

Transcript of Interview with Studio Superstar Karen Malek

Chantelle Duffield: We are so excited to have you here. Thank you very much for spending this time with us. My name is Chantelle Bruinsma Duffield and we're going to be kicking off in just a few seconds actually. I'm so fortunate to have the beautiful, beautiful Karen Malek with us here today, which is an incredible treat for all of us.

So if you are just joining, come and say hello. Howdy-doo! If someone wouldn't mind being my little tech support bestie and just type into the comments section if you can see both Karen and I. you can see my slides. You can hear me as well. Are we all set to go on the technology side? Because that's often our - good morning! Thank you, Jillian! Thank you Suzette! Thank you Jessie. Thank you Samantha. Hello, lovely Marcy. Thank you Maddie. Thank you Charlotte. Excellent. Thanks Julie. Thank you Hayley. Thank you Rain. How are you? Thank you lovely, Emily, Tanya. We've got lots of people joining us right now and this is going to be the most magnificent, magnificent time together.

So - also just a little bit of housekeeping before we do kick off. If you have a particular question you would love to ask one of our superstars today, we're going to be having a bit of a live chat thread in the Facebook group in the planner hub. So I believe Michelle has kind of got that all ready for you. So if you find that you've had a little bit of a light bulb moment or you hear something you love, we want to be able to share this information with more of our community. So that even if they're out teaching right now or they're doing something important, they can still get some of this knowledge and gain some of this information.

So if you do have something, jump over to Facebook and do comment in the threads, that we really can help to - you know, help more people feel involved. If you want to do that, that will be fabulous. Likewise, if you've got a question, just pop it either in the chat box here or you can pop it into Facebook and we will be checking that as we go today.

So I believe we are really about ready to kick off. I think it's ten o'clock and we always like to be prompt here. So I would like to formally welcome you to today's Superstar Studio Owners Q and A session and I'm so fortunate to have called on some of my friendly buddies here in the studio industry to be able to really share with you their wisdom, their insight, their genius, their experience in what has been the keys to really not only surviving in this industry but thriving and how to create a successful business, so that you too can go out and make more of a profound difference in your communities, reach more students and share your love of performing with your kids.

So first and foremost, this is incredibly exciting. Just a little reminder for myself. So do jump into Facebook and if you have a little idea, if you've got a question, you've got something you learned from today, so you want to kind of have more information, feel free to keep the conversation going in the Facebook planner hub. So jump over into there and post your comments there.

But today, first up, I would love to introduce you to Karen Malek. Karen is a woman I admire above all and truly - you're going to blush Karen as I say this, but I really do believe that you are the reigning queen of the Australian dance industry with your level of passion. This woman is prolific and she has had experience from running studios and having a son who's a performer to now running Transit Dance to being the president of the ATOD. This woman wears many hats, has incredible accomplishments and we have so much we can learn from her.

So today, I'm just incredibly thrilled to have you here. So Karen, welcome and thank you so much for being here with us.

Karen Malek: Thank you so much. That was a beautiful intro and I'm feeling very humbled and a little emotional. Thank you.

Chantelle Duffield: That's a good start to an interview then. We're off to a good start already. So for those of you who may not have been in contact with Karen, those of you who are from overseas, Karen, it would be so lovely if you would share just a little bit about you, where you started and how you got into the dance industry and now how you've come to this place of now being the president of the ATOD, the Australian Teachers of Dance, for those who don't know.

So Karen, we would love to hear a little bit about your background and where you got to where you are.

Karen Malek: Thank you. I grew up in Latrobe Valley which is a coal-mining, electricity-producing region of Victoria in Southern Australia. I grew up in a family of 10. I'm one of eight children. So to even have my parents give me the gift of dance was an incredible opportunity. All the children were allowed to do one thing and one thing only and fortunately, for me, it was a toss-up between brownies and dance and dance was on that night and brownies not until Friday night.

So I went to dance and fell in love and the studio became my safe haven. I had a wonderful ballet teacher who had many students go on to the Australian Ballet and long, successful careers as performers in classical ballet particularly and many of those students went on to teaching careers and that is what I aspired to do.

We never did exams when I was young. When I was a teenager, she did join an organisation with parental pressure. Parents really wanted the exams and it wasn't our AD. My father said, "Where should I find the money for an exam? We've done fine up until now."

She said, well I - she may want to teach one day. I heard all this and I did a bit of a backflip because I haven't considered that as a career. So from there, I did my exams. After I did my elementary, I could do my junior teachers, which I did before.

Two years later, I decided to start a satellite school in a new town called Churchill, which was about 10 minutes from where I lived. I didn't want to open up in direct competition to my teacher.

So over time, when my teacher came to retire, a friend and I took over the school and we ran that together for about 10 years and it continued on until I left to move to Melbourne. Our son Paul got into the College of Arts in Melbourne at age 12, so year seven to year twelve program. We didn't want to board him in a hostel. So the whole family upped and moved to Melbourne and it was the best thing they ever did. I started a school in Melbourne called Dance Discovery and the slogan was "A whole new world of dance" and to discover this whole new world of dance, the how, the why, the when and the where.

I wanted children to be inquisitive, to ask questions, to understand why they were dancing and why they did something. Not to be fearful of asking questions and I wanted them to learn more than just the steps. Under that 10 years that I had Dance Discovery, I had five schools and I had employed 20 teachers. So it became a little bit of an empire which was exciting on one hand and I really worked very hard during my 40s and into my early 50s before I sold the school for family reasons.

I really did miss the children, particularly in the classroom. But my family needed me. I had a young teenager, my youngest child, also the nicest teenager. She's an absolutely gorgeous girl and was as a child and is now as an adult. But she had a period of time where she was a bit challenging.

My husband was looking sad and lonely when I came - when we all came home at the night. He no longer had children to feed and read stories to and put to bed. They had all grown up and they were out with me at the studio and when we got home at the night, he would be in the middle of a movie. So we became ships passing in the night. I was concerned that when I do retire from teaching, we wouldn't know each other.

So I thought of this in my family's best interest that I spent some time at home. I took my daughter to school every morning. I picked her up every afternoon and took her to her dance classes. I was very much hands-on and there for her and for my husband and we fell in love all over again. I have to say that we are happier now than we've ever been, which is really lovely. But at the same time, I decided to go back on the board of directors of ATOD and an opening came up to be the president.

When they suggested that to me, I was a little bit aghast. I hadn't seen that in my future. I didn't aspire to that. That did happen. I'm now coming up to 10 years in the role and coming up to another AGM and considering my future, whether I continue on in that role or hand over to some new blood.

So I had always been passionate about ATOD and knew that they could be a force in the world of education. I wanted to really take it to the next level and let the world know about it. We did get some funding from Austrade. We were able to promote ourselves overseas, take our products to overseas where we just examined in two or three countries. We were now examined in several.

We are spreading the word and I think our syllabi are very easy to follow, easy to use, lovely to teach and our membership base has grown astronomically over that ten-year period. I'm very proud of the work that I've done along with the team. It's not something you do on your own but learning about strategic planning and governance has helped me be a better dance teacher.

I have still taught in - for some other teachers along the way. I haven't lost that love of teaching and now that I have Transit Dance with Paul, here we go again. It's exciting. Very exciting. So that's a little bit of my background in a nutshell.

Chantelle Duffield: Marcy just asked, "What is ATOD?" So it's Australian Teachers of Dancing, Marcy. It's an incredible curriculum that many, many studio owners - the Asia-Pacific really now. It's probably the better definition, Karen, would you say? Of who ...

Karen Malek: Yes. But we also have members now in Canada, America, England, etc.

Chantelle Duffield: So it's the global.

Karen Malek: It is becoming global.

Chantelle Duffield: ATOD is probably the next ...

Karen Malek: Yeah. We have curriculum - we started with classical tap and jazz. We updated all our syllabi and the systems of training and then we created a hip-hop syllabus, which a lot of people were opposed to because that's an ever-changing genre.

Then we started a contemporary system of training, which is phenomenal. Again, that's ever-changing. We added a street tap syllabus to align with our tap system of training. We have a national system of training, national character and we have an amazing preschool program and have done preschool for about 20 years.

So it was about updating all our systems of training on a regular basis, which we do every seven years, and when we update something, we provide the new resources free of charge to the members, who are financial members. They can exchange their old resources for new. We didn't want to be accused of updating as a revenue ...

Chantelle Duffield: Yes.

Karen Malek: Correct. We do get profits from examinations and that helps us to update our resources. But the company is very much working for the member and their students because really the members are the people who own the company. It's a not for profit organisation and I think we have the right philosophies and goals in place for gathering those things.

Chantelle Duffield: And it all comes back to the community of members you have, which is why I so - I so value what you do with ATOD. So Karen, we've got a lot of beautiful studio owners on the line and your experience has been so fascinating in the regard that you run a rural-based studio. You've run a metropolitan-based studio. You've now kind of run more of a contemporary-based program.

I would love for you to share - reflecting on your past and what has got you here, when you've been running the studios in different locations, different styles of studio I suppose, what have you found to be - if you would distil it all into a few things that have really been the contributing factors to getting traction in the studio, to creating success and creating a thriving business, what would you say have been really instrumental in your philosophy of studio management?

Karen Malek: You have to keep reinventing yourself. You cannot rest on your laurels because someone is going to come along and open the studio perhaps nearby, perhaps not. But you want to provide your students with the best you possibly can to make them the best artist. If they are having different experiences, life experiences, going to the beach, going to the park, going to the football, going to other activities, you don't want them to do too many. We want them to dance.

But still for them to have an opportunity to have a life. You want to grow the next generation of amazing adults. They need to be able to speak to people from all walks of life. If they're good enough to be a performing artist in dance, they have to have experiences to reach into and to delve into, to be the best artist they can be.

So it shouldn't be dance, dance, dance. It should be - there should be a balance for those children. So we want to really encourage them and the parents not to push them, if possible. It's hard for some parents. But if you can provide them with opportunities, whether it's performing in the community or whether it's having guest teachers in from time to time, that you know will inspire them to be the best they can be, for them to celebrate each other's - their friends, attributes and the things that they're good at, as well as appreciate your own skills and know what they need to work on.

I think we're helping parents in the schools, mainstream schools to grow the next generation of amazing adults. You know, particularly because dance won't be in everyone's future. We want them to look back and go, "I love to dance and I'm going to take my own children to dance one day."

Chantelle Duffield: Which will then ensure the population of the arts industry going forward, which is so essential. So I guess it is - it's that kind of borderline I guess balance between - many studio owners struggle with Karen is like that level of aspiring to professional competitive excellence, but then also to sustaining the quality of a lot of dance. How do you reconcile those two? Sometimes we have to kind of push the students and sometimes we have to support them.

How do you find - when you're breeding young artists, that you find that sweet spot of getting them to really become the best of the best and still nurturing I suppose in some way because sometimes that can - they - especially in the dance industry, I find myself, my own childhood especially. I find that too that sometimes there's very much an iron fist ruling in trying to get kids to be their best.

What's your approach to that when you're working with really talented young artists?

Karen Malek: I think if they're talented, they want to be the best they can be anyway, if they have that mind set and it's about fostering positivity, so that they feel confident in their abilities. Perhaps even encouraging all your students to have a journal and for them to celebrate the successes along the way.

I did a week's workshop opportunity with a psychologist from England whose wife has a dance studio and the Australian Ballet School brought him out and he said, "Our studio is not your average studio."

The ballet bars are painted bright red, bright green, yellow, blue. There are colours in the studio because we want the children to come in and feel happy and alive. There are lines on the walls. So that when they develop or arabesque line reaches that level, it goes in the book. They get a star. Athletes celebrate a second off their personal best time or if they're an Olympian athlete, they celebrate a hundred for the second. What do we celebrate? They're always striving to be better, to do better. If we can think about encouraging them to celebrate all those little milestones and to say, "Well done. You're amazing," we are doing a great job. It's not just about teaching the steps. I think teachers will agree with that and particularly seeing the little person come alive who's a bit shy or might have two left feet.

Every child in your care is your responsibility to do the best you can by them. Their parents all pay the same money. Please don't just focus on the talented ones. The talented ones will go ahead in leaps and bounds. If they want it as a career, they're going to have it. But you have work on those other children that they're the ones who will be the audiences, for the performing arts if they liked. They're the ones who will bring their children in turn. They're the ones who will ensure that your schools continue to thrive because how true is it that we teach the children, then we teach the teachers' children and then we teach their grandchildren as our teaching careers go through the years.

Chantelle Duffield: It's such a privilege. So creating a culture of celebration is - it seems like it's one of your real philosophical pillars I suppose. You're very fortunate to be able to go and travel and work and visit studios around the world and really see what they're doing in their businesses.

So a culture of celebration. What other kind of values I suppose have you seen - creating and really adopting as the methodology that they build everything around. What else would you say kind of the interesting things that studio owners can concentrate on to be able to really create this beautiful experience for the students?

Karen Malek: When I've gone to examine, I have come to some studios where I feel they are a benchmark to aspire to. The first one was many years ago, the way the organisation - it was beautifully organised. The children were beautifully-mannered. They seemed to be very keen to please, to help one another, to be kind to each other. It was just very obvious in the running - I think it was a four or five-day exam session.

When I finished, I thought this is the school to aspire to. That was on the Sunshine Coast and I've never forgotten it. Then more recently, someone joined and their school in South Australia has become another school that I admire for different reasons.

The children come in and they say, "My name is," and they speak eloquently with good diction, with confidence. So when the examiner is checking their names, she doesn't have to say, "Oh, number one, can you tell me your name?" or "Is your name Sarah?" Some children are shy. But they come in and they speak and they're trained to speak.

Not only that. Their work ethic is incredible. I want to tap into this woman's mind. I have to share with you who she is. She's an amazing woman. She's a mother and a grandmother and her school is pretty phenomenal in terms of what I see as an examiner. So there are lots of things people can do, teachers can do to improve the running of their schools I'm sure and unfortunate that I get to see those things in other studios.

The one thing that I would like to share with teachers that I've been doing on a regular basis over the last just few years - so in my late 50s now, I asked my students how they're going to school. Put your hands up if you like school and one group of children, very few hands went up and I thought, "My goodness. What's happening?"

I do know there's a whole generation of students who can't spell. I said, "Who loves English?" because who doesn't love English? Who doesn't love to read, to write? And not many hands went up and again I was a bit mortified. Put your hand up if you have to go to the front of the room to read in class from time to time. All their hands went up.

Put your hand up if you enjoy it. Not many do. So I've taught them how to read, running two fingers down the page, so that they can look up from time to time at their audience and they can look down and they haven't lost their place.

Some people run their fingers down the side of the page. I told them that - I asked them. Who wants to be a dance teacher one day? Now most of them put their hands up. Not because they really do but because they want to please you and they want to be like their dance teacher and so many dance teachers are so young and beautiful and princess-like, which they aspire to be. They want to be like their ballet teacher or dance teacher. They fall in love with how they make them feel and I said if you want to be a dance teacher, you have to be able to spell. You have to be able to write newsletters. You have to be able to write stories.

So I want you to promise me that you're going to work super hard in class. You have to go to school. You can't get out of it. So if English is not your favourite subject, I want you to turn that around. I want you to become your favourite subject and as well as writing all

those lovely things in your dance journal. Turn the page over and I want you to start writing things from school that you can come and share with me from time to time.

A couple of months later, I said - I did math as well because I have to do invoices. Then a couple of months later, I asked them how school was going and the hands were flying. They said to me, "Oh, my teacher said my spelling is much better," "My teacher said I'm reading much better," and I thought, "Have I really helped them do better at school?" and it got me thinking,

You know, parents are busy working now where when I was a younger teacher, not everyone was working or they might have been working part-time to pay the dance space. Now, most people are working to pay off mortgages and to put food on the table and so on. I thought, "Am I really having an influence here with school?" and yes, I am.

This is not the first time I've done it. I've done it at two schools now. The improvement in their school work has been such that parents have come and thanked me. They've heard about what I said to them. I think dance teachers have a real opportunity to impact the lives of their students in more than just dance. That was just one little chat I had. I know we shouldn't be chatting. We should be dancing. That meant more to me that if they do - I've always considered if they do well in dance, they're going to do well in school.

Chantelle Duffield: That's true.

I really believe that - who are we, what are we, we are educators first. Education is more than just steps. It is holistically educating the child and if we have an opportunity to educate them in - you know, comprehensive education, my goodness, what a gift. So I was just thinking Karen, it's so funny that this - this little training here is called Superstar Studio Owners. But really given what you've just said, we should call it Super Hero because like - I mean that is - that's like above and beyond just thinking about the experience we give the kids.

What I love about what you have shared so much Karen is it's the compassion and the care for the students that see through. You know, this is not just thinking about - and then how indebted will the parents be to you. I know "indebt" is a wrong word. But how devoted could they be to you when they know the experience the kids are getting in your classes are not just about steps and dance.

You're really truly invested in the child and that for me - if we live our life in that way, we will sleep soundly all our days with a happy heart.

Karen Malek: I think because I'm a little bit older, I look back on the first school I have and my business partner has become a primary school teacher. He always has been an amazing educator. We did have lots of very talented students who went on and lots of other lovely children who have now found careers in various fields. In fact, one of them is the right hand main personal secretary to our current prime minister.

She's a lawyer and she was a child who I hanged upside down on the bar. She was the one who loved to have a joke and play around. I always never wanted to squash her personality because she was unique. She has gone on to forge this amazing career for herself. There are many others that I look back and I wonder if I spent the right amount of time on all the children or did I just focus on the ones who had talent. I always promised myself I would never have favourites because my dance teacher didn't.

So I guess I worry that I – perhaps I did subconsciously work harder with those who had talent than those who didn't and that's not how you should teach. I've learned from that and although I did get a lovely email recently from someone I've taught that 20 years ago, so a very short time thanking me for the impact I had on her. So she's a veterinarian now working in Canada. Very successful young lady and it was the most beautiful email I got. But I still worry I didn't give those early students the same.

So my philosophy now is very much to treat every child the same, to make them strive to be the best that they can be. So if that helps any young teachers out there, then I'm really happy about that.

Chantelle Duffield: Well, we're getting some incredible, beautiful comments. I mean even Carla has just written in. It's so amazing Karen. Some parents don't understand the chat time and the importance of it. It's not just about dance. It's about helping raise the future leaders of our communities, which is – it's interesting to think about – you know, while we might look at those initial 10 minutes of a class, the very first little 10 minutes, just to kind of get the connection with the kids in the room, that can be seen as a sacrifice to the real learning. However, it's quite contrary in how valuable that time is in spending – just building a relationship I suppose.

Karen Malek: Yes. But you could have a hand-out. If the children are little, I do hand-outs and it pertains to the class plan. So parents can see what they're working on. But I could even do a little note explaining to the parents today we have some chat time and I talked to them, how important the schooling is because someone who works hard in the studio classroom generally works very hard at school and I wanted to make sure that everyone is working really hard in their main formal subjects like English and math and so on.

So you could speak to the parents, keep them advised. Be transparent. I think they will appreciate that. Now I understand what was going on.

Chantelle Duffield: So one of the core philosophies we teach here in the Retention Solution, one of our programs, is that the three pillars of retention – variety, connection and progression. Essentially, if things have had the same old, same old, after a while, the retention will drop because the kids will be like, yeah, I've seen this before. Especially this generation. It needs a lot of new things to stimulate them, the connection, the relationship.

The third is progression. We really identify that if the parents aren't seeing the level of development – because it's our responsibility as teachers to be able to communicate that to the families. If we're not making it easy for the parents to see how they're learning, how they're growing, the milestones that they're achieving, it becomes harder for the parents to justify forking out cash every week. So it's interesting thinking about how we can easily communicate back to the parents, how the child is progressing.

So that's a really easy way. You've said linking a visual, tangible little hand-out. The parents know, oh, now I know what they're learning and keeping them in the loop in a way that really comes back to the lesson plan, which is brilliant. I love that idea. Thank you Karen.

Karen Malek: Your welcome. That comes back to their journal too. They're writing what they learned or putting their little hand-outs that they've decorated in their journal. The parents will see physically and tangibly what they're working on. It might just be that you've written VMO and you might have started to teach children who are a little bit older, that they've [0:31:10] [Indiscernible] and how engaging that muscle is going to make their legs look fully lengthening their arabesque line.

The parents can see they're learning about anatomy. You know, what do French words mean in ballet. It doesn't matter what the genre is. There's technique and strong technique required in every genre, including hip-hop and that can all go in there and those parents are seeing that they're learning not just how to dance but how, why, when and where. It's really important.

Chantelle Duffield: We've had a little question come in on Facebook for you Karen. So if you are on the line, please, there's a big whole chat thread happening on Facebook right now. Karen and I are on there. Michelle is there with you, if you want to come and ask more questions.

So I've got a question for Karen. Where do you see the future of the studio industry and what trends are you seeing right now? That will be kind of one - I'm not sure who wrote that in, which I didn't say. But where do you see we're going?

Karen Malek: I think there has certainly been a trend to add tricks and acrobatic skills to competitive dance. I don't see that that's entirely necessary and I think that has been to the detriment of dance in some ways. I do believe that everyone should be well-rounded and I have no problem with students learning acrobatic skills.

But I will give you an example of what I mean. A couple of years ago and I started to put a little mark on everything that was done on the right leg, particularly kicks or leaps or whatever it was. Some trick of some sort. It might have been a walk-over. It might have been an aerial. One girl has 17 things on the right leg. I don't need to see her kick her right leg 17 times. That was repetitive. It wasn't just a whole set of skills. It was actually kicks.

Then another girl, she was a leftie. She had 13 on the left leg. Because I include choreography and that was a debatable question, I appreciate that. I felt that the choreographic content was compromised and the use of pattern and direction was compromised. I'm very open. I'm seeing an amazing solo done in a spotlight circle. They didn't move off that spotlight. I've seen an amazing solo done in a diagonal line. But that was its clear intention and purpose.

For mainstream, when you're teaching children, if there's not variety, if there's not a use of levels, if the tricks and kicks and turns are repetitive, and maybe even not done well, you're not going to thrill me. Particularly if it's too hard for the child. It's pretty black and white or we could have another whole session on competitions.

Yeah, I see that trending. I'm not sure that that's a great thing. I like to see inspiring choreography and choreography well-suited to the child. In Australia, I think that we are headed towards regulation in the industry and I'm a passionate ambassador for regulation. I will be very supportive of that when it happens. I'm also very supportive of the people having teaching qualifications and there's another huge argument around that. Yes, you don't need a qualification to be a good teacher. But you can teach in a primary or secondary school without a qualification.

The things that you can learn by doing a qualification and by on-going professional development is phenomenal. There are 14 units of work in the national qualification in Australia and that covers a broad range of topics. But it is just teaching basic dance. So for young people starting out and even for older people, that's a great start. That is the prerequisite to doing the diploma, which is based on medium level and high level dance.

So I'm a passionate advocate for having a piece of paper and I think if compulsory registration comes in one day and I believe it will in the younger teacher's lifetime. It probably won't in my lifetime of teaching. Hopefully in my lifetime because I would like to see it happen, but maybe not in my teaching lifetime because it will take great consultation with the industry.

But I do see that is where the dance industry is going and I think it needs to. We need to continue to evolve and develop.

Chantelle Duffield: That will serve our students. That will serve our businesses, the level of professionalism, the level of insight and learning. I was speaking to a teacher the other day actually and she has been teaching for 30 years I think, I believe. She has changed her classroom kind of setup and how she kind of engages with the kids. She has tried different things on how they enter and how they exit. She said, "I thought I was an old dog who couldn't learn new tricks. I think in a whole different new way." You know, the level of insight she has into her students has completely shifted and she's really engaged in a whole other level as well. In her passion for coming into the room with her kids, because she has got more ideas and more fulfilment and ...

Karen Malek: That's wonderful.

Chantelle Duffield: It's brilliant! That's - when we think about - like energetically, I believe that when we come into the classroom with our eyes shining bright and our kind of - oh, let's try this. That is infectious and the more professional development we can do to bring that and secondly, to mentor our team of teachers in that, in getting their eyes sparkling. That's our role.

So first of all, our role is take responsibility for making the joy. Then to be able to model that and empower our teachers to be able to deliver that same level of contagious enthusiasm and passion for dance, passion for music with their students. It's for me the heart of what our role is as studio owners really. That's my little soapbox, Karen.

Karen Malek: I think that you are spot on. The best dance teachers never stop learning. They're always going off and doing professional development of some sort. That's why they're with you, to gain more information on how they can improve, how they can run their businesses better.

I still do professional development because I don't think I know it all. I would love to know it all but I never will, because I'm never going to stop learning. I think that's a great thing. I now teach teachers and it's such a joy and what we've shared with one another. Some people share experiences I've never heard of. That's an eye-opener. You know, every year I hear something new that I can put in the back of my mind and keep as something. If I need to deal with in the future, I have a heads up on it.

Chantelle Duffield: When you've watched - oh, I've got more questions too. Oh, some good questions. This is a lovely question that has come in for you Karen actually and I will come back to what I was thinking. What are you most proud of? And actually working with - maybe let's kind of keep this to your role kind of mentoring the industry. What are you most proud of when you've worked for studio owners and educators across the field? What makes you really get all warm and fuzzy?

Karen Malek: Wow. I know it's not industry-related. But it has to be my family first. I can't help but not go family first and the support we have for one another. They've enabled me to be who I am today and to do what I've done. Then I guess I have always had a philosophy

of not looking back and having regrets, to doing what is honest in the moment. Even if I make mistakes along the way, that's OK.

So today, I'm super proud of where ATOD is now from where it was. I'm super proud of Transit Dance, which is only two years old. We're just coming to our third year and if anyone out there would love - are in Melbourne and would love to come and visit, please do. It's an environment where I open the door to enter in the morning and I smile.

It has become my happy place because everyone is smiling. Everyone is learning. Everyone seems to be on the same age, supporting one another and inspiring one another and right at this moment in time, that is really my happy, exciting place. I do love warm and fuzzy. The people I've met on my journey, going back to Indonesia to examine in November for the first time in a long time. It was so great to see all those friends I've made over the years and more recently to be in Thailand and to see all these people I haven't seen for about four years.

I would give them a hug and see how their scores are progressing. I think the people I meet actually. They've helped me think about that. Thank you for that question. I think the people I've met and the connections I've made and more people helping one another as teachers and not keeping all their knowledge to themselves, which is what that is. I have served my teachers so many years ago. Yeah.

Chantelle Duffield: It's the learning from each other and that's - I'm very passionate about collaboration within our industry because I feel that none of us have the answers and to be able to share what's going to make our lives easier, to - we kind of come back to - we zoom right back to our core vision. What is our core reason for doing what we do. It's to reach kids and I really believe if we can - if we can help collectively do that across the industry, my gosh, what we could do. My gosh, instead of having closed doors, what we could achieve. That excites me. That really excites me.

Karen Malek: Yeah. I have a teacher who opened a school very close to one of my schools and he advertised in the building underneath where I was with those little ...

So I tore one off and I went upstairs and I rang her and I said, "Oh, congratulations. I thought I would welcome you to the area. Would you like to catch up for coffee?" She went quiet. She said, "Why are you being so nice to me?" I said, "Because I try to be nice." I actually said - she's from New Zealand and she had been living in Australia I think about four years. She said, "You're the first dance teacher that has been nice to me." I said, "Oh, there are lots of us and if we meet for coffee, we actually might like one another. We might be able to help each other. You know, my beginners classes are on Monday nights. If yours are Tuesdays and we can help someone who rings, maybe we can suggest each other's schools when we get inquiries."

So we met up and we're still good friends. Why not? Isn't that what this industry is about? It's so small. Why not help one another? Oh, a teacher down. If you've got a spare teacher, that can help. No, I don't or yes, I do. Oh wow. That's awesome. Go help her.

Chantelle Duffield: People respond to different - it's so weird, Karen. Every studio is different and I truly do believe that each studio is this beautiful, unique little entity in itself and that has particular values and particular intentions of what they want to - there should be an art different from the studio down the road. If we each cultivate with intention, with thought and with heart and with care, if we really think about the experience that we want to deliver, that differentiation will carry and that is for me the essence of studio marketing and studio management really. It is helping you to - helping each studio to really discover

what they're passionate about and to embody that across every touch point in the studio so that students and families will be attracted to them because of what makes them unique. Not because of the other studio down the road, but because of the experience.

If we can each embody that level of just doing what we do, with such integrity and with such excellence, that is the only thing we can do and collectively if we all elevate - if we can all elevate the experience that we're giving all of our studios, that is when we're going to see the arts thing that are prominent across communities, getting more funding.

You name it. Everything we do, it starts with us. It starts with us as a studio owner and - the masterminds that we have and the brilliant people we have in this industry, my gosh, their brains and their contributions are immense. So with our powers combined, with Captain Planet - he used to bring it together there, Karen. To really think what we could share and what we could do. What is your dream? What's your dream for our industry, Karen? What would you love to really see happen, like 50 years, 100 years from now? What would you love to really see.

Karen Malek: OK. Wow. The actual dream is more short term. But long term, I would like to see people getting on with each other and let's not beat around the bush. Some people don't get on with people they were once friendly with because now they're rivals.

If you think about it in a different way, you actually could be amazing support for each other. That may never happen. But what a lovely thing to aspire to. So if the younger generation can start meeting - I see it happening now in Facebook. At least it's becoming a little more prevalent particularly in my hometown. I see teachers getting together and having checks about how they can improve things or how they can deal with the situation, which is really inspiring and uplifting to see. I would like to see the industry regulated. I would like to see people who wish to teach, to take that career so seriously and to have training in teaching philosophies, understanding how children learn and they all learn differently, to understand anatomically how to teach technique, to step bones, how to have correct alignment of the body because you're responsible for the welfare and well-being of children's bodies and how they grow and to be able to correct the forward tilt of the pelvis or rolling on the ankles or so on.

It's another incredible gift you can give that child. But without knowledge, just learning the steps is really not quite enough and you have a great responsibility to keep up with your professional development and have qualifications regardless of the naysayers and those who don't believe in them. They're valuable. They're valuable and it shows that you care and it shows that you want to learn.

If in itself it won't make you a great teacher, experience will help with that. So for the future, regulation, people who are really dedicated to professional development and support for each other in the industry is going to be a win-win. Yeah.

Chantelle Duffield: We have quite a few comments coming through about qualifications, Karen. I believe you actually got a program that does provide teacher qualifications. You want to tell us a little bit about that? Because I think people might be curious. It might be good to see what is available.

Karen Malek: You have to be a registered training organisation to deliver qualifications on the national framework. Transit Dance is not an RTO but we auspice with ATOD. So the qualifications we deliver are not ATOD qualifications. They're the qualifications on the national framework that ATOD as an RTO has on their scope and we in turn ...

So anyone can auspice with ATOD to deliver qualifications. But there are - there is a framework and there are compliance regulations and so on. So we offer a diploma in dance. We will offer advanced diploma in dance eventually and perhaps diploma of musical theatre. We now do diploma of dance in both contemporary stream and performing arts stream and I [Indiscernible] management.

In the first year, I had about 10 teachers. In the second year, I had 15 to 20 and this year, I have 50 teachers.

Chantelle Duffield: Holy moly!

Karen Malek: I know. I'm so thrilled. The reason they came to do the course was they may already be on the fulltime course. So they're doing part-time over two years. They want another string to their bow, something to fall back on. What if they have an injury? One of them was I've come to realise I'm passionate about teaching and I want to teach. So that's exciting. She will still finish the fulltime training.

Others are there because they've been teaching a long time and they never had an opportunity in the country they originated from and so now they're in Australia. They're coming to get that piece of paper. One is now working with disabled children. She's in her 40s or 50s. One from Mexico. From all over the world, they've come to live in Australia and the reasons are varied, but they're real and to have so many people wanting to study and be better teachers is amazing. So many fulltime dancers are looking for work. Who do you want to employ? Someone who's learning the steps - which I'm sure they're all. Some of them are amazing teachers because they've been helping at their studios and assistant teaching before they came to fulltime.

Do you want someone who's actually studying to be a teacher as well and/or completed their teacher training? Another dimension to what they can bring to your studios.

Chantelle Duffield: I think that's a really tricky element. I was speaking with a lovely studio owner in - it's a very central state in the States. Nebraska! I was speaking to a studio owner in Nebraska this week, Karen, and she values - her whole philosophy in her studio is excellence. So she wants to hire the very best teachers. The challenge is they're always getting a - you know, I am off on a gig for the next eight weeks. I can't come to class and it's this fine line between - again, like who we hire, who we bring into the experience of the kids and the consistency of how to - like you were saying, we can hire educators or we can hire dancers and performers. That's a very - for a lot of studio owners, it's that kind of tricky thing to navigate and - how do you manage that? How do you find that balance?

Karen Malek: We now have a philosophy - well, we have had from day one. That we want all our educators to be qualified. It's very simple. If they're not, they need to have a look at doing the qualification by RPL, recognition of prior learning, and they're doing the course.

Chantelle Duffield: Yeah.

Karen Malek: So that we can say that we only hire qualified, experienced teachers. There is value in the tutors who have had professional careers. If they are continually going off, that can be disruptive. That doesn't mean they can't bring added value in workshop experience and so on. We want - for children having normalcy through their training is advantageous to having several different teachers coming in and it takes them time to get to know the children and where they're at. If you can employ someone for 12 months at a time, that's a bonus. I think that it's up to teachers to be discerning as to the type of teacher they employ and are they the right fit for your philosophy.

Are they dictatorial type teachers? Are they assertive? Are they passive? Are they aggressive? In your process of elimination or interview, you really need to ascertain the right fit for your school and what you want to achieve for your students.

Chantelle Duffield: One of the things that we do, it's actually in the third module of the Studio Expansion Program is we list the studio's core values. So we distil essentially their essence, their philosophy, their intention of the experience of the student into like five keywords and those keywords form the foundation of all our marketing and all of our kind of retention strategies. But they actually also - we then turn that into a hiring framework. So we then hire based on the five key values. So when we're writing the job description for a teacher or for an admin staff, we actually write it with outcomes to meet the values. Then we have interview questions that aren't asking necessarily just for your experience but we actually take it further to be actually asking - so let's say one of the core values for a studio is giving kids confidence.

So we will then actually have a series of questions that elicit from the teacher - before they have even set foot in the studio, before they even come into contact with the child. Can you share some experiences of how you have helped give a child more confidence? We kind of go through whether it's teamwork, whether it's artistry, whether it's excellence, whether it's - so we want to know from a cultural perspective, when you're bringing someone in to meet your precious, precious, precious students, that they are going to embody this same philosophical intention that you do and that for me is where we start to see across the board the excellence in the studio owners.

We're all on the same page and that for me is - it's pretty exciting when you see that happen and teachers go, "My gosh! It's a whole different way of looking at bringing on teachers. It's pretty fun."

Karen Malek: It is. I worked in family law for 20 years.

Chantelle Duffield: That's right.

Karen Malek: I did. My boss who was really an amazing lawyer, and always there for his clients, and never lied - because I've worked for several. But this one was amazing. I worked for him for a very long time. He never wanted to see our school results. He wanted to know what the hobbies were. What did we do outside of work?

By knowing that I danced and that I taught and by knowing that the girl next to me was an equestrienne rider and had her own horse, he knew we were up early and we were hard workers. That's what he wanted. Hard workers and yet also had to be able to spell.

His interview process was very different from the norm. He was way ahead of his time. He was very much into plain speaking and those philosophies are really engendered in what we just spoke about. It's amazing help that you're giving all these wonderful teachers. Fantastic.

Chantelle Duffield: It is beautiful. Well, I know we've had so many beautiful comments here. Just people going like yes, yes, yes, love everything that you are saying Karen. I'm sure everyone on the line here will just maybe just share one little thing, one little - just to celebrate Karen and to thank her so much for giving her time so generously with us today. If you would just like to type in a comment that was your favourite thing you learned from Karen or what resonated with you most, that will be so lovely for us to pass back to Karen and to think as our way of thanking.

We've had people say that - this is so inspiring. We've heard people say you're a woman after my own heart. Yes, yes, we work together without fear. There are enough children to go around. Absolutely. Kylie said that teaching dance is more than just teaching the steps, which is so much a part of who you are Karen. Joe said I fully agree about the commitment to qualifications, the certification for instructors. It's a great presentation, which is beautiful.

Chantelle said that we're growing the next generation of adults. They're going to take that with you, with them. Carla said thank you so much Karen. You just re-instilled everything that we all strive to achieve with our students and communities. Live without fear and help to raise the future community leaders. It takes a village to raise a child.

Marcy has said with you Karen that she has taken away - that she's going to celebrate the milestones with students. Janelle has said that it's all such great advice. Thank you with [0:56:26] [Indiscernible].

Rene has said keep reinventing. But is 40 too old to get more educated? Rene! You're just beginning my friend.

Karen Malek: They're your best years.

Chantelle Duffield: Absolutely. Jillian said, "I love this. I thought I was old in the performing arts area. But I'm revitalised and excited." Beautiful, Jillian. Megan has said, "I love that you discourage teachers being enemies. I too reach out to local studio owners and offer mutual respect and if every one of us just takes these little things that Karen has shared and really embodies them as studio owners, my gosh what an industry we all have." thank you so much.

Well Karen, I am just so grateful we had this time with you today. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I adore you and every time I walk away learning more and having more commitment to really bringing our heart to what we do in our studios. So thank you so much.

Karen Malek: Oh, it has been my pleasure. It's so lovely to chat with you all. Thank you for inviting me Chantelle.

Chantelle Duffield: Oh, you are welcome. You are wonderful. You have a beautiful day, Karen.

Karen Malek: You too. Bye-bye now.