



Marni Konner President & Creator of Little Maestros

SGR persuaded Marni Konner, president of client Little Maestros LLC, to take a well-deserved break from her Superwoman schedule to have lunch, take a breath and give us this wonderful interview. Marni is the founder and creative force behind Little Maestros, an award-winning music program for infants and toddlers in New York City. Little Maestros is the reigning holder of the Nickelodeon Parents Pick Award for best children's music class in New York City (last awarded in 2009) and was chosen by the Red Tricycle, a New York City newsletter for parents, as the "Most Awesome" in the Kids Music Class Category.



What prepared you most for your career; education, experience or something else? The support of my parents. When I started Little Maestros, my dad (a lawyer) helped me with contracts and my mom did the bookkeeping. They have always been there for me.

What or who motivates or inspires you? I love what John McEnroe once said in an interview: "There is always room for improvement," and he said that when he was the #1 tennis player in the world! And my grandfather Mac (my son is named for him) is the entrepreneur I admire most. He started his business, Konner Textiles, with no money and grew it by himself – he made it successful because he made his customers feel special and he was so passionate about what he sold. He seemed so happy and in control and loved making his own rules. He worked until the day he died – retirement wasn't an option.

If you won the lottery, would you retire? I'm like my grandfather – if I won the lottery there is no way I would retire – I'd just buy more instruments and props for Little Maestros.

You've been so successful, what would you like to accomplish or attempt next? Creating something from nothing has been a huge and important accomplishment; Little Maestros really evolved from my own vision. I'd love to see Little Maestros expand to reach millions of children. I'm watching out for my brand but I'm not sure what the next step is. I have to find the right person or company to grow my business – anybody interested? If I had the time, I would love to consult for other people on their business ideas. I have learned so much starting and operating Little Maestros that I could really help sharing my own experiences. On a personal level, I'd like to travel around the world with my family.

To what degree have you actually controlled the course your life has taken? I have worked very hard to get where I am today. I train my teachers carefully, I listen to feedback and I watch what my teachers enjoy teaching and we are continually refreshing our curriculum. It's a trickle-down effect – if the teachers are happy, the kids are happy and then I'm happy. I have always envisioned having a job I love and a happy family life, so perhaps my decisions and actions have led me here.

If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive? "Congratulations, you were always nice to everyone, honest and fair so welcome to heaven!"

What are you most grateful for? Gosh, too many things are tied for first place in this category! My kids, my kids' health, my kids' happiness, having a business I love that also makes so many people happy. Not a day goes by when I don't take a moment to be thankful.

What interested you about the business you started? It combines my 2 biggest passions – my love of music and children. I started in the music business in the 1990's with Atlantic Records. When I had my daughter in 2002, I looked into various "mommy and me" type classes and was disappointed with the quality and lack of variety – the available music programs did not even include any live music. I just figured that I could do better. Ironically, I have a horrible singing voice and I can't play an instrument so I found a guitar player and we wrote our own songs. Then I bought a few basic instruments, rang the doorbell of the church across the street from where I lived to see if they would rent space and started my first children's music class for friends with kids.

News of the classes spread by "word of mom" and my new career was born. Then, when one of the parents asked if we could do her child's birthday, our fabulous birthday party business was launched. And our songs are now available on iTunes and CDs and we have T-shirts, too! So, it's been a very organic process.

And that neighborhood church is still the "headquarters" and flagship for Little Maestros today.

What is your greatest strength or weakness? My greatest strength is my drive. I give 100% to everything I do. My biggest weakness is my left uppercut in my kickboxing fitness class.

What is the best piece of advice you ever received? Be like the divvy – divvy tree in Aruba: go with the flow... I also love to embrace lyrics from songs – like from the musical Wicked, I am always trying to "defy gravity" and from the musical Newsies, "now is the time to seize the day."

What advice would you give someone else interested in starting their own business? I didn't have a business plan or financial backing – both are certainly useful! But what you really need is to believe in yourself, to believe in your product and to persevere.

How do you like to spend your free time? [laughing] I don't really have any free time at all! If I'm not at work, I am with my kids or doing something for my kids. I love every second of it but I wouldn't call it free time because I give all of my focus and attention and energy to whatever I'm doing. Just to give you an idea what my life is like right now, I am planning my daughter's bat mitzvah and my five-year-old son who has such a big and outgoing personality [just like his mother, observes the SGR interviewer] that, on a fluke, he's becoming a very successful child model and actor.

Emmie Howard Founder of Southern Proper

Emmie Howard is the co-founder of Southern Proper, which she started in 2005 following a brief stint spent climbing the corporate ladder. Southern Proper is a haberdashery for the Southern Gentleman found in over 250 specialty men's retail shops around the country and online at www.southernproper.com. Emmie is a native of Ripley, Tennessee and grew up on her family's farm in the Tennessee Delta.



What interested you about the business that you are in?

I've always loved a man in a seersucker suit and a bowtie. It is the quintessential Southern tuxedo. When I was in college, there were some retailers that provided that preppy look but nothing really captured the essence of the South and the place where I grew up. So, I decided to launch Southern Proper and, with the seersucker suit and bowtie in mind, we launched selling bowties and neckties on the web.

What do you believe is your greatest strength and your greatest weakness?

I definitely believe my greatest strength is patience. I think one of the things that I found is that this industry is always changing. Fashion is a fickle and changing business so one must have patience and persistence. My mother always said, "Never once, always twice, have patience have patience." Some people might say my greatest weakness is being too nice.

What advice would you give someone else interested in your success?

Well, I have been asked that a lot and what I always tell people is do not be afraid to ask for help. There has been so many people along the way who have helped me, including the lawyers of Smith Gambrell. Sometimes we just need a little help and people are really willing to help especially if you engage them and ask. That is one of the keys to success in business.

What profession other than yours would you like to attempt and why?

You know, I have always said that a small winery would be very interesting. I love wine so I think just learning more about wine would be really fun and interesting. Since my family is in farming, I have actually said that after Southern Proper, I might become one of the first female cotton farmers in the South.

What do you think makes a person successful?

Well, I'll go back to one of my things. I think patience is a key, persistence is a key but also I think being able to adapt is probably one of the most important things. Change comes every day and it is going to affect your business in some way.

Tell us about what you think is one of your biggest successes.

From a business perspective, I think the team that I have built at Southern Proper has been one of my biggest successes. We have put in place a very young energetic, excited "kool aid drinking" group of young professionals and I am very proud of that. We are not only just building a subculture in fashion with this whole Southern preppy lifestyle, but we are also building this culture within the industry with the next generation Ralph Lauren. People ask every day to come work for our company and I know the team is excited and proud of what we are building.

What is one thing that you have not done but you would like to do – either professionally or personally?

Professionally I think there are a lot of things that we haven't done and the world is our oyster because there are a lot of areas to grow in our business. I think that it would be terrific if we could launch a women's line, as the women dominate this Southern preppy lifestyle across the United States, or expand into different areas including children and pets.

What has been your biggest challenge?

It may be cliché, but I am a female in a men's business right now and although it has opened doors for me being a young professional woman walking into a room full of men in the men's wear industry, I think sometimes I can be seen as just so young, that I don't know the fashion. "She hasn't been in this industry, what does she know about menswear." But I believe that I have proven myself over the years by learning more about apparel, learning the ins and outs of retail, spending time in retail stores, spending time with tailors, spending time with our manufacturers all across the world.

What are you most grateful for?

My upbringing, because that is what influenced this entire business, and it goes beyond a seersucker suit and a bowtie. It actually is the grandparents that made us wear our Sunday best on Sundays in a small town in West Tennessee. It's the mother that always instilled proper etiquette and how to treat people. You know, style is not just how you look but how you act as well. I think that is a big underlying theme of Southern Proper, all the people that we work with and that work on our team. So, I am definitely thankful for those West Tennessee roots. It's a special place.

What is your favorite movie and/or book?

Well my movie is a no brainer, the Goonies. I don't know why, but growing up in such a rural area I never had cable TV growing up so we had a VHS player and we had the Goonies on VHS and I think my sister and brother and I watched that probably close to a few thousands times but we loved it because we were always adventurous growing up and we were always outside playing, so, you know, it was fun. We grew up literally on the Mississippi River. Our house overlooked the Mississippi, so, you know, it was very Huckleberry Finn.

Marni Konner was interviewed by Anne Pitter, a Partner in the Corporate and Real Estate Practices of Smith, Gambrell & Russell, LLP.

Emmie Howard was interviewed by Michelle Edwards, Counsel in the Atlanta office of Smith, Gambrell & Russell, LLP and a member of the Corporate Practice.