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Interviewer: MWSA Founder **Bill McDonald**

Interviewee: **Karen Pavlicin** is more than just an award-winning author and songwriter and former magazine editor – she is also a gifted athlete and community-spirited mother. Her list of notable achievements is rather remarkable.

Bill McDonald: In all this time I have been reading your books or listening to your music I am still amazed at how varied your talents and interests are. So let us start off by talking about some things that many do not know about you – like your being chosen to the *University of Rochester's Hall of Fame*. Can you tell us about this and add a little about your college sports career?

Karen Pavlicin: My induction into the Rochester Hall of Fame in 2004 was such an exciting yet humbling experience! I was one of eleven inductees from all sports, 1924 to 1990. What a wonderful, accomplished group of people – so fun to see how their sports careers influenced their lives. My primary college sport was volleyball. I played the middle blocker, which is an exciting position that gets a lot of cheers with the short sets to hit and the big blocks. I had the honor of being the first National Academic All-America volleyball player at Rochester. But honestly the best part of playing was the close friendships. I still keep in touch with my coach and several of the players. Six of us got together last year in Las Vegas for a weekend of catching up; all of these women are accomplished, beautiful women – doctors, writers, entrepreneurs, moms. We've kept each other going through life's ups and downs for more than twenty years!

Bill: You were not only a gifted athlete in college but you also graduated Cum Laude with a degree in English. What was of interest to me however, is that you also had a minor in Applied Economics. What gives with this – have you pursued this after college at all?

Karen: Well, there was this cute guy in the economics program – I eventually married him. Actually, I have a very practical business mind and have been involved in various entrepreneurial ventures throughout my career. So while economics has a lot of theory to it, I placed heavy emphasis on the “applied” aspects. I actually started out as a math major (both my parents were math teachers). Differential equations changed my life (and my major) and I've been writing with more purpose ever since!

Bill: I gather that in your younger days that you were also a very good poet. Do you still create prose for publication or pleasure now; and what did you write about?

Karen: I've been writing poetry since I was a kid – although back then it was mostly mushy cards to my friends and family. I studied poetry in college and did an internship at Writers & Books in Rochester, NY, which was a fun way to meet some creative, cutting-edge poets. I wrote a full poetry manuscript and had a few poems published. I also studied journalism and wrote for the school paper. After graduation I decided to focus on the nonfiction writing, especially for magazines. Today, I write poetry once in a while for myself when no other medium seems to capture the emotion. Certainly my poetry background has helped my songwriting as well.

Bill: You had a successful career as a magazine editor – is this something that you enjoyed? What kind of magazines did you work for?

Karen: I loved being a magazine editor! It was very satisfying work – every month I saw the tangible results of my team's efforts. There was always something interesting going on. The job combined my people skills, business management, and writing. I worked for a variety of newsstand and subscription publications, including *Carolina Adventure* (outdoor life – mostly hunting and fishing), *Camping Magazine* (for youth camp directors), and *Web Guide Magazine* (when folks were just beginning to figure out how to use the World Wide Web). My specialty was expanding publications and getting startups up and running successfully.

Bill: You have written a most useful book for military dependents that has served to help many families during deployment situations – how did you get data and information you used in that book? Did you have hordes of people giving you assistance and feedback? Do you hear from folks now who have read “Surviving Deployment” and get feedback?

Karen: My husband, Bob, served with the Marines and deployed all the time. One particular deployment, to Somalia, was especially stressful because we had a number of illnesses and family issues arise with the spouses in our unit. At the time (1993), the family assistance centers had only just begun and aside from a few brochures, there weren't many resources available for families (thankfully there are many resources today!). I remember talking with Bob after his second canceled homecoming about how someone should write a book about this... and he reminded me that I'm a writer so I could do it... I started interviewing spouses about what was working for them and with their permission, I shared their ideas with other spouses in various support groups. The information eventually grew into a book. I laugh now when I think about all those publishers back then who turned down the manuscript because they thought the topic of deployment was too narrow and not of real interest to anyone. I think those same publishers now realize how important the topic is to a very important group of people!

I do hear quite a bit from people who've read *Surviving Deployment*. Some tell me stories about how the book has helped them, some ask for advice about a situation they're facing, and some tell me other things I should include in my next book. That's really how my book *Life After Deployment* came about. Several wives and moms of service members wrote to me and told me that one small chapter about homecoming wasn't enough. Their deployments were long and frequent and the reunions weren't going

smoothly. They asked me if I would write a book about the reunion time after homecoming. So I interviewed more families and followed some of them for a year after their homecomings.

Bill: What inspired you to write children's books?

Karen: I needed a change professionally. Many changes had taken place in my life beyond my control. Most notably, my husband had died of cancer, and less than two years later, my 64-year-old dad died suddenly of a heart attack. I needed a positive change that I could influence, something I could pour my creativity into.

My first few attempts to write children's fiction didn't go very smoothly. I found it much harder to make stuff up! One day a friend who writes novels asked me how the writing was going. I told her about my trouble finishing the stories I had been working on and then I told her about a different story I had in my head. She suggested I consider the old ones practice and just take two weeks to write a draft of the story that was on my mind. So I did. And that draft turned into my first children's novel, *Perch, Mrs. Sackets, and Crow's Nest*.

People who've read the book ask about its connection to my personal life. The story takes place in my home town. It's about a boy dealing with the death of his dad and his best friend moving away. At the time I wrote the story – the summer after my dad died – I had been thinking a lot about my own childhood. At the same time, my son was wrestling with questions about heaven and faith. I wanted to give him a made up story about a boy who had some of the same questions and some of the same things happen to him in his life, without it being exactly the same. I'm often asked about the love interest in the story – John. There is no real life John.* I figured since I'm making up the story, I might as well add a nice looking cowboy for the mom.

Bill: In your personal life you have endured much. You married your college sweetheart Bob and started a family only to lose him to colon cancer at a young age of 38. How has this changed and impacted your life and that of your son? To add to that - and this may sound like a strange question to ask – but has this experience inspired you in some positive way to serve, or use your talents in aiding others in some capacity? I ask because I see a link on your web pages for ***The Andermax Foundation*** and was wondering if that was in part due to memory and love for Bob?

Karen: Bob's death had a profound effect on us, as you might imagine. The positive side of it has been this strong sense of purpose. Our son, Alexander, and I both feel God has a job for us and he's given us this experience – both the blessing of having Bob in our lives as well as the heartbreak of him leaving – to prepare us for this work. It's not always easy to know what God has in mind. But there have been many situations when it has been clear to me that I am where I'm supposed to be.

One of the ways we do that work is through The Andermax Foundation, which we created in memory of Bob. Bob's motto was *carpe diem*. He lived his life to the max

every day. We wanted a tangible way for his legacy and love of life to continue to impact many people. So we carefully chose three areas of giving: medical research to find cures for major illnesses, programs that use nature and the arts to help people heal physically and spiritually, and fundamental community changes to eliminate poverty. The foundation is funded with public tax-deductible contributions as well as corporate donations. Our first grant is being awarded this year in the area of cancer research in honor of Bob.

Bill: How did your family end up living in Minnesota?

Karen: 3M recruited Bob to work in marketing. In the Marine Corps, we lived on both coasts and traveled in between. I was pretty open to the idea of moving again. But to be honest, when Bob first mentioned Minnesota, I said “isn’t that up there somewhere in the tundra?” I had to look at a map. Now we’ve lived here twelve years and it’s truly one of my favorite places. The Twin Cities area is full of culture and great communities; it’s a wonderful place to raise a family. And since I’m answering this question in June, I think it’s not even that cold here.

Bill: What prompted the creative song and video on YouTube “I Believe In You”?

Karen: I wanted to write a love song to my military friends. I believe in our service members and our military family members. And I wanted to tell them that.

I talk a lot with military families across the country. I always try to bring humor and practical ideas and some inspiration into my talk. I like them to come away feeling like they’ll be okay no matter what happens in this deployment. This spring I was asked to speak at the National Guard Association of Minnesota formal dinner – on my birthday. I wanted to do something special and different. About two weeks before the event I got the idea to do a song. There was only one day I could fit in a recording session before the event. So I wrote the song and did a quick recording with the same guy who helped me produce my new CD. Since it really was meant to be a gift, I posted the song/video on YouTube and offered the song as a free download on MilitaryFamilyBooks.com. I also gave permission for other military families to use the song for their own personal use as long as they list me in the credits. I’ve received some neat emails from people who created their own videos and used my song alongside Toby Keith’s “American Soldier.” It’s wonderful to be able to be part of their lives in this way.

Bill: I have never asked this of anyone I have interviewed on the radio, TV or online – but is it true that you have a dung clock in your kitchen? I have to hear about this and why it is there.

Karen: Yes! My cow dung clock hangs on the wall over my kitchen sink. It was a wedding gift from my childhood friend Donna. She grew up on a dairy farm and made creative use of all that extra cow dung lying around! Andy, the boy in my children’s novel *Perch, Mrs. Sackets, and Crow’s Nest*, finds out how to make dung clocks in the book. I sometimes bring the clock to book events – the kids love it (although many won’t

touch it!). It's protected with epoxy, but you can see the corn and hay in the dung and some kids can't decide if that's gross or way cool.

Bill: Growing up what kind of a childhood did you experience and is any of that reflected in your writings or books?

Karen: I grew up in a small town in upstate New York. I'm the oldest sibling with one brother and two sisters. My parents gave me a strong work ethic – we had to weed this enormous garden before we could play with our friends! They also helped me develop my strong faith in God. Both my parents came from large families so our family reunions brought hundreds of cousins. Certainly all of these things – especially small town life, family, and faith – come into my writing often.

Bill: Who were your heroes growing up and why?

Karen: Wonder Woman – she could kick butt and look beautiful at the same time.

Bill: Now that you are older and wiser – do you still have heroes that inspire you or that you look up to? Do you have anyone in your own personal life that you would consider a mentor or teacher?

Karen: My mom is one of my greatest heroes. She's even better than Wonder Woman. She can kick butt, look beautiful, cook delicious food, kiss boobos, and make me laugh. She's smart, kind, selfless, and really good at a lot of things. She's always taught me that anything is possible. I believe her.

Bill: What do you wish for your own child when he grows up? What gifts have you or Bob given him that you think will prepare him for the world when he steps out from his childhood home?

Karen: I want Alexander to be happy, however he ends up defining happiness. Alexander shares Bob's view of life – they are very much alike. He has a great sense of humor and seizes every moment in the day to enjoy life. Alexander has a lot of special gifts. He knows that it's important to be kind and respectful to everyone. He's already experienced so much in life; he's learned to find his own trust in God.

Certainly, we've tried to pass along the notion that anything is possible. Like all kids, his aspirations change each year as he becomes more aware of new possibilities. His career choices have ranged from being a rescue hero and Marine to becoming the Pope to finding a cure for cancer. One day at the post office he was mumbling to himself. When I asked him what was on his mind (he's nine years old), he said he was practicing his Nobel Peace Prize speech. He said he wanted to be prepared. He'll do just fine wherever the journey takes him!

I learn something from him every day.

Bill: What hobbies do you have now?

Karen: Photography – I’ve taken more than 15,000 pictures! My favorite subjects are kids and nature.

Tai Chi and Yoga – It’s an amazing way to start a Wednesday!

I’m also fond of just “hanging out” – throwing a ball around with Alexander, going for a walk on our great trails, watching a movie. It seems like our lives are so busy, it’s nice once in a while to do nothing!

Bill: Do you have any creative projects in the oven cooking? Music? Books? Something else?

Karen: My first full-length music album will be released this summer. *Little Bit of Faith* is a collection of twelve songs I wrote after Bob died. It’s meant to be a journey through grief to hope. I included a variety of styles from contemporary blues to folk. All of the profits will be donated to cancer research – my goal is to raise \$1 million!

Bill: What kind of advice would you care to give to new writers and authors that might make their creative journey a little easier? What have you learned that you might pass along to them about editing, writing, publishing or marketing?

Karen: First, write the book (article, song, etc)! Many times new writers will contact me and say they have a great book idea and they want to know how to pitch it and get a contract. I tell them to write it first. Finishing a book, as you know, is no small task. Yet finishing it is one step you can’t skip - no matter what your aspirations for the project. So do the hard part first. Write. Don’t edit while you write – just get the story down and then go back to edit.

I think it’s also important to find a good editor. A good editor is not someone who tells you your writing is good. A good editor knows what’s wrong with your writing and can guide you to revise it appropriately. Having said that, you should also get to know your own voice so you know when to disagree with your editor.

And I guess most importantly would be to believe in yourself. Write because you have something to say, because you love to write. Write about what’s in your heart and what you believe in. That makes it worthwhile regardless of what gets published.

Bill: Do you have any regrets about your life path or the choices you have made – and would you do anything different?

Karen: We can always second guess our choices with the benefit of hindsight. But if we were able to change one thing, it might change everything else, too. Overall I’m happy with my life and so I think I’ll keep it. ;-)

Bill: There is a very hidden message in your writings that feels almost spiritual in some sense. Your writings seem to reflect hope and love and family relationships – is this by accident, or is this really what you are about?

Karen: It really is the essence of who I am. Family and good friends are very important to me. I love that my evenings are filled with Alexander's activities. I talk with my mom almost every day. I try to nurture my close friendships – some for more than 30 years! My faith has carried me through a lot in recent years and I definitely feel that my creative work is driven by God.

Bill: Is there anything you would like to add about your self or your outlook on life that you think others might find interesting, or of some value in their own life?

Karen: I try to laugh every day. Having a sense of humor helps me keep my life in perspective.

Bill: Who are your favorite authors or books – not counting mine of course?

Karen: Well, aside from yours....

Really, I have so many "favorites" you wouldn't have room to print the list. I love to read many different types of books – our house is filled with books and we go to the library often. I'm willing to try out any new author, but the book has to capture my attention in the first few pages or I stop reading.

Bill: What is your goal or goals for the next decade ahead? Have you given this any thought – or are you flowing along where the journey takes you?

Karen: Over the next decade, Alexander will hit puberty, attend junior high and high school, kiss girls... I think my most important role is to help him make those awkward years positive and help him continue to learn key life skills. Whew. Will I have time for anything else? Creatively, I'd like to write a movie script and I have a handful of book and music projects in the works. I don't worry too much about all that though. I trust the journey will take me where I'm supposed to be.

Bill: Before we end this interview – do have any personal inspirational thoughts or words that may have inspired you or helped you through your life that you care to share?

Karen: Buy more underwear! It's one of my top tips I give to military families and other people under stress. I absolutely live by it. Let's face it – who has time for laundry? And when do you really need to do laundry? When you're out of clean underwear. So buy more underwear so you can do laundry less often! I know I can't do it all – at least not all at the same time. Managing those less important tasks like laundry helps me keep balance in my busy life. I think all of us can find something simple like that to help us focus on the things that are more important and deserve more of our time.

One other thing that comes to mind – a few years ago, a friend gave me a sign to hang in my kitchen for a while. It said “This is God. I’ll be handling your problems today. Have a nice day.” It reminded me that I didn’t have to dwell on the bad stuff. I could focus on the good stuff and trust that it will all work out okay in the end.

Bill: Thank you Karen for taking the time to share a part of your life with us. I am impressed by all you have done, continue to do and no doubt will do in the future. God bless you.

Karen: Thanks so much for this opportunity. You and MWSA have been so supportive! God bless you.

**2011 note added:* There is now a real-life John! His name is Geno (Italian for John). I met him in 2009 and married him in November 2011. How many writers can say they brought a made-up character to life? ☺