



How This Improvising Mom Overcame Fear to Create Her Dream Job

Guest: Karen Manthey

You're listening to the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast, I'm your host, Shelley Hunter, and this is the place where we talk to people who recognize the Lord's hand in their lives, and specifically in their careers.

Thank you for joining me on the second episode of the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast. Today I'm talking to Karen Manthey. She has one of the scariest jobs I can imagine. She is an improv comedian. That means she gets up on stage and performs without a script literally improvising as the scene unfolds, all with the goal of making people laugh. Sounds terrifying. But Karen is also a wife and mother of four kids and I want to know how she juggles both her career and her family. Here's Karen explaining how it all started.

Karen Manthey: My husband and I are both from the same area. I was going to school in Washington when we were dating and he was going to Ricks at the time, then we got married and I moved over to Ricks, and we were there right during the transition of it turning to BYU-Idaho. I was taking classes with the intent of theater and speech education, so I could be a theater teacher, a drama teacher.

Then life happened, I got pregnant and he was done, so we ended up going to Eastern Washington for his masters, so I stopped. I just started raising kids. Then BYUI opened up their online, so they gave me the opportunity to be one of the first cohorts to try their online program and get my degree that way, and you could only get it in General Education online. While my husband was getting his PhD, I started doing that online and it was very slow going, because we were the testers, so it was very clunky at the very beginning, and it was a semester before I graduated, they had opened up eight different majors, [laughs] I was so upset. I was going to switch my major, so when I contacted the school, they said, "If you joined now it would still be three years before we can get all the classes up and going." I just decided, "That's fine. I'll just graduate with my General Education."

I again started taking some masters classes for social work, and I got pregnant. That was a really surprise pregnancy, so I stopped doing that. I don't have a masters but I do have a bachelor's degree.

That took a little bit of a turn, but before that when we were first married and we were living in Washington, I had tried out for an improv company. I just saw an ad in a paper was saying, "Come and try out and then you can win these free classes." I

loved theater and I knew a little improv and I knew some fun games from high school and that kind of thing, so I went and tried out. It was really fun, I really enjoyed it, but I bombed on one of the very last games we were going to play. I bombed it so bad that I froze. I was so nervous and I just froze on stage.

Normally with that game, when somebody's pointing at you, you're supposed to start talking and I froze so bad, I was like, "Just kill me. Let me die." You're supposed to die in the scene if you mess up or whatever. I was like, "Just let me die," and he was like, "No, come on. Say something," and I was like, "I don't know what to say." [laughs] I left feeling like, "I totally bombed it. I didn't get to win this free class." I didn't hear back from them, but I was really, really wanting to do it, so I emailed them

and I said, "I know I did a bad job, but do you need an usher? Do you need anybody that--" [laughs]

Shelley: Just let me in.

Karen: I found something that I love and I enjoy. They had emailed me back and they said, "You got in. We emailed you."

[laughter]

Shelley: You're kidding.

Karen: I just didn't see it. It was in my junk email or something, so I was really glad that I reached out. I took that opportunity, otherwise I might have missed something wonderful. I was with them in Washington for six years, then we moved to Kansas for my husband to get his PhD, and I found their affiliated company there. I was with them for six years, then I moved to Boise, and I was with that company again, so I just have been doing it for a long time.

Shelley: Improv seems like about the scariest thing a person could do. I would have said before that maybe singing is the-- But singing, you generally know what you're going to be singing. Are you nervous?

Karen: I used to get really nervous, especially, because a lot of the people that I was training with are now in LA doing really big things. They were incredible improvisers, and on my way to every practice, I'd be on the verge of tears and sweat. I would have armpit sweat marks [laughs] for hours. It was terrifying, but every time I drove home from practice I would be on such a high and just feeling like, "That was amazing. I've learned so much." It was that act of doing something that really scared me but made me not scared. Now I teach it, I do it and it never scares me and it's an awesome feeling.

Shelley: Okay, so take me back a little bit. How did you feel during the years that you were starting and stopping school, putting your original dreams on hold in favor of starting a family?

Karen: I definitely felt those moments of, "Well, this is it." [chuckles] But I also try and find a way to make things work. I usually have a pretty positive attitude about things, so I started volunteering for things. Whether I'm teaching or not, I love working with people, so I was volunteering at soup kitchens, I volunteered at our local high school to direct a play. I was doing things like that where I still felt like I was getting to use my talents, but I wasn't getting paid for it, I was just doing it.

Shelley: I love that. Okay, so let's pick back up in the story. Now you've moved to Boise, and then what happens?

Karen: I love the Worldwide company. They're wonderful. Wonderful people and I made really good lifelong friends. The Boise company just found that we had differing opinions a lot, and it ended up just not being a very good situation, so I chose to leave. There was a group of us that chose to leave. That was a hard decision, because I had been affiliated with this company for so long, and I just adored how they ran things, so it broke my heart to leave but it felt right at the time. Even a few weeks later, I'm like, "Was that the right decision?"

Shelley: [laughs] What did I do?

Karen: It was really hard, but I trusted and I felt like I need to stand up for myself, so I left and I started seeking out different improv in the valley. I reached out to Recycled Minds Comedy. I had met the owner, he's wonderful, Christian man, super, super great guy, and I said, "I'm interested in teaching if you need some teachers." He didn't know me, he hadn't done any improv with me, and he was really kind that he said, "I usually prefer you to take my classes." I couldn't afford it at the time.

So I just started going to the different improv jams that were around the valley, then I started performing with different friends and we started kind of forming our own groups. Then we actually booked something over at Recycled Minds Comedy for an audience to come see us, so that was his very first time seeing me do improv. Then he and his wife asked to meet with me later, reached out and they said, "We would love for you to teach for us. You have a great spirit about you, so we would absolutely love it." So I started teaching for them a few years ago.

At the beginning, it was terrifying; having to separate from the company that I knew and try this whole new method of doing improv, teaching and that kind of thing, it was really terrifying, but it has been an awesome journey. From that I've had people asking, "Try out for these commercials," or I just keep falling into some really interesting jobs where they need actors or they need improvisers, and that's been really great.

Shelley: What is the day to day look like for you and your kids?

Karen: When coronavirus wasn't going on, [chuckles] it was a weekly basis. I'd either be teaching improv. I'd have a night where I'm teaching or some kind of performance, and it seemed like every single weekend I had a performance. It changes every day, which is the improviser's life. It's always different, you're always on your toes. It was really great because my husband travels for work, so we can

look at the calendar and say, "Okay, you're gone this week." I am home for those times, and I can just not schedule myself. If he's home and he can be with the kids, then I can schedule performances, and I also can teach classes.

It's just worked out really well. It's not only an awesome outlet as a mom, because I get that me time, but I also can be there for my kids. There have been times when I don't find the right balance and I over schedule myself, then I'm really regretting that, and I don't get time with my kids. Then there's other times when I'm like, "Nope, we just need this week. We need this week off together and we can just be a family."

Shelley: I have been a work-at-home mom for 20 years and I feel like I have to choose to be a stay-at-home mom every day, because the world will provide multiple ways for me to ditch it all and follow opportunities. I feel like I have to be really intentional and really mindful about what opportunities I take. Also to your point too, is to trust that when I say no to one, another one's probably going to come.

Karen: Yes, and that does take a lot of trust. I feel like I get it wrong a lot. My husband, because he trains professionally as well, big groups of people, after 16 years he was like, "Maybe I should take an improv class."

[laughter]

Karen: We ended up making it one night a week. We made it our date night, where we were going, I was teaching a class and he was taking one of the beginner classes. These are three-hour long classes, so my 16-year old was babysitting that night a week. That was hard. It really was just because it was eight weeks of that, and it felt like our family was so on the go during that day that we literally had, I think it was 10 minutes together as family before we had to separate again and go do our things, and we started calling them our huddle times. So we'd huddle up like a football team and we're like, "How's everyone doing? You're all safe? Okay. We got dinner ready. We're going to do dinner and we're going to--." Actually, it ended being really fun. The kids thought that huddle time was the coolest thing. Those are funny memories but my internal angst and frustration by that, it wasn't the healthiest because I just was like, "We're not doing a good job and our kids are by themselves," and that really worried me.

Shelley: I actually have always thought that a little bit of mom guilt is good. I think a little bit of mom guilt helps you stay in check and say, "Is this okay, what I'm doing?" And sometimes, it is. "Is this necessary?" Sometimes it is. Other times, I think that mom guilt is the way of saying, "You know, maybe things are a little out of balance and it's time to dally back in for a time."

Karen: Yes. I think we're going to have that guilt regardless. I mean, it's very easy to justify and be like, "Well, I need to do this for me," and so we can swing one way or I never get a chance to even take a shower for myself because I'm focusing on my kids so much.

Shelley: Karen, what's the long range goal here? Are you expecting a big pivot point once the kids are all gone or are you already living the dream?

Karen: I kind of feel that I'm living it right now, just because I'm getting paid to do what I love and that's fantastic. I get to meet interesting people and I get to change formats, change troupes, teach children and teach adults. I've always had a goal to go back for a Master's degree but right now I love how things are going for me.

Shelley: What is an unexpected blessings, something that you couldn't see for yourself?

Karen: I didn't expect to ever be seen as an expert in improv. When I was working with the Worldwide Company, I was always looking to the teachers and just super wowed by what they did and I never pictured myself teaching because I didn't ever feel I knew enough about it. It wasn't until I finally put myself out there and said, "I would like to try teaching." When I was given that opportunity, I was like, "Woah, I, actually-- I knew a lot." [laughs] I have 17 years of experience doing this. It was amazing to me too, to be able to utilize that and help others see the joy of improv.

Shelley: It's interesting to me, your ability to do scary things. Have you always been that way or is that something that you learned?

Karen: I grew up in a theater family and I'm the 7th of 11 children, so you kind of have to stand out.

[laughter]

Karen: I ended up having that stage voice because it was loud in our house all the time. I think that I just found that at a young age. I took theater classes when I was little and I found how fun it was to make people laugh and to bring out emotion in people by putting myself out there. I just learned from a young age, that's kind of cool to try and do something that's a little bit scary that helps you grow. Self-confidence is a balance between self-affirmation, like loving yourself, and self-improvement. Because I feel like the more times I try those things that are scary, it isn't actually as scary as it sounds.

Shelley: What advice would you give to somebody who has similar hopes and dreams for their future but also wants to raise a family and also wants to be home with their kids or just be involved with their kids' lives?

Karen: I'd say trust. Trust yourself and trust that the Lord has your best interests at heart. Honestly, it's very scary to put yourself out there and if you're willing to try and willing to deal with rejection, then what do you have to lose? For me, there's a new path that keeps being open to me, which is wonderful and what I've noticed is being a helper is a big one where I just reach out to people when I want to help or I want to invest energy and talent into a project, and then all these doors are open from just getting to know different people.

One of my students, he's the CEO of a company in Boise and he adored my class. He found out that I was looking for a space for my company and he said, "Well, I've got a space, why don't we work something out and trade?" He's part some business leader group. There were other CEOs that came and started taking my class, and so

I adapted it for business so that they could use improv for business. I never would've pictured myself doing that a few years ago. But just from willing to put myself out there and share my passion with others helped open that door.

My advice is not only find your talent but figure out how to utilize it to help others. As far as improv goes, I have seen so much good come from my students where they feel more confident in their job or as managers, even some were students, in school and just having the mindset of saying, "Yes," and being courageous has helped them in their daily life. Really, for me, it's been, do what scares you and trust that it's going to work out.

Shelley: This is my last question for you. How have you seen the Lord's hand in your career?

Karen: I have-- So many times I've seen His hand. For me, when I feel the spirit, it's a repetition of thought often, where I have this thought and I tend to push it away, around like, "No that's just--

[laughter]

Karen: When I had the thought that I needed to leave the company I was with, that was really scary and I was like, "No, no, maybe we can work things out." I just kept getting that feeling again and again. Finally, once I follow that spirit, things just work out and doors are open. I've seen it over and over. Like at the very beginning, when I was driving to improv practices and I was such a newbie, and I'd be on the verge of tears, there's that little still small voice saying, "Come on, you can do this, just get through it, just keep trying." And performing when it was very terrifying to get up on stage or put myself out there, that little voice is just like, "You can do this. Just do it." So, I've put myself out there, and then it would always be a benefit. I've never gone wrong from listening to the spirit. If I'm feeling good about something and I feel like that's the right path, I going to go that direction until I feel no.

So I think Heavenly Father leads me that way. He just lights a little bit of the way ahead and there's this huge long tunnel that I'm in and I can't see but He lights a little bit at a time. It's amazing to see how far I've come and I don't know how far there is to go either.

Shelley: I mean, none of us do. All right, Karen, if people want to learn more about what you're doing, where would you send them?

Karen: Gamechangerimprov.com, that's my company and we offer classes and we perform at least monthly. I also teach with Recycled Minds Comedy. They don't do a lot of performances. They have CAS shows but they really just teach improv for people who want to improve in public speaking skills and just feeling more confident in general in life.

Shelley: I'm going to let you go because I know you're really busy and I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today but is there one thing that you could leave us with?

Karen: Oh, yes. The theme of improv that everybody knows is, "Yes, and..." which means say yes to what's happening and then add to it. I take that mentality and use it. I would encourage anyone to start using that mentality of say yes to what's going on even if it's something that's really hard. Even if you're in the midst of diapers and no sleep and you haven't had a shower in days, say yes to that, and see what you can do to add to it or, "What is my contribution to this?"

It's amazing what happens because it changes our mindset. If you lean in to the hard thing, magic happens. That's not only an improv thing but that's applied to life. If you lean in to the hard and try and figure out, "What am I learning from this?" Or, "What can I contribute to this situation to make it better?" That's all any of us need.

Shelley: I love that. Thank you for joining me today.

Karen: Thank you. That was great Shelley.

Shelley: I want to thank Karen Manthey for joining me on this podcast today and here are my takeaways. First of all, I think it's so interesting and I am so grateful for the fact that each one of us has a unique set of talents and abilities. I love how the Lord allows us, even encourages us, and maybe even mandates us to use those gifts to serve others. Maybe Karen's initial desire to do improv is that it just felt good to make other people laugh and it was something that she wanted to do. But now, 17 years later, she's doing that plus she's using her talents to help people become more confident in their jobs, to be better managers, be better moms and just be more confident in life.

Secondly, gosh, I am so glad that my goals have always been a little more mainstream, meaning that if you want to succeed in business, like I do, there's some pretty clear paths you can take but for creative people, I guess it makes sense that finding your dream job takes some creativity. But as I hope you learned here today, you don't have to figure it all out on your own, explore, experiment, volunteer, offer to help, and have faith that the Lord will guide you to that thing you were always meant to do.

That wraps up this episode of the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review on iTunes or wherever you listen to your podcast and share this episode on social media if you think others will enjoy it as well. Thanks for listening.

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