

Shani Dessie Sterling

Florida State University graduate Shani Dessie Sterling, who attended the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, has received the prestigious Fulbright Full Grant, which she will use to study cultural dance in Accra, Ghana.

Fresh from her master's degree studies in dance at FSU, Sterling will observe and record the similarities and differences in cultural dance in different settings, including villages, churches and social events.

She was awarded the grant from the Fulbright program, which is the largest international exchange program in the United States. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, it offers opportunities for students, scholars and professionals to study and conduct research internationally as well as opportunities for university teaching and teaching in elementary and secondary schools worldwide.

FSU Professor of Dance Patty Phillips said that when they first met, Sterling brought a "continuing and deepening interest in her African-American roots in dance." Phillips was also impressed by her perseverance and her ability to achieve exactly what she set out to achieve.

"Shani has a quiet determination, a calm approach to every challenging situation," said Phillips. "We came to respect not only her artistry, but also these very characteristics which have now brought her to this Fulbright award."

Sterling began her dance training in Houston at the Houston Ballet Academy and at HSPVA. She graduated summa cum laude from Lamar University with a bachelor of science degree in dance and danced professionally with the Second Generation Dance Company in Houston.

She has received several other awards and scholarships, including an honorable mention in Arts Recognition and Talent Search and a graduate teaching assistantship from FSU.

In 2005, Sterling spent three weeks visiting Ghana through West Virginia University and noticed that each village's dance possessed its own aesthetic personality.

"As a dancer and performer, I focus on transmitting energy as well as communication through translation," said Sterling. "Dance, therefore, can exist as a universal form of communication, surpassing all language and cultural boundaries."

This, in fact, is the very foundation on which the Fulbright program is based. Proposed to the U.S. Congress in 1945 by Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, the program was presented as a much-needed vehicle for promoting mutual understanding between the people of the United States and of other countries.

"International education exchange is the most significant current project designed to

continue the process of humanizing mankind," Senator Fulbright once said.

Sterling's research project, "Dance in Ghana: From Village to Stage," will focus on how dance travels from remote villages to institutionalized platforms within and outside of Africa. She wants to research what changes take place as well as what remains the same, and she wants to determine what effect these have on the perception of dance.

Sterling is one of eight FSU Fulbright award winners this year. Half of the school's Fulbright applicants (10 out of 20) were selected as awardees or alternates this year, with 40 percent (8 of 20) actually winning. This is a higher success rate than most of the nation's top-producing Fulbright schools.

Sterling is the daughter of Georgia Henderson and the late Richard Henderson of Houston.