

A Passion for Youth

Karen Wheaton returned to her Alabama roots and launched a revolution among young people who were hungry to know God.

Gospel singer Karen Wheaton discovered the power of her voice as a young woman, singing her way onto the high-profile stages of mega-ministries across America. But she discovered her voice's real power away from the bright lights of stages and on the dark streets of a small Southern town.

Karen recalls the drive—after a move back to her hometown in 1998—that ignited a brand-new passion within her heart for the youth. “These kids were sitting on the hoods of their cars in the middle of the night,” she recalls. “They were just wasting their lives and had no purpose for living. They had no idea who God really was; they equated God with religion and with dead churches.”

A mom to two teenagers, Karen's vision was huge—she hoped to stir a sleeping generation. She started small—taking cookies to a local youth group every week. That small step quickly morphed into a movement filled with hungry high school and college students from across the nation.

As the founder of Karen Wheaton Ministries () Karen oversees a handful of youth outreach projects including The Ramp, a denominationally neutral meeting ground where an estimated 1,200 students gather each month to worship and pray.

On any given month, Karen gazes into a sea of students hungry for a real experience with a real God. After spending years performing on platforms where thousands watched her sing to God, she now stands on the ultimate platform—watching a generation on fire sing to God.

FROM MOM TO MINISTRY

Karen recalls a childhood cemented by the ties of family and church. Her early years were nearly picture-perfect—her mom and dad provided a safe and loving home where she flourished.

There was no divorce. There was no drama. And life was good.

“I had awesome, strong Christian parents,” she says. “Because of that, I was raised in the church.”

She recalls being just 8 and “experiencing a real God.”

“I had an intense hunger for know the God that I had seen in my mother and my grandmother and just to know Him for myself,” she says. “I remember like it was last night, being 8 years old with a heavenly language pouring out of me like really impacted my life.”

At the age of 11, Karen discovered an anointing to sing before God and before crowds. “I was singing one night, and I sensed a presence flowing through me that was something different,” she says. “I knew that whatever this was, I wanted it all of the time.”

And so she sought to sing for the Lord at every turn. In the late '70s, she toured with Thurlow Spurr's Festival of Praise, a pioneering Christian choir and band.

As a college student, she was invited by Jim Bakker to sing on the platform of PTL. The dramatic alto later performed on the platforms of both the Jimmy Swaggart and Benny Hinn ministries.

Karen was living the life she dreamed about as a little girl, singing before scores of people and touring the country with her husband by her side. And though she was passionate about performing, her favorite role was as mommy to two little girls.

After 13 years of marriage, Karen learned one of her biggest, most painful lessons. “In early 1995, I went through a

divorce," she says. "The pain of infidelity in a marriage runs deep. You are so angry; you just think: Will I ever get over this? Will I ever live again? Will I ever trust again?"

She did trust again—the moment she discovered the healing power of forgiveness. "Only through the power of God can you love and trust people and truly, truly forgive; and in forgiving them you are freeing yourself."

"I bless him," she says, adding that she talks about her divorce only in hopes of helping other women struggling with similar situations. "The Lord so blessed me and taught me so many things concerning forgiveness, and how that in the pain of betrayal there is hope."

Her experiences not only changed her view of the world; they also changed the way she sang about it. "Experiencing this helped me to understand the pain of the real world, so it opened up my heart to sing different," she explains. "I have often heard people say [that] once you have had your heart broken, that you will sing different, and it is true."

A HEART FOR YOUTH

1998 was a year of new beginnings that took Karen back to her roots. With two teenage daughters in tow, she drove back home to Hamilton, Alabama, a simple town with just under 7,000 residents.

After witnessing a lack in the youth of her hometown, Karen wanted to reach out to them—even if that meant just baking for a few kids in a local youth group every week. Still adjusting to life back in a small town, Karen was nervous about getting involved with the youth.

You have your hands full with two girls already, she told herself. "I was like, 'Lord, that is so not me.' I felt like I was not their style. Then the Lord said in my spirit—and this was the real hook for me: 'What you invest in the lives of other young people, you will reap in your children.'"

After just one meeting with a local youth group, Karen could see beyond a group of gangly teenagers and into the eyes and hearts of a generation hungry for change. "One service with a group of seven kids made me fall in love with a generation," she says.

That meeting sparked within Karen a vision to provide a platform where youth could worship and pray unrestrained. She bought and transformed an old grocery store into a facility where the youth meet for monthly conferences called The Ramp, a moniker that symbolizes "a platform that takes you to the next level" and whose vision is "to facilitate an encounter with a real God."

Responding to the need, Karen Wheaton Ministries kicked off two more programs—Chosen, a group whose purpose is to mentor potential future leaders for the ministry, and Project Ezekiel (projecteze), a network of youth pastors and youth leaders whose vision is to awaken a generation.

Though she reaches out to teens and college students, Karen also embraces an even younger generation through events such as Josiah Generation Kids Ramp, an event that attracts youth groups from across the country.

Recently, Karen united with leaders across the country at TheCall Nashville, an event where youth from across the globe filled an entire stadium to pray for revival in the nation.

With a vision to build a summer camp capable of housing thousands of kids, Karen recently purchased 120 acres behind her home. In addition, she hopes to launch a school on the property.

From where she is standing, Karen sees a generation of youth refusing to settle for the stale religion of their parents. "They are not just going to sit back in pews and wait for the rapture," she says.

"I don't mean that to be rude, but a lot of my generation has done that. A lot of my generation just goes to they just sit around and sing about heaven. I love heaven, and I sing about heaven, but there is a world that is going to hell, and this generation is taking on that mission."

STIRRING A GENERATION

She calls them her spiritual children—a sort of restless, 30-and-under crowd looking beyond the things of the world for fulfillment. They are educated, technologically savvy and they seemingly have it all at their fingertips. But they want more.

"They don't want a lot of the things that took my generation down," she explains. "They're not just going to live a life of religious ritual. They're not going to be satisfied with church twice a week and with what this world calls generation has had all that and they know it's just not there."

Instead, she explains, they want authentic experiences. "They are radical in worship. They are radical in their passion for are not taken by hype or by religious façade," she says. "They demand the authentic, and I love that."

Perhaps it is the reason kids are flocking away from traditional churches and into places like The Ramp, Karen says, pointing to a recent statistic revealing that 90 percent of American children do not return to church after the age of 18. "There is not a middle ground, they want something real," she says.

Karen is no longer simply hoping to awaken a generation—they are already stirring and lives are changing. "I am seeing them totally delivered," Karen says. "I am watching them walk into a place bound to cutting, pornography, perversion, homosexuality, drug within days, I am seeing them worship God with no chains, no fear of man."

"I have been raised in the church all of my life, but I have stood on a platform and heard the sound of a generation,"

Karen says. "There is something coming out of them that is indescribable—kids that get caught in the gaze of God.

"I see in them a calling that is unique to this generation, and I believe that this generation will see what my generation has longed to see" she adds.

Today, Karen stands back with a smile. She has proven that even through the pain and confusion that life sometimes hands us, God wants us to be spiritual giants in the world of our children—and in the world of His children everywhere. "More than anything else, I would want to be known as a woman who really, really loved the real God, and really, really loved His kids."

Suzy A. Richardson is a magazine editor and nationally published freelance writer living in Gainesville, Florida, with her family.