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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Karla Karash– Class of 1963

(interviewed by Natasha Balwit)

June 7, 2013

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BALWIT: I thought to start you could just tell me a little about your background-- where you were raised and how you ended up at MIT.

KARASH: I was born in Flint, Michigan, and I moved at a young age to Royal Oak, Michigan, which is a suburb of Detroit. My dad was a mechanical engineer who worked in the designing of new car models for Chrysler, and he probably influenced my enjoyment of math and science. I enjoyed school, and was a good student.

When I was in high school the Russians started the race to space by launching Sputnik. That made me interested in a career in science so I could help the United States catch up in the space race.

Our preacher in Royal Oak, Michigan had a son who was several years ahead of me, and he got into MIT. My dad was so impressed. I had never heard of MIT, but that was the reason I came, because I thought, if he can do it, maybe I can do it. So I applied, and I got in. It was the only school I didn't visit, just because it was far away, but I did interview with an auto executive from Ford Motor Company in Michigan who had attended MIT. The fact that it was far away in a state that I had never visited made it seem more exciting.

BALWIT: The aim of this interview is to have your life story, your memories, whatever can, give context. Whatever you want to talk about.

KARASH: My dad was from Kentucky, and he studied at Berea College in Berea Kentucky. After graduating, dad came to Flint, Michigan to teach at General Motors Institute. My mother was from South Carolina and she met my dad at Berea College. She had been a good student growing up, and both she and my dad encouraged me to be a good student. I have a sister, two years younger who became a lawyer, and a brother, six years younger, who became a PhD chemist. Our family was close, and I was the only one to go far away to college. Both my sister and brother went to college in Kent OH, and they both lived close to my parents as long as my parents were living. Looking back, I realize I gave up the close family ties when I made the decision to come to MIT.

BALWIT: What did your family think of you going to MIT? Was your dad as impressed as he'd been with the preacher's son?

KARASH: My dad was thrilled. I don't know what my mother thought. She probably wished we were closer. But dad was thrilled and very proud that I went to MIT. Even late in life--neither my mother nor dad is living now, but late in life when he could barely remember me, he would say to somebody, "That's my daughter, she went to MIT."

BALWIT: So he was proud.

KARASH: He was very proud. It was a good thing for him.

BALWIT: What was it like to be a woman at MIT? There weren't very many women here back in those days.

KARASH: I remember our class being about 40 women. We lived in McCormick Hall, a wonderful new dorm. My best friends were the women in my class on the 7th floor at McCormick Hall. I am still close to several of these friends.

I was the only female in my civil engineering course. I got into civil engineering by accident. When I came to MIT, I thought I wanted to be in physics. That was the time of Sputnik. We were all coming here to save the world, to save the US as scientists, and I was going to be in physics. After the first two semesters of physics, I decided no, I wasn't going to be in physics. Then I was interested in economics. MIT has a really first-rate economics group. But my dad hadn't heard of economics at MIT. My dad objected to my going into economics, so I needed another major. An upperclassman that I knew through a service fraternity recruited me for civil engineering. I said, "Oh, sure, why not." But I didn't really understand what it was.

When I was young I played with boys. I was very comfortable in a male environment. So I did not mind being the only woman in my classes. Later in life I realized I missed being among more females. But we had McCormick Hall, and we had our own little group of friends on the 7th floor where I lived. So that helped to make up for the high ratio of men to women, but I think it was a hard environment for many men as well as women.

I remember one professor in civil engineering who was very skeptical of a woman taking civil engineering. He taught a soils lab. On the first day I was surprised by this: "Oh, we're studying dirt?" The professor thought I was ridiculous. I still remember him. He's still here.

BALWIT: But you'd say overall...

KARASH: There weren't any issues, except for a few little things like that.

BALWIT: I see. Do you have any favorite stories from your time at MIT? Good memories, bad memories, exciting things, nostalgia?

KARASH: Small things. I remember when I first came to McCormick Hall, the older women--they were very practical, and they wanted to be on the second floor or the third floor so they could walk up and down and didn't have to wait for the elevator. I was put on the seventh floor in a room overlooking the Charles. When I first arrived with my mom and dad I came upstairs, and there was Boston across the river--just beautiful. This was my room. I was so excited to have that room. I kept it. I stayed on that side of the building on the seventh floor for my four years. It was such a fabulous place. People pay lots of money for such a view.

Another story is about meeting my husband. My senior year in high school my dad moved to Cleveland to work for NASA, and he was kind enough to leave me back in Michigan so I could finish school and didn't have to start a new high school in my last year. I was a national merit scholar, and my husband, Rick Karash, was a national merit scholar the Cleveland area. The tradition in Cleveland was that one of the newspapers put the pictures of all of the national merit scholars on the front page, and I was included because my parents were there. Our pictures were right next to each other. It was Hurst and Karash, and both of us were going to MIT. My parents sent the article to me, and I saw Rick's picture, and I said, "Oh, he's kind of cute." But I never met him in the first year as he had advanced placed most all of the freshmen courses. I met Rick in my sophomore year when we were in physics class together. I met him halfway through my sophomore year. As Susan (Sue) Downs was alluding to, he had a girlfriend, which he never mentioned to me, but I knew because one of my other classmates, Carolyn Henry, went to the same high school. She knew his other girlfriend. Occasionally she'd say, "Well, so-and-so is here now," and I'd go, "Oh, okay." But it all worked out. We got married the week of graduation in 1968, and are still together.

Another story I'll tell you: I was the dorm president. It must have been my senior year, and one of the things that MIT did that year was they made an arrangement to exchange with Wellesley, so Wellesley students could come to MIT and take classes, and MIT students could go to Wellesley and take classes. In general, the co-eds hated the idea. The fear was that this exchange would cheapen the whole idea of getting an MIT degree for

a woman. I'm an easygoing person, I couldn't have cared less, but all the people I was representing were saying, "Oh, this is terrible, we can't do this." At one point the MIT administration sent me and a good friend of mine, Maria Karpati (now Burka) off to Wellesley to meet with the women at Wellesley in an effort to get to know each other. Maria believes that one of the Wellesley women we met with was Hilary Rodham, but neither of us can be sure of that.

BALWIT: What was it like, dating at MIT?

KARASH: I don't think it's so different. There were probably always, especially when you were younger, lots of people ready to ask you out to do things. Probably the same as you would find it now.

BALWIT: It's hard because school is so consuming. A lot of people don't have much time. But it still happens, and it's still fun.

BALWIT: So I'd like to hear a little about what you did after MIT, your career path since then. It sounds like you've done all kinds of projects. You've done a lot since then.

KARASH: Compared to some people, like Sue, whom you just met with, my career was pretty much in the same field. I studied civil engineering but I headed in the direction of planning as a career more than engineering. My MIT professors didn't encourage me to seek out a career as a Professional Engineer. The professors were more into doing innovative new things and starting companies, and they didn't encourage people to go off and become Professional Engineers, which might have been considered too ordinary. It was only years later that I realized I should have gotten a professional degree or certification, and that would have served me well in some of my later roles in the field.

Some of my favorite things that I did in my career happened in the early part of my career. I graduated in '68. In 1970 I worked on a study, a re-study that looked at transportation and highways around the Boston area. It was led at the time by Alan Altshuler, who was a professor here in political science, and he was a mentor to me, being from MIT. As a result of that study, there was a decision not to do as many highways, to do more transit. It was really a revolutionary study. Some time after that I worked for Fred Salvucci, who's here in civil engineering. He was secretary of transportation. He was very much of an activist secretary. So there were lots of things that could be done when you work for somebody

that wants to get things done and encourages you to do things. I think one of the best things I did in my career was to help start special transportation services for the disabled in Massachusetts. A service called "The Ride" covers most of the metropolitan Boston area, but I also helped with services in the rest of the state for people with disabilities. In terms of things I did in my career, helping to start The Ride is the one thing that affects the most people, because it's still a big operation today.

BALWIT: It helps a lot of people.

KARASH: The Ride does help a lot of people. It got started about 1977. I'd been out of school less than ten years when I worked on that. I've worked in the public sector, helping to do those kinds of programs, and I've worked in the private sector for consulting firms. I've worked for a lot of places more than one time. I worked for Multisystems, which was started by Daniel Roos, Joe Sussman, and Robert Locher from Civil Engineering in 1973 and then from 1995-2003. I worked for the MBTA (Boston's transit authority) twice in my career. I ended my career working for a firm called TranSystems, which is a midsize engineering firm. TranSystems focuses on engineering and design of transportation infrastructure such as bridges, rail lines, airport facilities, and so forth, and I was helping them with their transit and train consulting.

BALWIT: So it sounds like, living in the area, you've maintained a lot of connections with people at MIT.

KARASH: Right.

BALWIT: How would you say that's affected the progress of your career or your life?

KARASH: Well, I think it's been an important part of it. In 1973 I was hired by Joe Sussman to work at Multisystems. Joe was a professor here in civil engineering. I've had a lot of help along the way from people like Nigel Wilson, again from civil engineering, who's always been helpful in my career. Yes, I think the MIT connection has been important.

BALWIT: What would you say were the most rewarding experiences during your time at MIT that weren't academic? What did you learn outside of class?

KARASH: The thing I was active with my freshman year, and actually, throughout my undergraduate years at MIT was a service sorority. There was a sponsoring service fraternity called Alpha Phi Omega. At that time they didn't have women, but they encouraged the MIT women to form a female auxiliary, which we called Alpha Chi Delta. We did many service related

tasks such as taking children from an orphanage to the zoo and visiting people in assisted living homes. These projects got us away from campus and our minds away from homework and those weekly Friday quizzes that we had. Things that I wish I'd done...sports weren't really provided for the women, although you could seek them out. I wish I'd tried harder to do some sports as I got really out of shape when I was here. I tried to learn to sail and participated a little with the sailing team. I had friends on the sailing team, but I wasn't very good at it.

BALWIT: There are a lot of exciting things to do here that aren't necessarily organized activities like concerts and lectures. The culture is very vibrant. How would you describe the culture of MIT when you were here? Or maybe the culture of your living group in McCormick?

KARASH: I don't know that we had a culture since we were the first "big" class of women in a new dorm. If there was a culture it might have been different for different floors in McCormick. My closest friends were all on the seventh floor. People were independent, studying very hard as you can imagine. I remember that when we were seniors the big shock was that some freshmen were found smoking marijuana. The administration held meetings for us to talk about drugs and try to make us not so scared because we didn't know what marijuana was. I'm not answering your question about culture, but I think it hadn't really developed.

BALWIT: The question isn't really important. We can talk about anything you want to talk about, if you have stories or anything.

KARASH: I have a long-term friend, Maria Burka, who was a year behind me. She dated a fraternity brother of my husband, and we got to be friends from that. We just kept up over the years, and that's been really valuable to me. One of my roommates, Ann O'Reilly Stankard, died early (when she was around 30 years of age) from melanoma. My daughter is named for Ann. I worked for a couple of years for another good friend, Laura Peterson, who was a class behind but lived on the 7th floor. She is President of a consulting firm called Ventana. Actually, I worked for that firm twice, from 1986-1990, and again in 2012. That was the one time I didn't work in the field of transportation. For Ventana, I did computer modeling in systems dynamics. That was an interesting brief change in career.

BALWIT: A break, kind of.

KARASH: Yes, yes.

BALWIT: What fraternity was your husband in, out of curiosity?

KARASH: Sigma Chi. I know there are sororities now, and maybe that's a good thing because the value of the fraternity was that they made really lifelong friends. Today he's hosting at our house all the classmates that are in the area. They're all getting together. Some people have come from quite a ways. It's a larger group of friends than I have from McCormick. We were a small number in the first place, and we're scattered all over the place. So keeping one or two from that era is nice, but it would be nice to have a larger group. I know that there are sororities now.

BALWIT: There are a few sororities. They're a lot bigger than the fraternities, so they're not quite as tight-knit. I'm not in one, but a lot of my friends are, and I think they're a nice kind of cohesive group and great girls. Do you think that you would have joined a sorority if they'd been here?

KARASH: I don't know. I remember at the time thinking that I was against the idea of having a sorority. It was discussed. I remember thinking, no, we don't need that. But now, looking back on it, I realize that it's nice to have a group that has a bit closer affiliation, the ability to get to know each other, because this is a time when you can make friends that you'll keep for the rest of your life, and that's important.

BALWIT: So you say you were against the idea. Were students involved in making decisions like that in campus policy? Did you feel that you had a voice?

KARASH: We had a voice. I do think that came up. The administration ignored us when we objected to the Wellesley exchange program, but I think the administration always listened. When I was in school, Paul Gray, who became president of MIT later on, was the Dean of students. He was terrific. We had some good people that rose through the ranks. One of the reasons we liked him was because we felt like he listened to us if we had complaints or issues. I think one of the wonderful things about MIT is that you can really fashion your own curriculum. If you want to do something that's a little different, you just have to convince somebody that it's well thought-out, and they let you do it. It's very flexible. So from that point of view, it's much better than Harvard, which is much less flexible.

BALWIT: It seems that maybe you approached your career with that kind of flexibility, worked different places, did all kinds of different things. What would you say was your motivation all along? Where did you get inspiration or energy for your work?

KARASH: I don't know where that comes from. I'm not particularly religious, but I was brought up in a religious family, and looking back I found a high school

paper I'd written on how at the time the United States was not taking good care of the elderly. I found this paper much later in life. I said, "Well. I was thinking about this way back." And it ended up that some of my career was trying to help develop transportation systems that help people who are older and frailer or disabled. I think I did have a motivation to try and help people, and that came from my upbringing. But I was able to find ways through my learning at MIT and my connections through MIT to do something about it in my career.

BALWIT: So you're not really religious any more?

KARASH: I think I'm spiritual, but not religious.

BALWIT: How would you describe that? The role of spirituality in your life?

KARASH: I look intellectually at religions and think how so many religious backgrounds are similar. They are all about questing for some higher being or truth. I believe that spirituality helps us to see things as half-full rather than half-empty, that motivates us to work to improve the world.

BALWIT: You seem really positive and easygoing, as you said. Any tips for maintaining that?

KARASH: It's all about keeping perspective, being grateful for what you have. I've always felt that I've had a very lucky life. Great parents, great husband. My daughter is healthy, married. I have a granddaughter. There's so much to be grateful for. That's part of it, is thinking about all the good things rather than bad. In a lot of societies women are not treated very well, so we're lucky to be here. We have the ability to go to MIT. MIT is great because it encourages anybody go to MIT that has the capability. I'm proud of the Institute for that. It's a meritocracy, and if you have ability, then MIT will help you through scholarships or loans so that money is not a barrier to attending.

BALWIT: MIT opens doors for a lot of people. It's a struggle, but I feel like the luckiest person in the world sometimes, just being here. So you have a daughter? And you raised her here, in Boston?

KARASH: Yes. She was born in 1977, so she's now 36. We raised her on Beacon Hill, which isn't the usual place to raise a kid, but we always had a great time with it. Except for a few months off when she was born, I always worked. We had babysitters and live-in students who took care of Ann when she got home from school. Along the way, I had a few periods when my jobs or educational pursuits allowed flexibility, so I was able to attend

Ann's school sports, and it felt OK—that I was able to both work and be an attentive parent.

Ann went to Stanford. I guess she didn't want to be close to Mom and Dad. But that was also a great deal of fun. I loved going out to visit her in California and made many trips to visit her at school. She's back here now, which is wonderful. She married in 2008, and now we have a three-year-old granddaughter, which is the best.

BALWIT: I think it is important to go away from home. I'm from Oregon, and I came all the way here. You came too, from far away.

KARASH: I came far, and I feel badly that I didn't have my parents close by when I was bringing up Ann. That would've been very nice. I'm so lucky I'm close to my granddaughter. She's in Providence, and I can see her frequently. It makes so much difference. But I never felt the interest in going back to Cleveland. I always loved Boston and wanted to be here.

BALWIT: Nowadays, it's easier, too, with Skype and cheap phone calls. Were you homesick when you first came? What was it like making the transition?

KARASH: I wasn't homesick. No, I wasn't. I found this a great adventure and I loved it. I wrote my mother every week and later on started calling every week when writing was too difficult, but I wasn't ever homesick. I really enjoyed being here.

BALWIT: So did you plan on staying here?

KARASH: No, not particularly. We were delayed leaving because it was the time of the draft, and MIT had a program where my husband could go for an extra degree, which put off the draft for another year, so we were going to definitely be here a second year. Then I was in a master's program, which took me a while, and after that, I got hired right here. We never thought about moving because the jobs just kept coming in this area. Even though we switched around, there was never a reason to say, "Oh, I'm going to move for my job."

BALWIT: And your husband never did get drafted?

KARASH: The lottery came in, and he got a really high number, so at that point the draft was not a problem.