn Abod, said.

Dr. Bowen shaped countless young lives through the Bowen/Peters School of Dance in New Haven, which she ran from 1963 to 1982 with her husband at the time, Ken Peters. For the students, many of whom were black and came from less-than-affluent homes, the dancing they did was only part of the instruction.

"She told each of us we were beautiful and worthy," Angela C. Robinson, who became a Superior Court judge in Connecticut, recalled at a [commemorative gathering](#) two years ago.

But that was just one phase of Dr. Bowen's life. In the 1980s she and Mr. Peters divorced and she came out as a lesbian. In the ensuing years she wrote and spoke frequently on equal rights and related issues and was active in groups like the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays.

Then, after earning master's and doctoral degrees at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., she joined the faculty of [California State University, Long Beach](#), teaching in the English and the women's, gender and sexuality studies departments, influencing yet another generation of students.

"I'm a black, lesbian, feminist, writer, activist," she once said. "I see all of those as equal functions. I feel as though I've got a mission to be out front."

Angela Doreathia Bowen was born on Feb. 6, 1936, in Boston. Her father, Charles, died when she was 2. Her mother, Sarah Allen Bowen, was determined that her children succeed, which came into play when young Angela experienced a growth spurt at age 12 and began to stoop as a result.



Dr. Bowen at Clark University, where she earned a master's degree and a doctorate. Credit...John Ferrone, via Jennifer Abod

"In school at that time, rather than simply fix your posture, they gave you a D in physical ed for having poor posture," Dr. Bowen recalled in "[The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen](#)," a 2016 documentary made by Dr. Abod. "So I had this big red D. My mother was determined it was not going to stay on my card."

And so at 14 Angela was enrolled in a dance program at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in the Roxbury section of Boston. That was a late age to begin dancing, but Ms. Lewis saw some talent in her new student and was determined to bring it out.

“I was pushed and challenged and not allowed to not do my best,” Dr. Bowen said. Dancing became a passion.

“It turned my life from gray into Technicolor,” she said.

After several years at the school — she eventually found herself teaching younger students and helping keep the books — Dr. Bowen joined [the Jazz Train](#), a musical revue playing in Europe that depicted the history of American black song and dance.

The outspokenness that would later be a feature of Dr. Bowen’s activism showed itself on the tour. The troupe would often perform on poorly maintained wooden stages, and in the opening number, which had an African jungle theme, the dancers were barefoot, which left them with painful splinters in their feet for the rest of the show. Dr. Bowen, once she joined, would have none of it.

“After the second night, I led a little strike,” Dr. Bowen recalled, resulting in a costuming change in that opening bit. “From then on,” she said, “we had sandals.”

She didn’t stay in the Jazz Train long. She returned to the United States and married Mr. Peters, whom she had met when he was a drummer at the Lewis school, in 1961. They decided to open a dance school of their own and picked New Haven, a city where the Ivy League prosperity embodied by Yale University stood in marked contrast to areas of poverty and blight.

“I deliberately set up the school right in front of where the project was,” Dr. Bowen said, and she and Mr. Peters made a point of recruiting students from there.

“When we opened the school,” she said, “we had 14 students, and half of them were not paying.”

Among the students over the years was LaChanze, the Tony Award-winning actress, who as a girl traveled up from Bridgeport, Conn., to take classes. At the panel in Dr. Bowen’s honor two years ago, she recalled being infused with confidence by the ambitious program, which included performing in Carnegie Hall.

Image



Dr. Bowen in Amsterdam after attending a World Conference on Women, in Nairobi, Kenya.Credit...Jennifer Abod

“She empowered me to feel that I could be just as beautiful as anyone else,” LaChanze said.

The school gave its final performance in 1982, and Dr. Bowen was ready to move on, and to come out.

“I wanted a life of my own,” she said. “I wanted to live among women who were political and who were lesbians and who were all different kinds of things, who were feminists and who had politics and some kind of sense of the world.”

She had discovered the writing in the black feminist magazine Azalea and volumes like “Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature.” (“I read that book so much I wore it out,” she said.) And she had met Dr. Abod, then a talk-show host, who became her longtime partner.

She moved to Cambridge, Mass., and began to speak out on racism, sexism and homophobia. Her activism was evident at rallies and in her work with groups like the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, where she was a board member, co-chair and editor of the group’s magazine.

She wrote for various publications as well and spoke at and helped organize rallies and marches.

Her activism was not limited to staged events. In 1987, Dr. Bowen, Dr. Abod and two other women wrote a scathing article in Gay Community News about a cruise package that they and dozens of other women had been sold with the pitch that it would be “Sapphic sailing,” only to find when they boarded that the ship was full of heterosexual couples, families with children and so on.

“A heterosexual world we had sought to leave behind was locked up with us on a ship cruising to Bermuda,” they complained, going on to recount instances of homophobia, including from the crew.

In 1989 Dr. Bowen was among several leaders who walked out of a fund-raising performance for a Boston health clinic that served gay and lesbian clients after two white comedians told racist jokes.

In the 1990s Dr. Bowen, who had earned a bachelor’s degree at the College of Public and Community Service of the University of Massachusetts, again embarked on a new direction, enrolling at Clark to work on advanced degrees. She earned a master’s there in 1994 and a doctorate in women’s studies in 1997. Her dissertation was on [the feminist poet Audre Lorde](#).

After more than 30 years together, she and Dr. Abod married in 2013. Her other survivors include two sisters, Alphena Bowen Clark and Catherine Bowen Tyler; her children with Mr. Peters, Ntombi A. Peters and Jomo K. Peters; a stepdaughter, Elaine Peters; a foster daughter, Sharon Smith; and a granddaughter.