

Vivian Palmer

Taylor Foundation Contest

I'm aware that I carry traits, genetic wiring, emotional baggage. I can feel it in my bones. I am constantly shaped by the people, the places, and the things I encounter. Each one flows into my life and contributes to the formation of my person like the tributaries into the Mississippi. New Orleans is my one and only home, the only place I've ever lived, and a central part of my identity. Its culture and quirks are what make me who I am, and the music and arts of the city impact my life on a daily basis. As an arts lover and a dancer, New Orleans allows me to be immersed in a rich and colorful arts scene that is unique to this city alone. New Orleans is the only place where you can walk down the street and hear a jazz quartet playing in a club on one corner, and turn and see a collection of paintings hanging for sale on the wrought iron fence of Jackson Square on another, and for this, I am eternally grateful. Tennessee Williams once wrote, "America has only three cities: New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland." Every day, I wake up and thank my lucky stars that I don't live in Cleveland. Anywhere else, the city will not embrace you at first glance and let its artful culture seep into your pores; but in New Orleans, it's just how the city says hi. Here, because art is a vital part of the city's composition, I can be passionate about it without boundaries. However, without a city that freely and unapologetically expresses itself, I don't think I would feel comfortable doing the same.

Overall, society suppresses the arts, but in this city, they are highlighted, and dance, specifically, is something that New Orleans embraces. The art of dance, in and of itself, is universal. Everyone can dance, anywhere, at any time. Dance is spontaneous, and it can begin in an instant. It requires no formal training, no formal attire, and no objects, except two mobile feet,

and because of its easy access, dance can be found in every inch of the city. From the second liners on Bourbon Street to the tap dancer in front of St. Louis Cathedral trying to earn a buck, to the partygoers at Rock 'n' Bowl and even all the way to my own dance studio, dancers move and descend further and further into the New Orleans culture, a culture that has been alive with dance for three hundred years. From New Orleans' very inception, Cajuns gathered in dance halls to preserve their culture and traditions, and the same is true for the African slaves in Congo Square. Even when they had nothing else, no freedoms, no rights, they still had their own customs, which they preserved through dance. Once a day, for a few minutes a day, dance was a slave's escape from the tragic reality that was his or her life. In a similar way, dance allows people in New Orleans to escape their realities and be someone else, if only for a moment. However, it is only because New Orleans has the arts at its core that this escape is possible. Without things like dance and music pumping through its veins, New Orleans would lose all vitality, all spirit, all culture, and in turn, I, and many other artists, would as well. Without the arts, New Orleans would just be Cleveland, and the world would suffer an unbearable loss.