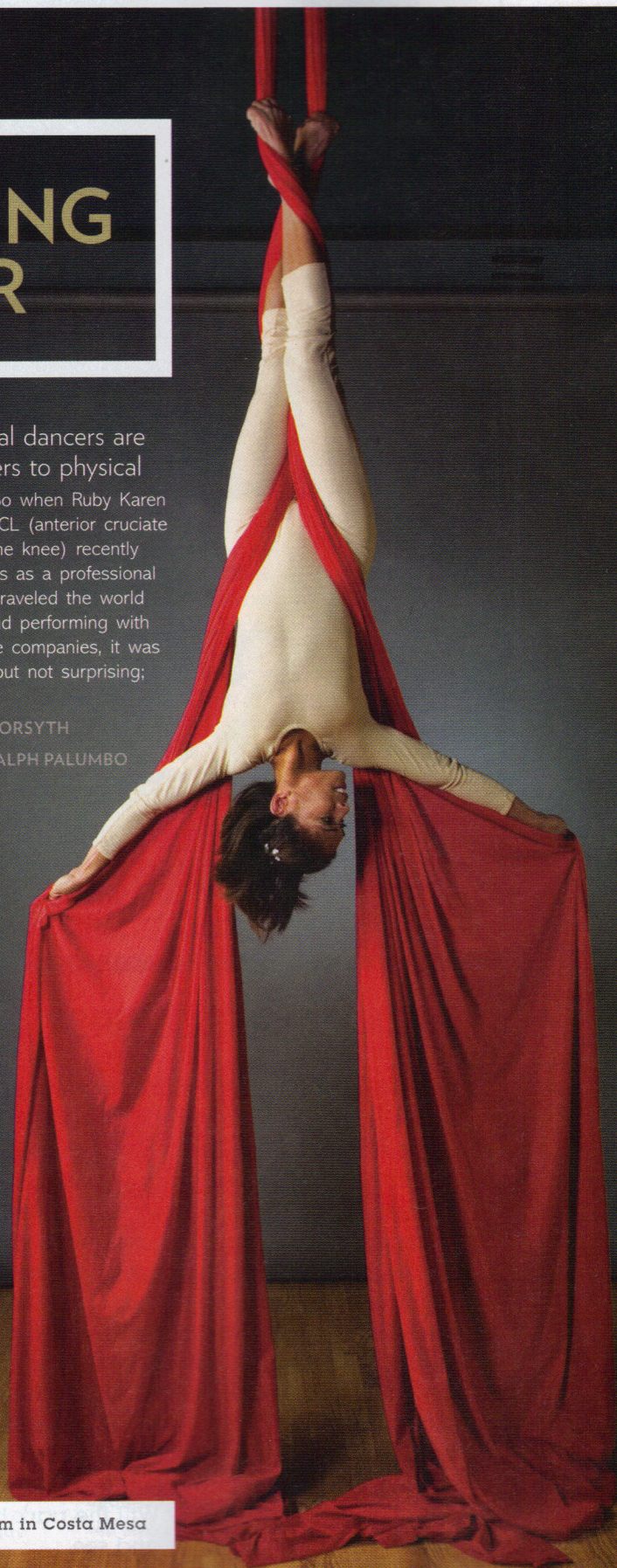


DANCING ON AIR

Professional dancers are no strangers to physical ailments. So when Ruby Karen injured her ACL (anterior cruciate ligament in the knee) recently after 35 years as a professional dancer who traveled the world competing and performing with various dance companies, it was devastating, but not surprising;

BY JESSICA FORSYTH
PHOTO BY RALPH PALUMBO

Ruby Karen at Dance Asylum in Costa Mesa



the petite dance wunderkind from the Philippines had been dancing since she was eight years old, and professionally for nearly as long. But what does an incapacitated career dancer do when she gets injured? She continues to dance, of course, just not on hard surfaces.

Karen took to the air with her dance skills, using the disciplines of ballet (for which she won a world title for the pas de deux in 2003) and salsa (for which she won a world title in 2005) as a jumping off point for aerial arts, in which performers use tissu, hammocks and rings to execute acrobatic feats (think: Cirque du Soleil). But it was during one of her many international trips that Karen decided on her next step in the dance world. "I was traveling and teaching kids in Europe and Israel, and that's when I got inspired to open a school," she says. And so began the Ruby Karen Project, a mobile organization based out of Orange County and dedicated to teaching the performing arts to all who want to learn. "Our motto is to introduce people to the world of aerial art," says Karen. "I add dance as an element to the program, but you don't have to be a dance person to do it; it's a no-stress class customized to the individual."

Besides learning how to look amazing while twirling from a piece of silk hanging from the ceiling, participants also develop strength and flexibility, and lose weight in the process. Karen slowly incorporates dance technique into the aerial routines, making them more graceful and unique, but none of it is mandatory. "I want people to be themselves rather than follow a certain choreography," she says. "Plus, it's more fun than just watching a show in Las Vegas."

GET AIRBORNE

■ **TAKE A CLASS** :: The Ruby Karen Project administers classes throughout Orange County, teaching everything from circus aerials to salsa and ballet jazz. Visit Karen's Web site or check out any of these locations for the latest class and workshop schedules.

714.330.7484 :: rubykaren.com

Bea Hive Dance Studio and Ballroom
9627 Chapman Ave., Garden Grove
714.638.5601 :: beahiveballroom.com

Dance Asylum
2777 Bristol St. Ste. D, Costa Mesa
714.549.0622 :: danceasylum.com

New Hope Gymnastics
17270 Newhope St., Fountain Valley
714.556.8050 :: newhopegymnastics.com