

## February 16, 2024 - WIL Highlights for Karen Goff

- **Growing up /early influences:** Born in Jamaica; her mother, grandparents and her teachers were among those who said she could become anything she wished. Her life has indeed involved a “winding path.”
- **Why divinity school for Masters?** Because she was (and continues to be) curious, went through phase of discovery, asking questions, studied philosophy. Said “it changed my life.”
- **Early mentor:** Dr. Martin Sanders (now deceased) sought her out and they developed special relationship (“a big burly white guy”) had a profound impact, taught her art of reflection, challenged her to find her voice and to deal with the hard stuff. Other mentors along the way even today. Helped her focus on CHARACTER above all – it’s WHO you are that matters.
- **Why Higher Ed?** Education essential in her family; also realized as an immigrant that not everyone has the same access so she must take advantage of her opportunity. Allowed for career exploration and someone once said, “You should work for a college because you are great with young adults!”
- **On Learning:** “Happens everywhere; be constantly learning; to think; to reason.”
- **Karen’s Purpose:** “To make a difference in the lives of young people.” Women’s education and leadership had / has strong appeal. She likes to sit with students, ask questions, co-create, help them learn to problem solve for themselves.
- **On Technology Related Education versus Liberal Arts:** “It’s not either / or, but both / and.” Believes students need to develop specific skills and competencies along with learning to be self-aware, to think globally, to be able to analyze and solve complex problems, etc.
- **On Oberlin:** Founded in 1800’s and first to admit women and blacks. Still place where social consciousness exists. Oberlin President Ambar says, “Run to the noise!” These are uncomfortable and challenging / polarizing times often painful – but freedom of speech is part of what sets American democracy apart, yet it comes with responsibility. Oberlin is a very caring community and allows for and supports civil discourse. Unique “Sustained Dialogue” program existed even before latest political and social issues arose. Promotes respect and dignity for each other even when challenging the administration.
- **How is her approach to leadership and her role as Dean of Students / Student Affairs different:** “For me students are at the center of everything I /we do. You need to be very intentional in supporting each and every student, for the ups and the downs / from highest to lowest moments. Get out where they are. At Oberlin’s Conservatory there are so many performances and ways to engage with students. I tell students that leadership is not positional or about a title, any role can provide opportunity to lead, to step up. Leadership is about PEOPLE and caring about them, it’s a passion.”
- **What should business and other leaders expect in next generation:** Acknowledge a more diverse world / multi-diversional ways. Think about cultural competence; Humility; what works one place may not work everywhere; adaptability and flexibility are musts for leaders and for next generation.
- **Other insights and advice:** Important as a leader to model the way. Look for leaders you admire. But BE AUTHENTIC / be YOU. Be open and aware; more listening is important too. Tells students – you must do the work that means accomplishing goals etc. Do the external work as well as the internal work on yourself (to grow, to develop, to understand your blind spots, etc.) Focus on building relationships because as a leader, that precedes the rules.

- **KEY LEARNING:** “Rules without relationship breeds rebellion!” Lead with love not just be an enforcer. (That seems to be the secret to how Karen can be very results-oriented AND also earn the respect and followship of her team and the students in her care. She’s not just a transactional leader but a caring one.)
- **On having a coach:** “I’m always looking to learn,” Karen said. “Don’t assume you have arrived. Having a coach can be instrumental in seeing your blind spots, and helping you crystalize your next chapter or steps on your career journey.”
- **On change:** To be effective change cannot or should not be abrupt. Needs to be evolutionary. Leader needs to read the cues, hold the tension between the old and the new, show value in the past and importance of forward thinking and embracing a new vision. Give people a space to try. Fear is typically at the center of reluctance or holding on to the past. People want to know impact on ME. Address the impediments.
- **On what’s next for Karen Goff:** No single answer. It’s a journey and she’s not consumed with the destination. Knows she has a certain set of skills as a leader - she is most interested in continuing to focus on serving others, solving problems – staying in the present for now. Will she be celebrating something in 5 years? YES!
- **FINAL thoughts / key take-away:** “Be authentic; Character is congruent with authenticity. Be true to WHO you are. Do the right things for the right reasons. Top of her list for everyone: Character, courage, confidence, competence.