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Eternal Creative Flame

“I heard my knee pop.”

On July 5th, 2024, Karen Chien almost lost her creative livelihood, dance, when she tore her ACL during a competition. The injury left her unable to take part in what had been her greatest passion since she could walk, and resulted in a long-term absence from the sport. Dance is one of the most unpredictable careers out there, with its reliance on the body, and this injury shocked that idea into Karen’s brain. Despite the mental and physical toll of the injury, she was able to take that opportunity to embrace other parts of her creative spirit, opening up other pathways to a performing arts career. She was able to pursue theatre and a hair business, and brought more music and art into her life, fully encompassing the joy that it is to have a creative career.

As a child, Karen always loved to express herself. Whether it be drawing, singing, or dancing. The second of three children, she was always very independent. She was driven, ambitious, and self-assured. Her parents could see her creative spirit from the beginning. She had a clear stage presence, front and center at every school Chinese New Year performance, and at the Mountain View Community Center. Her mother, Ning Wan, is a creative person herself, but hadn’t been able to pursue her passions growing up as an immigrant. “My parents were just trying to make a living. I

felt I had to really focus on education, so I didn't really have the opportunity to study art which I also really enjoyed." Now that they were in the position to, she wanted to give her children that opportunity. So at two years old, Karen's parents signed her up for dance class at the Community Center, nurtured her drawing and singing, and tried to allow her to find her passion. When she showed an aptitude for the arts, her parents continued to encourage her, and she moved to Dance Academy USA, a more competitive school.

Through school and competitions, she fell more and more in love with dance. Of course, the common worries about pursuing an artistic career were often on her mind, but her conviction was strong. This was what Karen wanted to do with her life. Her mentality was: "It's all based on how hard I work and how much dedication and passion I want to put into it," and this allowed her to fully embrace her passion.

Each year she committed more and more time to dance. She often had to sacrifice other passions in order to make time, even skipping school to go to competitions and conventions. As her skill grew, she continued to be inspired by the people around her. She was able to start choreographing for her high school dance program, Dance Spectrum, and shared the value of dance with people who had never experienced it before. She learned from great teachers and peers in competitions, and got to meet people from the industry who would be able to help her in the future. "You're meeting people from all over the world who are working at the same thing, and you get to dance with them," Karen told me in awe. The competitions had led her to meet faculty

that had worked on big Hollywood productions, as well as choreography for musical artists, and will be able to serve her as a connection into the industry when it becomes her time.

These competitions make professionals aware of up-and-coming performers, which allows the performers to get their foot in the door. In the dance industry, connections are essential. They are the method to get jobs, and in an industry where work is seasonal and irregular, as well as very competitive, your livelihood is the people you know. Only about 10% of dancers who pursue a dance career end up dancing professionally (Bellerose). And even if you do become part of that 10%, it is still immensely hard to book jobs, especially well-paying ones, like with the Janet Jackson show, where less than 1% of the people who auditioned booked the show. The way to get those opportunities is to have connections, so these competitions become essential to all up-and-coming dancers. The competitions also serve as an example for the audition experience for future projects, as the professionalism that is taught there is the same as that of the real industry. Competitions are a good starting point in a career that is hard to break into, and Karen was in a great place in that respect.

In 2023, Karen Chien won the title of Teen Eternal Flame, the highest ranking title for her age group, for the Heat national dance competition. She was chosen to represent the competition for the next year, and give individual performances at the same competition the following year. When I was speaking with her, it was so clear how

much this competition had meant to her. “I feel like I found myself, growing up there. That convention felt like such a safe space for me, to meet other talented people.” After that competition, she was able to travel even more with other companies and learn from different people.

Karen had always tried to be aware of her level of dance commitment. But because of her accomplishments, she had ended up overcommitting to dance, to the point where it was affecting other aspects of her life. Since the pandemic, she began spending four or more hours, Monday to Thursday, in dance, with competitions on the weekends. Now, she was traveling with three different dance companies, all with different requirements and time commitments.
“A lot of times I had to get there by Friday, so that means I’d fly either Thursday night or Friday morning, sleep schedules got messed up, like every week.”

This busyness is not uncommon, unfortunately. The competitive dance world creates a perpetual working state for most of its dancers. Children are being pushed to work as hard as possible and to fill up their schedules in order to keep up with the rest of the children. “They forget what life looks like without constant dance” (Long). It’s known that dance competitions should regulate more healthy training regimens, but such policies have not been put into place yet, so many dancers are still easily susceptible to overloading themselves and burning out or hurting their bodies.

Karen and her parents tried to be mindful and made sure she was going to a chiropractor and taking care of her body. But with the level of intensity that she was committing to dance, it was impossible to fully prevent an injury. And so in the competition right before heat nationals in 2024, a year after she had won the same national competition as teen eternal flame, she tore her ACL. She describes herself, on stage, thinking, “This doesn’t feel right, I feel like my knee is gonna buckle.” She ended up having to stop in the middle of the performance. “‘I can’t do this,’ so I just sat on the side of the stage in the wing, and I watched them finish their dance.”

She reflected that she hadn’t been taking enough care with her body and was overworking herself prior to the injury. “Things got really overwhelming really quickly, but I kind of was just like ‘oh no, I chose this, I have to deal with it.’” In the weeks beforehand, she had been to one competition after another, working herself to the bone. “I had way too many things that I committed to, I was really pushing myself that week to over my limit, and my body just gave up.”

After the performance, she was taken to the hospital, and the following weeks would be filled with MRI’s and contradicting advice from different doctors. Eventually, it was determined that she had only partially torn her ACL, meaning that she had a choice of whether or not to pursue surgery. Ultimately, they decided to go without surgery, instead opting to use physical therapy and time to strengthen the muscles on the knee and repair the tear.

“I think it definitely puts life in perspective, that the body is fragile.” Said her mom. The rug had been pulled out from under her, and she was falling. “You have a dream, you want to be a dancer forever, and then all of a sudden, her injury just made everything very uncertain in life.”

According to a British study, eight in every ten dancers get an injury per year, and it affects their ability to book jobs and provide themselves income, as well as sets them back in terms of physical state (Dobson). Dancers can lose years of progress on their career and skill in a split second, and it is never something that can be predicted or prepared for. About 14% of dancers had injuries that prevented them from performing for over eighteen months, with recovery not even being guaranteed in all cases (Dobson). In Karen’s case, her recovery was not straightforward.

“It took months, like probably 4 or 5 months to completely get all my flexibility back,” Karen reflected. She had to take so much time away, but ended up reinjuring herself in September because she was so desperate to return to dance. Her mother remarked that she really needed to “Face it one step at a time, you know, you can’t really rush anything.” But patience is the most difficult thing when you are unable to get your feelings out the way you normally would.

“I wasn’t able to give my all, which made me feel so guilty, because I was like, why am I even here?” Karen said. Without motivation or opportunity for dance, she felt lost. “I think she was at a really low point in her life,” said her mom. She wasn’t able to

go to practice and was suddenly left with a ton of time after school, and nothing to fill it. So she began re-exploring old hobbies.

Her creative flame was still burning inside of her during recovery, but without dance as an outlet, she needed another way to express herself. Her boredom and antsy energy led her to the other creative paths she had left to the side when pursuing dance. She spent more time drawing, which she had been doing since she was a child, but didn't have much time for when dance was at the forefront of her life. She got to bring music back into her life, not just the consumption of it, but the creation of it, which she did by starting a band. She started a hair business too, pulling from her own love for expressing herself through hair, and instead facilitating that for others. "I like to know that I'm helping people customize their character designs, it is definitely a way that people represent themselves. I think it's really special." Finally, she got to be part of the extracurricular she had set her eye on in freshman year, but hadn't had the chance to experience. She got to join the theater. After seeing the play from her freshman year, she had fallen in love with the art. "Everyone's playing their own part, and you get to create something so beautiful that you all love together." Now that she had more time, she was able to audition and land the leading role of Persephone in Hadestown."Maybe I can sing and act, like a triple threat, perhaps," which, funnily enough, was a school award that she ended up winning later in the year.

These beautiful opportunities were formed from an unfortunate situation, and as a result, Karen was able to reapply herself to her lost passions, solidifying that she wanted to pursue an artistic career no matter what.

Creative careers are essential for creative people, and the work created as well as the experience of making the work brings so much joy to everyone involved. “It’s been a lifetime of feeling the soulful, powerful urge to immerse myself into ways of bringing my ideas to life,” said Amy Schmidt, explaining why she chose an artistic career (“Artists & creatives”). When creativity is a calling, it won’t let go, and Karen didn’t intend to let it go either.

Her parents’ continued support of her dancing was a big help in allowing her to succeed in dance and otherwise. Her dad organized her competitions, creating extensive calendars and google sheets of every convention, company, and opportunity for Karen. “He puts it as his wallpaper on his computer so he can look at it every time, like Dad, you freak,” said Karen, before profusely expressing her gratitude to him.
It was clear how meaningful she found her parents’ support to be, and how essential it was to her journey. She spoke about how at first they had nerves about it, but made sure to make her feel safe and supported to do what she loves.

“He said it’s important to find a balance between choosing something that you love and something that will actually support you in life and make you money,” Karen explained, speaking about how much that meant to her. “I think that’s really important,

and that's what I think being supportive is, is helping this person, not just letting them go, but helping them figure out what the right way to come across it is." Her mom is just as supportive, going to all of her competitions with her, watching her dance, "I'm just so thankful because she is always there with me."

Studies have shown that parental support of artistic hobbies in children will improve their temperament and develop their critical thinking skills (Tang). Supporting your children and encouraging them to explore art will not only help them in that field, but will promote better self-regulation and motivation as well. Karen's parents have proven this, with their unrelenting support of her and their trust in her, and should be an example to all parents of creative children. Karen has grown to be an incredibly well-adjusted person who cares about all of the people around her. Her appreciation of her parents' support does not go unnoticed, and neither does her love for the arts.

Even when she was unable to dance, she still found other ways to express her creativity, and in doing so, found fulfillment. No matter how challenging an artistic career can be, it will still be worth it to share your art with the world, in any shape or form you choose. When given the means, you should pursue it, and when your child has a love for the field, you should support it. The joy that art brings to people's lives is invaluable in every way and should be cherished as such.

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