

Izzy Camilleri

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:31:10

Karen Brown

Welcome to another edition of Real Life Renos : The Podcast. Our guest today is Izzy Camilleri, who is one of Canada's leading fashion designers. Izzy has won awards such as the Innovation Award and the Fashion Impact Award and has dressed celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Mark Wahlberg, David Bowie and Meryl Streep. Remember the dyed silver fox coat in The Devil Wears Prada?

00:00:31:15 - 00:00:53:24

Karen Brown

That was Izzy's work. Her work has been featured in Vogue and InStyle magazines to name two of the many and last year, the NYC Journal called her a fashion disruptor. Today, we're talking with Izzy about her pioneering design work in adaptive and inclusive clothing IZ Adaptive is now the exclusive focus of her work, as she believes everyone should look great and wear well-fitting clothing.

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Karen Brown

Welcome, Izzy.

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Izzy Camilleri

Hi. Thanks for having me.

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Karen Brown

Nice to have you here today. You worked in fashion and then designed for film when production started to ramp up in Toronto. Tell us a bit about that time.

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Izzy Camilleri

Well, I. I started pretty young in fashion, and I, I entered kind of the high end fashion because producing in Canada is kind of expensive. So so that's why I ended up in that kind of field. And then it opened the doors to working for wardrobe departments in film when actually the Canadian dollar became very low during during the late eighties, early nineties.

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Izzy Camilleri

And so Toronto became a very busy place for film production. And I, I kind of stumbled on to it, but then it became the main part of my work.

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Karen Brown

Right. And then you met Barbara Turnbull. She was 18 years old and working a little job in a convenience store which was robbed. And during the course of the robbery, she was shot in the neck and became paralyzed from the neck down. You met her in 2004 and everything changed for you.

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Izzy Camilleri

Mm hmm. Yeah, I had never worked with someone who used a wheelchair. I never worked with someone with a disability that was very high level as hers was. And so I became a bit of a sponge, learning all the issues she had with clothes. And not only

issues, but but limitations and and lack of options. So I started doing some custom work for her.

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Izzy Camilleri

And through that relationship, I just learned what her needs were and how I could help her with them. So I didn't know that seeds were being planted. And after a couple of years I realized that if she had all these problems with clothes, it must be a lot of other people out there at the same problem. And that's how I really started to pursue IZ Adaptive.

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Karen Brown

Right. So it may sound to our listeners and viewers like we're talking about people who are wheelchair users exclusively and we're really not. The world of adaptive clothing is quite broad and includes people who are aging, people who have range of motion limitations, people who were born with physical disabilities, as well as progressive diseases and people who have paralysis.

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Karen Brown

So this conversation is for anyone really, who wants to look at maintaining independence while they're dressing. For our listeners who don't have a disability, can you talk a little bit about how you go about creating clothing for people who do have disabilities?

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Izzy Camilleri

Sure. Well, I would say one of the maybe most common issues is dexterity issues. So if you if you have trouble doing up a button

and that could come with arthritis, it could come with having a stroke, and then it can come with with other forms of disability. But finding finding ways of doing up a shirt or finding ways of doing up or pulling up a pair of pants that are easier for someone are the type of things that I think about all the time.

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Izzy Camilleri

So magnets can be a solution to replace a button or just using a larger or, you know, buying a shirt that has a larger button as opposed to a tiny little button could make all the difference in the world and could also make a person or allow a person to dress independently as opposed to having someone else to up their shirt or pull up their fly zipper.

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Izzy Camilleri

Even something like putting or having a zipper pull on a zipper so that like a larger pole, something that you can stick your finger into to pull the zipper up and down. So all of those those solutions are universal. We could all benefit from a button that's a little bit bigger or having a zipper pull that has something, you know, like like it doesn't make it any less attractive.

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Izzy Camilleri

It doesn't make it any less of a garments in terms of just overall fashion and appearance.

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Karen Brown

And you're talking about a zipper pull that's actually designed into the garment as opposed to an implement that would be carried

somewhere to then hook on to the zipper. Right. It's actually designed into the fabric or into the zipper.

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Izzy Camilleri

Yeah. Or even just, you know, it could be something that's added on. Right. And it could be taken off so or it's just the kind of pull that maybe the manufacturer has found or designed that is permanent, but it still looks attractive and it doesn't take away from the look of the garment at all.

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Karen Brown

Right before we get into a couple of your more popular pieces, you did a Ted Talk a couple of years ago. Mm hmm. An experience that very few people get to have. Can you tell us a bit about that and the reactions that you got some having done that.

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Izzy Camilleri

Well, I would say was the most terrifying thing I've ever done in my life.

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Izzy Camilleri

It was it was a lot of pressure because, you know, you have to memorize your speech and the average length of a Ted Talk is somewhere between 14 and 16 minutes. After that, you start losing people. So memorizing something like that, it took a long time. We were we were given a coach and to help write our speech.

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Izzy Camilleri

And just in terms of it having all the kind of ingredients and just, just the way that you write it. So there was a lot of, of editing, there was a lot of rehearsing. And unfortunately we, we, we had it all planned to, to do our Ted Talk in April. But COVID had come down like it was right when COVID started.

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Izzy Camilleri

So it had to be pushed. And then we ended up doing it in a studio and it was live streamed without an audience. So that took a bit of the pressure off. But it was still it was still pretty intense.

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Karen Brown

Right.

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Izzy Camilleri

And yeah, yeah. And the reaction was really great and it was very eye opening for people. The TED Talk is called Redesigning Fashion, and it was my journey into designing adaptive clothing, but then also my journey into starting the company and. And what, what the what's happening today in adaptive clothing, because I kind of pioneered a category in fashion that I had no idea that I was going to be a pioneer and revolutionize the way people with disabilities get dressed.

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Karen Brown

Right. And until then, I know that many of us who have worked with elderly people in particular for many years have seen clothes that do up at the back, and they're primarily made to be easy for

caregivers to access and help people get dressed. But the whole idea of independent dressing that is revolutionary for sure. Yes.

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Izzy Camilleri

Yeah. I think a lot of people just think of the like when I started to do my research back in, like, 2009 all I was seeing is clothing for the elderly or for people living in long term care. And after I met Barbara Turnbull, I had met another young woman who was injured from her sport and she was very young.

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Izzy Camilleri

She was in her early twenties. So when I started looking around, there's so many people out there that are young that don't want to be dressing in clothing for the elderly. So especially for someone who develops a disability or has a catastrophic injury during the course of their life, you know, they've got a certain identity and and clothing really defines who you are.

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Izzy Camilleri

And, you know, just from first impressions and things like that, or even if you just, you know, you like wearing a particular color or you like tight leather pants or you like whatever. And so if clothing, if your choices are stripped away of you because of an injury or a disability that you've developed, that takes a lot of your identity away.

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Izzy Camilleri

So having no choices or having choices that are that are have been designed for the elderly, when you're only 25 can be a pretty big pill to swallow.

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Karen Brown

Right. And I saw that you did a lot of demonstrating of the type of clothing on an AM I network program, Fashion Dis.

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Izzy Camilleri

Mm hmm.

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Karen Brown

There are two seasons of that out now. I hope they're going to come back with more because it really revolutionized the game for the subjects that you were all dressing and doing hair for and doing makeup for. You could just see the joy come out on their back. You must have enjoyed that process quite a bit.

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Izzy Camilleri

Mm hmm. Yeah. Yeah, it was it was a really, really great show to be a part of. And I, as you hope we get to season three, but it was also very eye opening for the participants and and our viewers as well, because a lot of people, including myself, before I started this, I had no idea of the challenges that people have. No idea of the limitations.

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Izzy Camilleri

When you see someone with a disability, they're dressed and you just don't realize what it actually took to get dressed or how limited their options are. You just kind of taken at face value. So, so so yeah, the show the show has been really great.

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Karen Brown

The amount of energy that it takes for people with disabilities to do things is a recurring theme in my work. For those who are watching, who don't know I'm an aging in place and accessibility strategist so this is my my wheelhouse. And it does reoccur this idea of how much energy it takes. And you know what? I did a podcast recently with an architect who talked about redesigning a washroom for a woman and what used to take her two and a half hours now took her half an hour and her joy was in being able to spend that extra 2 hours with her husband and her children.

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Karen Brown

Mm hmm. It's just those things that comes lately change life for people. So you are absolutely in that category. Speaking of game changing, let's get into a couple of your designs now. The Game Changer Pant, which I mentioned earlier, is certainly one of your signature looks. Tell us about it.

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Izzy Camilleri

Well, the Game Changer Pant is a pant that has a seamless back. And the reason that I came up with this pant is because from day one, when I started IZ Adaptive. Back in 2009, people started asking for a seamless back pant. And at the time, I was still learning. And I, I couldn't understand why that was so important.

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Izzy Camilleri

And the reason that it is important is because the the base of your spine when you're sitting is pushing against that center seam that's in the back of your pants. And for people that are wheelchair users who sit for very long periods of time, as well as for people that are paralyzed, who can't feel anything, they're not feeling any discomfort.

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Izzy Camilleri

But eventually the the tip of your spine and as well as your sitting bones can penetrate the skin and cause a sore and an opening, which is very similar to a bed sore and its exact same kind of of sorts. Just named two different things. But it's the pressure that's pushing down on the bone, pushing down on the skin, which could eventually cause this.

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Izzy Camilleri

The bone can penetrate, it can become infected, and you can develop sepsis and it can be life threatening. It's very, very, very hard to heal a pressure sore, and it takes a very long time. So I learned this naturally. But but then I started just telling people that like I'm a I'm a pattern drafter and I understand how pants are cut and made.

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Izzy Camilleri

And that seam is integral to the cut of a pant. And the reasons being is that it divides right and left it. It creates dimension between the back of the pant to the front of the pen and between your legs. It, it it creates the shape that we need to cup

our bum, just every anything. Yeah. Yeah. You can't kind of get rid of that seam without a very ill fitting pant.

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Izzy Camilleri

So. Or even like having a baggy pant, you can do it if it's a baggy pant. But then that kind of defeats the purpose because even if you're sitting on folds of fabric, that could also cause a pressure so on.

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Karen Brown

Right.

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Izzy Camilleri

And once the pressure sore, if you've had a pressure sore and it heals the odds of one coming back are up to I think it's like 83 or 84%. So if you've had one, you're going to do you can easily get one again.

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Karen Brown

Right.

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Izzy Camilleri

Because the skin is compromised in that area and your bone isn't going anywhere. So when COVID came down just before COVID happened, I had a conversation with someone and I told them, you know, the same thing that I told so many people before that it was impossible. And then when COVID happened, the world stopped. I was at home and I was thinking about it.

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Izzy Camilleri

And I you know, I thought I wonder if it is possible. So I think a couple of days. So I started having conversations actually, with people that have had pressure sores. I had conversations with health professionals. And then I went to my studio and started looking at the pattern and seeing how I can manipulate it in such a way that it could be seamless and how, how and where I could make that happen.

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Izzy Camilleri

And I and I figured it out and then I started to test it on someone who had almost died from from his pressure saw and yeah, so, so I, I developed this pant that looks great. It fits great. It allows for people to like one thing for this guy. Who was that? He tested them for me. He was only allowed to be in his pants for 4 hours and he would always have to change because of the pressure.

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Izzy Camilleri

And with our Game Changer Pant, he can stay in his pants for way longer and he doesn't have to worry. So they they reduce the risk

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Izzy Camilleri

of developing a pressure sore. So we have them in jeans, chinos, sweats and a few other things.

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Karen Brown

Shorts. I saw them on the website.

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Izzy Camilleri

Yep. Shorts are a new thing.

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Karen Brown

Yeah, right. I will link the IZ Adaptive site in our show notes. People, you have to go and take a look at these. These are revolutionary. Now, I know that people who are watching and listening are going to be wanting these, but wondering what the price point is. So can you tell us a bit about that?

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Izzy Camilleri

Mm hmm. They range anywhere from \$80 to just under \$200. We produce in Canada or North America. So we we we're not producing offshore, so we don't have those that same pricing. So, you know, so it's materials and labor and because sometimes people comment on the price but you know I'm not gouging or anything like that. It takes money to run a business and and also continue to do research and development and all that kind of thing.

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Karen Brown

Of course! I don't I don't think there's anything to apologize for for that, because routinely I pay close to \$200 for a pair of jeans. And this is without the research and your talent having gone into it. So for me, that sounds quite reasonable.

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Izzy Camilleri

Yeah. And I do try to make it reasonable, right. But there are others that, you know, they do. They can't afford it. And sometimes people who don't understand why they are what they are, but that's why they are they are.

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Karen Brown

Of course. Now, you, of course, focus on designs for people who are primarily seated, but you also do standing designs.

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Izzy Camilleri

Mm hmm.

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Karen Brown

And you tell us.

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Izzy Camilleri

Yeah, that. Yeah. So that's more for people that again, it's more about dexterity. So if you have trouble pulling, pulling, using a zipper, so it's pants that have an elastic waist where we also put these pull tabs at the side. So if you have trouble gripping, you can just keep your hands there. Kind of like a belt, but they're horizontal so you can cut your cup, your hands in them to help you pull up your pants or magnets on coats, for example, instead of a button.

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Izzy Camilleri

So it is about easy dressing and independent dressing when you have dexterity issues.

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Karen Brown

It sounds like magnets are themselves quite a game changer. Mm hmm. Mm. Now people with ...

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Izzy Camilleri

Yeah. And magnets don't work for everybody. Like, if you are a wheelchair user propelling your own wheelchair, like a manual wheelchair, when you when you do the action of propelling magnets can pop open. So they're not for everybody, but they but they are helpful for others. I would say they just don't work for, I would say large, busty women or people that are wheelchair users.

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Karen Brown

Can people with pacemakers wear clothing with magnets, or have pacemakers evolved? Perhaps? No, they can't. Okay. That's that's good to know. Okay. But that is something ...

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Izzy Camilleri

Well once magnets that are near the heart there.

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Karen Brown

Yes, they put the pacemaker in the shoulder now and my mother had one and it was I mean, years and years and decades ago. It's below her waist. And the wires went up so that it changed the

game of pacemakers when they started putting them in the shoulder. So fair enough. The Billy Shoes, when I was looking at your website, the Billy's shoes really caught my eye.

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Izzy Camilleri

Mm. And those are not my product. They're a product of a company in the United States called Billy Footwear. And Billy is a wonderful guy who had a catastrophic injury. He's a quadriplegic. And when he was trying to work through his new way of living in a paralyzed body, he had a lot of trouble with shoes. He's a very tall man with big feet.

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Izzy Camilleri

And he had so much trouble that he and a friend decided to start a company and they developed a pant ... sorry ... a shoe that there there's a zipper around the top of it so the whole thing opens and you just have to place your foot in it instead of feeding your foot into a shoe. And the issue for him and many, many, many other people, if you're paralyzed, is that what I never realized when I put on a shoe was that we kind of crunch our toes to get to the end and so for people that are paralyzed, they can't do that.

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Izzy Camilleri

And what can happen is when you are trying to slide your foot into a shoe, one of your toes could bend back or you can rip your nail off and you wouldn't even know it until you take your shoe off and kind of see what's happened. And that's very common. So being able to safely just stick your foot into the shoe and zip it up is another game changer for a lot of people and even for people

that they also come in wide and then even wider because often people develop a lot of swelling in their feet from sitting all day and from other conditions.

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Izzy Camilleri

People that also wear an AFO need that extra space in their in their shoe. So we have a very limited amount of designs. And if you go to the billy dot com website, they have a huge range of shoes for men, women and children as well.

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Karen Brown

Right now, the adaptive clothing business has been estimated to be worth about \$350 billion a year and I assume that's growing. You offer a consultation service to brands that want to look into this and perhaps branch out. You must hear from people all the time, clients of yours and just people you talk to. "Oh, I wish I could wear that brand, but I can't because blah, blah, blah." What kind of uptake are you getting from brands?

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Karen Brown

Are the lights going on?

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Izzy Camilleri

Yeah, we we do get sought out by brands and people and even like universities and colleges are now teaching this. So I get I get, you know people looking at me to to help with with papers or to do seminars because it is a very it's it's a growing category and there's there's not many people that that have the experience that I that I have.

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Izzy Camilleri

And now with my Game Changer Pant too I, I have a patent for the design of it. So I do want to allow other companies, other brands to license it. And I also I'm developing a standing version of it as well for people that could be wheelchair users, but also ambulatory, but then also for anybody who sit all day at their job or just like to look at them because they are quite interesting.

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Izzy Camilleri

And so, yeah, there's there's lots of possibilities.

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Karen Brown

Absolutely. Do you do work outside of the IZ Adaptive brand now?

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Izzy Camilleri

I do a little bit. I still sometimes service the film industry and so we we work on lots of different projects. I rarely but sometimes do custom work for people that live with a disability. It really just depends on my time and what the project is and if it's something I can do. If the person is close to me.

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Izzy Camilleri

Because doing custom work long distance can be very, very challenging, right? Yes.

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Karen Brown

So if somebody wants to purchase from IZ Adaptive, what do they do?

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Izzy Camilleri

Just go to IZ Adaptive dot com and you'll just see the categories and you can take it from there.

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Karen Brown

Right. There's a tool that helps you decide what size is best and, and so on. Yeah.

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Izzy Camilleri

We have a size chart and.

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Karen Brown

And the other the.

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Izzy Camilleri

Options are they're good. Pardon me.

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Karen Brown

The FAQ section is very good. Lots of information. Thank you. Right. Any last words for our audience? Anything that you want to mention?

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Izzy Camilleri

Oh, well, we have some new products coming up for fall that will be probably on the site in around a month. But yeah, that's about it. As we continue to try and put out a really good product that makes our clients just feel really great and allow them to to live an independent life and look great while we're doing it.

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Karen Brown

Terrific. Well, thank you very much for your time today. It was an interesting podcast and discussion and on our show notes I will put links to IZ Adaptive and Izzy's Ted Talk and whatever else we can think of. Billy Shoes. Put that on now as well. And again, my thanks. I would welcome our listeners and viewers to join us again for our next episode of Real Life

00:26:47:38 - 00:27:29:13

Karen Brown

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