

Sapere Aude — Dare to Be Wise:
04 Karen DeSafey Liller

CHILDHOOD

Full name: Karen DeSafey Liller

Tell me about where you were born and how you grew up.

I was born in Canonsburg, PA-I grew up there-it is about one hour from Pittsburgh-still consider it home (Go Steelers!)

What did your parents do for a living?

Dad was a bank executive-Mom a stay-at-home Mom.

What about your education?

I am the product of a great public-school education in Canonsburg, PA and I received my BS at West Virginia University in Morgantown, WV and all my other degrees at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida.

What kind of educational environment did you grow up in?

My family was very pro-education-I always knew I was going to college! My father went to college through the GI Bill and because of that opportunity not only did he go to college but so did all of his children. He was a first-generation student. My mom was absolutely brilliant and wanted to be a nurse but during the 50's and 60's she followed the norm to be a stay-at-home mother and was the best mother ever. She did attend and graduate from Bible College later on and was an exemplary Bible scholar and taught classes in church.

What were your interests in high school?

In high school I always loved science and wanted to be in the field as a physician or pharmacist. Also, I was athletic and accepted to the Drill Team where I loved performing and the rigor of the sport. I also played basketball. I have an artistic side as well and took piano lessons for over 20 years. I also love to swim.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree. (i.e., BA/BS, undergraduate degree, college).

My sister attended West Virginia University (WVU) in Morgantown and really enjoyed the experience-she received her PhD in pharmacology and become an executive in pharmaceutical firms, running her own firm before she retired. She truly is one of the most brilliant scientists I have ever known. My parents thought WVU was safer than the University of Pittsburgh so off I went to WVU as well. I was young beginning College-at the age of 17. But I did very well and graduated with a BS in medical technology (now clinical laboratory science). It was a great school, but I have asthma and after living up north for all of my life I craved warmer weather. When my dad received a new position in Orlando Florida after I graduated, I gladly accompanied my family to the sunshine state and have lived in Florida ever since.

What inspired you to get your master's degree? (i.e., MA, MS, MPH, master's degree, college).

I am ambitious so after working in a variety of clinical laboratories after graduation I knew I wanted more. One thing I really enjoyed was working with new staff to

mentor them. So, I began to think of a career in education. My Dad had taught accounting in a community college while working in the banks and at a very young age I helped him put scores on the students' papers and loved it! I remember pulling up a chair and kneeling on it to help him as I was so young! So, I then pursued a master of arts in technical education and an educational specialist degree as I believed that if I was to be an effective teacher or professor, I must understand the field. After that, I really wanted a PhD to not only hone my skills but be a researcher as well.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

I do not think it was a particular professor, mentor, or advisor but it was the subject that fascinated me. In the clinical laboratory, things are pretty much black and white. But in education, I remember thinking this is all so "gray"! What is the correct answer???? But the truth is it expanded my way of thinking to learn how to assess a situation and try what is best and learn how to always do better to improve the skills of the population you are serving.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

I would say always try new things, but you have to work hard. I remember working in the laboratory for very long shifts and then heading off to night classes for my master's. Then getting home and studying most of the night. Good thing I was so young!

Now tell me about your doctorate work.

Again, what inspired you to go on, instead of getting a job out of your master's degree (i.e., doctorate, college). I received my master's at the University of South Florida (I started out at what is now called University of Central Florida). I worked for years after my master's teaching medical technology and directing the Medical Technology Program at Tampa General Hospital. Again-after a few years, I knew I wanted more. I then was accepted to the PhD program at USF. I majored in curriculum and instruction but wanted to grow my science skills also, so my cognate area was public health. I loved public health-working for the health of populations and not just individual health. At that time, the College of Public Health was really new, so it is fascinating now to be a faculty member and have seen its growth. What inspired me was the quest to know more-to understand this field of education-what makes it tick and how I can combine my science background and knowledge with it to be successful. And I loved to teach. I loved being a graduate assistant during the time.

What factor or set of actors contributed to your pursuing an academic career and becoming a researcher?

To be honest, I had intended to follow in my sister's footsteps and work in the pharmaceutical industry but there was something about academia that intrigued me-I so loved mentoring, teaching, and growing my research skills, that I thought let me try academia and see how it goes! That decision led to my long career as a scholar. To develop research questions, hypotheses, and to be able pursue them was and continues to be fascinating to me.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

I think my major professor, Dr. William Blank, was the kindest individual I ever met and one who so believed in me. He and Dr. Wayne James guided me throughout the program. Dr. Blank taught me competency-based education skills that I still use today. Again, I was trying to fit two worlds together-education and science-and they were wonderful mentors.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

I learned that not everything is right or wrong-- theories work sometimes and not other times, and it is ok to live in a "gray" area until more is known and discovered. I learned that the hard work paid off as I was promoted from assistant to associate and then full professor in a short amount of time. I also have had much success administratively. I served as Dean of the Graduate School at USF and Associate Dean of Academic and Student Affairs in the College of Public Health. I also founded the Activist Lab which prepares students to be exemplary advocates and leaders in public health and lead our strategic area of policy, practice, and leadership.

Tell me about the relationship you had with your major advisor.

We had a fantastic relationship. Again, the kindest person I probably have ever known, and he always said he knew I would achieve and be the best I can be. He also said-I know you will finish your degree because you do not want your tombstone to say ABD (All but Dissertation).

Tell me about what you studied as a student, and what led you down that path.

As stated earlier, I focused on educational methods and theories and public health. Combining these worlds has been fascinating and I believe I am one of the few professors with this unique background. I also have clinical experience as a medical technologist, so I understand public health and medical issues from a unique lens.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Let's move beyond your education time and talk about your career.

My career has been very interesting. After receiving my PhD, I was thinking about academia, and I called the College of Public Health where I did my cognate area and a Dr. Robert J. McDermott answered. The first thing I ever said to him was "Can you see me to discuss potential employment?" And he said -well no, I cannot see you-you are on the phone. Funny guy I thought. Well, that led to me meeting him and I was hired as a postdoctoral scholar. In about a year, I was put on a tenure-earning assistant professor line in health education and the rest is history! Dr. McDermott and I worked together for years on research and publications. He became chair of the department, so our work continued together for a while. In fact, very early on, he had one project called "Prescribe a Safe Ride" where a local hospital started an outreach program where physicians wrote prescriptions for patients to obtain car safety seats for their children. The hospital wanted the program evaluated. Dr. McDermott was busy with other projects and asked if I had wanted to do it-and I said yes. That project led to my career in injury and violence prevention. I was bitten by the "injury" bug

as they say and loved this new and exciting area-in fact, I was curious why the leading cause of children's deaths received so little funding and attention? I still wonder that but that led to a long career in the field-I recently received the Distinguished Career Award from the Injury Control and Emergency Health Services (ICEHS) section of APHA and many other honors. I have used my epidemiology and health promotion and behavior change skills to develop many child and adolescent injury prevention programs and evaluate them (largely in the area of unintentional injuries and now violence prevention). Most recently I led the efforts for the analysis of the data of the Florida Violent Death Reporting System that combines information from death certificates, medical examiner reports, and law enforcement records to understand the "why" behind violent deaths. I also am now funded to study risk and protective factors for suicide among Black youth, ages 10-19 using a mixed methods approach. I am very proud of my efforts to pass injury prevention laws-most notably the Bicycle Helmet Law in the state of Florida. But this is all done with my colleagues and co-investigators. -I have been in so many coalitions, groups, etc. but it all paid off. I served on the Board of Counselors for the CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and several advisory groups, including the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH) Gun Violence Prevention Task Force I also have started coalitions and even spent much time in the Midwest to learn all about farming when I was researching farm injuries. It has been a whirlwind but worth it. And I learned much from the greats in the field, was active in the ICEHS very early on, worked with CDC, and with wonderful researchers such as Drs. Fred Rivara, David Sleet, and more. This field allowed me to combine my interests in science, public

health, and health education. And it was all new and exciting!

What has been your proudest research or other professional accomplishment to date?

I am most proud of my injury prevention research and the passage of the laws as stated above. That advocacy is what inspired me to become an advocate and start the Activist Lab in 2018. The Activist Lab prepares student to be exemplary leaders and advocates in public health. There are only two Activist Labs in the country-the first at Boston University and ours. We do education, outreach, research, have a podcast (Advocation-Change it Up!) and more! See <https://health.usf.edu/publichealth/activist-lab/>. Also, I am extremely proud to have been named a Distinguished University Health Professor at USF.

Were there any projects or studies you thought would lead to something interesting, that just did not pan out?

I always wanted to lead a CDC funded injury center at USF College of Public Health and while we have tried it has not yet happened-but it will! I am part of several other centers including the NIOSH funded Education Research Center in Occupational Safety and Health, and the NIJ Center for Justice Research and Policy. Also, I served as one of the team leaders of the NIOSH funded Agricultural Center at the College.

Tell me about your philosophy that guides your research chain of inquiry and your other academic pursuits?

I have always been curious about the "why" behind why people do the behaviors they do and why the larger picture-communities, states, and nations pass the policies and laws

they do and how these affect behaviors. In injury prevention, it is critical to follow the socioecological model as so many of our successes (seat belts, helmets, etc.) need policy change. It is not enough to be concerned about just behavior change as individuals and populations do not live in a bubble-our communities and environment are critical to include as we develop, implement, and evaluate change efforts.

Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle?

I remember my mentors telling me start with the best journal you can find to publish in and when they say NO (like so many do) look for another and if you can publish in a state journal that is fine-it is important to get the word out and go from there. Plus, once you have that one publication you can use it to build a bridge to other more prestigious journals. And find yourself a mentor who publishes so you can be included! Always form a team. Lone wolf research no longer works, and the truth is it really does take a community.

What single best piece of advice would you pass along to a new investigator or student researcher-in-training today?

I would say find a mentor who believes in you and whom you can truly learn from and do not be afraid to venture outside the box. Also learn to NETWORK-so many people told me the field of injury prevention was too small and it would be hard to make an impact—do not listen to naysayers. It is also vital to accept assignments (committee work, teaching, working with community groups) that might seem onerous but, in the end, it is all about learning and networking as much as possible. And follow up with

folks-always. If you reach out and hear nothing, reach out again! Persistence is key.

Describe the most courageous thing you have had to do in your academic career—perhaps something that put you at risk for the sake of standing up for a principle.

I think this was probably becoming an advocate and standing up for the importance of injury prevention and public health and to STAY with the field. This is so important now with some members of the public saying no to vaccinations and other life-saving measures. Also, I stand firm for gun violence prevention laws-even with the political ramifications. A respected colleague of mine told me the other day that she thought I was the bravest faculty member she knew due to advocating for truth and evidence in these turbulent times. That has meant so much to me and I hope to always be brave despite the odds.

When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

I want to be remembered for the research and policies that I was part of that saved lives. The Bicycle Helmet Law, the pool fencing law and more have saved lives and that makes me so proud. I also want to be remembered as an advocate who stood up for public health and what is evidence-based and did not conform to popular opinions or cave to political interests.

Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success. To what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?

I can say that my long hours at work did make it difficult to also want to be with my children 100% of the time also but I was able to find a balance with the good fortune

of having family nearby. I also made it a point to be at every game, recital, performance, and that meant working all night after the children went to bed. Also, I paid a price in terms of not having enough down time—even for myself but the injury bug never lets go! I also think going into academia I paid the price of not going into industry and probably making three times my salary but when you find your niche, I say stay with it. In the end, being excited about your work and anxious to do more is what it is all about.

LIFE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA

Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life and what have some of those impacts been?

First and foremost, my wonderful parents and sisters. Sadly, I have lost my parents and younger sister Lisa, but their impact and drive essentially created “me.” Also, my children who are always in my corner and my current husband Ron who as an attorney and prior legislator has, in the years we have known each other, always been my advocate and helps guide me in legislative and policy work. My large extended family has always been there as well. My family is very close and my nieces, nephews, and great nieces and nephews I could not love more.

What are some leisure time activities for which you have a passion?

What is leisure time?? Ha—just kidding. Well, I do love to play the piano, see family, swim, and watch mysteries—again to answer “why?”

If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, contemporary character or historical figure, who would it be and what would you want to talk about?

I would have loved to have met Ruth Bader Ginsburg—what a heroic woman and wonderful associate supreme court justice and advocate. I would talk to her about being a woman in her field, what she wished she may have done differently (if anything), and how she kept going and going even when things got hard.

If you were not doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?

Well, you are going to laugh but I always wanted to play piano in a fancy hotel. For me, it is such expression and I know can bring joy to not only myself or others. However, when I told my parents that was my career goal when I was in junior high, they said—Uh—let’s think about that again!

Which three books outside of academia would you recommend for others to read and why?

There would be *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *You Are a Bad Ass*, and *Things I am Thinking About You* (story of the loss of the author’s mom). First of all, how can you get better than *To Kill a Mockingbird*? I have seen this story performed on stage as well and what a wonderful novel—so much still to learn from that book. “*You are a Bad Ass*” was given to me last Christmas by one of my nephews and made me proud he saw me in that light. It is a fun book about inner strength and being yourself. And then on a more sober note, losing my mom in 2021 was probably the worst day of my life. My mom, Irene DeSafey, beautiful on the inside and out, gave everything for her family and taught us family first. In her last year I was her

caregiver and while it was the hardest year of my life to balance everything, I will never forget our many times of laughter and togetherness. She was always my biggest supporter and loved me and her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren more than anything in this world. I sought the latter book for guidance and help after this loss.

Share something about yourself that you believe is misunderstood by others.

I am from Pittsburgh, and we are straight-shooters and really do not mince words. But inside I think we are all marshmallows. We care and love deeply. I have learned that my faith and being Pittsburgh Strong has allowed me to not only achieve my dreams but survive many heartbreaks and losses. So, I would end with make sure, as we say at the USF College of Public Health, your practice is your passion, follow your dreams, and never underestimate the effects you have on others as you continuously strive to change lives for the better.

Editor's note.

Dr. Liller joined The Academy March 15, 1999, as a Charter member. She has served on the board and is a Fellow of The Academy.

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.