

EP06 P2: KAREN TURNER

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

00:00:00 **Katie Jensen**

Hi, I'm Katie Jensen and this is Part 2 of the Path of Public Service with Karen Turner. Music has always been a part of Karen's life, but it wasn't until university that she discovered her passion for working with people in social services.

00:00:16 **Karen Turner**

I was very fortunate. I got a job at a community living organization while I was in university and actually kind of worked my way through university while there. Those were the days that you know your part time job to actually pay for your tuition. Those days are long over, but they did. And I was like a contract sort of independent living worker. And so I worked part time during the school year, and I did some full time contracts in the summer and it was working with adults with developmental disabilities. And it was just phenomenal.

00:00:55 **Karen Turner**

I loved that job. I just loved meeting people and just meeting people that you know thought in different ways from myself. Meeting people with autism and various places on the spectrum. And it was really sad at times too, because I also worked with folks where they were often, you know, taken advantage of.

00:01:15 **Karen Turner**

There were, you know, several clients that I had that were sexually assaulted and harassed. And so just really horrible things that were inflicted on some people. But it was just such an amazing job, but I think I knew then that OK I really need to work in social services. I did that for a couple of years and then started in women's services. My kind of first job in women's services was at an Elizabeth Fry society in Hamilton which I think has just closed. And so that was working in a halfway house, so with women that were in conflict with the law and mainly on parole or probation.

00:01:55 **Karen Turner**

And that was just amazing. That job taught me empathy more than any other job that I've ever had. Like, I have just so many life lessons from that job. It really just kind of taught you not to judge. You know, everybody has a battle that you don't know about. I always say that when I heard the women's stories there, I just realized that there's so many things that contribute to somebody becoming in conflict with the law. For the most part, people don't get up and say, hey, I'm going to assault somebody today, today is the day I'm going to be violent.

These women have stories that started from birth. I remember a particular story, obviously can't be too identifying, but the person that I work with that had grown up in Nova Scotia in Africville and it was a Black settlement in Nova Scotia which was eventually demolished by the government.

00:02:52 **Karen Turner**

And so she had actually lived there, and her family kind of fell apart when the town was destroyed and kind of entered child welfare care and ended up having addiction, met partners that were quite abusive and just kind of long story short, kind of got to a situation where she herself was violent. But again, when you hear her story and you look at her and you see er scars.

00:03:21 **Karen Turner**

You realize that people are people. The crimes that they committed, like to be honest and it sounds kind of bizarre, but most of the women that I worked with, I felt like if I had their lives I would have done those crimes as well. It, it made sense.

00:03:38 **Karen Turner**

So for me, like I've always said to people, if you want to learn skills of empathy, work in corrections like get that under your belt.

00:03:46 **Katie Jensen**

I'm just thinking about the through line, because I was trying to figure out OK what's the pivot from working with women to working primarily with children

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00:03:53 **Karen Turner**

Yes.

00:03:54 **Katie Jensen**

But I think the through line is that there's a sense of making sure people have a home.

00:03:59 **Karen Turner**

Yes.

00:04:00 **Katie Jensen**

Why is that important to you?

00:04:02 **Karen Turner**

[Home] It's your anchor. It's the place that you should be safe and it's the place where so many people are not safe. It's a place where the children aren't safe. It's a place where many women aren't safe. It's the place when I worked with people with developmental disabilities. I mean that it was so important for people, you know, for some people, where there were things that they were responsible for that was theirs, they could come home and cook dinner and do whatever they wanted to.

00:04:30 **Karen Turner**

So that's always really important. But I will say and I'm not sure if you were going to go here, just that pivot from women to children, that was not something that I ever planned.

00:04:43 **Katie Jensen**

Oh, OK, tell me more.

00:04:44 **Karen Turner**

Part of it is a tragic story, but I, I will push on.

So I'd worked in women services for several years with women in conflict with the law. Women abuse survivors, women living with mental health challenges, and homeless women. And then I came into the government and continued working in women's services, or having oversight for women's organizations within the same ministry where I am now, and did that for about 8 years or so.

00:05:15 **Karen Turner**

And at that point, I felt like I knew so much about Violence Against Women, and I felt like I was really at a high point in my job where I knew a lot. And I started to think about management and is management for me, I wasn't really sure.

00:05:29 **Karen Turner**

And so my boss, she knew that there was an opening coming up as the Children's Manager and she said, "Why don't you throw your hat in the ring?" And I was like, I don't want to work for children's. And I knew that child welfare was part of that portfolio. And at the time, you know, there is a tension, there still is a tension at times, between Violence Against Women Services and Child Protection Services.

00:05:50 **Karen Turner**

And so at the time I was like, there is no way. I will not work Child Protection Services, that's not something that I wanted to do. But my boss convinced me, you know, throw your hat in anyway, so I did it for the experience. Let me try out, see if I get an interview. And then my boss announced that she

was leaving. And in the government sometimes when folks are hiring for jobs, if there's another vacancy that comes up for a similar job, you can just interview the people that are already in that pool. So it was a good thing I put my hat in the ring so I could be considered for that job and that one was just a contract.

00:06:24 **Karen Turner**

So I was really in that competition because I'm like, OK, now my dream job has come up. The Violence Against Women Manager.

00:06:32 **Karen Turner**

Like this is awesome, this is what I want to do.

00:06:35 **Karen Turner**

And a friend of mine, he was kind of seen as the front runner for the Children's Manager job, and I was so excited. And then my friend got very sick and passed away. Before the competition he had a very quick moving cancer, so it was so tragic. I remember, he actually died on the day of my interview, and so they had to do my interview a few weeks later. So then the competition continued, and I remember this was where I was really blessed to have some good mentors. And one of my mentors was the former director in her office and she said to me, you know what, Karen, I'm going to coach you for this interview and I'm going to tell you though, if you happen to win, you need to go into Children's. So I said, no, no, I'm only in this for Violence Against Women.

00:07:26 **Karen Turner**

And she's like, you need to go to Children's, seriously, you need to go. Long story short, I did the competition and I won. Yeah. So the Director at the time, I said, "Hey, I don't want Children's." And he said, "Well, the Violence Against Women job is only a contract, this one is permanent. So like, you need to take it, you're the winner." And so kicking and screaming, I went into Children's.

00:07:47 **Karen Turner**

It was not my plan.

00:07:49 **Karen Turner**

However, once I got there, and not just because it was permanent, that was the right thing to do, absolutely. I needed to do that to see the other side of that coin. For one thing, it was the same families, women dealing with abuse and their children are the same women and their children that are in Child Protection.

00:08:09 **Karen Turner**

It was so fascinating just to see from the other, I hesitate to call it side because we're trying to get away from the sides, but it was interesting to just see like what is the child welfare perspective. There is a tension at times between Violence Against Women and Child Protection. And I know from when I was on the Violence Against Women fields kind of front line, sometimes it would feel like we're doing all of this work with these women, and then these Children's Aid workers are just kind of discounting that and making decisions that these children are apprehending these

children and it's not fair. And we kind of saw Children's Aid Societies as just the folks that apprehend, as opposed to anything else or as supporters. And so I needed to work with the Children's Aid Societies to see what else goes on, what is the perspective there. And then to be able to link the two. And so the ministry has what we call a CAS DAW for Children's Aid Society Violence Against Women agreement where we fund committees between the two sectors, where they work together. And I have staff, Child Welfare staff and there's Violence Against Women staff that work together, and we specifically work on those intersections. And so for me to have experience on both sides of that coin has been invaluable.

00:09:36 **Karen Turner**

It would have been wrong for me to completely stay in Violence Against Women. It was the best career move, absolutely.

00:09:43 **Katie Jensen**

Did your mentor say like, I told you so?

00:09:45 **Karen Turner**

Yes, yes she did.

00:09:50 **Katie Jensen**

I think I would be best to ask, why did you apply for a job in the public sector way back in the 90s?

00:09:56 **Karen Turner**

Oh, wow. Wow. You know, working in the social services, while it is so rewarding, it's really hard on you, like, just mentally. Physically at times, even because I was working with homeless

women, and like my car, that was everybody's moving van. And so it was physically demanding, but just mentally demanding in every way like I've seen a lot of women like they're overdose or die of natural causes and just worrying about people. Whether you're working with women that are living on the streets, like you don't know if you're going to see them again or what's going to happen to them. And so it's draining. So I did get to a point where I got really sick. I got a bad case of bronchitis where I didn't work for two months.

00:10:46 **Karen Turner**

It was really horrible. And then just happened to see a job posted with the provincial government and they were hiring a few positions, and one was with Violence Against Women Services that I thought, oh well, that would be interesting. And I still never saw myself as a government kind of person, like I was full on left wing feminist, you know, hardcore grassroots worker. And the government, it's just like I'd love to see what goes on over there, maybe stay for a year and then come back, just kind of knowing all those government secrets. Twenty-one years later, I'm still there. I always thought that I was going to go back and, but yeah, I loved it.

00:11:26 **Karen Turner**

Do you ever hear from folks who you helped, who come back and say, hey, remember me, here's where I'm at now.

00:11:31 **Karen Turner**

You would be surprised how often. Oh my goodness. My family owns this lemonade business actually in Hamilton,

where it just operates during festivals at times. And my father, one thing that he does is he is the Director for this Canada Day festival called "It's Your Festival." And so my mother and I, gosh, I think about 30 years ago, we kind of started this business where we operate this booth where we make lemonade. And people know my mother especially from that business, and people come every year to see the lemonade lady.

00:12:05 **Karen Turner**

It is shocking to me how many ex-clients come by.

00:12:09 **Karen Turner**

And so there are some people that I literally see once a year, and I've been seeing them for the past like 20-30 years. They'll come by the tent and check in. There's one family I can think of, actually, where the matriarch of the family was a client of mine. And I knew her children from then because they were kind of living in in the shelter and received services with her. And so now I know their grandchildren. So I've literally seen 3-4 generations of this family.

00:12:39 **Karen Turner**

And then even in Toronto, from when I was working with homeless women for the longest time I would see women on the street, and sometimes they didn't always know that I had left, and so they would literally come up to me and they'd say, "Karen! I got a house!"

00:12:54 **Katie Jensen**

Oh my God.

00:12:55 **Karen Turner**

Like, oh my goodness. Though, sometimes people would come up to me and they'd say, Karen, where's my housing application, like what's going on?"

00:13:06 **Katie Jensen**

Would you ever phone back to your old positions and be like hey, what's going on here?

00:13:10 **Karen Turner**

Sometimes I did, because I did stay in touch with some people, and I'd be like, you know, saw Mary on the street and this is what she said. Yeah.

00:13:20 **Katie Jensen**

I can't even get over the fact that how metaphorical the lemonade business is in terms of like, life giving you lemons!

00:13:27 **Karen Turner**

Yeah. Yeah, exactly so true!

00:13:31 **Katie Jensen**

Let's say you're talking to somebody who is you, but in the year 2023. Someone who is really grassroots, who is kind of like, public service, what's so great about that? What would you tell them? What is the persuasive thing that you would tell them to consider public service as a career?

00:13:50 **Karen Turner**

Ohh that is such an amazing question, because, I'll be frank with you, some days it's like, it's not for everybody, because it is a job. I'm going to say, even though I should be ending on a positive note and I will, you know, it is a job though, where sometimes you have

to do things that you don't necessarily agree with. Or sometimes this is kind of the government of the day and there are things that we have to do. And that can be really challenging. And I've seen people, even friends that have come from working on the front lines to government, and were not able to do that, and that didn't fit right with their spirit. And I get that, I totally get that. And many days, as I said earlier, when I'm kind of talking to my staff about self-care, sometimes those are the things we're talking about is like, oh my goodness, this is so hard to do this, like I don't exactly agree with this.

00:14:48 **Karen Turner**

However I will say, and a winning endorsement for working for the public service, one thing that surprised me, is just how much people really do care. I think it's an amazing job if you do kind of want to see how organizations work from the inside, if you want to be able to influence a system. As I had talked earlier about, one of the challenges for child welfare organizations is that intersection with special needs.

00:15:17 **Karen Turner**

How do they get through those waiting lists and those kinds of things.

00:15:20 **Karen Turner**

I mean, one thing that we're able to do as government workers is to not just can I complain about the system, but to say, hey, let me organize a forum where I can get all of you together, where we can encourage organizations to do cross training or to get at a table together and work through situations

and do some of that community organizing. I think there's nothing like it in the community. You know, it's hard to do that in the community. You're kind of one of 100 other organizations and, you know, who's going to listen to you and trying to organize this forum. But in the government, those are the places we can have some influence. We're able to bring agencies', you know, stories out to get their stories to kind of like the higher, you know, officials in the in the government. At times, we'll go to meetings, you know, when we're able to present stories and challenges to the Minister and staff and political staff in, you know, ways that are sometimes challenging in the communities.

00:16:21 **Karen Turner**

There's something to be said for sometimes, you know, it is about working from the inside.

00:16:25 **Katie Jensen**

It's so much fun to complain and to push against the the man, but also sometimes you have to cooperate with the man to change the man without him knowing you're changing him.

00:16:35 **Karen Turner**

Yes. Very true.

00:14:41 **Katie Jensen**

So you've worked with babies, women, older folks, people who are at the end of their lives. What comes next for you?

00:16:48 **Karen Turner**

That's a good, good question. You know, I can retire in five years.

00:16:55 **Katie Jensen**

That's why we're celebrating you.

00:16:57

Thanks! And so I do often think, OK, what do I want to do with this last five years?

00:17:02 **Karen Turner**

There's an absolute comfort in what I do. Like, I feel like it's taken me a long time to get good at my job. And I love my team, I'm obsessed with my team, we have such a great relationship. And so sometimes when I think, maybe I should be like reaching out and seeing what else is out there, and then the team brings me back. And especially you know, with COVID and everything that's gone on in the last few years, you realize just how important your team is.

00:17:29 **Karen Turner**

One thing I'm always saying to my Director is, I'm not saying I don't want to leave, but I want to leave for something that I really want to leave for, something that's really interesting. I'm not just gonna climb a ladder for no reason. But next? I'm not sure. I just know that needs to be something that is interesting to me.

00:17:50 **Katie Jensen**

You've worked a pretty even balance in different sectors. Twenty years with women, 10 to 15 with kids.

00:17:56 **Karen Turner**

Yeah, but I mean, I guess the one group that I haven't worked a lot with is men. So maybe that's next, I don't know.

00:18:03 **Katie Jensen**

And they need help!

00:18:05 **Karen Turner**

Yes!

00:18:08 **Katie Jensen**

This has been a joy. Thank you so much for sharing your story. I mean, it takes a really special person to do the work that you're doing, and I hope people tell you how amazing you are every single day.

00:18:21 **Karen Turner**

Thank you. I'm going to record that so I can listen to that!

00:18:25 **Katie Jensen**

I mean, it's true, it's the really bleeding edge of taking care of society is supporting the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, who are falling through the cracks. And that is your job, is to catch them.

00:18:39 **Katie Jensen**

Thanks for listening.

00:18:41 **Katie Jensen**

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00:18:50 **Katie Jensen**

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00:18:53 **Katie Jensen**

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perspectives and operating good faith to build trust with QC members and all public citizens.

00:19:05 **Katie Jensen**

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