

Influential Women Spotlights Karen McColley: Educator, Community Leader, And Advocate For Lifelong Learning

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Connecting Education, Business, and Community Service Through Resilience, Curiosity, and a Commitment to Helping Others Grow

Karen McColley is an accomplished educator, community leader, business professional, and advocate for lifelong learning whose career reflects a commitment to education, service, and making a positive difference in the lives of others. Currently serving as an Adjunct Associate Professor and Tutor for Math at Wilmington University in New Castle, Delaware, Karen brings extensive experience across education, business, and farming to her work with students. Known affectionately as “the why professor,” she encourages students to understand the reasoning behind what they are learning and to connect mathematical concepts to their personal interests and real-life experiences.



Karen is finishing her Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership and holds a Master's in Special Education K-12, an MBA, and a Bachelor's in Business from Wilmington University. Her academic journey reflects the same curiosity she encourages in her students: to ask questions, understand the “why,” remain open to learning, and continually look for ways to apply knowledge.

Before entering higher education, Karen taught across all levels, from elementary school through high school, including special education and life skills programs. Her professional experience has also extended into business administration, event venue management, and farming operations. Alongside her husband, she owns and has restored Sunnybrae Mansion in Milford, Delaware, a

historic 90-acre property that has been transformed into a celebrated event venue. They also operate a large-scale poultry farming business and have other investments.

These diverse experiences have shaped Karen's approach to education and leadership. She understands that learning does not happen only inside a classroom and that practical experience can provide lessons just as valuable as those found in textbooks. At Wilmington University, she is active with her students while also serving as part of the WU Faculty Senate, the Master's of Professional Studies Advisory Board, and several committees.

Her commitment to community service is equally extensive. Karen has served as a Planning and Zoning Commissioner for Milford and as vice president of Downtown Milford Incorporated, where she led a five-phase streetscape project. She has also served as President of the Kiwanis Club and as a Commissioner of the Milford Museum. Her dedication to young people has included serving as a Boy Scout Assistant Scoutmaster and Girl Scout leader. In 2001, she was crowned Mrs. Delaware International, where her platform focused on the integrity of youth. She was later honored with the Hometown Hero Award for her contributions to the Greater Milford area.

Karen attributes much of her success to the foundation she received from her family growing up. Her father was a doctor, while her mother was very active in the Milford community. Together, they gave Karen the courage to become actively involved in her community from a young age. Her husband of almost 50 years has also been instrumental throughout her journey. Although they were raised differently and working together has sometimes presented challenges, Karen considers that experience a positive and important part of her growth.

One of the most important lessons her father taught her was that no one can intimidate her unless she chooses to let them. He would tell her, "when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade!" He also encouraged her to "use that noggin'" and figure out how to handle situations calmly while looking ahead to see challenges on the horizon and prevent them when possible.

That philosophy has guided Karen through countless professional and community situations. Whether navigating business scenarios, Planning and Zoning meetings, classroom challenges, or male-dominated environments, she has learned the importance of maintaining composure and thinking ahead. During her time as a Boy Scout leader, she was one of only five women among approximately 250 people, an experience that reinforced the importance of confidence, respect, and staying true to her principles.

Karen has also learned that difficult interactions do not always require confrontation. Sometimes, she believes, the best response is simply to smile, say "have a good day," and let things go without allowing another person's behavior to disrupt her focus. As she explains, just because someone does not argue with you does not mean they agree with you, but maintaining composure and dignity can be pivotal in creating a positive outcome.

Her advice to young women reflects these lessons. Karen encourages women to stand up for themselves while remaining supportive of those around them. She cautions against entering professional environments assuming that others are against them or making judgments based on appearances or industry stereotypes. Having worked across education, business, and farming, she knows firsthand that people are far more complex than assumptions may suggest.

Above all, Karen encourages women to remain hungry for knowledge and always ask “why.” Understanding the reasoning behind decisions and concepts, she believes, is essential. Rather than making assumptions, she encourages curiosity and learning.

She also wants women to become comfortable with failure. Karen teaches her students that failure means “first attempt in learning.” Rather than viewing failure as something negative, she sees it as an opportunity to become more attentive to details and learn more effectively. She believes that people should live passionately but responsibly, continuing to learn while ensuring that what they pursue connects meaningfully to what they are already doing.

This philosophy directly informs Karen’s approach to higher education. One of the biggest challenges she sees today is helping students overcome their fear of failure and apply what they learn. She sees many women in her classes who read extensively about achieving their goals but hesitate to put that knowledge into practice because they are afraid of failing.

Math anxiety is another challenge Karen addresses directly. She uses resources such as Jo Boaler’s videos to help students understand that their brains are capable of more than they may believe. She has encountered high school girls who have told her, “I can’t do this, it’s for boys, I’m a girl,” and she challenges those assumptions by pointing out that many of the math teachers around them are women.

Karen also sees an ongoing misconception that college is too expensive or no longer worthwhile. She points to the possibility of earning a master’s degree at Wilmington University for around \$11,000 with careful time and money management. While she acknowledges that going to college does not guarantee success, she believes education gives people a significant hand up and opens doors.

For Karen, the opportunity within higher education goes beyond teaching content. She wants students to develop critical thinking skills, time management abilities, and the confidence to understand the “why” behind what they are learning so they can apply it to their lives. Her students include traditional learners, adults returning to the classroom after decades, and military members taking classes from other countries, each bringing different experiences and perspectives to the learning environment.

Respect, empathy, compassion, diversity, inclusivity, family, resiliency, and giving back are the values that guide Karen’s work and personal life. Family remains central to everything she does. She and her husband have built a life together over almost five decades, raising four children

and involving them in their farming operation and the restoration of Sunnybrae Mansion. Rather than hearing their children say they were bored, Karen and her husband always found plenty of projects to keep everyone involved, creating opportunities to work together while spending meaningful time as a family.

The family's connection to Sunnybrae became even more significant following the loss of their son Will to glioblastoma brain cancer two years ago, after Karen had also lost her sister and mother. In his memory, the family built Will's Pavilion at Sunnybrae. Will loved life and firmly believed in "Carpe Diem ... Seize the Day!" His memory remains part of the family's ongoing story and their connection to the property.

Karen's commitment to service extends well beyond her immediate family. Through her work with the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Planning and Zoning Commission, Downtown Milford Incorporated, Kiwanis Club, Milford Museum, and other community enrichment efforts, she has consistently sought opportunities to contribute. Her 2001 Mrs. Delaware International platform focused on the integrity of youth because she believes that building a good future and a meaningful legacy begins with children and cannot wait until they become adults.

Throughout her life, Karen has faced significant personal and professional challenges, including the loss of close family members and a Parkinson's disease diagnosis. Rather than allowing those experiences to define her limitations, she continues to emphasize resilience, learning, and growth.

Today, Karen remains committed to teaching, mentoring, serving her community, and encouraging others to embrace curiosity and the lessons that come from failure. Her upcoming book will further explore resilience, lifelong learning, and the idea that failure can represent a "First Attempt in Learning."

Through every chapter of her career and personal life, Karen McColley continues to demonstrate that education is not simply about acquiring information. It is about developing the confidence to ask questions, the resilience to keep learning, the courage to face challenges, and the willingness to use knowledge in ways that make a difference.

Learn More about Karen McColley:

Through her Influential Women profile, <https://influentialwomen.com/connect/karen-mccolley> or through her website, <https://sunnybraemansion.com/>

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