

# Karen Donadio, Aqua Instructor in Mount Pleasant, SC

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After studying Recreational Therapy at Northeastern University, [Karen Donadio](#) spent 24 years working side-by-side the USWFA (United States Water Fitness Association) as an Aqua Instructor, where she recently acquired Aquatic Personal Trainer Certification. Additionally, she has her Shiatsu Massage Therapist License from The Boston School of Shiatsu and has taken the initiative to blend her knowledge areas in wellness to brand her own program called “Hydrogatsu.”

Having represented herself at several different facilities, Karen is always looking for ways to learn more to best serve the overall wellness of her clients. About 10 years ago, she had the opportunity of meeting a really incredible guy named Igor Burdenko who she admires as her career idol and will be pursuing a new certification from the exclusive [Burdenko Institute](#) in the coming weeks! Igor Burdenko attained a Master’s degree in Sports medicine, a Ph.D in Training and Human Performance and as a Rehabilitation Specialist, he has developed a method that is extremely effective in helping people recover from injuries. Attaining certification from the Burdenko Institute will set Karen apart from the average aqua instructor and enhance Karen’s overall wellness knowledge to another degree. We’re so excited to see her excel and are thankful for people like her who are so committed to enhancing the lives of others through wellness and fitness! **See below for a sneak peek at the highlights of our interview with Karen:**

## **Interview Highlights:**

### **When did you start as an Aqua Instructor?**

I was introduced to water aerobics when my son was two years old. After gaining 60 pounds from the pregnancy and only delivering an 8 pound baby, water exercise was all my body could handle. When the

weight finally did level off, I enjoyed the classes so much that I decided to get certified to be a teacher of water aerobics. I thought it would be a fun hobby!



I also want to make a statement that the term “Aqua Instructor” is often associated with water aerobics, which tends to draw the image of white haired people floating with dumb bells talking about their grandchildren. While we have those participants in some of our

programs, that preconceived idea limits the audience and range of opportunities of aqua therapy opens itself up to. This field of fitness in state of the art aquatic centers has grown leaps and bounds in the last twenty years. For instance: Aqualogix (Karen’s latest certification) is a method used to train the Navy Seals and trampolines are in the water to assist our lymphatic systems. As you can tell, we have come a long way in the world of Aquatic Fitness!

For something to do while I focused on raising my son and pursuing my full-time career of teaching in the schools, I went on to Lesley University to obtain my Master’s in Special Education. I only started subbing for water fitness classes and instructed a regular Saturday class. As time went on, I became more active in obtaining my own water fitness classes and actually only subbing in the public school system. About the same time, my interest in alternative medicine started to form. Acupuncture to be exact. I looked into schools and realized it would be a 7-year journey. It was through that disappointment that I discovered an 18-month certification course in Shiatsu Massage in Cambridge Massachusetts which soon became my passion. I love that it is a modality performed fully clothed, no oils or creams, on a mat, on the floor providing such comfort where both the practitioner and client become one with the earth.

### **What does ‘water wellness’ mean to you?**

My approach is certainly holistic, leveling the mind, body & soul, leveraging the Water Wellness Pyramid to individualize the way I tailor each session. The Water Wellness Pyramid aims to strengthen, improve and grow in these 6 areas:

- Balance

- Coordination
- Flexibility
- Endurance
- Speed
- Strength

### **What makes you different?**

What I liked most about the USWFA is that they require you to develop your own program. By doing so, I have taken my talents that I feel most passionate about and combined them. Yoga and Shiatsu Massage combined with strength and aerobic conditioning in the water forms my unique program: Hydrogatsu.



I train in both warm water facilities (Kids First Swim Club) as well as regular temperature (80-82 degrees) facilities. My classes are not just physical, but they also have to be fun, lively, upbeat and all-inclusive. My exercises are all able to be adapted to individual areas of need in all participants. We have a great play list of music and timed water breaks. I can go anywhere there is water, even the ocean, although I haven't trained anyone there yet.

Having been a member of the USWFA for over 20 years, I've also become an Aqua Instructor for new Aqua Instructors. I have taught certification courses to bring new people into the field of teaching water fitness to others. My motto is "Safety First: The safety of participants, including instructors, is the primary concern."

### **What is the age range and level of fitness of your clients?**

I instruct students generally between (but not limited to) the range of 25-70.

Whether they're recovering from a sports injury, wanting to lose weight, seeking an exercise routine for stress relief or strengthening muscle to ease the symptoms of hip dysplasia, I've worked with a wide spectrum of conditions and have tailored wellness plans to cater to their personal needs / goals for optimal success.

I do see an area of opportunity to introduce kids or troubled teens into aqua fitness / therapy. I think that'd be an incredible challenge to take on and a very rewarding niche audience to address.

### **What audience do you currently market to?**

I do individual and group sessions with local organizations / facilities but I also connect with local Physical Therapy offices to gain independent clients for personal training. Often times, when individuals are discharged from their physical therapy, aqua aerobics / therapy is an excellent transition! In chest-deep in water, 80% of your weight disappears and the deeper you are in the water, the less weight you carry. Aqua therapy / aerobics provides a low impact exercise with the water acting as a natural resistant increasing muscle strength while maintaining comfort and pliability of their overall body movement.



### **What was more most challenging condition / biggest success story you've instructed?**

My most challenging *physical* condition thus far is one of my newly acquired clients I have the pleasure of working with. She is a well-known doctor in the area with hip dysplasia that has had two surgeons tell her that an operation is inevitable. After researching her condition, I work towards strengthening the muscles surrounding the joint to aid her post-operation recovery.

I also had a participant tell me that my classes helped her find peace after losing her husband. It was a great motivator to know she was coming to class with friends because compassion, comradery and a judgement free zone are all threaded into the fabric of my classes.

**What was the longest-term client you've instructed?**

There's one client I can recall that I started seeing 12 years ago that has now retired and become a Certified Aqua Instructor herself! I've seen a handful of clients for so long that I encourage them to become certified because of their form & enthusiasm. Because this is something you can do until your 90+, it's really a positive lifelong investment.

**If you won the lottery, what would you do with it?!**

There are so many small things I notice in my daily practice that have fueled a dream of mine to build my own State of the Art Aquatic Center. I would call them "The Hydrogatsu Aquatic Centers" (notice the "s" because they would eventually be franchised around the world) and the membership will be private pay and all-inclusive.

I would buy at least 2 acres of land, build in indoor/outdoor glass enclosed pool with filtered mineral water from the ocean. The water would be therapeutic to the body, lavender infused, be naturally cleaned without chemicals and would have only ramp access and a chair assist.

The pool would be equipped with tread mills, trampolines, paddle boards, stationary bikes, stationary poles (for pole dancing), paddle boards and galvanized ballet bars around the pool at three different levels. The facility would be surrounded by rooms for all kinds of different healing modalities ranging from acupuncture to Physical Therapy and everything in-between! It would have nearly everything you could imagine for water wellness!

**For more information about Karen Donadio and Hydrogatsu, please visit her website at <http://hydrogatsu.com/>**