

Smooth talkers

These two proud Queenslanders have voices that have taken them all over the world

PHOTOS NICOLA BERNARDI

Forging a friendship in a suburban high school in North Queensland, Karen Jacobsen and David James both went on to become voiceover artists. As the voice of iPhone's ever-helpful Siri, Karen's voice reaches millions of people around the world, while David's dulcet tones now grace the cabins of Tigerair flights – both in person, in his work as cabin manager, and via pre-recorded cabin announcements. We recently chatted to Karen and David about everything from their mutual love of Queensland to the joys of frequent flying – and what it's like to hear their voices pop up in unusual places.

How did you two meet?

KJ ▶ We met in Mackay, North Queensland, on the first day of school in Grade 11. Two new boys showed up, and of course all the girls wanted to know who the new boys were. One of them had moved up to Mackay from Sydney, and that was David.

DJ ▶ We also both had part-time jobs at Kmart, so we worked together on Thursday nights and Saturday mornings.

KJ ▶ Wasn't that an education? That's the only real job I ever had! My Dad is really proud of that. After school, I was extremely inspired by my idol Olivia Newton-John and I wanted to get to the big city as soon as I could, so I went to Brisbane and studied music. While there, I got into voiceover work and started working as a musician in piano bars too. I couldn't believe that before I'd even finished university I was making a living out of music.

After Brisbane I moved to Sydney and lived there for 10 years, where I built a solid entertainment business for myself. You couldn't turn the radio or TV on in the 1990s without hearing my speaking or singing voice on ads. Then, after 10 years in Sydney, I moved to America. I knew that that was what I'd always wanted to do. I was scared, but I was clear that it was right. So I moved to New York with a suitcase and a dream.

So how did you become the voice of Siri?

KJ ▶ A client contacted me looking for a native Australian female voiceover artist living in the north-east of the United States. I saw that brief and thought: That job is mine. I went to the audition and got hired for the job. I recorded four hours a day for three weeks. To create a voice system based on my speaking voice they needed to capture every combination of syllables possible.

Do you get a lot of people recognising your voice?

KJ ▶ I do. When people realise that my voice is the one in their GPS or smartphone [it's now in more than 400 million devices around the world], they get very excited about meeting me and they want to tell me about their relationship with their GPS. Many people talk to me as if they already know me in a very familiar way.

As both of you are frequent flyers, what are some of your favourite places that you like to visit in Australia?

KJ ▶ Ooh, well it's North Queensland isn't it? I've been to a lot of ▶

beautiful islands and nothing touches the Whitsundays. As Aussies I don't even think we realise how pristine and stunning the Whitsunday Islands are. There's nothing like them. They're so untouched.

What are some of your other favourite spots in Queensland?

DJ › I live in the Gold Coast, and the Broadbeach precinct is a great area for families; there are so many restaurants to choose from. As a crew member, my favourite destination is Cairns. I love doing the North Queensland flights because I love the diverse landscapes and coastlines that we get to fly over. It's just amazing.

But then I'll do a Sydney flight and look out of the window, and see beautiful Sydney Harbour; or fly to Adelaide and see the salt pans or the Adelaide Hills as you come in. I love my job so much because of that – it's not like looking out of a normal office window, where you see traffic or other buildings.

KJ › You really are the perfect employee, David!



"I see Sydney Harbour, Adelaide Hills... It's not like looking out of an office window" – David

DJ › Well, this is my 10th year of flying, and I genuinely enjoy going to work.

KJ › I think that Brisbane is a well-kept secret. Brisbane is a world-class city that has totally matured. It's an international city. The people are so friendly and engaged. I love the South Bank area. It's so handy for the city, but it's gorgeous. They've created something incredible – they've even built a beach there! The Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary is the ultimate. It's good for all ages. And Ballandean Estate's winery is another gem of a place for travellers visiting Queensland, it's just gorgeous.

Karen, in your work as a motivational speaker you talk about the skill of recalculating. How important is being able to recalculate your journey in life when things don't go according to plan?

KJ › I think it's the key to happiness. It's the key to living a life that you can love. If you are able to let go when something doesn't go the way you wanted it to you, and keep moving forward and feel good, you're golden.

So where has your voice work taken you?

KJ › My voice work has taken me all over the world. I'm



speaking and singing at large events in so many countries around the world. I'm such a passionate traveller, and always have been. As I kid I was totally enamoured with the idea of travelling, so to have travel as a huge part of my profession is a total joy.

My voice has ended up in 400 million devices! I even just landed at Brisbane airport and went to the car park to get a rental car, and there's my voice in the elevator saying: "You're on the first floor". My voice pops up in amazing places that are sometimes unexpected. In cruise ships, in taxis, even in software programs used by visually impaired people around the world.

What do your kids think of your voice work?

KJ › When my little boy was smaller, he thought everyone's mummy was in the iPhone or the GPS!

DJ › I used to do voice work for onscreen cinema advertising and the 24-hour cinema information phone line, so when people rang

up to get the movie times – that was me. And when my kids used to go to the movies, they'd sit there and listen to Dad.

KJ › That's adorable.

DJ › My daughter recently flew on Tiger, and she texted me to say, "I can hear you, it feels like I'm at home."

You both spend a fair amount of time in planes. What aspects of flying do you like?

KJ › When I'm flying, I feel like I'm going places in my life. It's exciting to me. At heart I'm still a little girl from Mackay in North Queensland who can hardly believe that this is my life. I haven't lost touch with that side of myself, so to me flying is really exciting. I just love the sky too. I love the different clouds, skylines and landscapes.

DJ › I was flying from Melbourne to Perth one night and when I looked out over the Great Australian Bight I could see purples and yellows and reds coming through the clouds – the sky was like a kaleidoscope. It was incredible. Another time I was flying just on sunrise near the border of Queensland and the Northern Territory, and I could see a thunderstorm with darkness on one side and the sun rising on the other. It was just amazing.

KJ › And you could see all of that at once? You really do have a great job, David!

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