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Karen Zander

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Meg Miner

Illinois Wesleyan University, mminer@iwu.edu

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Oral History Interview with Karen Zander,
Conducted over Skype, June 25th, 2016,
Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan Archivist

Meg Miner: Well, good afternoon now! This is Meg Miner and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University, and today is Saturday, June 25th, and I am recording a call with an alum of our institution. Karen, would you please introduce yourself and tell us a little about how you're affiliated with Minor and Wesleyan?

Karen Zander: Sure. I'm Karen Zander, class of '70. And...I was affiliated with President-President Myers in a variety of ways. First of all- and I'm a graduate with a BSN from the School of Nursing.

Miner: Great!

Zander: So the- the first thing that I remember about him is that he- there were rumors that he wanted to close the School of Nursing, which I couldn't believe. [Miner laughs] So somewhere along the line, and I think it was when he took a group of us out to the Boston Symphony here in Boston, he was starting- he started to talk about his love for astronauts. Did you know he had a love for astronauts?

Miner: Oh, he did not.

Zander: So a respect- let's say a respect for astronauts. So in response to that, and I don't remember what day he took us, you know. Whenever alums were in the Boston area, he took us to the symphony. I wrote him a letter about how nurses and astronauts are the same space. They think the same. They have the same adventures. [laughs] So I was trying to like make sure that he was not going to pursue this rumor that was out there that he was going to shut down the School of Nursing.

Miner: I had not heard that! [laughs]

Zander: But I could not believe that- that, you know, I mean the nurses- it's such a solid school, and when we went there, he'd probably never heard of Dean Schenk.

Miner: Oh, of course! Yeah.

Zander: Oh yes. Dr. Schenk- she was- she told us on our first day in class there that one- that they turned down nine people for every one that was sitting there in the class.

Miner: Hmm. That's-

Zander: Our freshman year, first class we had.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: They saw- I- I couldn't believe it, especially because, you know, nurses, especially now, not so much when I graduated, now make really good salaries, so I couldn't believe that he would want to do that with, you know, such a, you know, a well-paid alumni. [Miner laughs] So anyways, that was one thing I did. And then-

Miner: Well, what- let me ask you a little more about that. So you-

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: Do you-

Zander: I think I wrote him a letter 'cause this was before there were computers, I think.

Miner: Sure. So would it have been fairly early in his time there then?

Zander: I think- I don't remember.

Miner: He started in '89 so- okay.

Zander: Yeah, Donna- Donna Hartwick, who was then the dean, sort of told me about her worries about that.

Miner: She did. Okay. And so you never really found out if he- if he pursued that or if it was some-

Zander: Oh no, he didn't. Well, apparently he didn't. [laughs]

Miner: What did- what do you- can you tell me a little bit more about the comparisons with the astronauts?

Zander: No, I don't. I wish I had the letter.

Miner: That's okay. That's okay. Well, I haven't come across it in his stuff, but-

Zander: But, you know, nurses like adventure. They like new things. Most nurses, I can't speak to all nurses. Some of them disappoint me highly.

Miner: Aww.

Zander: It's like-

Miner: Well, I'll tell you that I'll keep my eye open for that letter. Who knows? He kept a lot, so-

Zander: Oh, maybe he's got it! And then the other thing that happened was that he- he called me to tell me that I was getting an honorary doctorate.

Miner: Oh.

Zander: And I didn't know why he was calling me. I was like worried, like "Oh no! Am I in trouble for writing that letter?" [Both laugh] And so I got an honorary doctorate from him in-

Miner: 2001.

Zander: I think it was 1971.

Miner: I thought it was 2001.

Zander: Oh, okay. Yeah, 2001. I'm sorry.

Miner: It's okay.

Zander: 2001. Time flies. I had just graduated then. Yeah. But, you know, Wesleyan's been very good to me. I got three awards. One was the Young Alumnus Award which when I got it- I received it on the football field. He talked about how he couldn't imagine how they locked us in every night, the women.

Miner: [laughs] Uh-huh.

Zander: And- and, you know, I had a...a boyfriend there who was a- a folk singer and so- we're the class that's famous for wearing peace signs when we graduated.

Miner: Oh, very active and interesting class. Yes.

Zander: I know! I know. It was great. It was a great class, a lot of togetherness. There still is a lot of togetherness.

Miner: Yeah. That's nice. That's a good community.

Zander: Yeah. So...that's- that's my memories or specific memories of him.

Miner: When you were back for the- the honorary doctorate, there probably were events and things surrounding that. Did you have any interaction with him at that?

Zander: Well, there was a dinner-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: -the night before.

Miner: And you'd-

Zander: Yes.

Miner: -said in your comments when you replied to my request to participants in this project something about his interest in antique knives.

Zander: Right. And I was actually thinking of bringing- you know, I have a few myself that I was thinking of bringing him one. [Miner laughs]

Miner: So was that a- when the topic of knives came up or-

Zander: I think so, at the dinner before I got the honorary doctorate. Yeah, there were like four other people I think who got theirs at the same time.

Miner: Well, that's great. Do you recall anything about, you know, the kind of impact that, you know, had or was that more of a curiosity?

Zander: What kind of thing?

Miner: The- the- kind of thinking about knives.

Zander: Oh no, I just thought, you know, I've got a couple, I could bring him one or two. But I know he did.

Miner: What do you- so talk to me a little bit about your time in school.

Zander: You know, I was Sigma Kappa and still very proud of it, and it- it gave me a lot of strength and support. I was not against living in the dorms, but I just thought living, you know, living in a real house would be more fun.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: So we had- we had the house across the street from where the- where the Sigma Kappa is now.

Miner: Oh. Okay.

Zander: Yeah, and you know, it was a great support to me and a great- I still have alumni like (name, 8:36??). I'm sure you know her.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: Yeah, others that- that hang together often.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: And as far as school, everybody hated the humanities course.

Miner: [laughs] Is that the one hundred level-

Zander: I took it, but I didn't want to. [laughs]

Miner: Was that the three hundred level humanities?

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: Yeah. I didn't know people hated it. I've always heard good things about it.

Zander: Yeah, the people- they would complain and complain about, you know, how much work there was and studying, but I took it on as a challenge.

Miner: And has it-

Zander: And even though I was a nursing major I tried Spanish freshman year-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: -'cause I heard you were supposed to do that but I almost flunked out.

Miner: Uh-oh. [laughs]

Zander: And then I did go on- I went on this- the short term trip to England.

Miner: Mmm.

Zander: At that time- I can't remember who led it. Some English professor led it and we went and studied at the Tate galleries.

Miner: Mmm.

Zander: And it was the first time we all flew in the same plane together over from- from O'Hare.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: And that was an amazing adventure. And-

Miner: How so?

Zander: It opened up my eyes to there is another world out there and I was so anxious about figuring out how the money worked.

Miner: Mmm. That's so true. Yeah.

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: So that was your first study abroad. Was it also your last then? And is that the only one you did when you were in school?

Zander: Yeah. I only did short- three week short term and that short term was in what, January or February?

Miner: January. Yeah. That's kind of a hard thing. That's an interesting program that they've built in some things since then I think.

Zander: Oh yeah! It- it- you know, there were couple of us nurses- people who were nurses on that program. So I- that was really kind of a great- I think a great attribute. Now I think they've changed short term to May?

Miner: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Zander: Yeah. So it kind of worked out well. And- let me see. And then you know, we did rallies against, you know, against the Vietnam War.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: We did rallies against Women's Hours. It was very active and it was mostly our class.

Miner: And you won on that one.

Zander: Yes. Finally. [laughs]

Miner: Did- was that ended during your time?

Zander: Just during our time though.

Miner: Wow. Wasn't that ended while you were there still or was it after? It was after.

Zander: I graduated in '70.

Miner: Yeah. It was right around that time. Well-

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: A few of the students after that appreciated that. Probably not a lot of students participated at that time. It's a...yeah.

Zander: Yeah. Oh, what else?

Miner: Were you involved in student government at all?

Zander: No.

Miner: Okay. [laughs]

Zander: I left that to (name, 12:22??) and (name, 12:23??)-

Miner: Yeah.

Zander: -who are still friends of mine.

Miner: Yeah. Yeah.

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: Yeah.

Zander: No. I- I stayed out of government and I deactivated the nursing sorority.

Miner: You did?

Zander: Sigma Theta Tau, yeah. And Donna Hartwick still has the letter where I said they don't do anything useful. [Miner laughs] You know, I wanted to do something useful, like my sorority. We went around and sang to people in nursing homes-

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: - 'cause we had a geriatric focus at the time.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: So we focused- we did useful things. Our nursing sorority, Sigma Theta Tau, all it did was like, I don't know, have meetings.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: I didn't need more meetings. So I've always been kind of a- a little radical in my own little way. But I remember my parents dropping me off at Ferguson freshman year and I was- I felt so free. [laughs] Freedom! And then they gave me a senior roommate named Penguin.

Miner: Oh!

Zander: Yeah. Her- her nickname was Penguin. Her real name was Carol (name, 13:53??) but her nickname was Penguin, and I couldn't figure out why I got a senior.

Miner: Now that's interesting. I hadn't heard that. So they paired you up with upperclassmen?

Zander: No. Not all of us, no.

Miner: Oh, okay.

Zander: Some people actually got other freshmen, but I don't know.

Miner: Huh.

Zander: They- they figured she and I would get along I guess.

Miner: So the transition to college wasn't difficult for you? You were ready.

Zander: Oh God, I was so ready to leave home. Well, because I- I went to Illinois Wesleyan's music camp-

Miner: Ah.

Zander: -two different summers and they would bring us over to the campus for one night each- each summer and we would go on campus and I think it was a three week long camp and I- I loved the music camp and- and that was how I ended up at Wesleyan.

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: And, you know, I got in early, whatever that's called, early admission.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: So- and it was the only place I applied for. So-

Miner: Oh. Perfect!

Zander: Yeah. So it was a match made in heaven for me. And I had- and I had gone to Maine East and Maine South. Actually Hillary was in both my Sunday school and- and my high school.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Zander: Yeah. So- but she was a year older. So we had a recruiter, Jim (name, 15:43??), (name, 15:44??) yeah, who came to Maine East and South. But- but before that I already knew I wanted Wesleyan because of the music camp.

Miner: Hmm. And just so- because I know this, but just so people who are listening to this recording in the future, you're speaking of Park Ridge.

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: The school's in Park Ridge and that's why you're mentioning knowing Hillary Clinton. [laughs]

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: But Hillary Rodham then, right?

Zander: Yeah, Rodham then. But yeah, she and I sat in the same high school class for years-

Miner: Mmm.

Zander: -in the same room, breathing the same air. I don't even think she'd remember me.

Miner: Yeah. [laughs]

Zander: I was- I was not popular and she was popular in a geeky way.

Miner: [laughs] That's funny.

Zander: And she was secretary of the student senate at- yeah, at Maine South.

Miner: Oh.

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: Wow. [laughs]

Zander: So she started her career a long time ago.

Miner: That's a long time to be doing that, right?

Zander: Yeah. I don't know if- and then she went to Wellesley, which happens to be where my office is now.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Zander: Well, so, we have these- these tangential connections, but nothing serious.

Miner: Yeah. Definitely a small world.

Zander: Mm-hmm.

Miner: Mmm. You know, I- you mentioned Wesleyan being good to you, but you know, those awards that you received, they don't just give them out like candy, you know.

Zander: I know. I got- I got the Nursing- distinguished whatever, thing in nursing.

Miner: Excellence in Nursing.

Zander: I got the Young Alumnus and then I got...the honorary doctorate, so I- it's been very good to me, which is why I have no problem coming back for the women's mentoring weekend.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Hmm. Yeah, that's a great reason too.

Zander: Yeah, it was amazing this past year. It was amazing and the council is so much more diverse. I happened to bring a- a friend of mine to take care of me 'cause I'm in a wheelchair and-

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: -I need help at night and in the morning, and so I brought her. She's Muslim. And I was so relieved that the campus was so diverse-

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: -because it wasn't- you know, my class, we had one Jew and two blacks.

Miner: Wow.

Zander: So maybe- maybe there was a little minimum, but that was pretty much what I remember.

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: And- and then they had some faculty person who actually married a Muslim, and went through all the things that Muslims go through as presenting at that night, the stuff they have at night...short stories.

Miner: Oh!

Zander: It was awesome, and she felt very welcome.

Miner: Mm-hmm.

Zander: I know. I was so happy about that.

Miner: I hadn't heard about that. So that's something that happened this year as well?

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: Yeah. That's great. Well, that's wonderful to hear that that was a good experience for your friend.

Zander: Mm-hmm.

Miner: There's certainly a lot of...a lot of people who make great efforts to- to- as the saying goes, to bring the world to Wesleyan and Wesleyan to the world, you know? So-

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: Mm-hmm. Well, very-

Zander: I think that's part of the spirit.

Miner: Yeah, this year- you mean when you went?

Zander: Yeah. Totally.

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: I felt it. I'm so proud.

Miner: Well, that's great to hear.

Zander: Yeah, plus I gave the keynote speech-

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: -Find your strength, which is partially my story but it really- it was after our phrase that we use at Spalding rehab hospital is to find your strength.

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: So I meant it in two ways and I gave out a little questionnaire and then I got to do a real job interview with one-

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: -one of the people, and she- she was awesome. [Miner laughs] I mean, I'm just so proud to be from Wesleyan. Then I went out and I got a Masters degree in psychiatric nursing from Boston University.

Miner: Mmm.

Zander: But freshman- after I graduated, I- few colleagues know this, but she was a psych nursing instructor. Her name was Bernadine Drake.

Miner: I do not know that person.

Zander: And I- I had a guy who- he was very distraught and they asked if they could send him up from the emergency department, which was on the first floor and I was on the third floor...when I was on the psych unit, and I was all alone and he held a gun at my head because he was very distraught 'cause his brother had just gotten killed in a gang and so he was like really upset. He pulled a gun. He held it at my head and I channeled my psych instructor, Bernadine Drake. I- I channeled her for the whole hour and a half he held a gun at my head-

Miner: Oh my goodness!

Zander: -in order to get through that.

Miner: And what do you mean by that? What did she do? What did she- she...help?

Zander: She- she was- she would have totally stayed calm. She would have said all the right things. She wouldn't have done anything to upset him. She would have said all the right things, especially about, you know, "How are you feeling now? How are you feeling now?" just like a good psych nurse.

Miner: Oh my gosh!

Zander: And so that really kept me alive-

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Zander: -until more help came.

Miner: And how did they discover you? Was this-

Zander: Oh, they sent him up to my unit to talk to me because they didn't apparently have anybody down in emergency department-

Miner: Yeah.

Zander: -that- that had psych skills. So they sent him up to me. "Yeah, I'll talk to him!" Little did I know at the time.

Miner: And you said- you said you were alone at that time?

Zander: Yeah. I was alone and I was down at the far end of the hall in a room because it was the only patient room that was vacant, so I had him go down to the end of the hall and I went there and that's when he held a gun and he told me if anybody showed up, he'd shoot them.

Miner: Oh wow.

Zander: So it was pretty scary, and then you know, my mother was already un- well, you know, my mother and father were already disappointed that I went into psychiatry where you don't even wear a uniform.

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: [laughs] And I told them about this, they- they- “Oh, what happened?” What really it says to me is that I learned principles really well...[Miner laughs]...and I was meant to be a psych nurse.

Miner: Well, yeah. You were certainly able to reach back and get that information in a hurry.

Zander: Yeah. I really channeled her, like what would she be doing?

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: What would she be saying? Stay calm. Don't let them startle you. And then finally, a nurse came. My replacement came at three o'clock from down the hall. I could hear her coming. I had to warn her. I had to ask her to go get the doctor on call, 'cause there- the doctors weren't on our unit. They hung out on the second floor. And so she went and got him, and I started seeing spots-

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: -like after it was all over, you know, I started seeing spots in front of my eyes-

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: -like floater spots.

Miner: Hmm.

Zander: And I said to him- his name was Dr. (name, 24:56??), and I said, “I think I'm going psychotic,” and he said, “No, Karen. You're just terrified.” But- but by the end of it- are you ready for this?

Miner: Yeah.

Zander: He and I were playing duets on the piano that was in the hallway.

Miner: Oh dear.

Zander: And then we shipped him off to the state hospital.

Miner: Oh dear. So- but you'd actually gotten him to put the gun down before anybody came?

Zander: Yeah.

Miner: Wow. That's pretty phenomenal.

Zander: Yeah, and it's all because of Bernadine Drake.

Miner: Did you ever tell her?

Zander: No. I never...[Miner laughs]... actually I think she left Wesleyan, went on teaching somewhere. I don't know if she's still alive.

Miner: Hmm. Mm-hmm. But-

Zander: I'll have to look it up.

Miner: Wow. Well, that is an incredible story.

Zander: Yeah. Yeah. Wesleyan saved my life. There you go.

Miner: Prepared you well for the world.

Zander: Mm-hmm.

Miner: Wow. Well, I mean, is there anything else? Any other stories or ?

Zander: Oh god.

Miner: ...this year?

Zander: You know, I don't think so.

Miner: Well, thank you for participating. I really appreciate it.

Zander: You're welcome!

Miner: Alright. Well, you have a great afternoon.

Zander: Okay. You too.

Miner: Buh-bye.

Zander: Bye-bye.