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## A Conversation with Karen McShane

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Interview of Karen Patton-McShane  
Duration: 00:28:03  
Elizabeth Hallahan and John Blake  
April 18, 2018  
History Lounge  
Making History  
Professor Stephanie Yuhl

**Karen:** Hello!

**Elizabeth:** Hi, how are you?

**Karen:** Good, how are you?

**Elizabeth:** Good! We are just going to start recording really quickly, is that all set?

**Karen:** Nope, not a problem.

**Elizabeth:** Alright, just so we get everything.

**Karen:** Sure.

**Elizabeth:** Alright.

**John:** Perfect.

**Elizabeth:** Okay. And do you have it on your phone too?

**John:** Yup.

**Elizabeth:** Okay. Alright, sorry about that.

**Karen:** It's alright.

**John:** Hello.

**Karen:** Hello.

**Elizabeth:** I'm Elizabeth.

**John:** I'm John

**Karen:** It's nice to meet you both.

**Elizabeth and John:** It's nice to meet you.

**Karen:** I'm Karen, obviously.

**John:** Yes, yes.

**Elizabeth:** How are you doing today?

**Karen:** I'm doing alright, thank you. Just got home from work a couple of minutes ago. Your email didn't pop up right away which is why I'm a little bit late.

**John:** Oh no, that's fine don't worry.

**Elizabeth:** No rush at all. So, [To John] do you want to do the introduction?

**John:** Sure, we are just going to do a brief introduction, just formalities, and then we'll take part in the interview.

**Karen:** Okay.

**John:** Okay, so it is April 18<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday, it's about 4:40. We are going to be interviewing Karen Patton-McShane. I am John Blake here with Elizabeth Hallahan.

**Elizabeth:** Alright, are you all set to get started?

**Karen:** I'm sorry I didn't catch that?

**Elizabeth:** Sorry, are you all set to start the interview?

**Karen:** Yes, I am.

**Elizabeth:** Alright, perfect. So just to begin, and for an introduction, we were wondering how did you decide to come to Holy Cross?

**Karen:** So, when I was in high school, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I sort of decided on a whim that I wanted to go to college in New England and I had a couple of criteria. I wanted it to be a smaller, liberal arts school. I wanted it to have a Spanish program, and I wanted to be able to go into teaching, and so I applied to a couple different schools, and honestly Holy Cross offered me the best financial aid package, so it made the decision to come to Holy Cross really easy.

**John:** Absolutely. So what was your transition from high school to college like?

**Karen:** It was [pause] It wasn't difficult. I was really excited to start college, but like then once I was away from home I started to feel a little bit of homesickness. I had a roommate that I didn't get along with really well, because we just had very different schedules. And so I was really excited in September and then by like Christmas I was like, "Oh man I can't wait to get home." And so [pause] there was [pause] I don't know. I don't know, obviously I don't know what other people experience, but it was kind of, it felt like for me flipped. Like you would expect people to be kind of nervous at first and homesick and then like get used to it, but sort of the opposite happened for me. But it [pause] it worked out well. I [pause] you know, made it through the year and obviously came back and so, you know, it wasn't [pause] it wasn't at all happy and easy, but it wasn't too difficult either.

**Elizabeth:** Alright, thank you. And you attended college from 2002 to 2006?

**Karen:** Yes.

**Elizabeth:** Alright, so kind of, we were just wondering what was going on in the world during that time? Were there any big events outside of Holy Cross that influenced your experience, and if there were, what were they?

**Karen:** I think most obviously there was [pause] the terrorist attack on September 11<sup>th</sup>. So, I started at Holy Cross in 2002 just one year after that happened. And [pause] that lead to I think a lot of the [pause] political movements on campus, I want to say. There were a couple, there was a protest every week when ROTC was dressed in uniform, and so, there was a lot of conflict there. As like you know, do we go to war do we not go to war. And that was the biggest thing going on that I can remember. And it didn't impact me personally because I wasn't involved with either of those organizations. But, you know, I had a cousin who went into the military, so I would get upset when I saw people protesting ROTC. But nothing like a direct impact on my experience there.

**Elizabeth:** Alright, thank you.

**John:** So, I guess transitioning, you mentioned that your roommate, you guys didn't really get along. So, I guess for some people when they come out, because I guess coming out is a process,

and I guess if you weren't comfortable with your roommate, who was the first person you kind of reached out to at Holy Cross?

**Karen:** *[pause]* Honestly, I didn't really get close with anybody at Holy Cross until my second year. So, I was *[pause]* I actually met Kara, who I am now married to, when we were working together at Kimball. We were the only two people working on a breakfast shift and I brought her coffee because one of the things that I had in my room was a French Press and a *[pause]* hot pot. And so, I made her fresh coffee so she didn't have to drink the coffee from the dining hall and it was a fast friendship after that.

**John:** That's very sweet, that's very nice.

**Karen:** *[laughs]*

**Elizabeth:** And did you guys meet your freshman year, did you say?

**Karen:** My sophomore year, her freshman year.

**Elizabeth:** Okay, and recognizing that coming out isn't a one-time experience necessarily, when and who did you first come out to?

**Karen:** She was one of the first people that I came out to because we were going to room together, and so full disclosure, I wanted her to know going into it that, you know, I'm attracted to women and she didn't think it was that big of a deal. And, you know, I came out to my mom and sister pretty early also. It was very emotional coming out to my mom and she just kind of laughed at me, and was like, "I don't understand why you're crying, just it's not that big a deal. It's fine." She actually teased me that because I was going to a Catholic school I was either going to come home a nun or a lesbian, and so we joked that she was right. And so yeah, it was my mom and my sister and Kara were the first people that I came out to and then slowly I came out to other people at the college and other family members.

**John:** Okay, so I guess were you out during your time at Holy Cross? Were you...did you feel comfortable being who you were at Holy Cross?

**Karen:** Yeah it was *[pause]* it was a little difficult at times because there were not very many out people on campus and, in fact, my senior year I was sort of the default president of ABiGaLe because I was the only out person that I knew on campus, the only out person who was willing to be involved with those organizations. And so, I *[pause]* yeah, I guess I started to come out junior year, I was completely out, everybody who was going to know knew by senior year. And so I was involved with ABiGaLe, a little bit with Allies and at the time, I don't know if there still is, there was a support group that I went to for people who were not out yet, but you know, so that I could be someone there who could sort of share experiences from the other side to maybe help people feel more comfortable with coming out.

**John:** Sure. And how were those experiences? You know, did you find comfort in them? What was it like I guess?

**Karen:** It was *[pause]* you know it was nice having other people to talk to even while it was still frustrating that, you know *[pause]* I was sort of, you know, the only one that people knew about. And it actually led to *[pause]* a, don't know who did it, have some suspicions, but you know somebody on St. Patrick's Day wrote "dyke" on the dry erase board outside of my room. And so

like there was that sort of targeting because I was the only one that was out. But I had good support from Professor Stanbury and Professor Kodge, and my friends so, you know, I didn't end up going to class that day because I was pretty traumatized by it I guess. But now I look back at it, and it's kind of like, whoever did it was just probably a drunk asshole and you know, I try not to let it, bother me too much anymore.

**Elizabeth:** And you mentioned, you talk a lot about the support systems you found at Holy Cross. Did you ever consider Worcester, the city of Worcester outside of Holy Cross, to be a place where you could enter into gay community, or at all?

**Karen:** You know I never [pause] I never really spent time in Worcester. When I did leave campus, it was on one of the buses to Providence or to Boston, so I never ventured into the city. In fact, I didn't really go into the city of Worcester until my senior year when I drove Kara to a conference at WPI, and then her senior year when we went to one of the restaurants before graduation. So you know I've only been in the city of Worcester, off campus, like twice.

**John:** Thank you. So how would you, you said you met Kara your sophomore year of college, correct?

**Karen:** Yes.

**John:** How would you describe your relationship with her throughout the rest of your time at Holy Cross?

**Karen:** So she was absolutely my best friend. I was doing a, I did a minor in women and gender studies and one of the things we ended up doing for one of my classes was screening the film *Boys Don't Cry*, and I left that screening absolutely wrecked. I was like sobbing, so emotional, and you know she met me afterwards and she was like, "Okay, let's go to Lower, let's get some dinner, and I think like *Return of the King* was playing at the Kimball Theater, she was like "We're going to see *Return of the King*" and, so like she was always there. Whenever things were rough, she was definitely the one who was most supportive of me and [pause] and like before we even got married my mom was calling her you know the "red-headed step-child" teasing her, like giving her hugs, you know, thanking her so much for being the support to me, so she, before we even were even in a relationship she was my best friend and, you know, my family considered her family as well.

**John:** Absolutely.

**Elizabeth:** And, you mentioned certain professors before and you mentioned your interest in GSW studies and the experiences and classes you took. Were there any other specific experiences that were academic related that also influenced your experience?

**Karen:** So [pause] you know I did my, whatcha call it, it wasn't a thesis, it was a capstone project with Professor Shaun Maurer and [pause] she was probably really frustrated with me because I was a procrastinator, I'm not quite as bad anymore, I think she was convinced that I wasn't going to get the project done but working with her and doing the project on the history of ABiGaLe on campus and combining that with sort of my own history of coming out was a really powerful experience to see sort of where I fit in to into the history of LGBTQIA identities on campus, and I absolutely hated presenting it. I cried. I was not a very good public speaker, but it

was a really good thing for me to do. And it helps me feel more connected now to campus and, you know, more comfortable coming back to Holy Cross.

**Elizabeth:** Thank you.

**John:** Sure, so I guess kind of in retrospect, if you could do anything from your experience at Holy Cross over again, how would you do things differently? Would you treat people differently, would you have done things differently, joined different clubs, I guess?

**Karen:** I don't know, it's hard to say because you know if you go back and change one thing that could change the whole future and I'm kind of happy with where I am right now. But you know if I could change anything from the past without changing where I ended up, I probably would try not to let other people bother me as much, like, you know, that roommate I had my freshman year, you know, just let that roll off my back like water off of a duck, you know, the, I guess we'll call it hate crime, for lack of a better word, like to not get so upset about that because it was, in the grand scheme of things, not that big a deal. So I would try to, I guess I would try to keep things in better perspective and focus on what's important and not worry about things that aren't important.

**John:** Now did that, you called it a hate crime, did that happen once or were there multiple isolated incidents like that, I guess?

**Karen:** I only remember the one time, that it was, it was Saint Patrick's Day, or the evening before St Patrick's Day, so like I said it probably was you know an isolated kid who was drunk and just being stupid, but you know at the time we called it a hate crime and there were some younger students who were active in the LBGT community who like wanted to do, you know, a rally to support and everything like that and I wasn't comfortable getting involved with that at the time, but it felt really good to, you know, have these younger students trying to support me that way.

**John:** Absolutely.

**Elizabeth:** Thank you, and another question, Holy Cross has a pretty strong Jesuit identity, did you ever find that the Jesuit identity and the environment on campus, did that affect your experience and your view of your own sexuality?

**Karen:** I think that it was a fairly positive effect. I think that, you know, the the idea of men and women for others, I think that the *[pause]* adults on campus really embodied that, at least the ones that I that interacted being, you know, in the humanities doing a lot of English classes and Spanish classes. And I think that it was, it was very supportive in that way. The cats are fighting, sorry.

**John and Elizabeth:** That's ok.

**Karen:** And so I feel, I feel like that, you know, there was there was acceptance there and I think that the Jesuit mission of education and social justice, and, you know, basically people treating each other with dignity *[pause]* made it a place where I wasn't scared to come out. It's not, it's never I don't think like a really comfortable thing, but I wasn't afraid of how adults on campus would respond.

**John:** Absolutely, were there any chaplains or any priests that you felt you could confide in while you were at Holy Cross?

**Karen:** Not really, because part of my whole process was *[pause]* brief stint with atheism. I decided that I didn't believe in anything and now we get back to Kara again who was like 'okay, come with me to my church' and so we actually would drive out to Lincoln, Rhode Island on weekends and go to, not every weekend, but and go to her church in Pawtucket. And so that was sort of where I found that spiritual sense of belonging. I didn't have the same connection on campus, like I couldn't even make it through a full year in the Chapel choir because I was *[pause]* I was having a lot of issues with Catholicism in general at the time and so I, I kind of stayed away from the Chaplain's office and the priests on campus.

**John:** Sure, sure.

**Elizabeth:** If you feel comfortable, do you mind elaborating on like the issues you had with Catholicism?

**Karen:** Catholicism? My relationship with my father is a little rocky and so all of the like, the patriarchal terminology that goes into a Catholic service tended to upset me and so I, yeah

**Elizabeth:** Thank you.

**John:** No, that makes sense, so was that something, when you were coming into,

**Karen:** I can't hear you.

**John:** I'm sorry, so when you were coming into Holy Cross, was that something that might have been a deterrent for you, this I guess, identity of a Catholic presence associated with the college?

**Karen:** No, because my issues didn't start happening until after I started school.

**John:** Okay.

**Karen:** So the fact that it was a Catholic college actually made my Catholic grandparents really happy, and like, but I wasn't, I wasn't looking for a Catholic school, but I wasn't like "oh god I can't go to a Catholic school" so it was neutral for me when I started.

**John:** Okay.

**Elizabeth:** Thank you. And based on your experience, what advice would you offer to LGBTQ students on campus now who are trying to come out?

**Karen:** Honestly, I would say just do it, it's not going to get any easier, I think, by trying to hide who you are. With my own experiences, and as a teacher, I've worked with some students who, I worked with a student who actually has been in the process of transitioning from female to male,

and before he started to express himself as he truly is, there was a lot of depression and anxiety with that, and I felt the same way, like I went through a pretty bad phase of clinical depression in college, and I think part of that was trying to basically hide who I am and so I think that if there are students on campus who are right now in the closet and trying to decide whether or not they're going to come out, I would say that the short term potential backlash is far outweighed by the long term benefits to mental health.

**John:** Sure, so I mean, you mentioned that you kind of suffered with clinical depression, I guess, during your college experience. What were some, I guess, resources that you looked to maybe outside of Holy Cross, the Holy Cross community, that might have helped you both during college and even after college?

**Karen:** So I actually, I went to, I made use of the counseling center on college actually and that helped just having somebody to talk to. Kara's home from work and she's waving so [to Kara] but I've already talked about you at length, they're probably sick of hearing about you. And support from my family really, from my mom and my sister. You know they never judged me and they didn't, it wasn't like understanding because they'd been through the same thing, but it was definitely sympathy, like they sympathized with how I was feeling and did what they could to try to support me even though, you know, they were in Hershey, Pennsylvania and I was in Worcester, Massachusetts. And so there was support from some of the family, from friends, from the counseling services available on campus.

**John:** Did being that far away from home have an impact on you?

**Karen:** Did what? Being that far from home?

**John:** Yes.

**Karen:** Sometimes it was, it was difficult because I could only get home you know on the major holidays when we had a long break. And, I was only like just starting to get used to this whole computer thing and so like sending emails regularly, and god forbid I try to send a text message. My mom had to drag me kicking and screaming into a smartphone. So, you know, it was, it was not always easy to stay in touch and I think that was that was harder sometimes especially going back my freshman when things were I think probably at close to the worst. But then my senior year I had my car and Kara's family only lived forty five minutes away so when, you know, if things got bad or we just needed to leave we could drive to, you know, Providence, stay with her family who accepted me as daughter just as much as my family accepted Kara, and so I sort of had a second home by the end of my time at Holy Cross away from my family that was closer to the college.

**John:** Sure

**Elizabeth:** And to wrap things up, what was your transition like from college into the working world?

**Karen:** It was a little bit scary, because I didn't know what I was going to do. You know I, I graduated with a bachelors in Spanish and the minor in Women and Gender studies, and I wanted to do education but I wasn't able to follow through with that. I never studied abroad, so I wasn't comfortable with my fluency level in Spanish to do something in that direction, so I really, I had no idea what I was going to do. So I ended up moving back home with my mom, and I finally decided to go to graduate school, and so I ended up having, I guess two years between when I finished Holy Cross and when I started graduate school. But I was able to reach out to professors and the people I had worked with in the college archives to get letters of recommendation for graduate school, so even though that time had passed there was still support from the Holy Cross community to help me continue into, you know, the next steps for my career.

**Elizabeth:** And would you offer any advice to Holy Cross seniors who are transitioning into the working world?

**Karen:** I couldn't, didn't get that

**Elizabeth:** Oh sorry. Do you have any advice to offer to LGBTQ seniors at Holy Cross who are transitioning into the professional world?

**Karen:** Reach out to the alumni association, we've got the, *[to Kara]* Kara what's it called again, is it just the LGBT Alumni Association? Alumni Network. So there's a network now for out alums, or I guess not out alums, but reach out and, you know, Holy Cross is great with networking and so, you know, seniors who, you know, aren't sure what to do, talk to the LBGT alum or talk to alum in whatever field they're interested in. It's a great resource and we should all make better use of it.

**John:** Absolutely, absolutely. *[To Elizabeth]* Elizabeth is there anything else you'd like to add, any questions?

**Elizabeth:** Is there anything that you want to add that we didn't cover, that you want to talk about?

**Karen:** No, I think that covered it.

**Elizabeth:** Alright.

**John:** Excellent. Well, thank you so much for participating. This really means a lot and you're doing a lot to help other LGBTQ students on campus, so we greatly appreciate that.

**Karen:** Absolutely. Thank you for taking your time to get me involved in this.

**Elizabeth:** Thank you. And we just have a couple quick questions just to confirm. So what year did you graduate?

**Karen:** 2006.

**Elizabeth:** Thank you. And what was your major at Holy Cross?

**Karen:** Spanish.

**Elizabeth:** Spanish. And if you're comfortable answering, what is your gender identity?

**Karen:** Female.

**Elizabeth:** And if you're comfortable responding, what is your sexuality?

**Karen:** Lesbian.

**Elizabeth:** And if you're comfortable responding, what is your racial or ethnic background?

**Karen:** I'm white. That confuses a lot of people though, because I majored in Spanish and I, you know, have the dark hair and eyes. I had a lot of people, including native Spanish speakers, assume I am Latina, but I'm white.

**Elizabeth:** And what is your current or former occupation?

**Karen:** I am a teacher.

**Elizabeth:** Teacher, okay. Alright, thank you so much.

**John:** Thank you very much Karen.

**Karen:** Thank you.

**Elizabeth:** Alright, thank you.

**Karen:** Bye.

**John:** Bye.

**Elizabeth:** Have a nice day.

**Karen:** You too.