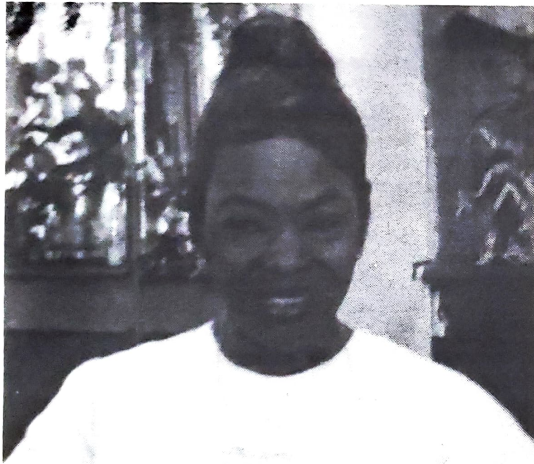


## Success Story

# Johnson Helps Inmates Escape Prison With Dance

BY FLORENCE L. REISER

Were those sounds of music and tapping escaping from the barred windows of the Taconic Correctional Facility? Yes! Four times a year, Mary Johnson has made the impossible happen for the female inmates at Bedford Hills.



THE SOUND OF TAPPING FEET...MARY JOHNSON, founder of On Time Dance Studio in Peekskill, volunteers her time teaching female inmates dance at the Taconic Correctional Facility. Photo by Lee R. Acks

Johnson, who is the founder, artistic director and choreographer of On Time Dance Studio in Peekskill, volunteers time to teach tap dancing to inmates, who call themselves "The Taconic Seven." The dance therapy program has had such a positive effect on the lives of the prisoners that other facilities are now interested in duplicating it.

"I was raised in Uniondale, Long Island, but I spent my life at Radio City Music Hall admiring the Rockettes," the dancer admits. Her mother, the owner of a dance studio, encouraged all children, boys as well as girls, to dance. Johnson began dancing when she was only three. She studied with noted

performers Leslie Uggams, Henry Le Tang and Nina Simone, and has toured nationwide with Ray Copeland, Olanji and Gregory Hines.

Rather than face the uncertainties of life as a performer, Johnson's father guided her to another profession: For five years she served as a freelance court reporter for the Department of Commerce and the Defense Department in Washington, D.C. "I left this sensitive and confidential work because I couldn't keep my feet still," she confides.

Because of her work with homeless children at her studio in Peekskill, Johnson became known to the Taconic Correctional Facility. This led to her association with the institution's Comprehensive Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment Program.

Some of the program's staff members were skeptical about the ability of the inmates to participate in the program. But they soon changed their minds when they realized the attitude and appearance of the prisoners began improving.

The artist's life has been enriched by her work with the inmates. "The experience has brought hope to the young

women, something positive to believe in . . . they will carry [it] with them for the rest of their lives," she says.

This summer, the choreographer was selected as a resident artist in the Westchester Arts Council Residency Program from a cadre of 60 candidates. These artists provide workshops and demonstrations for schools, community centers and cultural organizations throughout the county. She has also received a Certificate of Merit from the Westchester County Board of Legislators and the New York State Assembly Citation for contributions to the community. The artist was also selected by Nu Psi Zeta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority for Community Service Woman of the Year Award, the highest honor the sorority bestows.

"Dancers are special people. They're always reaching for higher goals, striving for the unreachable, the unattainable," Johnson states. "You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it come true."

*Florence L. Reiser is a freelance writer in Hastings-on-Hudson.*