



Karen Ann Storjohann
ROBS History Project
May 16, 1999 59

It was on a brisk spring afternoon on the 16th of May 1999, in the closing year of the century when we met up with Karen Storjohann in the television studio of Brentwood High School, New York. Sitting across from one another she recounted the story of her life and teaching career during the decades when it had grown to become the largest and most diverse school district on Long Island.

Karen Ann Storjohann was then residing in East Islip with her husband, her son Alex and four cats, none of whom by her own description were petite. Named after her paternal grandmother, Catherine Anna, Karen had been fortunate in that she had known and remembered three of four grandparents. Catherine Anna died when Karen was five. Her grandfather from her maternal side died when she was nine. Her last grandmother passed away when Karen was thirty and by that time was well into her eighties.

She didn't change her name when she married but retained her maiden name, (coming as she claimed), from a long line of *difficult* women. Her mother simply added Karen's father's name to her name. She was Edna Munson Storjohann and when she married Alex Werner she and Alex had agreed she would not alter her name because she'd already been working in the district for years. She'd started when she was twenty and got married when she was thirty three so she'd been there a while. There was the matter of her licensing with which she was identified and it might otherwise have created a lot of confusion. She'd been active in the Teachers union and he was already an established administrator. So, they kept their names separate. Alex Werner had been Principal of Twin Pines.

John Mead had given her a nickname in the District. She'd become active after the third year. When she taught at Southwest John Mead was assigned Principal. Half way through the year Central moved him and Frank Hall for a lot of reasons that were political but irrelevant here. It was she said, "water under the bridge". John Mead had been a military guy who was shot down over France during World War II. He feigned being a deaf mute in order to get smuggled out of France. *"That's someone"* she said, *"you should have interviewed because he has fabulous stories to tell"*. At any event, John was at a Principal's meeting while Guy was Superintendent and was trying to run an idea by the Principals that he was trying to get his teachers to do. All of a sudden he spoke up and referring to Karen said, *"Well that's fine for you to sit there and say but I've got 'Tiger Lady' in my building."* Well it made everyone who knew what he was talking about, guffaw because Karen with several others had been handling grievances for the building at that time they just about fell off their chairs. It wasn't more than a day before word got back to Karen about that story. She just knew too many people for it not to get back to her. A couple of days later it happened to be John's birthday and she bought a card for him with a tiger on it and signed the card, *"Tiger Lady"*. He turned beet red because he really didn't expect it to get back to her that fast. *"What a Great story!"*

I asked Karen about her immediate family. She told us her son Alex was now 16 years old and was about to have his Eagles swearing in ceremony in a couple of days. He officially became an Eagle Scout in February of the current year. His given name is Alexander Arthur (Alex for his own father and Arthur for Karen's father). He stands over six foot four and is a Junior in St. Anthony's High School in Huntington. Karen said, *"We're going through that typical junior year thing wondering 'What do I want to do' and where do I want to go"*. It's a very difficult task because at sixteen years old few are ready to make that decision.

Karen said she and her husband have both been offering the same consistent advice. *"Go any place for the first year. As long as it's a decent school it's pretty much the same no matter where you go. You don't have to figure it out at sixteen or seventeen or eighteen or nineteen. It's not etched in stone"*.

"You can always transfer to wherever you want to go once you figure it out". Karen's son Alex has a wide range of interests. There are a lot of things that he enjoys doing. That's why at this stage it's such a difficult decision to make or to narrow it down. Karen was not quite as unfocused when she graduated from high school but the times back then were quite different. She did not go to school intending to become a teacher. She went to college carrying two majors. Math was the direction she was thinking she would be going in and Social Studies because she enjoyed it. Where she expected to end up was in neither area. She imagined herself going to Law School and eventually practicing law. Thirty some odd years later, none of that was what happened because what happened was somewhere about the end of the second or the beginning of the third year. She told us she was going nuts carrying two majors; Social Studies and Mathematics which are not compatible entities. They take you in different directions and the things you want to read and be involved in if you're doing Social Studies, Philosophy, Sociology and all these other things they take up a tremendous amount of time. She couldn't do both and had to decide. She opted in the Social Studies direction because it was somehow fuller; more complete than math. When she graduated it had been her intention to work for a couple of years and then return to Law School. Well, the years became thirty-three. They had snowballed.

We had been speaking about Alex. He was in a good troop, 205 out of East Islip where Gerry Curtain has been instrumental in running the troop for many years. So many opportunities were afforded Alex there. Gerry was Alex's Eagle Advisor and just a great all around gung-ho guy. Ironically like his father, Alex learned to play golf. At the same time his father devoted so much time to being an Administrator, he was discovering almost no time left for golf or anything else. An Administrator's job is nothing like that of a teacher. The phone can ring literally anytime and it has rung anytime. They've' been on their way out the door to dinner and her husband will often get that call.

Karen grew in empathy and insight into an Administrators role as she represented teachers as their Union Rep often having to meet their needs as well.

Some think it's a modern idea, but it's always been the most basic of negotiation ideas. The Grievance Committee in the early days of the Union really takes us back a long way. At that time when she first started we didn't have a Contract. We only had a salary agreement. So all of this stuff about going in and negotiating and trying to reach some kind of rapprochement to settle problems came about during that time period that Karen was working in Brentwood. Prior to that it was just *"Well we're the bosses and this is what you'll do"*. There was no discussion unless somebody was willing to entertain it. It had no weight. Literally, *"whatever the Board of Education was willing to give is what you got. The law was on their side"*.

Karen returned to talk about Alex for a moment and tell us about *"the qualities of personality, talents and inclinations he has that have appeared in other generations of family pointing to qualities such as his love of the outdoors."* *"That very much goes along with Scouting. He's well trained in it. He's been to Philmont Scout Ranch, the Boy Scouts of America's premier High Adventure™ Base. He went last year when he was fifteen. Sixty four miles of hiking in the wilderness, six thousand to twelve thousand foot elevation and what you've got on your back is what you've got. He went with a very good crew of eight guys that accompanied him with three adults. This was something that Gerry Curtain organized. First they took him to the Air Force Base, they spent the night there after their flight and were treated royally by the air force, took them to the Olympic training center and then to Philmont, New Mexico. That's Northeast of Santa Fe, near Cimarron, New Mexico and its mountains, literally in the middle of nowhere. They gave the boys a briefing, went through their packs to make sure they weren't carrying additional weight. Anything not necessary was put in a locker"*. Karen was anxious and might even have been stressed if she didn't know how well prepared Alex was for the experience that may have included, scorpions, rattlesnakes, bears and altitude sickness. She was born in Mount Vernon, Westchester County, New York in 1944 right before the end of the Second World War. She has a specific memory of that time when she was young unrelated to the war. It has to do with an unforgettable hail storm that pelted her and her girlfriend Annie O'Conner in their neighborhood school yard when huge hailstones the size of snowballs started coming down.

This happened in Mount Vernon sometime before they moved to Long Island. They were still living in Westchester and the school was only a couple of blocks away. Annie lived right next door to Karen at that time and their mothers both came running to get them and bring them home. *“That’s one of my earliest memories of that time. I must have been of school age because otherwise I wouldn’t have been allowed to go that far from home by myself.”* *“We moved to Patchogue, when I was eight,”* she said. Furthermore, she had no memories of the War years. She was very ill as a child and it was not a time when she would have had a great deal of recall of events happening in her world. She was actually one of the first people diagnosed and treated successfully for celiac conditions; which is an immaturity in the digestive system. Actually, she said that did have something to do with the war years. A pediatrician from Tuckahoe, Dr. Kessler diagnosed her condition. She was fortunate in that she was one of the very lucky ones who was just lucky to outgrow it. She was put on a restricted diet and couldn’t have sugars or fats which pretty much eliminated everything. As a consequence she never cultivated a sweet tooth and today only occasionally enjoys a piece of very dark chocolate. Before her diagnosis people didn’t know what to do for children with this malady they just died from it. Karen was literally dying of malnutrition so her diagnosis and treatment saved her. She was hospitalized. He took a look at her and saw the distended abdomen like children from Biafra and said *“we need somebody with her same blood type – for a direct person to person blood transfusion - and we need him now”*. They scoured the family. Karen’s Aunt Ann’s brother had just returned home from the Italian campaign. He was the same blood type and they hooked them up. That transfusion saved her life.

Karen’s mother’s parents were Swedish and Norwegian, so it was obvious that they met here and not there, since her grandmother’s brother was aboard ship with her grandfather. They were both sailors and when they arrived here they were introduced and the rest, as they say, became history.

They lived in The Bronx where, at that time, was the last stop on the trolley line. Fifty years later what the end of the trolley line had been was no longer anything resembling what it was then. The line went way past what it had been. No longer farmland it had become solid blocks of apartment houses. Westchester was unrecognizable from what it had been to what it became.

Karen's father's ancestry was German. All her grandparents had been born in Europe. Her mother's parents came to the U.S. as adults with their families, but her father's parents came here as children of seven or eight years of age. Her father's father was one of seven and her father's mother was one of eight. They came from good sized families. Her father's mother's family came with all three generations of family. They packed up everyone in the 1880's and set sail. As an historian Karen knew well what would have been happening at the time. The wars for unification that were then taking place and the boys coming of age for military service, dictated that they leave "the old country" before being drafted into military service.

Her father's family lived in Brooklyn and then in the Bronx before settling in Morthmia, New Jersey. Her father's grandfather on his mother's side ran an ornamental iron works business. He worked on the original Madison Square Garden, Norschell Courthouse and projects like that. He was one of the people architect Stanford White hired. Some of his work is still around. It was of high quality. This was beautiful ornamental iron work. It had been his business before he left Germany. He just packed everything up and took it with him to America.

Karen's father loved to fish. He obviously was not a fisherman by trade but it was what he absolutely loved to do. That was his idea of heaven. He loved salt water fishing and when he could no longer do surf casting he went down to the dock to throw a line in to wait for a bite. He never gave up on the snappers. In fact he was preparing his fishing gear for the next season when he died at 91 in 1997. His idea of enjoyment was to have a cigarette, sip his Manhattan and fish.

When I asked what her mother loved to do to enjoy herself her answer was immediate and to the point. *"She loved to sew"*, was her answer. In those days people didn't graduate from high school unless their families were fairly well off. They went to work at a much earlier age than we would consider appropriate today. Her father was born in 1907 and her mother in 1910 so we're talking about an entirely different time period. She worked for a custom dress making house that catered to the *"Four Hundred of New York"*. She began as a model showing the gowns and clothes and then became a sales lady. When she was asked if Karen had any photos of her mother when she was working or the clothes she may have designed we heard that photographing any of the people or clothes in that establishment were strictly prohibited and might have got her fired. The clientele who brought their business there were very private people and the dress making house would either have clients of the husband's wife or the husband's' mistress never both. But no photos were taken under any circumstances. You also needed to know who was going to the same party so you didn't sell the same dress of the same color garment to people who were buying outfits for the same occasion out of your house. If someone was buying it from a different dress making house that was their problem. These garments were high priced and high fashion. Mrs. Ford, Mrs. Edison as well as the cast of the four hundred were the principal regulars. Karen's mother truly loved what she did. It was prestigious work and she was proud of her products. As a saleslady she was responsible for fittings and to make sure that the garment was finished properly. So even though she didn't do the sewing she was responsible for knowing what was supposed to be done so that it was done correctly. It was very difficult to go shopping with her mother, because she would turn a garment inside out only to announce to the world that it was a rag.

Karen's brother is sixteen years older than she is. As a matter of fact he was expected to arrive with his wife Marge for a family visit on the evening of our interview. As if to alert me Karen said, *"of course he will have very different memories"*. Referring then to their parents, she explained that he grew up with them when they were young. Karen got to know them at a different time in

their lives. She was born when her mother was thirty-five and she was a baby with no one in between. He would have been the one with all the war time memories to include the start of the depression; an entirely different period of perception. Her father saw service in the military during the Korean Conflict. They had entirely different frames of perception and hers would include Viet Nam. You really cover the span of a lot of years though it all had happened in only one generation of family. Karen's mother worked until Karen was born. Her paternal grandmother took care of Artie while he was still a baby.

She said, "This is going to sound funny but my brother and I have only recently got to know each other. He was gone and in the service when I was still two years old. While he was in the service he married. When he came out of the service he went to Columbia. When he graduated he already had two children. We never lived under the same roof as brother and sister past the time when I was two years old until fairly recently when we've been able to spend a couple of weeks together have we gotten know each other. We didn't know each other as big brother and little sister we know each other more as adults. He's a really great guy, plays a great game of golf, and has a terrific sense of humor". She described herself as "playing at golf".

When asked what she had learned from her parents as the first and perhaps most important teacher's she ever had, she answered me with this one word: **persistence**. Quit was a word in neither their or her own vocabulary.

We'd already learned from Karen's previous description of her mother how determined she was. Lacking a formal education this was a person who wouldn't allow herself to be prevented from attaining ultimate goals or achieving whatever she intended to accomplish. She could do anything she set her mind to. Independent of spirit, her focus may have been on the domestic side, but she nonetheless had been working in the real world since she was fourteen or fifteen years old. During the depths of the Great Depression she brought home thirty-five dollars a week, which was even considered very good money back then. During that period Karen's father developed jaundice.

He was sick and out of work at a point in time when it was an absolute horror. He was a well trained apprentice who had worked in the butchers and smoke houses on Mott Street as a young man. Toward the end of the depression he took a job with Frigidaire and learned the refrigeration business. He could turn any room into a refrigerator. He was amazingly adaptable in his ability to adjust to major changes in his working environment. He was very focused. He built many of the walk in refrigeration and freezer units that were used by the duck farmers out east. When the family moved to Patchogue he started working in East Moriches for Eastern Long Island Appliance Service; Sales and service for Frigidaire on the North Shore to the South Shore and Everything East. That was a big territory in 1952. The duck industry was a mammoth industry at that time and he was on call from the farms twenty four hours per day. If something went wrong you had to go out there. He built their walk in lockers. He built the walk-in lockers for a number of the fishing stations otherwise you had to call somebody else from the city to help you out; but he knew how to do it.

They were always a three-generation household as long as she could remember, and they were close. Her grandmother who lived with them in Mount Vernon, died when Karen was five. They moved to Patchogue when she was eight. There they took care of her Great Uncle, her other grandmother's brother. He was an elderly man who left home at fourteen and joined the British Merchant Marine. He was a Swede. He was over six feet tall if you'd been able to straighten him out. His legs were so bowed from arthritis that his feet were here and his knees were there. A standard bred collie could have walked between them without touching either one.

"The man was an absolute rip. He had sailed around the world on some of the last of the old four mast square rigged ships. He could tell you about going through the straits at the bottom of South America into mountain water and sailing up the River Platt. He had been just about everywhere.

He is the one that introduced his sister to her other grandfather who had also sailed all over the world and spent several years in the orient and who spoke seven languages. It was a very interesting family. He and his partner John were house painters, an absolute rip but always there. If she had wanted to learn something, that was fine. "We'll learn how to do it". You want to learn how to cook? We'll cook. You wanna learn how to ride a bike? Fine! We'll learn how to ride a bike. Whatever you wanted to learn to do, if they knew how to do it, they would teach you how to do it. Karen did not grow up learning to be a typical female in that time period. She was not in the kitchen. Her uncle taught her how to split rails, make shingles out of a log, trim trees, or plant anything. It might take her a while to remember all she was taught because it's in there, but she'll do it. No one had a more profound impact upon her and the person she became than her own father until the day he died and even now, she says,. "He was a rock".

Brentwood for all its idiosyncrasies has always been known for its forward thinking. There have been many breakthroughs that have occurred that also included innovations in curriculum. Karen was personally recognized upon her arrival around 1966 by a certain cooperating teacher by the name Nobel who was affiliated with Adelphia University. At that time they had a reputation for Teacher Training excellence preparing student teachers to teach. Karen had not even entertained the thought but when recruited due to her unique background and diverse training and exposure to a multidisciplinary approach, to her own studies ie., Social Studies, Mathematics, Art, she immediately signed up to take additional education courses and to re-consider shifting to a career in education. She applied for a job and learned there was an opening at the building that Mr. Nobel was assigned. It was in Northeast Elementary. She was impressed by his approach to teaching and to his creative and uniquely memorable sense of humor. She was hired and became one of the few women at that time who was allowed to teach in the upper grades. There was then a very strong sense of segregation of women K to 3 and any man that they could get to teach Grades 4 to 6.

She recalled here were a lot of men looking for teaching positions to avoid being drafted. The government was filling vacancies with new recruits for Viet Nam. Competition for the few openings was fierce. Most of the men she met while she was teaching in those upper classes were men who were hired to teach because they were trying to avoid being sent to Viet Nam where they might be killed. Teaching a group of adolescents seemed a much better idea than being sent to South East Asia where you could easily lose your life. As the war progressed and eventually the numbers of draftees declined those very teachers who were marking time decided to leave teaching and to resume their lives such as they were. Of the men she recalled only one remained in teaching while all the rest left and the person who continued to teach moved to a school district other than Brentwood.

The first job for which she was paid was at a camp run by her Elementary School Principal, whose name was Ben Tebatchnick. The school was down on the water in Bayport on the South Shore of Long Island.

Christmas was a big family holiday and always a lot of fun, but she said, *"I think we enjoyed the summers more; going out on the boat. Our boat was in the water all summer at East Moriches and that's where we were, out on the Bay, fishing, clamming. In those days you could catch and eat what you could and not think twice about it. Now, I wouldn't touch anything from those waters or put it in my mouth"*.

Karen admitted to being a lifelong night person while acknowledging that work has required her over the years to acclimate to a certain adaptation and adjustment to her own biological clock. Her preference would have been to sleep late in the morning and stay up to all hours of the night.

We wanted to know if Karen could name a fragrance from childhood that evoked a pleasant memory conjuring up an enjoyable time in her life. Without hesitation she gave us *strawberries*. *"The house in Patchogue sat on a rather large piece of property. It was on a plot that measured 120 feet by 200 feet and*

we had a strawberry patch in the back. There is nothing better than fresh strawberries that you pick out of your own strawberry patch every year. Strawberries are wonderful.”

She first attended school in Mount Vernon, going there for the first couple of years and then in Patchogue she went to Medford Avenue Elementary School which is still there. She didn't get to the first part of Kindergarten because she fell off the stoop and broke her collar bone but doesn't remember much from those early years. While she didn't attend school in those rooms, they did have the most fabulous Kindergarten space. They were sort of round as she recalled and were out at the end of the building, so it was squared off at the two sides with this great round projection at the end of the building with all glass around that rounded part.

The teacher who had that room, Mrs. Wicks, had the most wonderful collection of natural history stuff. *“She had a fabulous rattlesnake skin, all sorts of things like that. Her room was just the neatest place in the world to visit and everybody loved going to her room whether they had been her student or not because it was just like visiting a museum. It was an exciting room and was supposed to be. Some Principals may look upon that as being an excessive amount of clutter but she always felt that you never know what's going to turn somebody on so you just have an abundance and hope that somebody finds something that's going to say, “Ohhh, that's interesting. I like that”.*

She attended high school in Patchogue as well and had a number of very good teachers. They were young and not very much older than the students. The Shortino brothers, one of them is still alive and very active with the Suffolk County Teachers Federal Credit Union. There was Mr. McCloud, Mr. O'Brian, Mrs. Priest, were all just wonderful people.

“We had a very, very good class. The graduating class was just 200 kids. Most of us went to college. We were a well off class too and raised a lot of money.

We wanted to buy new curtains for the school's auditorium because the ones that were there were hideous. They were only two years old but would have cost a lot of money. It was customary for the graduating class to donate a gift to the district. That was what we wanted to do but they wouldn't let us. The other thing we wanted to do was pay for our own graduation in the Patchogue Theatre which only recently has been made into the new Gateway because it was always so hot to have it in the gymnasium or on the field. We wanted to pay to have it in an air conditioned room and they wouldn't let us do that either. We had a lot of money and had been very hard working. We had taken one of those old hotdog stands, and the boys that were in shop class refurbished it, put it all together and we sold popcorn and hot potatoes ,bags of peanuts and hotdogs, and soda, coffee, and cocoa from that concession stand at all the football games. We also sold corsages at all the football games, some in the home team's colors and some that were in the visiting team's colors. And we sold to both sides of the aisle. We knew how to make money and we had a lot of fun doing it".

Karen did her undergraduate work at Adelphi and matriculated to complete her graduate work there as well. This occurred at a time when that University prided itself in its exceptional teacher education program on Long Island. She was not there as an Education major her undergraduate major had been in History and then she took graduate courses to get her State License to begin teaching.

She was interviewed in Brentwood by Charlie Black and Vinnie De Simone. The part of her interview that she recalls most particularly was when she got the feeling that it was her legs that were being interviewed for the position opening. Charlie had been a character and a half. He was a gym teacher before being appointed Principal. She used to believe that it was very strange promoting a gym teacher to the administrative position of Principal but has since changed her mind about that. If someone has been a Coach and was

good at being a Coach, it could very well be the talent necessary to be a good Principal. History doesn't enter into it, being a mathematician doesn't enter into it either. You need good people skills. At that point administrators and teachers were together in negotiations since there wasn't really an organizational approach to discussions with the District.

Given that Karen also remembered the degree of camaraderie that existed in the district. It wasn't until after there was a contract that teachers and administrators split into two separate organizations. The camaraderie she saw could be explained by the fact that so many of them were young. There was a tremendous influx of young people into Brentwood at that time. We were having the first of the big population explosions of the mid sixties that would ultimately change the district as we knew it.

Sam Weisman was a person from back then who left a big impression on Karen. Sam was the Building Representative. He was an old time Union man. Union was something in his blood. He would come around to collect the union dues that was an amount small enough then that you could take it out of your pocket. He promoted the idea of union and took care of new people. He sat down with every last one of us and asked "... *Are you a saver or are you a spender?*" Which might be considered a strange question, and depending upon how you answered, "*OK, if you can save money then you don't put money into the annuity. If you said you couldn't save money, he would tell you to put your money into the annuity because you were going to need it.*" It was actually very candid and good advice which the union has continued to give to its young people. Of course, now we have tax sheltered annuities which is far better than what the state was doing. It amounts to the same kind of thing. A systematic program to help somebody save for their future, and it was much more needed then than it is now. Karen's salary in 1966 amounted in total to \$6,600.

Karen was nostalgic when speaking of the time years ago when there were intramural volleyball matches between teachers of the district's elementary schools. They had a lot of fun with that. It was just something that

some of the phys ed. teachers decided to do. Teachers would stay after school once a week and play volley ball and they developed a rotating schedule that was fair to everyone. She spent most of her thirty three years in the district in the sixth grade, two years in fourth grade and two years in fifth. Teaching elementary school you taught all subjects. She was certified K to Six for Elementary and 7 to Twelve for History. Many of the people she worked with in her early days, among those who stayed, have now retired. A number of them didn't stay. Ronnie Berg was a dear friend. Marie Gerolum was another person in her cooking group that started with them over thirty three years ago. The group is together still rather informally. They all enjoyed cooking so they'd get together to enjoy different kinds of good food every so often with six couples. They'd informally meet six times a year, pick a theme; in fact they're meeting not this weekend but next weekend, and the theme this time is Indian food. Each of the couples cook but Karen hadn't made the decision yet about what she and Alex would be cooking. They run it differently from most other cooking groups. The host and hostess are responsible for getting the table together, and all liquids, from cocktails to coffee, you're responsible for and then the five courses are brought by the guests. This is a group of long standing tradition that maintains strong connections with one another and is almost like an extended family. Karen maintains another group with a reading focus that has a long standing tradition with one another. They meet several times a year.

Some of the other things that she was involved with grew out of her BTA (Brentwood Teachers Association), involvement. She sat on the District Curriculum Council and Sabbatical Committee for a while. That was where I first met Karen through Ken Moss during the time when The Maslow Toffler School of Futuristic Education was seeking recognition for its' designation as an Alternative School. She also served on the committee that put together the District Middle Schools, transitioning from Junior High Schools to Middle Schools. We worked on that Karen said, for about a year. The year before it happened, the summer before the year it was about to take place, we sat down at Central Administration, and we had a group of just teachers from the middle schools, teachers from the elementary schools, a guidance counselor,

so that we could hash this out, what did we need to be concerned about having this mesh because as an elementary school person coming into a secondary building there were going to be a lot of changes and we didn't want to be treated as second class citizens. Nor did we want to act as second class citizens. That was a very important consideration that we not create a differentiation in staff that what was sauce for one was sauce for the other. The original design plan called for our working more like a secondary teacher works in relation to the rest of the staff not a relationship with the students. Take our fair share of the duty; you're on cafeteria, you're on hall. That we thought was very important that we had a blending of the staff. We were incorporating six, seven, eight people in a program with all their students and doing it all at once. So that literally in a given year two thirds of the students were going to be new as well as a hefty chunk of the staff. In so doing they would have had a large impact on a lot of people's lives. However, they didn't exactly get the plan that they set out to get. There have been some changes in it over the years and once everybody got behind closed doors everybody kind of went their own way, some of it good some of it bad from Karen's perspective. *"I like many of the things we did at East. We didn't stick us all in one hallway we were kind of spread out. Steve Howland retired the summer of the transition from the Junior High and Ross Herzog came in for the first year of the new Middle Schools operation. That year we had a change of administration, a change of direction and all happening at the same time. The regular sixth graders came over to be seventh graders and the fifth grade came in as the sixth grade. Literally two thirds of the population of the building changed at the same time, plus all the teachers. Major changes took place and administrative changes as well. It was very difficult for everybody. Some people went to the Freshman Center. Some people went here, some people went there. So it was very disjointing for a lot of people."*

When I asked Karen if she had any thoughts about teacher training and preparation to teach she referred to recent policy changes (1999) in teacher education. She said in recent times there was an emphasis upon the importance of requiring having a major in a subject to emphasize the

importance of academic readiness to teach with focus. We have always known that taking as many education courses as you can is important to prepare you for classroom teaching. However, as in life there is no preparation better than having real life experience in the classroom. As Albert Einstein once said, *"experience is not the best teacher, it is the only teacher."* *One learns best to teach by teaching early and often.* Most teachers have discovered that the most effective way to learn a subject yourself is to teach that subject to someone else. Whether you plan to be an elementary school teacher who teaches all subjects or not, where ever and whenever possible always teach what you love, because guess what? When you teach what you love your students will learn to love what you teach.

Karen talked about how her background growing up prepared her to teach many subjects because she was interested in many subjects from a very early age and was fortunate in that she had people in her life that loved life and learning and made time to teach her whatever she was interested in learning to do. Her curiosity and that of those who surrounded her was boundless. At the end of eighth grade when Karen was in school, they asked her *"Do you plan to go to college?"* If she said yes to that question the only other question they asked was, *"What language are you going to take?"* That was the end of the conversation until she got to her junior year when there was an opening to take electives and she was asked, *"What electives do you want to take?"* The rest of the time it was all in lock step. You took math, you took science, you took social studies, you took English and a foreign language. That was it! Everything was a Regents Course. There was no such thing as you were going to college and you didn't take your regents courses. Forget that. It wasn't happening. She said that one of the biggest mistakes New York made was to loosen the enrollment qualification to get into college so that you did not have to have a Regents diploma. It sent the wrong message and we've been paying for it for a long time.

I asked Karen how she defined her own purpose apart from any specific professional “job” description I wanted to know what got her up every morning and made her come to school to meet students on time for the last thirty three years.

She saw her reason for being in the classroom to be that of a facilitator of experience who was exposing students to something that could open them to learning something of interest. She might give them an idea; something to think about that wasn’t just information but was something for them to “chew” on. To enable them to see the relationship between what people were doing in the real world and what they were doing in the classroom. This was not just something they were doing in the classroom to fill the hour. It was something that relates to what was going on in the big picture of our wider spectrum. So much of what is happening in science so much of what is happening; global warming, air pollution, environmental pollution, endangered species, it all comes back to very basic science and how we are intertwined with the things that we’re doing. If we don’t do them carefully it is not just the spotted owl that goes, we go with them. We might not go on the same day but we’re going to follow them in short order. Whether you’re talking about chemistry, or physics, it all interrelates. They love roller coasters. It’s physics. ***It’s physics.*** You can say okay, you love roller coasters. This is what is necessary to make that thing work so that you don’t come flying out of there. Don’t you think that it would be a good idea for you to know? Aren’t you happy that the guy who is building it, knows it? You try to build a relationship between what they’re doing and what they perceive is the real world. *That it is the real world.*

I asked Karen if she ever kept in touch with some of her own teachers that she had when she was a student. She kept in touch in one sense. When her folks were still living in town she would run into them now and again because Patchogue was a shopping center for people that lived in the community and also lived in surrounding communities that didn’t have their own shopping areas so you would see people. *“We’ve also had a couple of high school reunions and our class was also very well liked so a number of teachers have come to those reunions”.*

She started working for the union largely because of Sam Weissman. Shirley Seiden was taking over as the President. *“Back then Shirley and I happened to live in the same apartment complex. I think it was my third year of teaching that I moved to live in Brentwood along side of Hemlock Park School. That was a Bay Shore mailing address but it was in the Brentwood School District. That came about because I was falling asleep driving home from Garden City going to my Graduate Classes. Just that extra distance out to Patchogue was knocking me out. It was a very long day because I would have to be up fairly early to get to work on time and then I would leave work, go to these graduate classes and then go home again. The distance out to Patchogue in those days, you’re talking prior to a lot of the highways we have today, that made it a lot easier; Southern State and the Long Island Expressway, it was not a good thing, so I moved though my father wasn’t happy about it but that’s a whole different story”*.

Shirley became President of the Union and I was working very closely with her and those were the early days. I remember standing in her apartment and cranking out mailings to the community on a mimeograph machine over our contract. It was really a very unique time. Since Shirley and I lived in the District we used to go to the School Board Meetings because as community residents we’d have the right to speak. It would create a lot of stir. We would walk into the meeting and someone sitting up on the stage would catch that we had walked in and the elbow would get passed across the stage... *“woops! They’ve arrived”*. That was what got me started and I was working on grievances with Sam Weissman in the late sixties and Edie Tom who became Edie Welsh, They were a good group of people. It was a very different effort then because everybody was doing volunteer work and everyone was also trying to gain acceptance for the idea of a union and one that was viable. Everyone was a volunteer. You worked your full day and the perc you got was that you worked more hours. At the end of the year we had an executive council dinner that the union paid for. That was our big treat for hundreds of

hours of voluntary effort. Therein lies a great story. Shirley retired and moved to Phoenix Arizona. She wouldn't be interviewed, so Karen offered to share the following account on her behalf.

She'd become President of the Union and was teaching a full schedule at Southwest Elementary School. One day Dr. Naninni who'd become the first District Superintendent, needed to speak with Shirley. He called over to the School and they said she was out on the playground doing playground duty, so he said, "*Oh, never mind, I'll drive over*". So he drove over and parked next to the playground, and was walking across the field to go out to talk with her. Realize that people in those days were not always immediately recognizable for who they were. Meanwhile, the front office had just received a phone call that a "strange man" was on the field. Only women were on the field, some in the building had people running toward where they were to see what stranger was walking out to where Shirley was standing. Occurrences like this soon caused all of the parties to realize that it was almost necessary for the Union leader to be a secondary person because it would have been easier for them to juggle their schedule than would it be for someone at the primary level to do the same.

Later when Les Black became President of the Teachers Union the district had already begun granting release time for the President but that was similarly easier to do when it was a High School Person. At one point he was made a reading consultant for a year and given half a day of released time to accommodate the need to adjust the schedule. It had become a creative need to meet an end. The provision mandating released time eventually became part of the contract so expanded had become the union leaders' responsibilities. Many of the financial adjustments became effective after Jack Zuckerman became the union leader in Brentwood.

Karen had been a member of a subcommittee of the Negotiation Committee but had never served as a Negotiations Committee member. "*Not my thing,*" she said. Her role on the Sabbatical Committee had been in the

early days of its existence when it was far less political in nature than it later became. When still effective, the Curriculum Advisory Committee clearly served to help shape the direction in which the district was moving. Guy DiPietro, Superintendent of Schools had promised Karen and Shirley its' continued existence by inclusion of specific language in the contract between the Board and Teachers of the District before he left, but there was no way either they nor he could have known that by then he would be deceased, along with his wife Roseanne, their three sons orphaned and his promise to Karen and Shirley no more than a dream deferred.

Karen next spoke of achievements by the Brentwood teachers union when she referenced some of the accomplishments we got in terms of respect for teachers. *"Part of the reason we have the respect down the line is that we have been able to send to Central Administration candidates from our ranks. All the administrators have come from our ranks that have been successful in Brentwood. The few that they've pulled in from the outside have not been big hits. They haven't made it. They didn't know how to work with the community, they didn't know how to work with the teachers, they didn't have the pulse of the place. We've been highly successful from that standpoint and we've not only improved the position of teachers and salaries and working conditions which is the typical role of a union but we have also been successful enough that we have promoted from within our own ranks for every administrative position up and down the line and we certainly have the respect of our school board. We didn't always. We went through a period of time when we had a very contentious school board. We were luckier than most in that regard. We got rid of them fast. It was likely that their own particular manias helped us. If they had been less unique, shall we say, it would have been a long time getting rid of them. Their eccentricities brought out their craziness and we got rid of them a lot faster than if they had just been anti-teacher. They had other problems"*. Karen herself has at times had to lean on the support of the union.

"I don't think you get anyplace in this district unless you have the support of the union and I think that everybody has to feel that that support is there and I think that it's very important that all of our teachers understand that union support is there 100%. I know from being on the other side of the table that we've defended people and defended their rights even when we believed they were wrong." "But you go in there and you defend their right to have a full hearing. Hear all the mitigating circumstances. Get it all out. And then you decide what's going to happen. It's much like being a lawyer at times. It's about due process and sometimes it's very difficult. Other times you're in there defending yourself. I've gone head to head with more than one administrator on standards. And I've seen standards in some respect erode tremendously and I don't think we do kids any favor by doing that. I don't think we do them a favor by eroding standards, I don't think we do them a favor by "give away grades", I don't think that's helpful. I know many of the older teachers feel that way. I've certainly done that battle. I've done that battle for other teachers where they say, 'Why do these grades look like this? Here's the grade book. Can you make something else out of this? What do you make out of no homework done? What do you make out of every single test failed? Absences are a big part of it and we're dealing with a sizeable number of children that go home to no supervision. I'm sorry, we don't want to hear it, but a child cannot raise him or herself. It requires supervision. Kids today in great measure are being required to raise themselves. They are feral children with television as a babysitter. Nobody is raising them. Our society and culture is paying the price for that and it's very expensive. Coming from me, a person who is coming from the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, I hear myself and I say OMG what does that mean? I've become old and I don't really think it is that because I don't really think that being at that end of the political spectrum means you disregard what goes in to make something happen or what goes into making a child a student, an adult, a successful person. It doesn't happen by saying, there's the refrigerator and here's the bread the peanut butter and the TV set. It happens through an interaction and an adult setting the example. What if there's no one home?"

There were a number of other things that happened over the years that touched her deeply. At the retirement party last year from East Middle School Joe Hogan made a special trip over to present Karen with a plaque when he recognized her for her contribution to the Union. I should have been to the BTA end of year party to receive it then but I was at an Eagle Court of Honor for another young man's honor in my son's troupe and I couldn't be at both locations at the same time. I had worked with that young man for a number of years in scouting and as a member of the committee had basically felt that I needed to be there. That was why Joe came to East Middle's Retirement Party to give me my plaque. That was something that I was certainly touched by; being recognized by the Union for my service.

There are some kids that really stand out in your mind just because they were great to work with and they were successful. Others stand out in your memory because you just couldn't get there with them and it's very hard. She was thinking about a particular youngster with whom she had worked but was still unsuccessful in keeping him from being sent to prison. Sometimes there's nothing you can do even though he was only a sixth grader when their lives and paths crossed. She told us that Shirley Seiden had had him as a student when he was in fourth grade, was in trouble then and they tried to get help for him but it was during a time before there were services for every hang-nail that exists and we still couldn't help. He stole a car that summer between fourth and fifth grade. He spent fifth grade in a reformatory. Then she had him again in Sixth Grade and he was just in trouble constantly. He stole a car when he was sixteen; stole two cars; two brand new Buicks off a showroom floor, fenced one of them and kept the other, got shot by the police in the process of them apprehending him with that car, stolen goods in the trunk and three other boys who she also had in school. That was one very difficult day. I heard it first over the TODAY Show when they broke for local news about him being shot. It was a day she will never forget. From what I later understood he was a three time loser and was sent away to spend the rest of his life in jail.

We all had a bad day on May 16th 1983 when East Middle had been the site of a hostile takeover by an armed intruder who'd been a substitute teacher and former Stony Brook undergraduate and a student himself in that very building some years earlier. Though you were not present on that occasion you no doubt remember it well.

That traumatic event still comes up when people who were present are together. It's a faculty that is very conscious of the reason for a prohibition of jackets in the hallways, and for example the concealed threat posed by an unexamined book bag. They are far more sensitive to those issues than others who have been fortunate to remain untouched by the senseless violence in schools.

I asked that she speak to her reason for submitting retirement papers. Karen began telling me that she thought about it eighteen months in advance of her turning fifty-five and becoming legally eligible for "Early Retirement" in New York State. She had not been well. Her father had not been well and she had recently had a health scare at which point she was told by a doctor in St. Frances Hospital who had examined her for a possible heart attack that she was suffering from stress and unless she made major changes in what she was doing would likely be seeing him for more serious reasons in the near future. She went home and composed a letter of resignation and on April 1 of that year submitted her notice to the front office and gave a copy to others to whom she was responsible.

About the same time both of her husband's parents had been ill so he'd been flying back and forth on the shuttle between New York and Florida. Karen's girlfriend had been taking her back and forth to see her doctors because of the possible heart attack and she came home and said to herself this has got to stop. Something in this equation must go because I can't do this anymore. She drafted a letter and went into work the next Monday morning

and resigned as Chief Delegate of the Building and as Union Delegate. They'll have to find somebody else to do this. She also resigned as Chair of the SIT Committee. She decided to relieve herself from as many responsibilities as she possibly could in order to reorder her priorities to favor herself. She hadn't considered it before but as it happened the day was April Fool's Day. She put copies of those letters in the appropriate mail boxes and sure enough, everybody including the Principal thought it was a joke. The next thing that happened was Bob Soccoa got his copy out of the mailbox and came down to my room and asked, "What is this? Is this your sense of humor?" After I explained it was for real and told him, "I'm not doing this anymore I just can't." He went scurrying back to the Front Office and told them, "She's not kidding! Well, we were nearing the end of the school year, the SIT (Site Based Management) Committee has a lot of responsibility in the Middle School, we had monies to disburse, accounts to balance, a final report to write and all of which, teachers, administrators, students and parents from the community, student council, selected representatives from the student body that we have sit on the SIT Committee, it is a fairly decent sized group and we get a good sized budget and we take a fair amount of responsibility for things that happen in the building. We have monthly meetings and set an agenda for the year setting out what we are trying to accomplish, allocate funds for it and get those funds from the district. You have a responsibility for the bookkeeping for yourself, so you know if you have spent all your money or not, and also for the district and then you have to write up a report of what you've done, what your documentation is for and why you have selected this problem to work on and what results you've had. We were a very successful and very active committee and had a number of very good programs. So it was a lot of work to get all of this together. Some of it could be delegated because each sub-committee, hopefully, put their own section together, so it was a bad time for me to decide "I'm not doing this," but it had to happen, otherwise it would never end. It had to just stop.

Once I stopped doing all that, I just concentrated on teaching, my son and taking care of my family and myself. Ever since then I've been spending a lot more time reading, gardening and planning a move to Santa Belle, which is an Island off the coast of Florida in the Gulf Of Mexico. We own a home down there that we're going to be renovating and working with a contractor on the renovations. A wonderful way to be spending our time which sure beats getting up at 6:30 am, – so says this night person! I never favored getting up before the sun had risen. I always preferred going to bed before the sun came up.

What I'd do differently would be to consider having more children. I was almost forty when my son was born. I was really pushing it. I'd have had kids earlier and had more of them. They're a lot of fun.

I asked Karen to name a book or books that she has read that has had a profound effect upon her or impacted the quality of her life in the present. This is what she told me. *“One of my oldest memories is of my father reading Sherlock Holmes to me. I love Sherlock Holmes and I love mysteries and I still re-read Sherlock Holmes every couple of years and I just love Jeremy Brett's interpretation. I used to read the Hounds of the Baskervilles with my students (Jeremy Brett's version), because it's superb and I'd read a couple of the short stories in class because I just absolutely adore mysteries. It's not profound or earth shaking like reading Socrates or Plato but it certainly answers your question from a personal perspective”.*

Did she have any advice for the young people who will be taking her place in the classroom and did she have any concerns for the direction education or the role the Union will take as the district advances into the future? Responding to them in reverse she believed the most difficult task in front of the union at this point was going to be making the people who have not had to struggle to get the benefits achieved put into the contract and appreciate them for It is very hard to appreciate something that is just given and has not involved the struggle to achieve it. They didn't have to do anything

to get the salaries they have. They didn't have to do anything to get the class size regulations they didn't have to do anything to get their lunch period guaranteed as sacrosanct. They didn't have to do anything to get provisions for the help of students, that's all there. So many of the things that were not there when we started are just there and were there when they walked in. This might speak more to our generational experiences but I see many of our young people looking for people to do more for them instead of asking, "What can I do" Instead of pitching in and saying, "How can I help here?" They don't know and how could they know because there's no one telling them. Where they're starting in the profession we have people who don't know who Al Shanker was or G. Guy DiPiero or 'Chuck' Puleo or any one of a number of other people who were pivotal in the achievement of our contract and standards we now enjoy. While Carmelo Puleo wasn't a pioneer in the Brentwood Teachers organization he brought creative ground breaking programs to Twin Pines. Many of the things that Chuck Puleo did at Twin Pines are now coming back only because we've come full circle and *everything old is new again*. We didn't talk about it at all during our time together but one of the big mistakes our District has made and is already in the process of rectifying is the fact that they demolished their reading program; absolutely destroyed it. We had a wonderful reading program. We went through a phase of *whole nothing*, she always called it, because it was wholly unsuitable for our student body. It just wasn't going to get the job done. And now we're in the process of reversing that whole disastrous decision and bringing into effect a really solid reading program. If you don't have a good reading program your entire educational program will be a waste of your time and effort. It's gone. The school is dependent upon its reading program. That starts in kindergarten and if you undue that you're sending a ripple up the whole stream and going over the falls without a barrel. It's just disastrous. She had been here long enough to have seen it. ***A good reading program!*** She saw it totally destroyed. Now we're seeing a change heading back in the direction of having a real, viable reading program and a lot of that innovation is coming back. You can look at Chuck's school, he was doing

it years ago. Chuck knew what was going on and many of our older administrator's also knew what was going on. They knew that reading was first and foremost and that that has to happen. It's what an Elementary school has got to be all about. Karen said she is of the opinion that our Union is up against the same thing that our teacher's are facing. The people running things are now of a certain age that very shortly will be handing over control to a younger group of teachers who were not there when and as a result do not know the history of how these things have come about and may not even have an awareness of the value of them for the same reason we've been talking about. They'll be handing the Union over to people who were not there when, do not know the history, of how these things have come about, if you were not involved when the fight to attain something occurred, if you didn't have to work to get it, if it was just handed to you, you value it less. You don't understand what you've been given. That may well be where Plato comes in. Coming from the well-ordered State, one hasn't learned how to choose.

Something else important that we talked about had to do with moving the Sixth Grade to the Middle School. That was how we got much better schedules. She didn't mean that from a teachers point of view but from a teaching standpoint for the student Our day at the elementary school was becoming so fragmented that it became impossible to get a half hour chunk of time to teach anything We had LRC, ESL, Bilingual, Math Lab, Reading Lab, Speech, all these pull-out programs and they were done without consideration for what else had to happen.....namely TEACH! Certain things when they were pulled out you were not supposed to teach certain types of lessons while they were gone, so you had a constantly revolving door and some of these programs were mutually exclusive. Let's say you were going to Math Lab and Reading Lab you were not ESL or a Bi-lingual student. So if these things were clustered you could have had the people who were going out on a given day going out at the same time so that the rest of the day you had your class in front of you to teach. Instead, I brought my schedule the last time I was in the sixth grade to that Middle School Meeting that we were having and I showed them what a

piece of Swiss cheese I wound up with for that week and one of the things that had to happen was that we NOT wind up with this in the Middle School because it precluded meaningful teaching. And that was something we were able to eliminate because these kids were pulled for these other programs in different ways. They were scheduled differently and that was a big boon. I think the biggest thing the district could do to help elementary schools out besides the reading program being really viable is to do something about scheduling the day so that they don't have this Swiss cheese because I think it really mitigates not getting the job done... and not being able to be thorough.

While you might say that it is no longer my problem, you have to remember my husband still comes home to me every day and he's still working in the system. He has two more years and then we' won't have to listen to this stuff anymore. Can you imagine, in the last few years I didn't want to talk about school any more when I got home. That was part of how I knew, separate and apart from the things that were funny, I found myself wanting to turn it all off as I pulled in the driveway and not even think about it. I'd bring my paperwork home and prepare my lessons at home but basically this had to be there, and here had to be here.... but then my husband would come home and he would vent about everything under the sun, which of course, he had to do. Now he has an Assistant he vents to so I don't get as much of a barrage any more as I used to get.

Karen began her interview by recounting a story that gave us both a hearty laugh. It occurred to Dr. Louis Naninni during one of his first days serving as newly appointed Brentwood's Schools Superintendent. I asked her if she could tell us one final humorous story with which we might tie a ribbon around our retrospective but she responded by saying she could not, for there were so many stories that choosing one from among the other hilarious memories would be impossible for her because so many things that happened were such an absolute riot but that it was sometimes the only way we could make it through. The humorous events that occurred to us provided their own kind of comic relief and they were in their own way a kind of blessing.

That being said we concluded with thanking Karen for her willingness to sit for this length of time to share her memories both high and low of her life and career of thirty-three years in Brentwood. I promised to one day soon sit in the same chair and to do what she had done by sharing my own experience with her and everyone else by becoming a part of our history project. Karen's last day of active service would be in June of 1999.