

Coach for the corporate class

At 42, French entrepreneur Karin Genton-L'Epée has found a way to turn her passion into her career

By Valentina Huber

“I was just at this seminar on quantum physics,” Karin Genton-L'Epée tells me at a recent corporate mixer. “It was amazing!” She says she's working on a way to incorporate what she had absorbed at this seminar into her communication seminars. I simply stare and nod. Quantum physics for corporate seminars? Why not? It's all about energy, something she admits to having a lot of.

If you have ever attended a Women in Business dinner or a Power Breakfast, or run in a marathon, or gone to a corporate mixer, or eaten in a downtown restaurant, you are likely to have met her. Like Savoir-Faire, she is everywhere, a five-foot four-inch (1.56-meter) powerhouse, infusing the atmosphere with electricity. Her intense blue eyes will focus on you immediately, and then a broad, open smile will break across her face. The effect is warming; it is clear Karin likes people.

“People fascinate me; they recharge me,” she tells me, curled up on a blue couch in her tidy, Ikea-esque Prague 1 flat. “Although I get most of my energy from having my alone time.”

I have a hard time figuring out where in her schedule she fits that alone time in. When she's not out networking, she's lecturing to members of the business community, teaching them how to communicate across cultural borders.

L'Epée Coaching and Consulting, she says, was born in the wake of American learning experiences combined with Czech living experiences. “My idea was to share the belief that if you understand the way you communicate, you will understand how and why people react to you, or don't react to you, positively or negatively. My goal is to help people to understand themselves ... to make things run more efficiently. I'm very American in that respect. I want results.”

Fire walk on 34th Street

Although she was born in the French protectorate of New Caledonia, Genton-L'Epée spent most of her life in Europe and the United States. She moved to New York City in 1983 and worked as a retail consultant. “My idea was to bridge the gap between American and French,” she says, noting the influence of culture on buying patterns: “You would never buy a sombrero in America; you'd buy it in Mexico.”

Her knowledge didn't come easily. First, she had to learn English; all the while, she studied Americans and the retail market. She found she loved New York City and the American way of life.

“The energy is something I connect very well with. It's the only place in the world where I feel like I can just plug in. I just spent four days [in New York]. When I got back people kept saying, ‘You look great, you look great.’ I think it just restarts my battery.”

While living in New York, Genton-L'Epée became acquainted with the writings of millionaire success guru Anthony Robbins.

Robbins' Web site notes, among other things, that he is committed to the “philosophy of Constant and Never-Ending Improvement (CANDE).” It also touts clients from all corners of the rich and powerful — from Mikhail Gorbachev and Nelson Mandela to the Los Angeles Kings, Pamela Anderson and the U.S. Army. U.S. Vice President Al Gore once featured Robbins as a speaker at a Putting People First in Government conference.

But it was his use of fire walking that first caught Genton-L'Epée's attention. She saw a photo of Robbins fire walking, and she was hooked. Before long, she found herself at one of his seminars and with some 200 others, just down from Macy's on 34th Street, she marched across three meters (10 feet) of red-hot coals. Robbins, she said, taught her how to “manage her state.”



VLADIMIR WEISS/The Prague Post
A communications consultant, skydiver, karate expert and networker extraordinaire, Karin Genton-L'Epée is captured in a rare moment of stasis.

“You don't learn how to fire walk; you just do it. What you learn is to trust and relax.”

“You don't do anything that you can't do; you just use your potential and channel it. And that takes discipline.” The seminar, she explained, prepared her.

“You focus. You don't look down. You don't learn how to fire walk; you just do it. What you learn is to trust and relax.”

Although she recognizes this only in hindsight, that moment was a turning point. “I have the same feeling when I skydive,” she says, something she's done a dozen times.

“There's a freedom after you jump,” she says. “You're flying and there's no noise.”

A family of strong women

Despite Genton-L'Epée's many “extreme” pursuits — she also runs marathons, and is a brown belt in karate — she didn't realize she was adventurous until the age of 35. “But don't get me wrong,” she says. “I always have my safety net somewhere.”

Her grandmother wasn't so prudent, losing the family clock-making business in a late-1970s hostile takeover. When talking about the loss of her family's factory, words

don't come easily: “It was one of those great little companies that could have done very well. The clocks are famous. They were given to heads of states. Charles and Diana were given one at their wedding, I think.” After the takeover, the company “was sucked dry.” It went belly up last year.

But when her mother, Marie-José L'Epée, was young, the factory was in full swing, giving her many liberties not allowed other young ladies at the time. She traveled extensively, studied at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and even worked as an airline stewardess. She married at 27, late for those days, and gave birth to three children, Karin in 1957, Alexandra two years later; and David in 1964. The children lost their mother in a car crash five years later, in 1969. Karin began using “L'Epée” after her grandmother died to preserve the family name.

“I don't think the rest of the world was ready for [my mother] to do what she wanted to do. For some reason, [my mother and grandmother] were always fighting something, and I guess I'm trying to finish what they started.”

And what were they fighting for? The right to follow your dharma, Genton-L'Epée believes.

“It doesn't matter whether they ran a company or studied on a scholarship. What is important is that you do what you are meant to be doing and be at peace with it.”

“For many years, women weren't allowed to have any space, and my mother and grandmother fought that. In many ways, women didn't believe in themselves then. In the end they fought their own [societal] belief systems,” she adds.

Quiet like a church

Genton-L'Epée got her first taste of Prague in 1989, when she came to celebrate New Year's Eve. Her brother, David, was working in Prague at what is now known as the Hilton. Back then it was the Tešnov. “My brother and I usually try to organize Christmas and New Year's together, because we almost share the same birthday,” she says, noting that her birthday is New Year's Eve and David's is Jan. 2.

“It was just me, my brother, his wife and some friends,” Genton-L'Epée recalls. “And it was my birthday, so I wanted to do something different. I wanted to go to the square.”

“We got to the square, and I swear to God, it was packed like a church. [Just before midnight] the people were quiet. They were all holding little lights. It was one of the most moving moments of my life.”

She didn't relocate to Prague immediately. The '80s stock-market crash took a heavy toll on the retail industry. So she returned to Paris in 1991, and then to Prague in May 1995, where her brother still lives.

Like the way she remodels herself, her seminars are always being updated, tweaked, retooled. Usually after she reads a new biography of some successful business leader. Or attends a seminar on quantum physics.

“It is important for people to understand that there are not just two poles — yes and no — but three poles: yes, no, and ‘yes and no,’” she says cryptically. To illustrate, she quotes from her quantum-seminar notes: *Est-ce que l'univers se déploie devant nos yeux grands ouverts, ou est-ce que nos yeux grands ouverts ne sont que les fenêtres par lesquelles l'univers se voit?* (Is the universe unfolding in front of our wide-open eyes? Or are our wide-open eyes merely the windows by which the universe sees itself?)

I ask her if she's trying to find the key to the universe. “No,” she says, her tone very matter-of-fact. “I guess I'm trying to learn what my role in the universe is.”