

# Karen Stanwood: Staying Curious and Taking Chances

## Jonathan Schultz

Karen Stanwood understands the value of mentorship and professional development. Whether it's navigating the twisty world of scientific publishing or lying on a bed of nails (keep reading), being curious and taking risks is much easier when you have a steady, experienced hand to guide you. As Director of Electronic Publishing and Production at SLACK Incorporated, a publisher of health care books and journals in the Wyanoke Group along with Healio and Vindico Medical Education, Karen has weathered many industry changes. In this interview, we discuss those changes, the value of professional development, and the importance of organizations like CSE.

**Science Editor:** How did you get started with scientific editing and publishing?

**Karen Stanwood:** Like a lot of people, I kind of stumbled into it. When I first went to college, I thought I wanted to be a psychologist. I liked talking to people and helping them. My first course, though, was a research course and I was like, "No, thank you." That wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to talk to people and help them with their problems. I transferred to what was then Glassboro State College, which then became Rowan University of New Jersey (the Rowan gift came while I was there). My father had been a teacher, so I was looking to go into teaching. I graduated with a dual major in elementary education and English, and I tried for a little while to get a teaching job.

Not that I didn't like it, but it was very difficult to find a job. I did some substitute teaching and worked in a daycare center, which made me question if I ever wanted to have children. I was very focused on getting a job that would lead to a career, and it was suggested I look into an editorial position. I did that, and as soon as I started, I realized this is where I'm meant to be. I love to sweat the small stuff. I love that attention to detail, that finished product of having a journal in your hand, having your name on the masthead. It was the perfect fit. Thank you to my first manager for taking a chance on me.

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I started as an assistant editor and moved up the ladder in journals at SLACK. Over time, my purview has expanded so I currently focus more on the systems that support our journals, whether that's our production system, content management system, or peer review system.

**Science Editor:** Do you find that the initial desire to help and talk to people that led you to psychology originally is being met by your job?

**Karen Stanwood:** It really is. I've always been attracted to jobs that I think will make things better, such as psychology, teaching, or scientific publishing. Being a manager falls into that category, too. Supporting my staff with sensitive issues, especially in this pandemic situation, and making sure that people within our department feel like they're part of a group, fulfilled in their job, and meeting their own personal goals hits on many of the same elements as the other careers I've been attracted to.

**Science Editor:** What would you say you enjoy most about this career?

**Karen Stanwood:** I'd have to say the variety. The way that it has always functioned at SLACK is that our editorial staff do both editorial and production work. They're doing both copy editing and proofing, sending to the printer, doing layout, and working in our content management system to

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get the issues online. So you're learning a wide variety of tasks. As I moved up, I learned more about management, bigger initiatives, strategy, budgeting, and all those higher level things within the organization. I'm the type of person who always want to learn more; I always want to do more. All these different, random tasks over the years just taught me so much more about the industry or about things that I didn't know, and that put me in a good position. The rest was serendipitous: The trajectory of my career and the trajectory of publishing are kind of following the same path. When I started, we didn't have email on our computers. For our meeting program, we worked on giant pages with the abstracts, cutting and pasting them so pictures could be taken and shrunk down. For peer review, I remember stacks and stacks of folders and papers with decision letters that needed to be typed out onto letterhead to be mailed to authors. But then we got layout software followed by electronic peer review systems and content management systems. I've had to learn, and train others on, XML and HTML and other pieces of technology that have become more prevalent. The technological advances have been the biggest change during my career, and provided me with new things to learn and ways to advance in my career.

**Science Editor:** That's a good segue to mention that you are the co-chair for CSE's Professional Development Committee. What is your approach to professional development? When someone is coming into your organization now, starting from a place you were years ago, how do you think about training them or bringing them up?

**Karen Stanwood:** I would say that mentorship is a passion of mine. I feel really strongly about leading by example and having professional goals that are not necessarily related to your direct job. For example, for me, it was learning more about XML and our content management system. It's important to have a network for career development, throughout your career, as I always think that there's something to learn and someone to learn from.

That's why I'm drawn to the professional development community—to have a place to network with like-minded people and develop programs that are helpful for others; for example, within CSE, helping members find someone who they connect with, to hear about opportunities, or to learn skills they may not have learned in their workplace. I think the Professional Development Committee already has a strong foundation of great programs, and to be able to contribute to that is really exciting. I'm succeeding Jasmine Wallace, who has done an amazing job. I'm so excited to be moving into that position and working with Carolyn DeCourt. It's an exciting time for opportunities that are not necessarily linked to an annual meeting or a regional event—to not have those geographical barriers and the financial costs for travel.

I think there's an opportunity to reach a lot more people who maybe were not able to participate in some of the activities prior to our current pandemic situation.

**Science Editor:** That is a side benefit in a way as there are people who wouldn't normally be able to come to the annual meeting who are now able to be more involved. That brings us to our current socially distanced reality: How are you staying connected with both your coworkers and others during this time?

**Karen Stanwood:** So, Zoom is the main platform, lately, in terms of my workplace. We have some standing staff meetings, for example, with our journal managers, and I have one with my supervisors once a week just to spend a little bit of time on personal things and see how everyone's doing or if anyone needs anything. It's a very stressful and difficult time as well. It's not your typical work-from-home situation, so I think it's important to make sure that everyone feels supported besides just getting their work done. We also do some fun things: Once a month, we have a birthday party Zoom to celebrate the birthdays that month. It's not mandatory, but it's a nice opportunity to see people in other parts of the department, people you would typically have seen in the hallway.

I am also involved in a number of organizations, CSE being one of those. We have monthly meetings with the Professional Development Committee where we discuss the initiatives, but also just network and form connections with people outside of our immediate workplace. I'm also involved in SSP as deputy co-chair of the career development committee, working primarily on the mentorship program and on a virtual networking pilot. It's good to get to know people outside of your workplace and be able to talk about confidential things, as well as big industry initiatives and how different people handle certain situations. I am also the chair of the membership and marketing committee of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences. I have a lot of activities that I'm working on with different groups that I feel keeps me well-rounded and knowledgeable about different issues while connecting me to amazing groups of people.

**Science Editor:** With all that, do you have any time management tips?

**Karen Stanwood:** Probably not very good ones. Because my daughter is 18, I do have the luxury of not having to cook for her, and she is pretty self-sufficient. I know that not everyone has that level of free time. I am also a hardcore list-maker. I try to carve out time for specific activities; I can't say I'm perfect at not multitasking, but I do try to make time where I specifically dedicate time for one task. For example, for meetings, I set aside time beforehand to make notes and time afterward for follow-up emails.

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**Science Editor:** Are you a paper and pen list-maker?

**Karen Stanwood:** I am a *pencil* and paper list-maker, generally because it does change a lot. This is funny because I read a book recently called *Between You and Me* by Mary Norris, who was a long-time copyeditor at *The New Yorker*. It's a fabulous book, only 200 pages—super great read. Mary is very funny, and she liked my tweet about her book (my 2 seconds of fame). She has a chapter about pencils, covering her favorite pencils and how pencils are made. My inner nerd was just in heaven. She mentioned a brand of pencils, which I ordered and I'm loving. So yeah, I am definitely a pencil and paper list-maker.

**Science Editor:** You've talked a couple of times about the importance of mentorship. Was there somebody that was mentoring you at the beginning?

**Karen Stanwood:** That was my first manager who hired me, Kaye Coraluzzo. Unfortunately, she passed away not too long ago. At the beginning, she was very kind to me and very, very knowledgeable. She had been at the company for about 20 years when I started; she had a lot of institutional knowledge to pass on to me and was not shy about doing so. She knew a lot of people both inside and outside of our department within the company. She showed me that was important: that you don't just need to know the people who work directly with you. You need to know all of the other departments because you need to know what they do and who to ask when you need help. She was just a very nurturing person. When I first started, she made me feel supported and helped me feel like I could grow and learn.

As I moved up in the company, the person I would probably cite next is my current supervisor, Jennifer Kilpatrick. She has always been supportive of me wanting to do more, and learn more, and ask questions. She's never not given me an answer to a question that I've asked. She has been both directly supportive and has also given me the space to do the things that I asked to do or became interested in.

**Science Editor:** I guess the proof is that you've been there for a long time and seem to be enjoying it. It's a tricky balance as you say, between being supportive and also allowing people to grow on their own.

**Karen Stanwood:** Exactly. It's not a formal mentorship situation, but it's definitely an informal mentorship. Jennifer has taught me things that she knows and also given me space to learn things that maybe she doesn't know about. And then I've come back to her and shared what I know. It's very collegial in that way, and hopefully it's meant that we can both grow and learn more together.

**Science Editor:** What is something that you think would be surprising to somebody who maybe only knows you professionally through CSE?

**Karen Stanwood:** Very few people would know this about me, but I once laid on a bed of nails. The story behind it is about 20 years ago my husband worked at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and housed within that building is the Mütter Museum. He was very good friends with the then director of the museum, Gretchen Worden, who sadly is also deceased, but she was a fabulous woman. The Mütter Museum, for lack of a better description, is a museum of medical oddities. It's truly fascinating. One of the perks of my husband and Gretchen being good friends was that I got to see what's not in the museum, the things behind closed doors. Everything from things people have swallowed to skeletons with different medical conditions. It's an incredibly cool place.

I'm not sure if they still do it, but every year they would do a calendar with professional photographs of all the fabulous displays. One year for the calendar launch promotional event, Gretchen's idea was to have some folks come in who had some unusual talents. We got to witness these performers and afterwards we got to interact with them. There was a sword swallower, and of course, someone with a bed of nails. At the end of their presentation, they asked if anyone wanted to lay on it. They told us the trick is you have to be lowered straight horizontally onto it. Obviously, that takes a lot of skill to do by yourself, but if someone's helping you, holding your hands and steadying you, it's fairly safe. It was definitely not comfortable, and I didn't last very long, but it wasn't painful or anything like that. When you're in a room and someone offers to let you lay on the bed of nails, what went through my brain was: I feel like I kind of have to do that. When am I going to get that chance again? Isn't that a story for your grandkids or *Science Editor*?

**Science Editor:** I've been to the Mütter Museum a couple of times. I'm jealous that you got behind-the-scenes access.

**Karen Stanwood:** It's a great place. You know, I've taken my daughter, and they have a beautiful portrait now of Gretchen in the museum to honor her.

**Science Editor:** Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanted to discuss?

**Karen Stanwood:** I want to share a little bit of advice. Some of this ties into two things that I've already talked about in terms of involving yourself with different organizations: Whether someone is early career, mid-career, anytime in your career, remember to ask questions and be curious about things. I feel like anyone you can talk to, there's something you can learn from them. To a certain extent,

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that's why I've involved myself in the organizations I have. There are just incredible people in all of these publishing and editorial organizations who are very willing to share, who are very open to questions. I've become less shy at asking those questions or going up and introducing myself. I would definitely recommend that if you're interested in someone's career trajectory, or the topic of the talk they just gave, or a tweet of theirs that you saw, don't be afraid to reach out to them. Reach out even if you have imposter syndrome or feel like the person is so many levels above you that you

couldn't possibly bother them with a question. I have never had a situation where I felt like I was bothering someone, and everyone I've met is very passionate about publishing and about sharing that knowledge. CSE a great place to do that. It's a great group of professionals who are always willing to talk about what they do, how they got there, and things they might've done differently. I feel like there is a benefit to just asking those questions, being curious about people, being curious about their careers and what they do, and learning as much as you can.