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Interview with Karin Waller

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Narrator	Karin Waller (KW)
Interviewer	Patricia Schechter (PAS)
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Headnote	In this moving account, the narrator describes the personal, social, and intellectual intersections that brought her to graduate study. She also describes her thesis project on the role of mediators in the workplace, the first completed by a master's student in CR at PSU.

[starts at approximately 4:00]

PAS: Today is May 27, 2020. I am Patricia Schechter and we are delighted to welcome Karin Waller to our public history seminar. She is going to talk about her career in Conflict Resolution, the early days, as she was the first student to earn a master's degree with a thesis in the year 2000. Welcome and thank you so much.

What drew you to pursue a degree in Conflict Resolution back in the late 1990s? Or put another way, if conflict resolution was the answer, what was the question?

KW: I did make notes to which I will probably refer, and I really appreciate knowing the questions in advance, because it was really fun to look back at old journals and other stuff. I guess to start out, it was 1997; I had been in a bunch of different jobs, largely administrative, and I was working at OHSU and I was completely uninspired. My daughter had just started kindergarten. I'm a single mom. I actually found out about a homeowner's program so I bought a house. There was a whole lot of stuff going on! And I'm like: "You know, I could be doing this really uninspired job for my whole life or I could try to find a grown-up job that uses my skills and that maybe I am passionate about..." So I guess the question was: what could use the skills that I want to use? So I was kind of open to the universe's signs—I'm a little bit floofy in that way—in fact I once made a decision to go Ireland based on a pack of cigarettes at a bus stop. That's a whole other story! Something about cogitating on this question... and I happened to be walking down Broadway close to Portland State... [video freezes 6:30-7:00] in a grocery store in the produce section and I heard someone talking about mediation and a new mediation program, and that was Robert Gould! So I kind of sidled over and I said, "Hmmm, this sounds kind of interesting." So I made an appointment with him and I was so inspired by his passion and the language he was using. He was kind of speaking my language. And I had been thinking about the master's in social work. I was thinking about an MSW but I was just so inspired by his passion that I thought, "I'm going to check this out. Maybe I'll apply to the MSW later, but let's just see what this is."

PAS: Can you take us back to that shared language? Is there a word that stands out for you?

KW: Nothing emerges, but I think the thinking/feeling, the heart/head... I'm really smart—he didn't say that, but I could tell—but I have a lot of passion for bringing this alternative dispute resolution process... this whole new... I will say that in 1997, President Clinton enacted the Alternative Dispute Resolution and so there was a lot [of momentum] and it also leads to the activism question. It just suddenly made it a reality, a thing that suddenly had value. Talking to people, talking to one another, learning about each other, resolving conflicts without having to sue each other. It was there was some language happening and some acknowledgement. And it was like "Wow! People might pay attention to this!" So that was really exciting.

I guess I am going to say the heart/head—and maybe I stole that from you, Patricia—but it was really that. It was like, we are smart and we love people; and my mom said from the time I was pre-teens that I was helping resolve conflicts with my friends and their parents! [laughter] So I already knew this was a thing I do and that I liked to do. It kind of [fit].

PAS: I love that deep resonance around humans and human conflict. Is there a little story from the deeper past that might illuminate this point: that kernel of self which become activated, validated, and brought forward that allows affirmation and even sometimes healing, that allows us to take that step into something new?

KW: I mentioned Mom, and her telling me about that this is kind a propensity that I have as the “middle kid” of three kids. But one thing she said was about a friend I had in junior high, Cindy, and she and her mom were always [at it]. Surprise! A teenaged girl and her mother fighting! And so my mom said, “I heard you talking on the phone to Cindy and you were counselling her on how she might approach her mother about this thing.” And then I would go to her house and sort of talk to her mom a little bit. And so I sort of did this little, you know, just seeing things that could be maybe—this word wasn’t used, but—facilitated.

Other huge opportunities to learn about conflict and my reaction to conflict were divorcing a kind of unstable person and having a daughter with him. We got divorced when she was one year old, and so it was constant negotiation with someone who wasn’t always on super rational footing. So that was a lot of quite painful learning for me. But good learning, you know, you take that as a tool kit where ever you go.

PAS: Those stories just give so much grounding to your decision. Thank you. In this project, we are very hungry for the student story, the student feel, from that first cohort. Not to put too much pressure on you, but the next question is about the tone in the classroom: Who’s in the room? What does the room feel like? What is CR 512 like?

KW: There was a lot of excitement. I was not the first one in. There was kind of an existing cohort because it was just getting started. In fact, I don't think the program was certified or ratified until probably two years into the classes. This ADR Act came out and almost all of my cohort were from government agencies. It was working people who were really excited. Like, "Wow, this is a thing!" This is some human skills! There was some real excitement in the classroom and kind of that heart/head thing again. These were all smart people who were in touch with caring, just caring people. We had this really great connection. We were all excited and speaking the same language that we hadn't had the opportunity to connect with others on. Not everyone rocks this stuff!

As to the question of activism on campus, you know, I was so involved in my own world, with my daughter in kindergarten, and classes, and I was working half-time, which was in CAPS (now part of SHAC) and so I had a lot going on. So in terms of campus, I couldn't really say "activism or not," but certainly we all felt in the program that sense of real activation.

There were some fabulous teacher-mentor people, like Mary Zinkin. I can't remember if Barb Tint came earlier or later, and she's now all over campus doing her amazing stuff. Charles Tracy, who became my life-long friend until he died, and a very strong mentor. So there was some really good stuff going on, and I found in Mary a female intuition that was strong and proud. It wasn't like taking seat at all. It was like, "This is valid." That was super cool for me, and maybe [was] another activist feeling thing.

PAS: I love the word "activation."

KW: I just thought of that. Isn't that good?

PAS: So good. Really lively and vivid, very helpful to reconstruct the language that you all spoke. And how that changed over time.

KW: I do want to mention Mark Danley with the Bonneville Power Administration was also a huge mentor to me. He's another name I don't want to forget.

PAS: I did notice the name Charles Tracy, and that one is not a name that we have bumped into.

I wonder if you could say just a little bit about his field and what he imparted to you. Sounds like it was a really positive relationship. That would be great.

KW: He was more like an angel more than I know what his background was... [laughter] Let me think about that for a minute. We ended up co-teaching a class together, which was just a small facet of all the things that we did. He was a Buddhist. He used to be a police officer in Chicago and I don't know how he navigated his way to what he was doing [at Portland State] but he was someone who had really the hard work. He was so great. [pausing; overcome with emotion]

PAS: These are the people who change our lives. I don't know how they do it. It is something of a miracle.

KW: He died of esophageal cancer about ten years ago, but he was so amazing. [speaking emotionally]

PAS: So here you are in these very interesting classes filled with people not dissimilar to yourself, people who are in the work world, who are seekers who are looking for “more,” and they want that “more,” and they want that “more” to be in alignment with their passions and gifts around people. So that’s very vivid in your discussion. It sounds like you got some good signals about that, like “This is the place where this conjuncture is going to be welcome, validated”; a full range of knowledge, and full range of “ways of knowing” are going to be validated and upheld.

Nonetheless, I’m sure you learned some new things. Some surprising things. And things that may have even created some dissonance. That’s also the sign of a good education that you are challenged. We want validation for students and we want engagement but it’s also good to bump into new stuff and then figure it out. Can you take us back to a moment or a passage where you were learning something surprising or even difficult? Something that you even resisted, frankly; those episodes are rich with learning as well.

KW: Yes! I have the quintessential story with Mary Zinkin. Let’s see. So there were a limited number of classes in those early days and I was new to the cohort. So there was this one class that was required and she capped it; there was a cap and I couldn’t get in. I was very upset by that cap because I had things locked in and I had a lot going on. You know, I challenged her on it. I begged her. She stayed firm. I think it maybe had to do with numbers and being able to partner off in various things. But anyway, I was pissed and frustrated.

I was in another class with her that term, must have been, and we were doing some role playing with some mediation stuff. And she said, “Does anyone have a conflict they can think about that they would be willing to role play?” And I was like, “Huh. Should I be super brave and engage in this?” And so I did. I said, “If you are comfortable with this, I do have something.”

So we proceeded to kind of mediate ourselves. We did a role play of a difficult conversation and it was so amazing. It was a perfect example of how you get from this point to that point. In understanding but still being unhappy, but accepting reality, in being right but someone else being right. You know? Valid. It was really just the perfect example of what I was learning, and maybe what she was learning too.

PAS: That’s so wise. I’m going to probe. From that role play and from that moment of bravery, is there a little dimension in the exchange or aspect of the scene, a keyword, a gesture, which stands out in your memory? I am drilling down here but this is where oral history is such a gift.

KW: You know, I remember where we were sitting at a table. Like the shape of the room... gosh!

PAS: What was the shape of the room?

KW: So... let's see, it was kind of a... [giggles] rectangle, and so Mary and I were at the corner of a table. The door was there, [off left] classmates were around the table and a window behind. And regards to a specific word or phrase or anything, I don't have anything.

PAS: Fair enough. You very nicely recall needing to summon some courage.

KW: Heart courage is one of my strongest suits, but actually that was one of the hugest lessons for me in my studies and in this whole experience. It was what I always considered a weakness, you know the crying and being sensitive and stuff like that, that maybe I felt really shy about or that other people had put me down about, or I felt, "Why do I always cry!?" All that stuff... I found out that it's super valid. It's like even my outbursts, which was pretty much what I had with the not getting into the class, that would happen to me a fair amount throughout my life. And I realized that that is because I am feeling. I am feeling what's in the room. I'm sensing what's going on around me and I'm affected by it. I'm really sensitive and instead of being always a weakness, it's actually a real point of strength, and something that not everyone can put out on the table; and I can often start some really important conversations through that [ability]. So that was a really big learning thing.

PAS: Fantastic. I'm going to keep going. I think we are getting some traction on this deep learning. So just one more probe. One of the things that the students and I are wrestling with in the narratives and how the literature frames peace, war, and human disputes, conflicts... what comes up pretty regularly is that each human has their own kind of theory of power, their own framework for making meaning, for leveraging their needs in everyday life (as we all do).

So in terms of this deep learning, what was the theory of power that was being taught, and do you think when you came out of this role play that you had a "new one?" An "adjusted one"; or now you had "more than one?" What about how power works? Because yes, we can validate one another's emotions and experiences, and power stays right where it was.

KW: I guess kind of a little piece of that would be that the whole “being right” concept, I guess. I tend to be a little bit bossy in my life, and so because I’m sensitive and because I think and feel strongly, I have come from a place of “I think I am right about this. No, I *am* right about this.” And so to recognize that I can be right *and* the other can be right is not an “I’m right, you’re wrong,” it’s “I’m right for me, and you’re right for you. And we can disagree.” And there’s that, you know? You don’t have to resolve it. I could have just walked away. And she could have said, “No, I am not engaging with you on this.” Which would be her power; that would be a different kind of power that she could have chosen to wield. And so that’s the closest I can come to answering that question.

PAS: That’s wonderful. I have enormous empathy when students can’t get into a class. They are juggling ten plates, and they bump up hard a cap or rule. This is structural violence, that we offer something to students and then we take it away. Or we offer a degree and don’t have enough room in the classes. To me: Problem. To me that is structural violence and not OK. At the same time, because I’m a department chair, I perfectly well understand that our non-tenure line faculty are underpaid, they are doing way too much anyway, and these are the small places where they can exert some control over their ever-ballooning labor. You know as a PSU person this is happening right now. We are 50% or more adjuncts. Everything at PSU is under-supported. We are at .7 of where we should be with IT nationally.

KW: But they are winning awards!

PAS: For being amazing anyway, yes! Like PSU students! They don’t get what they should have, and they triumph.

KW: And I think that a lot of us just love PSU. And I think that is being abused in a lot of ways, taking advantage of at least... but those of us... I started at PSU as a 16-year-old undergrad in 1980. And so I went for five years. I did a study abroad. I came back; I moved to Seattle. I got married. I moved back to Portland. Realized I was 9 credits away from finishing a general studies degree. So I did that. I went away again. I came back for a master’s and started working. I kept working. I went away and I came back. And now I’ve been back for 13 years. And yes, more and more is loaded on us. And that’s the nature of a public institution. It’s the nature of the world right now. It doesn’t make it feel any better... Anyway!

It captures the interstitial quality of CR and the way that it reached a certain segment of potential student with its special brand, if you will. And then it has its story as it unfolds. So it’s’

a beautiful description of how we function in this particular pond. How this fish swims in this pond we are in.

PAS: Tell us a little bit about your thesis topic, and where that fit in this journey; and then what you found and what was your argument?

KW: Well, if we go back to one important mind-opening thing I found in my studies was the Myers-Briggs type indicator. MBTI. This tool just opened a lot things for me. I know there are other structures by which to consider ourselves, but this was so useful in terms of especially team work on the job. With workplace mediation and with all teams, to really understand *where am I on this spectrum?* How can I have such truth here again, and this other person has their truth there. Wait, we are talking about the same thing! How are we not agreeing? Because we are looking at it totally differently. What are the facts? Then, how do those facts make me feel? It is not always a gender thing, and it's just *a thing*.

So that [tool] was extremely impactful and was what I ended up doing my thesis on, but I will also say a couple of things. I felt like Rob rushed me into trying to decide on a topic, and I kind of panicked about it. I had no idea! I started talking to different professors. I kind of have a psychology-ish background, and so I started to psychology professors and we kind of talked stuff out. They said that you should go talk to so-and-so in Education. And then I'd talk there. And I had a friend in South Africa and he got married and invited me to his wedding and paid my way! So I went to South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation hearings were going on, the TRC. I attended a couple of those and I wove that into what I thought my interests were, into what I thought I could develop into a thesis.

Then working with it for a little while, I thought that this was too big and too amorphous. The more people I talked to, they said, "No, you have got to tighten the thesis topic up or you will go crazy." I was doing my practicum at Bonneville Power in the employee relations—I'll think of it—it was kind of dispute resolution, but it was where I did my practicum with Mark Danley. I was working through things. I had been inspired by the MBTI. I was actually doing case intakes, and so I was hearing employee challenges and I was starting to see this stuff in real life. And I was like, "Wow! I have such [a topic here]."

So, Shared Neutrals, which started in that office, was an interagency mediation program, which is what a lot of the people in my cohort were. So one of them worked for BPA, one of them worked for the Forest Service, etc. So this Shared Neutrals was mediators, trained the same way from different agencies, who could mediate the other agency's conflicts

because that was a truly neutral situation. There would be no perception of, like, “Well, they work in HR and they must know all of that...”

So it was a wonderful concept that I really embraced. But I thought: not all these guys were the same. You know, I could look at different personality types. And I would observe that this was really into the facts and it just got me thinking: OK, I could work with this. And it was right there in front of me. So I had this 25—less than 30—the existing group that I was working with. I had this system, the MBTI thing, and it just felt like I could work with this. There was this tool, and then I could make this other tool that would get at how these personality styles would affect how a mediator goes about resolving a conflict. That’s what my thesis ended up being.

I would say something, though: I always feel like I cheated in making this a quantitative methodology instead of a qualitative methodology. Quite frankly because I was talking to different people and it was a statistics guy—whose name I can’t remember now—who said, “I think we could crunch this.” And I thought, Oh that would be a lot easier... because this number with this number gives you a result! And then you can talk about it. Instead of doing the interviews, and doing SPSS, and getting key words etc. It was just kind of there for me. And I was, like I said... a lot going on. I always felt like I was cheating, but the end product was that I got results, and how I talked about the results was just as valuable as doing all this other stuff.

Now, it was very subjective because I made the second tool. I made the questionnaire that tried to get at how would you approach this and what do you feel are the most important element of this conflict? So some was subjective. I did have a lot of people look at the questionnaire first [which made me more confident].

PAS: What you are sharing is that you had the opportunity to improvise in a grounded kind of way, and ask the questions that you wanted to ask, to make something that was actually doable, which is very common on the PSU graduate landscape. And Conflict Resolution is a multidisciplinary field, so you are not just tracked down one little trail, but you are alive to the many possibilities which sometimes can be disabling. Too many choices! It’s very American.

KW: I jumped through them all first! There was a lot of ground-breaking that I had to do, even to the point where when I was working with the Graduate Office to get the actual degree, they were like, “What should we call this?” Should we call it Master’s in Conflict Resolution? We actually had to work out exactly what my credentials are! Karin Waller, MS Conflict Resolution? The things that you would not have thought of—it was almost like I had an advantage—because I like getting things done. I think I had the advantage of coming in a little later than the first cohort, because it felt very amorphous to them, because I had the advantage of just slightly more structure already. So I think that kind of launched me ahead a little bit.

PAS: That’s amazing. How rich! What’s the most important thing you would want future learners or celebrating this 25th anniversary to know, particularly from the student perspective.

KW: I guess just going with your passion. If you are drawn to something and you can make it feasible, do it! [chuckles] Then also—this is probably hindsight and much easier to say than to do—even if you don’t get a job in it exactly, all those skills—whether you are doing research or mediating or teaching or whatever—all those skills are applicable. All those mentors will stay with you. That’s what I think is the stuff that has stayed with me. It took me a while to realize that, maybe, with the whole toolbox skill set things, but in hindsight, that’s really been important.

CC: You said “heart courage.” I’m one of those people too: when I’m really passionate about something or angry I start to cry, because it is breaking my heart. I felt like that you had a good description of it. Would you say that’s what you meant by “heart courage?” Something is breaking your heart and you just have to cry about it.

KW: Yeah. I think it’s really being in touch with how you are feeling. For me, I just think of crying as spilling over. It is like *this is too much!*

CC: But crying is good for the soul.

KW: Yeah. It won't always make you look very pretty but... [laughs] ...and it makes some people extremely uncomfortable. And sometimes we do feel kind of dumb and it might not feel like it's the right place at the right time, but it is what it is. And sometimes being able to show that vulnerability can be really powerful.

PAS Well stated. We have to be vulnerable in order to learn. We have to let down our guard a little bit in order to learn. And that's not validated—it's all about lobbing the formed idea and smashing whatever has come before it. It's a very different model of knowledge acquisition.

CC: I noticed that my sons got that from me.

KW: Nice!

CC: Just really passionate about something and then start crying. I taught them that it was not wrong to cry. I told them that it was a good thing to do but it is interesting how society puts that on them that they can't and shouldn't cry.

KW: Boys don't cry!

CC: They better cry!

KW: They have a lot to cry about.

CC: They cry when babies are born!

KW: Good for you!

PAS: "Sorry, not sorry!" I'm going to put Liza on the spot.

LS: I just had a question. What are some processes of healing that you learn about in conflict resolution? I feel like that is kind of an important end product, right? Healing?

KW: And/or on-going. [laughter] Did you say you thought that was an easy question?

LS: I don't know! [laughter]

KW: I think the power of saying what you need to say and being heard is 85% of healing. And then I guess—and this just on the spot—I think being able to apply even a little bit of what you learned from that [experience] will take you into the future, and I think you heal through that learning.

LS: Through the application of everything you've learned. Then I had one more... What would you want to see in an exhibit about Conflict Resolution?

KW: Having this opportunity [to be interviewed] led me back to old journals and stuff like that, and I found a copy of a letter I had written to my dad. Basically it kind of said what I said to you about how I found the program. And I said "Dad, I really think this is a good fit for me." Presenting snippets of people's thoughts or process—something visual or written—would be great. Although I don't know if people would actually [read it]. I was really into 'zines for a while. So I always like making little things, but we are so digital now I don't know how that might work. But maybe thought bubbles. I'd have to think about that a little more.

LS: That's a question for putting you on the spot!

KW: And if you had ideas and wanted to run them by me I would be totally available to give my reactions or thoughts.

LS: Thank you!

KW: You're welcome!

PAS: Another idea is a walking tour of the history of Conflict Resolution on our campus, like the Peace Poles, Neuberger Hall, and the CPSO office.

LS: Even the Park Blocks themselves, all the years of protesting...

KW: Very interesting! That would be a visual thing you could do...

PAS: We could make a map, it could be an interactive app; it could also be an experience that we do together, but I don't know if during the pandemic we are allowed to walk around together in the park. That would be nice.

KW: It will be really nice when we can do that again.

PAS: Thank you for your time.

KW: Absolutely; it was a real pleasure.