

INTERVIEW WITH ZOE KNIGHTON

This interview was conducted through World of Work (WOW), which is a program that introduces year 10 students to what it means to be successful in life and work. A major part of the learning that takes place during the program is for these young people to interview someone who they perceive as successful. In this interview, Orvokki Britton asks Zoe Knighton about her life in order to discover what it may mean to be successful in hers and many others lives.

Tell me about yourself, who is Zoe Knighton?

My name is Zoe Knighton, and I am the cellist in the Flinders Quartet which I founded back in 2000 and fast forward twenty-two years and it's now my job!

What do you like to do in your down time?

I've got a young family, so that's pretty much what I do in my spare time, and being a musician, it's not the kind of work where you can just clock on and clock off, the work is never ending. I've been a freelancer, and would probably still consider myself as a freelancer, in that I just do whatever work comes my way. Being a freelancer, you do get used to looking after yourself in terms of making sure that you do have time off, because when you don't have a regular income, you need to take the work as it comes because otherwise there are times when you're not earning money and times when you are earning a lot of money. If you say no to income, then you never know when people are going to ask again. My days pretty much consist of around two or three hours of practice, which is learning all of the music that I have to learn and making sure that I'm on top of it, making sure that artistically I know that I'm progressing and doing what I want to do. The rest of my time is pretty much spent replying to emails, organising schedules, programs and media releases for concerts, touching base with patrons, asking people for money, applying for grants and acquitting grants. So most of that time is spent on a computer. My job is .6, which is basically the equivalent of three days of full work, so a full workload is 1.0, so essentially I get paid for three days a week with flinders, in actual fact I work six or seven days a week. That's just the way it is in the artistic world, is that you're always putting in more than you are reaping financially. Most artists will say that financially it's tricky, but we don't do it for the money, the money is there to make sure that you can eat and pay the rent, so it is an essential part of it, but it is definitely not a pursuit to go into for the money. In terms of other ways that I unwind are running, crocheting, reading, taking photos and bushwalking with my family, so those are the things that I am doing when I'm not playing the cello or writing emails!

How did you get to where you are today?

I took a pretty traditional path of undergraduate degree, post graduate diploma and masters degree. During that time, I started working freelance with the symphony orchestras in Melbourne, and you can chug along pretty happily doing that. I was teaching a lot at the time and the quartet was working pretty hard which was filling up most of the gaps in my diary. In 2012 two of our members left, and the other founding member Helen and I decided to keep on going and to aim for .5 employment because we didn't want to be full time. We both have young

families so the goal we wanted to achieve was balance. We achieved that goal this year actually so Helen is on .5 as education coordinator, the quartet is on .4 and I am on .6 as artistic director. Getting to that point was hard, we had to understand in terms of setting up an organisation, we had to come incorporated, which meant a whole lot of paperwork. We have a manager, and she is treated like a member of the group and gets paid exactly the same, so she dealt with all of that. In terms of the money that is available for an arts organisation, you can ask private individuals to give you money but you need to be set up in a way that they can do it and you can give them a tax deductible receipt. There are two main reasons why people give money to you as a donor: one is that they believe in what you do, and want to help and be a part of the creative process, and the other reason is that its a tax deduction, so they would much rather give it to somewhere of their choice rather than to the government. So you need to be set up in a way so that people will want to do that. In terms of getting government funding, we needed to set ourselves up organizationally, and it's really competitive to ask for money and have an arts organisation in Melbourne or anywhere in Australia. I don't do that much orchestral playing anymore, and that was sort of my go-to source of regular-ish income, but I still teach a little bit which is always a lovely and necessary thing for musicians to do because it means that you are constantly questioning and pushing yourself to ask why you do things, and that is really important. In a nutshell, there are lots of stories intertwining that bring anybody to where they are at this point in time, but a lot of it has been getting my head around playing to the best of my ability, doing loads of practice and rehearsals and knowing how to run yourself as a business.

When you were sixteen, did you expect to be doing what you are doing now?

Yes and no, I think I probably saw myself playing and having a permanent job in an orchestra. When I was sixteen I went to the very first melbourne international chamber music competition. I didn't really understand what all of the buzz was all about. I knew that chamber music was special but I didn't understand how special. So when I was playing in string quartets when I was sixteen, I went to the competition and saw these brilliant young groups doing amazingly well. So I think that there was a seed planted there. I knew I was going to be a musician but I didn't understand in what capacity. When I was sixteen, I was so certain about what I was going to do with my life, so I did muck around with trying on other careers, sort of like how you try on a new style of clothes, but nothing serious, more just like having a bit of fun. At that age, everyone else didn't know what direction they were going but I was on this direct path, which I was sure about, but it was a bit boring.

When did you first start playing the cello?

Not until I was ten actually. Musically that is quite late, but I had played piano for a few years prior so I took to cello like a duck to water. I loved it instantly, but most importantly I loved my teacher and wanted to spend time with her and please her.

Are you happy with what you do in life and in work?

That is a question that lots of people ask themselves, and in our household we do ask ourselves that question a lot. The short answer is yes because I have crafted it that way. Anything in my life is happening because I have chosen it to be that way so really, I better be happy with it because everything I have done has led me to this point. Everyday I wake up and say "I'm very

lucky to be living in Australia” or “I’m very lucky to have a roof over my head, food in the cupboard and fridge and to have a gorgeous family”. So in terms of happiness-wise, absolutely. I am definitely one of the lucky ones. Work-wise, the short answer again is yes, I am happy. Sometimes it’s a conscious decision to be happy, because that’s just my natural state of being. In the rehearsal room, things do get hard! People can get a little bit tense when things aren’t going to a certain standard, but we have been doing it for twenty two years so we know how to look after people as well as push forward for a certain artistic result. Even when things are hard and tricky, at the end of it, I do consciously tell myself “gee, I am really grateful to have been pushed, and that somebody told me that I was so wildly out of tune in that spot, I don’t want to walk on stage playing wildly out of tune, thank you for telling me!”. I am a big believer that everything works out in the end, even when things are tricky, there is some good to be found in it. Working with a quartet, it’s only four of us, so there is no variation in the people that you are working with, it’s a close number of people all of the time. We have had various changes of personnel and some have been more effective than others, they have all worked but think now with how we work at the moment, one of the benefits of working with a string quartet in the industry is that yes, there are four individuals, but we are all here for a common purpose and that is music. Music always goes first rather than an individual’s ego or willingness to dominate a conversation, the first and foremost is the music sounding the best it can, and how we can achieve that. When you put your attention and your whole being into something that is greater than you, for me that brings happiness. If you focus on yourself all of the time, gosh, for me that’s a recipe for disaster. The way I gain happiness is focusing on something that’s far greater than me and then you can’t help but be amazed and bewildered at how extraordinary things can happen.

What brings you happiness in life and work?

Any kind of growth, or increased understanding. If I can understand even basic musical things such as a composer’s life, intonation or rhythm, or larger concepts such as understanding a phrase structure, or being able to look at a piece of music and in my head and slightly sculpt it in a different way, that for me brings happiness. Even things like the idea of being in a constant state of awareness or consciousness so that I can focus on where it is that the music is going to take me on any given day. Whenever people come and watch our rehearsals, like a patron, they talk about not understanding what we are talking about in the rehearsal, but also the amount of time that we will spend just getting a tiny portion of the music a little bit better. A lot of people wouldn’t hear what we are hearing and will say “Look, I just couldn’t hear what you were talking about in the music. I guess I could hear it was changing, but I didn’t know why...”. With music there are so many different layers of understanding and listening. When I was learning tennis in my first year of uni, I was terrible at it. I just couldn’t hit the ball, and the tennis coach said “don’t worry about hitting the ball, just focus on whether the ball is spinning towards you or spinning away from you or spinning sideways?” and just that act of increased awareness and focus of what I was actually looking at, helped me hit the ball. It’s the same thing with music, you need that increased awareness and listening, and for me that brings me happiness. It’s almost a form of meditation because when you are listening super, super, super well, there is no room in your head for any kind of chit-chat, linear thought, or thoughts that come into your head without you wanting them to. It still happens when playing music, but if you are listening, concentrating,

focusing and being aware super, super well then it doesn't happen so much. That is one of the reasons why I love music. When I am doing it to the best of my ability, it is like meditation.

What advice would you give to your sixteen year old self?

Practice more, trust yourself more, and when people give you advice delve into deeply what it is that they are saying. Music and instrumental teachers have enormous power and we all want to please our music teachers. Sometimes it's very easy to blame them for steering us along a certain path that maybe wasn't the best path for us, but I think that when anyone ever offers help, it's always with the best of intentions, and always because they can see something that you can't, or something clearer that you can, or something in more detail. To really delve deep into what it is that they are seeing that you're not, I think when anybody gives a piece of advice, there is an element of truth in there. Whenever we have had a bad review, I have agreed with it most of the time, people can say the same thing in a multitude of different ways. So basically, my advice to my sixteen year old self would be, listen to the advice that's given to you and delve into its many different layers of meaning. Know that every little piece of advice has worth in it, even if you choose not to follow it.

Can you define what you think success in life is?

Oh gosh that is a very big question! I don't think it is possible to define success because I think that as soon as you do, you are drawing a line in the sand and saying that's what success is. There is a very wonderful saying/story and it goes that *if you want to have the juiciest mangoes, do you focus on juicy mangoes or do you focus on fertiliser, soil, air, light and all of the things that go into making juicy mangoes?* Juicy mangoes are the success bit, but if you are concentrating on the juicy mangoes and that's all you're living for, then you miss the joy of getting your hands dirty and watching that mango develop. Eating a juicy mango is gone in however long it takes to eat a mango! Then it's gone, and that's done whereas the lifestyle keeps going and going and going, so in terms of success I think that it's more important how one fills one's days needs to be something which you are happy doing. In that way, everybody is different. When I look at my son who is twelve and is very different to me, I suspect that he is going to be really happy with a day where it's very structured. That doesn't suit me, I like to say when I'm going to turn up to rehearsals, and when I have my breaks. So it is really important that the process is the thing that's valued more than the result. We need to strive, aspire and have ambition for something because otherwise nobody gets anywhere. Who knows if those things are worthwhile or not, or if they inspire unhappiness because if you don't achieve your life's ambition, does that mean that you are a failure? If you're not wealthy does that mean you're a failure? If you are never able to have children does that mean you are a failure? In terms of getting something out of whatever it is that you are doing at whatever point in the day that's the important bit. I adore playing the cello and I love practising and finding that quiet space within me that allows the music to flow through, that brings me immense joy. I love working out tricky bits, even though it makes my brain hurt. I love the feeling of my brain hurting, I really like that. I like connecting with people who love chamber music as much as I do, I really love that. I actually really love someone forcing me to define what it is that I want to do in the next year, which is grant writing. You have to be really clear about what it is that you are doing for the next year. I love it because it forces me to plan. I wouldn't have planned that amount of

detail, if I didn't have to do a grant. Whenever we submit a grant, Wendy the manager and myself quite often will have a little bit of a moan at the end of the day, "Oh my god that was such a hard day, it was really annoying!" but we always say "Look, regardless if we get the money or not, how good was that to force us to be very clear about what it is that we want to do.". Quite often the questions that they ask you in a grant, force you to look at what you are doing differently, and I think that's really great. Success will be what it will be but it's not what you should focus on.

What were the biggest challenges that you had to go through to get to where you are now?

When you are a musician, you are constantly questioning whether or not you are good enough, and whether or not everything that you are doing is worthwhile. Do we need all of these musicians in the world? When you go through a music degree there are countless people telling you that you're not good enough, and making you feel like there is a very long way for you to go, and that has been a big hurdle. Financially my life has not been a secure one, but luckily money doesn't mean much to me! If it did, I would be doing something different. Keeping a string quartet afloat is a constant financial challenge and struggle. I need to understand budgets even though it's not my forte, I need to understand how to read a balance sheet even if I don't want to. Another challenge is keeping my life feeling like it's in balance. People in all sorts of industries are feeling a little bit out of control at the moment as everyone is racing to keep up. When you're a parent and you're driving your own business and trying to look after yourself as well, you're pulled in many different directions. Once you have other commitments other than just making sure that you're ok, that's intensely hard.

How did the pandemic affect you and your work?

We were lucky! Organisationally we had set ourselves up so that we had our first salary. So previously we had been paid for what we did but it was basically on contract. We worked, we got paid. So the short answer is that we were really lucky. We had job keeper, which was more than our salary, so we were really happy that the government looked after us very well. Personally and artistically it was tough. We did as much as we could online, which was time consuming and satisfactory. We were lucky, but artistically it was a bit of a bummer.

Do you consider yourself successful?

That's a very big question! Yes ... well, carrying on from what I was saying before, if I consider myself successful, in a way in my head that would mean that I would stop. So I guess my answer to that question would be not yet. There is this never ending journey and cycle, and as a musician it's "practice, rehearse, perform, practice, rehearse..." and you hope that you are getting better and growing as we go through that. So the answer is not yet, based on what I said before.

If you weren't in this line of work what do you think you would be doing instead?

Innately I'm a teacher, I think that it comes very naturally to me. I love writing, so there would be some kind of element of that. I also like taking photos! So any of those three lines of work, if I wasn't the artistic director of the flinders quartet, that's where I would be.

What is the best advice someone has ever given you?

My very dear teacher, who said to me in one of my lessons *“Zoe, we don't need another Rostropovich, the world has Rostropovich, what we need is you, so you need to find what is you and bring that.”*

What does it take to succeed in life and work?

If possible, removing the distinction between life and work. I think that if you go to work and it's seen as something arduous and something separate from your life, for me that creates a diversion with my focus, a disjunct between two people. If you see “work is life, life is work, life just is” then I think it's possible to remove the idea of success being a definitive outcome. We would all like to think that in some ways we have achieved something, and I guess that is how you mark success. If it's possible, make your life just something that flows from getting up in the morning, to doing something which means that you're able to contribute to the world in general, and for that you're either given money, or something else. I think it's important to know that it is unrealistic to think that we don't need money, but in my experience money will come if you focus on what it is that you are actually doing to make the world a better place. And that stems from what I said beforehand, which was that if you are focusing on yourself to find your happiness, it's possibly the wrong direction to be looking. If you're looking outwards in terms of, what's my place here and what can i do to make it better, then that's probably a way of continuing to put one foot in front of the other.