I have had the honor and privilege of interviewing pioneering women in our field several times during my career as a dance therapist. In 1981 I interviewed Liljan Espenak for this publication. In the early 1990’s I interviewed Elizabeth Polk, which today is preserved on videotape. The joy in speaking with women who have contributed so much
toward advancing dance therapy knowledge was deepened when Claire Schmais, Ph.D., ADTR and Elissa White, ADTR, agreed to sit for this interview in 1996, several months before the demise of the Hunter Dance/Movement Therapy Masters Program. Therefore, it seemed fitting to ask them about the events that led them to create this seminal program in 1971. Since I was in the unique position of having worked with both women at Hunter for 17 years, I knew that their experiences would be of considerable interest to people in the profession.

As the founders of the first dance therapy masters program, Claire and Elissa set the standard for professional preparation in the field. As such, they have a unique perspective about dance therapy education and the factors that laid the foundation for the program’s formation. In addition, they have a lot to say about their friendship and professional partnership, which spans 40 years.

As trendsetters in their own right, it is fitting that theirs is the first joint interview that the AJDT has ever published. While the interview was conducted several years ago, it remains rich in content. The interview also provides a historical context within which we can understand where the field of dance/movement therapy came from and where we are today.

N: Both of you are considered among the most respected dance therapists in the world, as well as two of the most renowned dance therapy educators. In light of your accomplishments and reputations, I feel honored to be interviewing you. I would like to begin with asking each of you to speak about the experiences that led you to dance therapy.

E: I came to New York at the age of 19 to be a professional dancer and retired at the age of 21, so I had to do something with the rest of my life. I had been a studio dancer and I had never been to college and was thinking about returning to school. I remember going to New York University and thought I would become a dance major, but I realized that I had danced so long it would have been like starting over. I was in psychoanalysis at that point and was interested in combining dance and psychology in some way. Someone at New York University told me about a woman named Marian Chace who taught dance therapy at Turtle Bay Music School in New York. So I took my first course with Marian in 1963.

C: I remember specifically, I had just given birth to my third child and I was house sitting for the Seegers in Beacon, New York. I was thinking, what am I going to do for the rest of my life? I sent for a

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1 Pete Seeger is a world-famous folk singer.