

## Spotlight &gt; Dance

9 questions with Threads  
Dance Project founderKaren L.  
Charles

By Chris Hewitt  
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About 20 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 the book  
'Warrior of the Light.'

"I wrote it all down, my plan, on paper and then stuck it in a drawer. Every once in a while, I would pull it out of the drawer, read it and think, 'No, I'm not ready yet,'" says Charles, 51, whose reluctance had 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 closing that drawer.

"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 die, telling my children I always had this dream to be a choreographer but I never tried to do it.'"

Charles — formerly an administrator at Perpich Arts High School in Minneapolis and Main Street School of Performing Arts in Hopkins — set to work creating pieces, holding auditions and putting a company together. That company, Threads Dance Project, is named for the strands that tie Charles' grandmother's quilts. Threads' newest piece, the athletic and moving "Warriors of Light," will be performed this weekend at Cowles Center for Dance & the 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 reading-loving Twin Cities: book clubs.

"Warriors of Light" was inspired by Paulo Coelho's book, "Warrior of the Light." In conjunction with three bookstores (Avalon on Grand and Subtext in St. Paul and Magers & Quinn in Minneapolis), Charles led a series of book club meetings to discuss themes in the novel, which is a favorite of hers.

"I read it over five years ago and it has really stuck with me. The 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. "So I kept thinking, '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 yet. So she went back to the book, combing it for images that might suggest movement to her. Then she spoke with her company — for "Warriors," it's eight women and two men — to see what they took away from the book.

Not all of them loved it. One dancer declined to read "Warriors of Light" because she said it felt too much like a self-help book — which, in some ways, it is. But the dancers came around eventually, helping to create a poignant portion of "Warriors of Light" in which they move while other dancers read aloud their thoughts about who they are and who they'd like to become.

"She encouraged us to find the emotions in it without being overly dramatic," says dancer and company manager Michala Cornell Martinez.

When it came time to create the music for "Warriors of Light,"

Charles turned to a composer very close to home: Twin Cities legend Sanford L. 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 solidify the humanist themes of "Warriors of Light."

"I told Sanford about the feel of the piece but then I said, basically, 'Do what you want,'" says Charles, adding that she felt surprisingly calm about giving up control. Maybe that's because she retained the right to disagree with Moore, 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 if it doesn't feel right for the piece," Charles says.

Charles — who came to the Twin Cities 15 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 tell them: 'If you can't learn fast, I can't use you.'"

Her education background comes in handy with Threads, whether she's teaching moves to her dancers or trying to find 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:



Threads Dance  
Project

SUMMER STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

**Q. When did you know you wanted to be a dancer?**

**A.** Age 5. I kept bugging my mother and she agreed I could go to classes. She later told me that she always thought I would stop, but I never did. With choreography, I was working at Perpich and I would often choreograph a dance for the kids there when we would have these shows. One day, one of the teachers said, "You know, you're good at this. You could do this."

**Q. What would you do if you had a million dollars?**

**A.** Create an endowment so I could expand my work with dancers, especially dancers of color.

**Q. What's your motto?**

**A.** You can do everything you want in life, just not all at the same time. And this 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 quiet 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, to this day, is always a person who is working to make other peoples' lives better.

**Q. Who would play you in a movie?**

**A.** Sanaa Lathan. 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 ate candy all night long.

**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.** "Will I get it done? Is it good enough?" I've started this blog (threadsdance.org/directors-blog) and I wrote the other day about wondering who I'm trying to be good enough for.

On this piece, the book kind of settles me, which is a hard thing for me. My husband always has to remind me that the "dance gods" don't necessarily have to like my work as long as I feel good about it.

**Q. What's the scariest thing you've ever done?**

**A.** I'm not afraid of most things. My son went bungee-jumping and I would never do that. I guess, honestly, the scariest thing was starting a dance company.

Chris Hewitt can be reached at 651-228-5552. Follow him on twitter.com/ChrisHMovie.

**What:** "Warriors of Light"

**Who:** Threads Dance Project

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

**Where:** Cowles Center for Dance & the Performing Arts, 528 Hennepin Ave., Mpls.

**Tickets:** \$29-\$24, 612-206-3600 or cowlescenter.org

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