9 questions with Threads Dance Project founder Karen L. Charles

By Chris Howlth
chowlth@pioneerpress.com

About 30 years ago, dancer/choreographer Karen L. Charles began to think seriously about starting her own dance company. But it took a tragedy to make the company happen.

Her newest piece is inspired by her company’s book “Warrior of the Light.”

“I wrote it all down, my plan, on paper and then stack it, in a dresser. Every once in a while, I would pull it out of the dresser, read it and think, ‘No, I’m not really sure,’” says Charles, 51, whose relentlessness has something to do with having a full-time job and two kids. But when Charles’ father died in 2010, leaving her just enough money to put together a dance piece, she realized it was time to stop thinking about it.

“He was a postal worker and, just before he died, he told my mom he had always wanted to be a doctor. He had never told anybody that before. Never,” recalls Charles, who has danced with several companies and has degrees in dance and computer science from Texas Christian University. “So I told my Mom, ‘I don’t want to do this, I want my children leave this dream they always had this dream to be a choreographer but I never tried to do it’.”

Charles — formerly an administrator at Purdue Arts High School in Minneapolis and Main Street School of Performing Arts in Hopkins — set to work creating pieces, holding auditions and putting together a company. That company, Threads Dance Project, is named for the threads that tie Charles’ grandparents’ quilts. Threads’ newest piece, the athletic and moving “Warriors of Light,” will perform this week end at Cowles Center for Dance & Performing Arts.

Charles says she’s always looking for new ways to connect audiences to the art form of dance and, with “Warriors of Light,” she may have found the perfect one for the retooling Twin Cities book clubs.

“Warriors of Light” was inspired by Paolo Coehlo’s book, “Warrior of the Light” in consciousness with three bookstores (Avalon on Grand and Subtext in St. Paul and Magers & Quinn in Minneapolis), Charles had a series of book club meetings to discuss themes in the novel, which is a favorite of hers.

“I read over five years ago and it has really stuck with me. The whole world is so dark and the idea in the book, this idea of being a warrior of light in the world, really resonated with me,” says Charles, who uses her hands so much when she speaks that it’s almost like they are dancing. “I’ve always liked, ‘How do I make this into a piece’?”

Like most choreographers, Charles usually begins creating a piece by listening to music but for “Warriors of Light,” there wasn’t any music you. She said she’s been getting ideas for visuals that might suggest movement to her. She then spoke with her company — for “Warriors” it’s eight women and two men — to see what they took away from the book.

“Of all of them loved it. One dancer declined to read “Warriors of Light” because she said it felt too concrete like a self-help book — which, in some ways, he is, but the dancers came around eventually, helping to create a more emotional portion of “Warriors of Light,”” says Charles. “It’s women and other dancers read our thoughts about who they are and who you’d like to become.”

“She encouraged us to find the emotions it in without being overly dramatic,” says dance company manager Michael Cornell Marrs. When it came time to create the music for “Warriors of Light,” Charles turned to a composer very close to home: Twin Cities legend Sundahl & Moore, who happens to be the music director of her church, Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, and who will perform much of the music live this weekend.

Creating the piece with the dancers and with the help of Moore and her other collaborators challenged Charles, who refers to herself as a “controlling person,” but it also helped simplify the humanistic themes of “Warriors of Light.”

“I held奋战 against the feel of the piece but then I said, ‘Ok, just I don’t really care as long as we feel she felt surprised coming up with something. Maybe that’s why she became the real label to Chicago, whose music has changed quite a bit as it has been used by Threads’ dancers. “I’ve learned to be pretty good at pushing back, if I don’t like something or I don’t feel right for the piece,” Charles says.

Charles — who came to the Twin Cities 35 years ago when her husband, Kenneth, took a job with General Mills — says her pieces typically take on a life of their own as she and the dancers work together.

“Things change to such an extent that she says, ‘When I audition dancers, I get crazy ideas. If you can’t learn fast, I can’t use you’.”

Her education background comes in handy with Threads, whether she’s touching lives on dancers or trying to get new ways, like the book clubs, to interest people in dance. In fact, even after giving up her education career to focus on Threads, Charles says that when she’s asked who she is, she still responds, “A teacher.”

As her answers to our 9 questions reveal, there is still plenty of teaching to be done.

G. When did you know you wanted to be a dancer?
A. Age 5: I kept tapping my mother’s legs, and she agreed I could go classes.

She later told me she always thought I would ski, but I never did. With choreography, I was working at Purdue and I would often choreograph a dance for the kids there when we would have those shows. One day, one of the teachers said, “You know, you’re good at this.”

Q. What would you do if you had one million dollars?
A. Create an environment so I could expand my work with dancers, especially dancers of color.

Q. What’s your motto?
A. You can do anything you want in life, just not all at the same time. And that is related: Life is about choices, so be careful of the choices you make.

Q. Who do you admire most?
A. My parents. My dad was strict but always supportive. They grew up in the Depression and they didn’t understand dancing, really, but they always supported me. My mother taught for 37 years and she, I think, is a person who is working to make other peoples lives better.

Q. Who would you play in a movie?
A. An African-Latino, there’s something about the way she moves through space and the way she speaks.

Q. What was your first job?
A. I worked at Six Flags amusement park (near Atlanta), in the candy store, when I was 15. I was hardly any eight long time.

Q. What’s the best thing about your job?
A. I get to do something I love all the time.

Q. What are you thinking about when you’re beginning a piece?
A. I get it done! It’s good enough!

Back with Threads Dance Project

For Threads Dance Project

"What's Warriors of Light?"
What Threads Dance Project

When: 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday

Where: Cowles Center for Dance & Performing Arts, 528 Hennepin Ave., Minneapolis.

Tickets: 520-524-612-206-3600 or cowlescenter.org

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