

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

3/27/26 Marie Lavendier

Individualized Major: Movement Therapy

Ken:

This is *Indie Major*, a show devoted to the wide-ranging stories and visions of individualized majors at the University of Connecticut. I'm your host, Ken Cormier, and I'm here with Marie Lavendier.

Welcome, Marie.

Marie:

Hi, Ken.

Ken:

Thank you so much for being here. You have the distinction of being one of the first graduates with an individualized major from the University of Connecticut, so it's a pleasure to have you here to talk about that.

The major you created was called *Movement Therapy*. Let's start with a little bit about what that major was all about.

Marie:

Sure. As a bit of backstory, I was a transfer student from Clark University, where I was a sociology major. When I came to UConn, it felt huge in comparison. I switched to psychology, but I didn't really like the focus on research at the time—this was in the 1970s—and some of the courses didn't appeal to me.

So I started wondering how I was going to complete my degree and what my options were. Around that time, I began taking dance classes. UConn had a small but wonderful dance program, and I

really liked the professors. I also took theater and mime, and I loved those courses.

Someone told me—this was around 1974—that there was an individualized major program, so I looked into it. I thought, “I wonder if I can combine psychology with these dance and theater courses.”

In high school, I had experienced some depression, and therapy had really helped me. At the time, I was actually seeing a dance therapist in Storrs who had a private practice. That experience really resonated with me. I felt alive when I danced—I loved movement—so I started thinking about creating a major in movement therapy.

Ken:

That’s fascinating. Did you already have an interest in dance and theater before coming to UConn, or did that develop once you got there?

Marie:

I did have some background. Growing up, my father loved to dance. After dinner, we’d go into the living room, put on records, and dance together. He taught us the cha-cha, swing—everything. It was a lot of fun.

I had also studied a bit of dance and was an athlete, so movement always appealed to me.

Ken:

And your interest in psychology—did that come from thinking about it as a career path, or from your personal experiences?

Marie:

Definitely from my personal experiences. That’s what led me to see

dance and drama as healing modalities. They really are therapies in their own right—drama therapy, dance therapy, movement therapy.

Ken:

You mentioned you were seeing a dance therapist at the time. How established was that field back then?

Marie:

It was actually pretty well known and fairly popular. You don't hear about it as much now. One challenge, though, was that to practice professionally, you needed graduate training—a master's degree in dance therapy—where you'd learn clinical skills and therapeutic approaches. So that was always part of the plan.

Ken:

Right. As a testament to the individualized major program—which is now in its 50th year—you were part of the first graduating class in 1976. We actually still have your application, your plan of study, and your essay explaining your rationale.

You also presented your major to a panel of faculty. I see you included independent studies—one in transpersonal psychology and another in Gestalt/dance therapy. Do you remember those?

Marie:

Somewhat. My transpersonal psychology study was with one of my favorite professors, Kenneth Ring. He wrote extensively about near-death experiences and life after death. I think I may have helped type parts of one of his books, and that may have been part of the independent study.

As for the Gestalt work, I don't remember as clearly, but I may have explored it with the dance therapist I was seeing. Gestalt therapy is

very holistic—it uses bodily sensations to help understand emotions and issues.

Ken:

That ties in perfectly with your major. What made you want to create an entirely new major instead of combining a major and minor?

Marie:

I remember being terrified to pitch the idea—I almost didn't go in—but I pushed myself, and I'm so glad I did.

I've always been a bit of a maverick, taking my own path. It's not a straight line—it's more circuitous. It felt almost miraculous that I could design a major around what I was passionate about.

Ken:

What did that feel like at the time? Did campus feel like a place of radical possibilities?

Marie:

Well, I remember UConn making the front page of *Time* magazine for streaking in the middle of winter—that was part of the culture!

Compared to Clark, which was small and very politically active during the Vietnam War, UConn felt different. It was transitioning into the disco era after the war ended. Most students didn't really understand what an individualized major was, though my friends in the dance department did.

Ken:

Were there particular people or experiences in your major that stand out?

Marie:

Yes—Marcia Heath, the head of the dance program. She was incredibly supportive. She even took us to the Wadsworth Athenaeum for a sound sculpture exhibit where we could improvise and explore movement. She had a big impact on me.

Ken:

Did you go on to graduate school?

Marie:

Eventually. I was accepted into dance therapy programs in the 1970s but wasn't ready to go at the time. Later, in the 1990s, after having a family, I attended Central Connecticut State University and earned a degree in marriage and family therapy.

I worked mostly with children and families, and I incorporated movement into my work—because you can't just sit and talk with children to understand what's going on.

Ken:

So you stayed connected to that therapeutic approach?

Marie:

Yes, though I also spent many years teaching. I taught elementary and middle school students in Hartford and later taught writing and humanities at the community college level. I used movement and meditation in my classes, which students really responded to.

During the Iraq War, I had some veterans in my classes, and my therapy background helped me support them.

Ken:

It sounds like your interdisciplinary vision carried through many areas of your life.

Marie:

It really did. Today, I'm a certified qigong teacher—a movement practice similar to tai chi. I have a home studio and have been teaching for about 15 years. I also do coaching and am pursuing additional life coaching training.

Ken:

You've also stayed involved in dance over the years.

Marie:

Yes—I've performed, choreographed, and even taught dance in the Caribbean. Movement has always been part of my life. Now it's more focused on healing rather than performance.

Ken:

How do you think dance therapy and movement-based healing have evolved?

Marie:

You don't hear as much about formal dance therapy today, though it still exists in hospitals and psychiatric settings. But what has really grown are alternative movement practices—like ecstatic dance, yoga dance, and conscious dance.

These create spaces where people can connect with their bodies and emotions. There's often reflection afterward, and it's clear that people really need this kind of experience now.

Ken:

It's fascinating how your vision aligns with these developments.

Marie:

Yes, and I'm so glad the individualized major program still exists. It sounds like the process hasn't changed much, which is wonderful.

Ken:

Thank you so much for sharing your story. It's been a pleasure speaking with you.

Marie:

Thank you, Ken. It's been wonderful to reflect and revisit those experiences.

Ken:

Thanks for listening to *Indie Major*. For more information about individualized and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, visit iisp.uconn.edu.

We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support.