



The perfect foil to a life in the law: 'just let go and dance'



March 25, 2025



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They say every cloud has a silver lining. But when dance teacher Virginia Keast was working as a lawyer, it was as though every silver lining had a cloud.

"When you're a lawyer, it's about recognising risk. Whether you're giving advice or drafting a document or representing someone, it's all about focusing on all the ways that things can go wrong," says Keast, who now runs Never Stop Dancing, a class that boasts some 100,000 subscribers from around the world.

"Dancing is the opposite. You get to forget about the hard stuff and the risky stuff and what can go wrong in life and just focus on the here and now and having fun."



That's not to say Keast disliked her work as a lawyer. While she never felt the call to dance in court, the former Chapman Tripp and Housing New Zealand solicitor says she got so much out of her career, relishing the mental gymnastics and the unique perspectives it offered into the fabric of society. But when it came to making a choice, dancing trumped the law.

"I really enjoyed being a lawyer," she says. "I just enjoy what I do now more."

Decision time

Keast has had a passion for dance since she was a child, frolicking around her family home in Levin with her sisters to Abba's *Dancing Queen*, practising jazz dance and teaching aerobics in her final years of high school in the late 1980s. Her group even appeared on [national television in 1990](#), performing a routine to Billy Idol's *Mony Mony*.

But she also had a passion for debating and English and when she consulted her high school's careers advisor, law seemed to be the best option. She studied law at Victoria University, did some travelling and started her law career and her family, putting dancing on the backburner. It wasn't until 2011,

when she went to a local dance exercise class in Wellington, that her desire to get moving again woke up. "There was just no putting it to bed anymore."

Keast began teaching dance classes and choreography alongside her day job as associate general counsel for Housing New Zealand, enjoying the light optimism provided by her hobby compared with the constant vigilance and risk aversion required for her legal work.

But with a loyal base of clients gradually building and two children at home, the tussle between the two pursuits began growing in intensity.

"The dancing had built up to the point where I couldn't keep doing both. Our kids were a lot younger at the time, so to work full time, have a young family and have a business on the side was just too much. So, something had to give, and I just really didn't want to give up dancing."

In 2016, after working through a "belt-tightening" financial plan with her husband, Keast left the law and ramped up her dancing business. Modelled on the enthusiastic, exuberant dance style of the 1980s, Keast's classes took off, attracting people – mostly women – who were looking for a way to relieve the pressure of their daily lives.

"Lots of the women who come to my classes, they've got busy jobs or busy lives, and they've got a lot on their plates. So, it's good to have your brain do something completely different that challenges it in a completely different way.

"It's quite common for people to leave things – drink bottles and clothes – behind after a class. They dance and then float out, and their brains get a break from trying to remember everything in their lives. I think that's actually a good sign."

Much like anyone who leaves a full-time job to start a small business, Keast says it was a financial sacrifice in those early years. Even though she had built up a following, it took a while for the business to earn what she wanted it to. "But that was what we planned for. We weren't expecting the millions to start rolling in."

Despite the initial uncertainty, her business flourished once she fully committed. "It was very difficult having a foot in each camp. I always felt like I was running to get where I needed to be. You can't go all-in when you're splitting your time between two things," she says. "Once I focused solely on the dance business, everything started to fall into place."

Fully invested

Leaving the law also gave Keast the time to do all the essential tasks a small business needs to thrive. She was able to invest fully in website building, marketing and social media, allowing her to reach more people and build her following.

"I'm a person who likes to do things myself, but it's just impossible to do that while you're working. I was getting frazzled. So, it was great to just be focusing on Never Stop Dancing and family and not have this third demanding thing as well."

Then there was the transition from the work itself. Keast says her time at Housing New Zealand provided a mix of different work, much of it involving important public sector law.

She also worked on Treaty of Waitangi settlements during her time at the Office of Treaty Settlements and Chapman Tripp, which provided mental stimulation and a perspective on social issues that is hard to replicate.

"I'm always learning new things now, which I love: how to create a website or how to edit video or how to work my way through YouTube – that kind of thing. But I do miss the real tricky problem-solving with law that really hones your brain. I do Wordle but it's not quite the same."

Offering her classes online and in-person in Wellington, Keast says she gets to know many of her clients quite well. They come from all walks of life; she has a few lawyers coming through and even a retired judge. She enjoys seeing the benefits something like dance provides them, as it did for her.

"For me, dancing is a great foil for what can be a stressful occupation and an occupation that can take over your brain a bit.... It's a chance to just forget all of it, just let go

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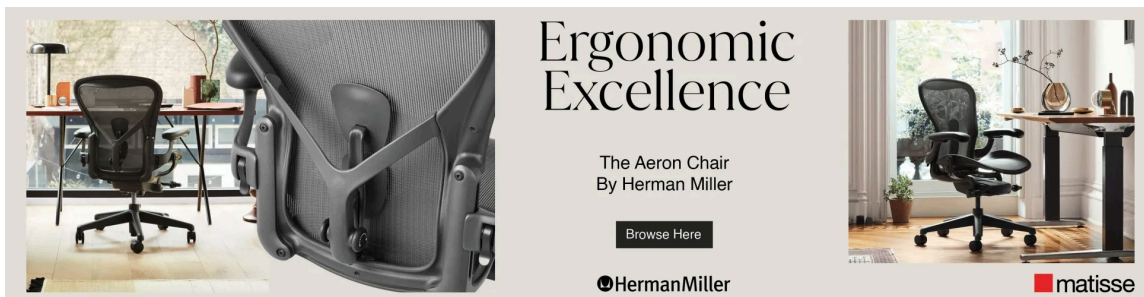
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