



Ep. 18: Karen Holmes Ward (COM'77), WCVB Director of Public Affairs, Community Services & Host of 'CityLine'

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

Karen Holmes Ward (COM'77) is a staple of the Boston media landscape and has built a distinguished career earning her a spot in the Massachusetts Broadcasters Hall of Fame. She is the Director of Public Affairs and Community Services at WCVB and many New England natives or transplants will recognize her as the Host and Executive Producer of the weekly TV talk show, *CityLine*. Karen joined us on Proud to BU to unpack her journey to Boston University, the many lessons she learned while finding her passion in the local media industry and her experience as the leader of BU's Black Alumni Leadership Council.

Podcast Transcript:

Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations, and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU podcast. My guest today is the director of Public Affairs and Community Services at WCVB Boston, Karen Holmes Ward. If you still live in New England, you'll also recognize Karen as the host and executive producer of the award winning weekly TV talk show, *Cityline*. Karen graduated from the College of Communication in 1977, and since then she's built a distinguished career culminating in her recent induction into the Massachusetts broadcaster's Hall of Fame. Karen sat down with me to reflect on what inspired her to pursue a career in broadcast journalism, how she climbed her way up the ladder within the industry, and what continues to motivate her now. Karen Holmes Ward, you are a graduate of the Boston University School of Public Communications, now COM. Tell us a little bit about what you're doing for work now.

Karen Holmes Ward: Currently, I am the Director of Public Affairs and Community Services at WCVB Channel 5, and I also host a program that comes on every Sunday at noon called *Cityline*. And in my role as Director of Public Affairs, I am a part of our nine member department head group and I oversee all of Channel 5's outreach in the community or public service efforts, our partnerships with nonprofits in the Greater Boston area. I also, with our general manager Bill Fine, manage our editorial board, and as host and executive producer of *Cityline*. In addition to actually hosting the program, I'm responsible for getting topics, guests, etc. on to make sure the show gets on every Sunday.

Jeff: Well, thank you again for being here. I feel like I've seen you on my television for at least half of my life.

Karen: That's right, you'd be surprised how many people come up to me now and say, "Oh, my mother used to make me watch you when I was little". Ugh.

Jeff: Did you grow up in the Boston area?

Karen: I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. I went to Shaker Heights High School and I was in the media club and in Cleveland. And that was kind of where my interest in broadcasting began.

Jeff: Well, what led you to the media club?

Karen: Well, when I was in elementary school and junior high school, I was always the person that was called on by the teacher or the principal to speak in front of the school assembly at Thanksgiving to deliver the Thanksgiving poem. I was always the person that somehow was called on to stand up in front of the class and read the assignment from last night's homework. So I got used at an early age to kind of hearing myself talk and speak. I was our public address announcer in junior high and high school. So I would make morning announcements, like pay your library fines by the end of the day if you want your report card, or there'll be a bake sale in the girl's gymnasium to benefit the cheerleaders, you know, that type of thing.

Jeff: You've literally been doing this your whole life, then.

Karen: And then in high school I was the first woman to do play by play basketball announcing.

Jeff: Amazing. How did you know - at what point in your life, I mean obviously, in high school you joined the media club. When did you decide that you were going to pursue it as a career and how did that translate to you coming to Boston to attend BU?

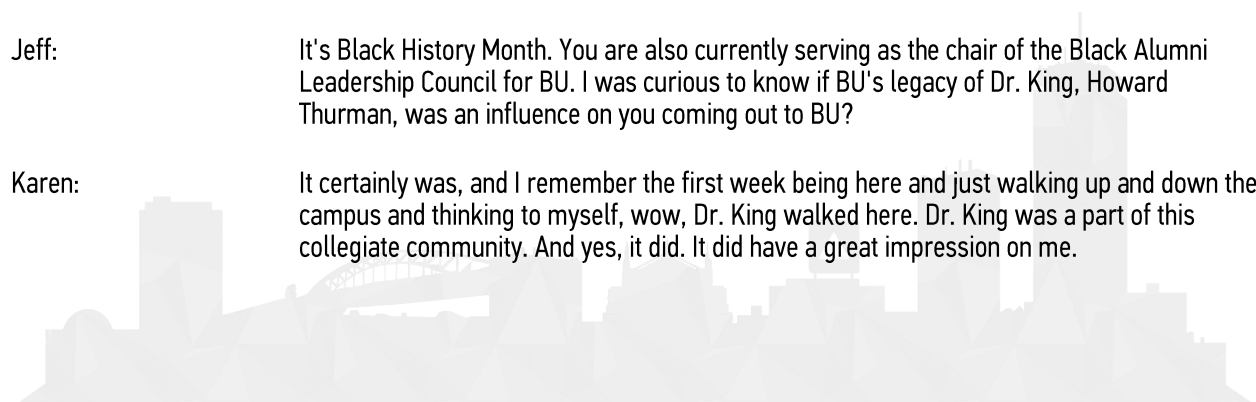
Karen: Well it is very interesting you would ask that question. In addition to being pretty good at public speaking, I was also in AP English most of that time. And my 11th grade AP English teacher suggested, have you thought about a career in journalism? And I guess I really, really kind of hadn't done so. My mother's a teacher and my dad is an attorney, so I kind of always thought I was going to go to law school. But after I talked to my AP English teacher, I really thought about it seriously as a possibility for a career and started doing some research on schools for broadcast journalism. Boston University, Emerson, Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. Obviously there are many around the country and my parents wanted me to go to school closer to home because I was the first born. You know how parents are, they want you to stay close to home. And my dad had always told us that if we really believed in something that we needed to state our case, make our argument for it. And I really thought about how I was going to convince him to let me come to Boston University. My dad, in addition to being an attorney, was very involved in the civil rights movement in Cleveland and headed the Cleveland branch of the NAACP. So one night at dinner I made this grand speech and gist of it is that I said to my father, Dad, I want to go to Boston University because that is the school where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. went to school.

Jeff: I was going to ask you about that.

Karen: He just laughed. He laughed and he said, "Okay daughter, you got me, you can go." So that's how I convinced my parents to let me come here.

Jeff: It's Black History Month. You are also currently serving as the chair of the Black Alumni Leadership Council for BU. I was curious to know if BU's legacy of Dr. King, Howard Thurman, was an influence on you coming out to BU?

Karen: It certainly was, and I remember the first week being here and just walking up and down the campus and thinking to myself, wow, Dr. King walked here. Dr. King was a part of this collegiate community. And yes, it did. It did have a great impression on me.



Jeff: I'm going to jump around on you chronologically. I want to talk more about your role as the chair of the Black Alumni Leadership Council. What do you hope that, that organization of leaders can achieve for BU?

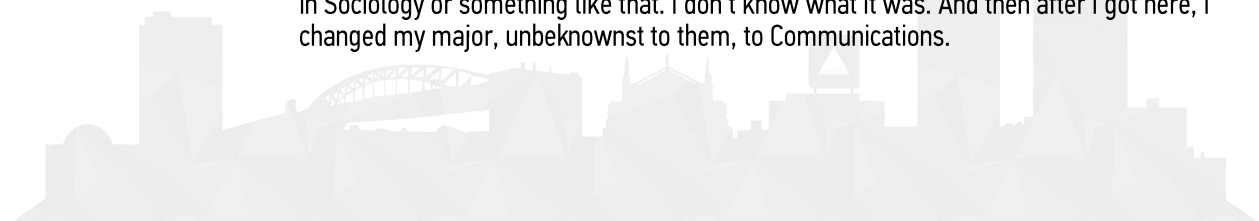
Karen: Well, as you know, the alumni group for black alumni is really kind of in its infancy. It's been around three years now, and what we hope to do is reconnect alumni, African American alumni, with the school. I think in many cases, once you graduate, you move out of the city, you don't always reconnect back with the campus. And so many things, so many wonderful things have happened here on BU's campus since many of us graduated that we don't know about. So our main goal is to get as many black alumni from as many different years as possible to just kind of reconnect, come back to campus. We have created a Facebook page which we call a virtual campus, and what we're doing is posting old pictures, posting information about what's going on here at the campus, kind of celebrating the diversity of past black alumni, sharing the diversity that's currently on campus. Many of the staff members, many of the initiatives that people don't know about, as a way of drawing people back into what drew them to BU in the first place.

Jeff: I want to rewind the clock on you now. So much about what we talk about is keeping people connected to BU. When you stepped on the campus as a first year student, how long did it take you to feel connected to BU? Did it happen in your first year? What was your life like as a first year student?

Karen: Well, my first year I was in Towers, which at the time was a girls' dormitory. But guys could come in if they had a food card, but they had to be out by a certain time of the day. I think people are just like, what? That must have been a really long time ago. But yeah, Towers on Bay State Road. Beautiful. And I had a group of friends, some of whom were from Cleveland, Ohio that I knew who went to my high school, who also came to Boston University. So I had a group of people that I was connecting with when I first got here. And the Martin Luther King Center on Bay State Road was still open and in effect, so that was always a place where you could go and hang out. But BU was a big campus and there are a lot of people here. So, we'd hang out at the George Sherman Union. I think one of the teachers I had was someone that one of my parents knew. So you try to find a way to connect, but I think most freshmen feel disconnected the first year. I mean, that's just normal. You're in a new environment. Nobody's making sure that you get up to go to class if you sleep through your alarm clock. No one's reminding you of all the things that have to be done, to get up and out the house like your parents did when you were at home. So there's always that little transition.

Jeff: I was definitely going to ask you about places that you were hanging out. I'm guessing that in addition to academic work, there might've been some student organizations that you were a part of. But tell me more about the process of learning about media and mass communications. Some professors maybe that stand out, other mentors you had during your time at BU? Anything you can tell me about that?

Karen: Sure. Well, interestingly, even though I convinced my father to let me go to Boston University, he still wanted me to go to law school. So, I had expressed an interest in communication, but because, at the time there were not a lot of black women in television and communication. And so like most parents, they wanted to make sure that their child went to school and graduated with a degree that would give them a career so that they could support themselves. So when I got to BU, I told my parents I was just going to major in Sociology or something like that. I don't know what it was. And then after I got here, I changed my major, unbeknownst to them, to Communications.



Jeff: Did you know you were going to do that the whole time?

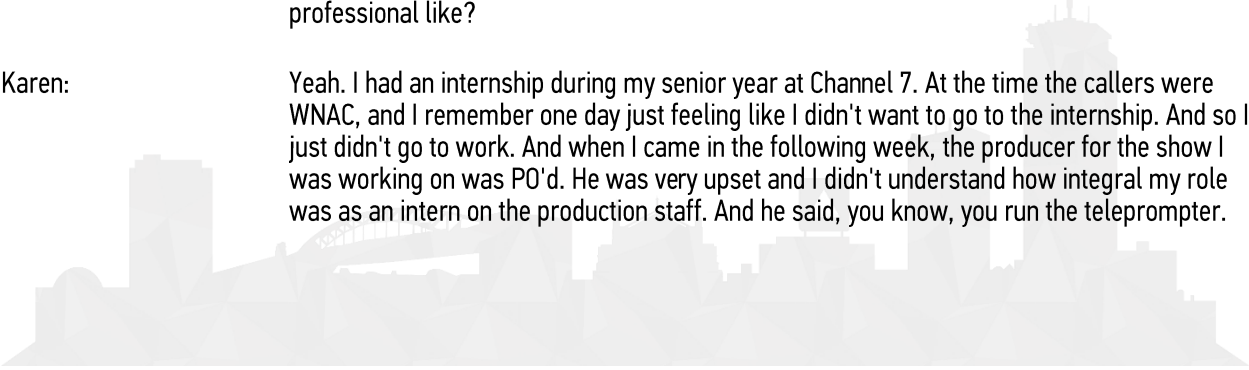
Karen: Yes, I did. I changed it to broadcast journalism. I don't remember now if they were mad or not. They just kinda went with it. But I think the compromise was that I told them I was minoring, which I did, in politics and history, which is a good entree if you want to go to law school. So that was kind of the compromise. So once I got into SPC, I had an advisor by the name of Blaine Latelle who was a war correspondent for CBS. He was on the faculty here at BUSPC and just very creative in terms of teaching the classes. And I think once you get your requirements out of the way and you're able to take the interesting additional classes, Blaine's I thought was just wonderful because he didn't just focus on book learning. He gave you information, practical experience that would take you into career. And by the time I was a senior, I had excelled enough to be accepted into one of the extracurricular programs during that year. SPC had a project to send students to New York and Kansas City to report back to Boston radio stations who could not afford to send their reporters to the conventions that year. So they set up a studio in Columbia University, and every day our advisors Blaine Latelle and Dave Claytelle acted as the assignment editors and they would send us college students out into the big city to go get a story. So I had to go find and get a story with Walter Mondale or one day I had to go interview Jesse Jackson. You had to come back. File your story. And it's interesting. The general manager at Channel Five Bill Fine, who was also a graduate of BUSPC was the anchor person in that radio setup. So we'd all come back, file our stories. Bill would sit there in the studio and feed it back to all the radio stations in Boston. So I mean, that was great experience. It was great experience because you had to operate under pressure. You had to use your wits, you know, how do you manage the big city when you're a college student, how do you get to Walter Mondale? How do you figure out how to interview Jesse Jackson? So that kind of stuff I value about our education here at BU. The opportunity to get the practical experience.

Jeff: What kind of decisions did you have to make as you were finishing your degree about moving on to that first big job off campus? I knew you started out in radio, right? Can you tell us about how that went?

Karen: I did! Well, again, another BU connection, Blaine Latelle had a very close working relationship with the news director at WEEL, the all-news radio station. His name was Mike Wheeler and Blaine did a good job of calling the people he knew in the city to say, "Will you take an interview with this student?", "Please take an interview with this student". And he would kind of really assure us into our entry-level positions. And so my opportunity was at WEEL and you know, it was all not a bed of roses. I interviewed for a job as a news writer and at the time with all news radio station, you just write new stories over and over again for 24/7. That's all you do. And my writing speed was not good and I did not pass the writing test. So I was of course, very dejected and disappointed. Came back to Blaine, told him I didn't get the job and he worked with me on my writing speed. And then I went to take the test a second time and I got the job. So again, support from BU.

Jeff: Sure. Tell me a little bit about that first job off campus. Some of the lessons you learned that maybe you didn't get to read in a textbook, those skills that you felt like you needed. I mean you talked about writing speed, obviously, but what were those first few years as a professional like?

Karen: Yeah. I had an internship during my senior year at Channel 7. At the time the callers were WNAC, and I remember one day just feeling like I didn't want to go to the internship. And so I just didn't go to work. And when I came in the following week, the producer for the show I was working on was PO'd. He was very upset and I didn't understand how integral my role was as an intern on the production staff. And he said, you know, you run the teleprompter.



At the time it wasn't a union situation. You run the teleprompter and when you weren't here, we didn't have anybody to do it. And we had to scramble and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And he read me the riot act and I felt so bad because I hadn't really thought of it in that way. And you know, fast forward, I have those same conversations with the interns that I have now. No, you committed to do this. This internship is your rehearsal for real life. And in real life, you just can't decide you don't want to come to work. You got to come to work. So those are the kinds of things you learn early. And then just being dependable, being on time, understanding that there's a hierarchy in terms of who's the boss and who's not the boss and if someone who's got years more experienced than you do, suggests you do something in a certain way, you should do it that way because they know what they're doing and you don't. So those are the kinds of things that you learn early on.

Jeff: So relatively quickly in your career though, you made the move to Channel 5 WCVB and started working in public affairs. You've been there for quite a long time. I think it's unusual that a professional would stay with the same company for as long as you have. Tell us more about that path. I assume it hasn't all been a straight line for you, that there have been some twists and turns. But how have you kept things relevant for you? How have you been able to keep yourself happy? And in a position for a couple of decades now.

Karen: So, after my job at WEEL as a news writer, there was a position open at WILD radio, which at the time was the daytime, black-owned radio station and they had an opening for an afternoon news announcer and I knew I wanted to be on air. So I left WEEL, was able to land the job at WILD, was the afternoon news announcer. And then I was promoted to news director there and morning drive announcer, and I hosted a radio talk show every day from 10 to 11:00 AM. Learned a lot about the city. And back to this threat about my parents before I moved to Channel 5. When we were at WILD radio, it was one of the first times the pope came to visit Boston, and originally the pope was supposed to go through Roxbury and then last minute they changed his route and he didn't go through the black community where there was a very large black Catholic population. Big uproar. So that was one of the things that we covered at WILD, lots of coverage on that story. And that particular year I won a broadcast radio award from the Massachusetts Legislative Black Caucus and took it home, showed my parents. My father was in city council at the time and when I got home for Christmas, there was a nice resolution under the Christmas tree; whereas, wherefore, Karen Holmes, blah, blah, blah, a long resolution. Anyway, that was to me my father's way of acknowledging that I had had made it in this career. Okay. So I stayed at WILD for two years and I hear there's a producer slot, associate producer slot open at Channel 5 and all along I had been freelancing at WGBH on their 10 o'clock news. I had been freelancing at WBC. Um, there was also a TV station here in Boston and no longer exists Channel 68, I was doing stuff on their news. So lots of freelance opportunities, but nothing full time. And I was able to get an interview with Phil Balboni who, many people will know. He was the public affairs person at Channel 5 and he ended up founding this world news service that I'm sure many people know about. Anyway, they had interviewed someone else who they really wanted for that job, but that person's salary request was way out of line for what the position paid. And someone told me that they were dissatisfied with what the other person was asking. So I called Phil Balboni back. It just happened to be the day before Thanksgiving and asked for a second interview and said, I'll be glad to come in tomorrow to talk to you. And he said, well, you know, you can come in Monday, tomorrow is Thanksgiving. But I was just so eager. I was ready. Be persistent. So I ended up getting the job at Channel 5 and had not done real detailed production, learned quickly. I had lots of other friends who were in those positions at other stations and I would go home every night and call them on the phone, what do I need to do? What's this? Tell me about that. You know, kind of a little sink or swim, learn as you go. Picked it up fairly quickly and was able to get promoted over the years from associate producer to producer. Then I got back on air and became host. And

then as time goes on, getting promoted through the ranks to where I am today. And your question was why did you stay at WCVB so long? Well, WCVB is quite a television station. There was a New York Times article, I'm not quite sure of the year, but that said that WCVB was the best local station in the country. And at the time when I started at Channel 5, Boston was the fifth largest television market. Now I think we're down to maybe seven or eight. And the journalism here in this market is very competitive. I was just blessed to land at a station like Channel 5 early in my career. There are many people at Channel Five who have been there longer than I have. Jorge Quiroga just retired. He stayed at Channel 5 for 40 years. I could just tick off names. So many people at our station come and they stay because it's a great station to work for. A great station to work at. Channel 5 has produced lots of programming that was syndicated nationally. We are the biggest station in the Hearst Television Radio Group. Hearst Television owns us and it's a great place to work. There was really no need to go any place else.

Jeff: That's great. All right, again, most people know you from their TVs and Cityline. That's certainly where I had seen you first. Tell us a little bit more about that show. When did it start? I don't know how long you've been on the air with that.

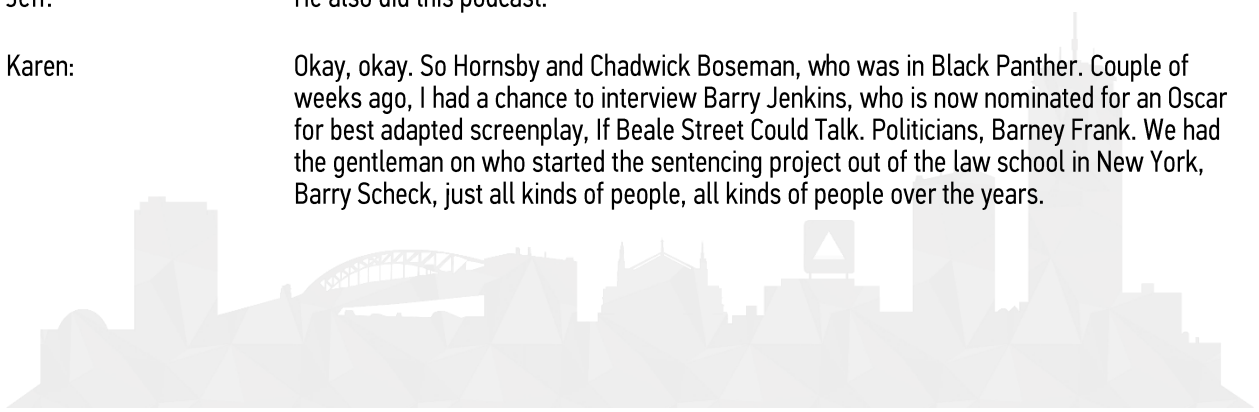
Karen: Well, WCVB was founded in 1972 by a group of community leaders that said they wanted to provide more local programming in the Boston market than the other television stations were doing. And they've kept to that commitment. Cityline was one of the first shows that was on the air on Channel 5. at the time it was called, um, City Streets? I'm sorry, it was first called Third World, then it was called City Streets. And then the name became Cityline. I joined the program staff by the time it was called Cityline. So lots of great local programming there at the station. I think Aqui was another program aimed at the Latino community. And of course now everybody, I hope watches Chronicle, which is on Monday through Friday 7:30 to 8:00 PM. Chronicle is the longest running locally-produced magazine show in the country in the prime access slot. In many stations and other markets, you've got jeopardy, you've got Wheel of Fortune. But we're very lucky here in Boston to have a show like Chronicle. We can turn on and see what's going on next door or in your community. It's a treasure in New England.

Jeff: As the host of Cityline, you've interviewed some incredible people. I'm curious to know just some of the interviews you've done that stand out in your career as being your favorite.

Karen: Well, Cityline is another treasure because we really have the freedom to produce stories that we think are appropriate for our viewing audience. And we have a pretty wide latitude. So over the years, I have interviewed all sorts of people from Jesse Jackson when he ran for president. One of the scariest interviews I did was minister Louis Farrakhan. We were searched by his fruit of Islam guard before we came in to actually do the interview to make sure we didn't have guns. I think right around that time there were threats against his life. We have had tons of art people, Patti Labelle, Gladys Knight, Billy Eckstein, more recently Russell Hornsby, who is a BU graduate

Jeff: He also did this podcast.

Karen: Okay, okay. So Hornsby and Chadwick Boseman, who was in Black Panther. Couple of weeks ago, I had a chance to interview Barry Jenkins, who is now nominated for an Oscar for best adapted screenplay, If Beale Street Could Talk. Politicians, Barney Frank. We had the gentleman on who started the sentencing project out of the law school in New York, Barry Scheck, just all kinds of people, all kinds of people over the years.



Jeff: So I can only assume that, I know you've been on the campus a bunch. I know that you've probably met with students. What kind of questions are they asking you about? Advice you have to share about, you know, getting into production, getting into being on air, With all of your experience. What advice do you give today's people about breaking into that industry?

Karen: Well, when I was a student, I knew everything. And that is the case with many students today. And that's good because you want people to have that confidence and that resilience and that sense of I can do anything. But what some of the things I tell our interns when they come to our station is not to think in terms of just broadcast television. There are so many different ways now to get your message out. You need to be more rounded. So to think about podcasting, producing podcasts, think about digital production, think about producing content for the web. Think about producing longer documentaries or feature films. Just because it doesn't get picked up by Hollywood, so you can put it on Amazon or Netflix. There are so many different ways to engage in a broadcast career nowadays. And so I think that's kind of what I share if people were to ask me, what do I do? What do I do? The second thing is, be persistent. Along the way, many people told me no or I didn't get this job, or, no, you can't do this can't do that. You can't listen to the word No. This field is very competitive. And if you have a passion for it and you think you can contribute and achieve, then you just have to keep at it and one of those one, one day that door will open and you just have to get through that little crack. Once you get through the little crack, you're good to go.

Jeff: A question I sometimes ask our guests is about success because I think it can be a complicated conversation to have with people. You made a reference to your dad giving you a proclamation from the city as a young person because in his eyes, you were successful. Since then, you have won awards for AP, Best Public Affairs Show in 2008, Journalist of the Year from the National Association of Black Journalists. Last year you were inducted into the Massachusetts Broadcaster's Hall of Fame. Are you able to feel that you've been successful?

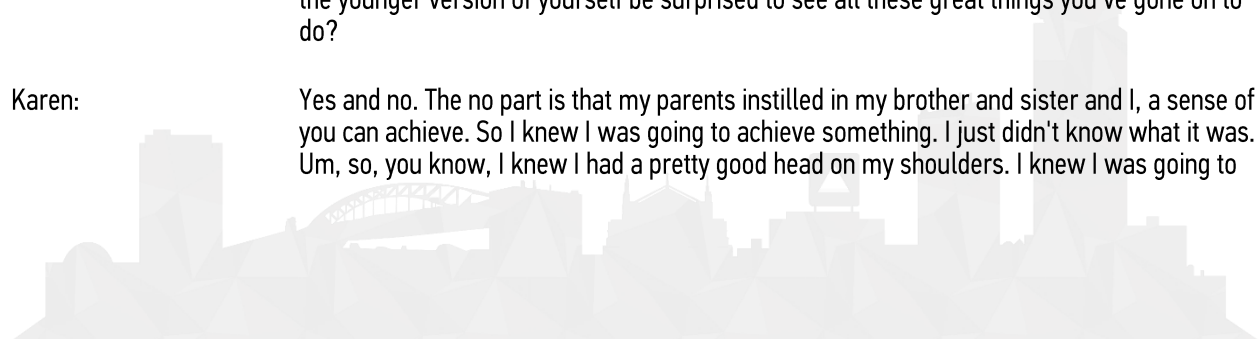
Karen: Well, you know, it's funny, you hear people say this all the time, you don't get in it for the awards, but it's nice to be acknowledged for your work. I did have a banner year last year. I got two honorary doctorates last year. I got the Ida B. Wells Barnett Award for women in the media. Ida B. Wells was an African American woman who was a journalist back in the late 1800s, 1900s, just a little aside from the NAACP. And it's just been remarkable to receive all of these accolades. When you're in the job day to day, you don't really think of it in terms of your body of work, you're trying to get the next show on the air or get the next project off the ground. So yes, it's nice to be acknowledged. It's a little humbling. It's a little, I feel a little self conscious about it.

Jeff: Well that's why it's hard to talk about. Right?

Karen: Yeah, it is. Yeah. I was honored to receive a lifetime achievement award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. And it's just, it's to be recognized by your peers, but [whispering] I feel a little awkward.

Jeff: So when you look back on yourself as a student here in the 70's, would that student, would the younger version of yourself be surprised to see all these great things you've gone on to do?

Karen: Yes and no. The no part is that my parents instilled in my brother and sister and I, a sense of you can achieve. So I knew I was going to achieve something. I just didn't know what it was. Um, so, you know, I knew I had a pretty good head on my shoulders. I knew I was going to



be good at doing some of that. Just didn't know what it was. Yes. Yeah, that young student would be surprised that 2019 Karen has been honored in this way. M-hm.

Jeff: Well, thank you again for what you're doing with the Black Alumni Leadership Council. It's incredibly important. Thank you for all that you do for BU and thanks for carving out time for it.

Karen: All right, well if there are any Black Alumni within earshot of this podcast, please sign up for our Facebook page. It's the Black Alumni Network at Boston University. It is easy to find if you're on Facebook and please join us.

Jeff: Thanks again, Karen.

Karen: Thanks.

Jeff: My thanks once more to Karen Holmes Ward for joining me on the podcast. I enjoyed hearing about what brought her to BU and the bold moves she made here on campus, and later in the media landscape of Boston to achieve her dreams. I also want to thank her for the work that she's doing as a chair of the BU Black Alumni Leadership Council. I look forward to seeing you back on campus soon, Karen. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU podcast. Do you like what we're doing? Please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy, and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni relations. Our themes are from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit bu.edu/alumni/podcast.

