

Self Made Destiny
By Karen Lynn
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Their were fifteen people that evening, assembled all in a circle, arm lengths apart. I walked into the room, and sat down and took my place amongst them. “Good Evening everybody.” “For those new in our class, my name is Karen Lynn. I am your adaptive aerobic teacher.” “Let start the evening exercises with our warm up.” I reached down and turned on my tape player with the prerecorded music. This was not easy for a person with left side hemiplegic, Cerebral Palsy. And the use of only one hand.

But thank God, for my dance teacher’s guidance and my mother’s insight. As the smooth jazz floated through the room, one of my students spontaneously asked me where my interest in dance came from. With my next exercise I began to tell her, “Dance became my life during the first meeting with Al Gilbert, my dance instructor. I was only 3 and a half years old when my mother decided to use tap dance lessons as a tool to build and strengthen my little twisted body.” As I kept teaching, I couldn’t help remembering that I was only 5 months old when I was stricken and knocked into a coma. The experts, wrong as usual, declared I only had a thirty percent chance of survival. Assuming I did survive, I was going to be deaf, dumb, and blind.

I looked up at my students, smiling broadly. “I fooled them all, as you can see, so will you?” And, as I took my next breath, for my next exercise, I noticed another student struggling to say something. “Ms. Karen, I don’t think I can do this exercise. The young student seriously said. “Where did you find the strength, and courage, to carry on in your life?” “I got it through my own life’s experience. If I can do it, so can you, for sure! Something inside of me kept driving me on. I have always, been propelled to carry on with my life in a manor of which most disabled people don’t. I have always been highly motivated to be the best person I could be. When people told me I “could not” or “would not” be able to accomplish going to college, learning English, with a learning disability, or becoming a dance teacher, it only motivated me to push myself even harder to become.”

My student smiled as her arm shot forward in a half circle to the beat of the music. Exercise after exercise the aerobic class moved forward. By the end of the hour I saw a tired but satisfied, group of students. I walked to my car and went home to prepare for my lecture in the morning. I was going to address Sean Dineen’s Civil History’s class. “Ms Karen, what was the hardest part of getting your education? An eager student asked in the second row? “I got tired and angry of being passed from one class to another never learning a thing from my primary and secondary instructors. I was eighteen years old and still could not compose a letter on my own. I worked in the community and didn’t get anywhere. I was tired of not being treated with dignity or respect.”

The students question’s brought back a lot to mind. The pride I felt the day I had my first recital, the burning anger at the “helpful counselor” who insisted for a second

and third time that I was mentally retarded, and the joy on my mother face as she saw me get the degree that even she thought was impossible. “So I fought and won the first Civil Rights Case, in the state of California, in 1979. Like your professor, I don’t give up easily.” I laughed inwardly. So many battles, in so many place, it seemed to go on like a vengeance, but I rose above it all, like a warrior.

Professor Dineen then moved to my side, “I haven’t told you the funny part of the story my dear friends, sixteen years after not being able to write a letter, Karen here wrote something else. She was the prize winner of the Kaleidoscope Literary fiction Art Award contest of 1983. She also became a published author of “the Broken Hoof., in 2006.” A story dear to my heart-” For one person to achieve all these triumph seam very hard to believe or ignore. But it was all true.

As we walked out of the classroom, Professor Dineen remarked, “You know Karen, you laid the foundation for everyone else. “I know, Sean, I agreed. That’s why I wanted to teach, I needed to prove to myself that I didn’t have to settle for crumbs that people threw my way. But even so, I’ve had to freelance and accept my destiny in a world that neither recognizes me, nor the price I’ve had to pay. And, I was not able to attain the higher dance degree that I desired.” Then Professor Dineen gave a wiry look. “What do I always say, Karen, the average person would not last a second in our situation. You really did well, my friend.”

We walked out side of the building, into the fall air. With another breath Sean said. “They were really paying attention to you. You captured an interest in then that not even I have been able to maintain.” That made me feel really good inside. “Should I mention that when my article gets written tomorrow, I asked? I’m sure the folks at VSA will want to talk about that!” I declared.

VSA was a disability writing group where I came to read an excerpt of my work to my peers. After reading, I mentioned that I had been taped, back in 1985, while taking a class to show and mention to the world, my successes, and also to show how much I appreciated my mentor and teacher taking the time with me, all those years ago.

The VSA members had been burnt by the same fire I had, and could relate. But came out of it and survived, each in their own way, to make a mark in this world. They were bringing awareness to the world by living life on there own terms, and I was happy to see that I wasn’t alone.