



ANNIE DAVO

Karen Allen has found a niche in high-quality clothing design. "I want to make sweaters people will keep for 20 years," she says.

## Designing a Future

*Actress Karen Allen trades her high-spirited romps with Indiana Jones for a more leisurely life in the Berkshires.*

AFTER NEARLY THREE DECADES IN SHOW BUSINESS, a successful actress moves to a bucolic New England village where she creates and sells her own line of clothing. The role is one Karen Allen might be tempted to play—if she weren't already living it.

Best known for starring in the film classics *National Lampoon's Animal House* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Karen still acts but spends most of her time in the Berkshires, stitching together a new life and career.

If you walk up Railroad Street in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, you'll find Karen Allen Fiber Arts, a treasure box featuring intricately patterned cashmere and merino wearables. If it's your lucky day, you might also find the designer.

Now 54, Karen's eyes sparkle with the same wonder as they did when she was dashing about the world with Indiana Jones. Her petite frame, sporting embroidered trousers and a rust and brown zip-front jacket from her line, remains enviably fit, a testament to lifelong yoga practice.

by SUZANNE STREMPER SHEA

Karen steps behind the counter to answer the phone and remains there to hand-stitch edges on a pile of scarves and tell the story of how she fell for knitting at the side of her maternal grandmother, Florence Howell.

"My grandmother was passionate about knitting," says Karen. "I can't think of her without a pair of needles in her hands."

The concept of making something from nearly nothing thrilled Karen. "Starting with only the ideas of colors, design, and shape—a blank page to write on. I don't think I had that feeling about anything else as a kid. I would go into fabric stores or yarn shops and look at textures and colors and patterns. It's a kind of ecstasy—oh my God, all these ideas!"

In 1969, 17-year-old Karen entered New York's Fashion Institute of Tech-



Harrison Ford and Karen Allen on the set of 1981's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

nology to study apparel design. Then a 1971 trip to the theater changed her life.

"I was never in a play, never read a play except if forced," she says. "Then I saw a play, and it was like vroom...."

*Apocalypsis cum Figuris*, a production by Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Theater Laboratory, told the story of Christ returning to Earth as an innocent.

"I literally walked into that theater

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one person and walked out another," she says. "It was not like watching a performance—it was like witnessing a profound experience. I said, 'I don't know what that was—what they were doing—but I want to start doing it tomorrow.'"

Several years later, while studying at The Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in New York City, Karen spotted an index card announcing a director's search for an actress. John Landis chose Karen to play Katy, the fresh-faced female lead in 1978's *Animal House*. Her great luck continued when Steven Spielberg cast her as Marion Ravenwood, Harrison Ford's old flame in 1981's *Raiders*.

Theater work in the Berkshires in the 1980s brought Karen to an area where she instantly felt at home and where, in 1988, she purchased one. Over the next

15 years, she acted around the world, founded a yoga studio in Great Barrington, and even moved back to New York City in 2000. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, she pondered life in general, and the result was a return to Massachusetts and her first creative love.

**"It's a kind of ecstasy—  
oh my God, all these ideas!"**

Karen had prepped for her return by re-entering the Fashion Institute of Technology to learn machine knitting, which produces garments at a much swifter rate than by hand. Successful sales at a Berkshires bazaar encouraged her to rent the 450-square-foot shop she opened in May 2005. The shop expanded into the upstairs this past summer, for a total of about 1,300 square feet.

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ANNIE CARO

Actress Karen Allen has fashioned a second career out of a lifelong love: knitting.

Her sweaters, which take a day to knit and another day to wash, block, and sew, range in price from \$350 to \$850.

"I want to make sweaters people will keep for 20 years," says Karen. "In this disposable era, it's nice to make something that will last. That's why I love cashmere. Each time you wash it, it gets more wonderful."

Karen still acts, but she prefers short-term projects that don't keep her away too long from 16-year-old son Nicholas or her knitting. She teaches acting at Simon's Rock College of Bard in town and knitting design at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in nearby Lenox. And, when she's not at her studio, Karen works at her shop, greeting often incredulous browsers.

"It's good for me to be here, to see people trying things on, how things fit, what body types things look good on. It's a kind of warm feeling. I get to tell people how I make stuff; behind every design, in a way, there's a story. There are other things in life than acting. Whether I was an actor or not, it would still be a good thing to be here." ★

*Karen Allen—Fiber Arts, 35 Railroad St., Great Barrington, MA. 413-528-8555. [karenallen-fiberarts.com](http://karenallen-fiberarts.com)*