



WOMEN IN BUSINESS WEDNESDAYS INTERVIEW

GINA GIBNEY
FOUNDER, CEO & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
GIBNEY

WF: How did you get your idea or concept for the business and why did you choose it?

GINA: I started to dance at age 4 in a little local “tap-ballet-jazz” studio in my hometown in Ohio. And although I kept dancing, as a student at Case Western Reserve University I saw myself as a “world saver” headed to a career in civil rights law or urban policy. It was through the guidance of an extraordinary and inspiring mentor, Kathryn Karipides, that my head and heart became one. Kathryn believed that “the body has its truths, which are sensed and must be listened to.” Through her artistic mentorship, and being part of an incredible community of dancers, I came to see dance as an all-encompassing pursuit that was not only physical but also reflective, creative, intellectual, spiritual, political, and interpersonal.

WF: What inspired you to create your business?

GINA: Careers in dance are relatively brief, and as I entered the field professionally I recognized the importance of structure and sustainability. I founded Gibney Dance in 1991 with a dedicated group of dancers and artistic partners who shared my interest in creating collaborative dance works and establishing a home base where we could help build the field. We found that we could reach outside the walls of the studio and boundaries of dance as an artistic practice to address inequities we saw around us and effect social change. We are now known simply as Gibney, and these dynamics are very much present in our current organizational model: Company, Center, and Community.

WF: Did you have any mentors/support systems that encouraged you? If so, who were they and how crucial have they been in the development of Gibney?

GINA: My life partner, Pamela van Zandt, has been a champion of Gibney’s mission, and we have benefited tremendously from her wisdom and guidance in the areas of business and human relations. I have also been extremely fortunate to work with dedicated Board Members, including Women’s Forum member Alair Townsend, and other leaders in a variety of fields who have provided extraordinary guidance throughout our 30-year history. I strongly feel the importance of building a Board that you respect, and then listening – even if (maybe especially if) you don’t like what you are hearing.

WF: Where do you draw inspiration for your choreography?

GINA: While I spend less time in the studio in my current role, when I was actively choreographing my inspiration was always drawn from personal experiences – an image that struck me as particularly resonant, or conflicting truths that provided interesting tension, a life phase or change that I was encountering. My own experience was the starting point, but the greatest inspiration for my choreography was always the dancers I

WOMEN IN BUSINESS WEDNESDAYS INTERVIEW

worked with in the studio—by sharing our experiences, ideas, and impulses, we were able to build something together that held meaning for all of us.

WF: What was the hardest sacrifice (if any) that you had to make for your business?

GINA: At almost every juncture of our organization's growth, an opportunity was presented that required that I leave something else behind. When we opened our first studio, it was an extraordinary opportunity to create an artistic home, but then there was a studio to run, and I had to alter my creative process to conform to a more rigid schedule. Not too long after that, I realized that if I was serious about choreography, I shouldn't perform in my own work. More recently, the opportunity to expand Gibney's downtown space from 2,500 to 55,000 square feet required me step out of the studio altogether and into the role of fund raiser and construction manager. I literally donned a hard hat. These were not really moments of pain or angst. There are just a series of moments of acceptance when you need to give something up in order to grow.

WF: How has your company had to pivot operations during the COVID-19 pandemic?

GINA: Gibney's two locations in Manhattan have been closed to the public since March 16, 2020, something that previously would have been unimaginable.

What I have learned from this time is that our organization is about more than our spaces – we are about our community – our staff, the artists we serve, our audiences, our leadership. We have adapted almost all of our programming to the virtual space – from classes, to performances, to professional development, to mental health support for our field. Virtual and hybrid programming such as on-line classes, and live-streamed performances have actually helped us reach a broader and more diverse audience. Our staff is working remotely and we are all focused on keeping our mission alive. We have become a more equitable and responsive organization, and I believe that we are stronger for the ways we have evolved in response to enormous challenges. The support of the NYC funding community has been more crucial than ever. Pre-pandemic, our budget was 60% earned revenue from space rentals and classes. Today, it's closer to 10% earned revenue, with 90% now coming from foundations and individuals who care deeply about culture in New York City.

WF: How do you see cultural businesses based in the arts, specifically dance, evolving for the future in light of the COVID global pandemic?

GINA: I think the pandemic had made us stronger, but I also believe the isolation has shown us that we all want to be together in community. Culture is the beating heart of New York City, and one of the things that brings us together. How many times have you heard someone say that without culture, there's no reason to be in the city? As artists and cultural leaders, we can elevate the voices, create the experiences, and provide the possibilities for all of us to heal and move forward.

WOMEN IN BUSINESS WEDNESDAYS INTERVIEW

At the same time, the cultural sector and cultural workers have been devastated by the financial and emotional implications of the pandemic. More than ever, culture will need support from all corners.

WF: What are some tips you would give other female entrepreneurs who are looking to start their own businesses?

GINA: Never underestimate yourself - and never let anyone underestimate you.