Educational Experiences of a Psychology Professor: Dr. Robert Kugelman

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Laura DiIulio
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Laura: Ok, so for the first question, what schools did you attend in your childhood? What were they like?

Kugelmann: My first school was Holy Family School in Weehawken New Jersey, I went kindergarten and first grade there, and that’s where I had my first friend, that we used to together in the yard next to his house and I remember I was madly in love with Mrs. Johnson my kindergarten teacher, she had red hair. I used to walk to school I was able I was five years old but I was able to walk to school by myself, I wasn’t supposed to but I did

Laura: Yeah

Kugelmann: And I’d even walk home by myself it was, you know I had to walk I don’t know how many blocks but past a business district, the downtown area, but it was no problem.

Laura: It was a bit of a different world probably back then that sounds so nice

Kugelmann: It was it was kind of a city you know it was a city setting

Laura: Yeah,

Kugelmann: Then we moved and from second grade to eighth grade I went to St. Mary’s School in Middletown New Jersey

Laura: So catholic school

Kugelmann: Catholic school, yes, all the way through. And that was fine we had huge classes there were 60 kids in a class, one teacher all day

Laura: Wow

Kugelmann: Yeah, I don’t know how they, and it was mainly nuns, I don’t know how they did it, would’ve drove me nuts

Laura: And just to, moving on to

Kugelmann: High school?

Laura: Oh the, well the next question is, which this can incorporate high school as well I guess

Kugelmann: Ok

Laura: Who was a favorite teacher that you had

Kugelmann: In grade school?

Laura: Or at any time, I know you mentioned the kindergarten teacher with the red hair

Kugelmann: Yeah, I wouldn’t call her my favorite teacher, I don’t remember what she taught, I guess how to write, things like that

Laura: Yeah, yeah

Kugelmann: But I don’t remember that specifically. My favorite teacher was in college and it was a man named Patrick Mullahy, M-U-L-A-H-Y, and he taught, I had him for three psychology classes, and I really liked him. He was, he had a reputation of being gruff and mean, but he was a delight, and I learned an awful lot from him and it affected, he was the only person I kept in contact, you know, the only faculty member I kept in contact with after I graduated.

Laura: Really

Kugelmann: I went over and had dinner with him once years later I corresponded with him, and fortunately I, he died around 1980 but I did have some, you know, contact with him. There were a lot, years later I realized there were a lot of questions I might have asked him that I never thought to ask him at the time

Laura: Yeah
K: But, that’s the way it goes
L: And what, what university was this?
K: Manhattan College
L: Manhattan College, ok I remember you said in class
K: Yeah, in the Bronx
L: Nice, what was something memorable that he installed in you, I guess psychology maybe?
K: Yeah, he taught, he had been, I don’t know what exactly his relationship was with Harry Stack Sullivan the great American psychiatrist, but he introduced me to Sullivan’s work, and he wrote on it extensively. Sullivan developed what he called an interpersonal theory of psychiatry, and when I learned about phenomenology I went oh, Sullivan was on the same track. So, Sullivan, or what I learned from Sullivan’s approach and that stuck with me ever since
L: Yeah, whoa. What hobbies or extracurricular activities were you involved in?
K: When in college?
L: Growing up, it could be college, high school, elementary
K: Ohh, we, the kids, I had a lot of kids in my neighborhood so we did baseball in the summer, and football in the fall and winter, and then basketball later on. I was terrible at them, but I liked that. Bicycling, a friend of mine and I, we bicycled when we lived in New Jersey to Valley Forge, it was 100 miles, when I was 16
L: Is that in New York?
K: That’s in Pennsylvania
L: Oh Pennsylvania ok wow
K: Overnight we made it all day we stayed at a motel and the next day we rode our bikes out to Valley Forge where we spent the day and the next day we rode home again. So I liked biking, if my high school had a bicycle team or club I would have joined but they didn’t and you know, it never even occurred to me that that was even possible, but I liked, I went all over the county down to the beach and the hills and everything. So that was a hobby.
L: Awesome, well when did you become interested in psychology and in the human sciences?
K: My junior year in college
L: Junior year
K: I was a math major, and I had taken a semester off and I was doing my quote on quote Rome semester, I was travelling around Europe on my own
L: Oh, ok
K: And it dawned on me at that point, I don’t wanna do math, what am I gonna do with math?
So I was kind of thinking about that and I went into a bookstore in Thessalonica Greece and just happened to be there, and I found a book called *Understanding Media* by Marshall McLuhan, and I read it and I thought that’s what I wanna do. And it was a book about the way consciousness is affected by technology, you know first the alphabet and then printing press and then things like the typewriter, the television, it was a really interesting study by this guy who’s a, by training has a literary critic. But he was interested in this, well you could call it history of consciousness
L: Ok
K: And that really grabbed me so I said how do I do that so I took classes in psychology, anthropology and sociology but psychology seemed to me the closest to it.
L: Did you return to Manhattan College?
86 K: I did return to Manhattan College after taking the semester off and I finished my major in math.
87 L: Oh, ok
88 K: Because if I had changed majors I would have had to stay an extra year.
89 L: Yeah
90 K: And I would have lost my draft deferral, because you only got a draft deferral for four years and I didn’t wanna lost, I didn’t wanna risk not graduating.
92 L: Yeah, yeah.
93 K: So I decided, I figured out a way to take the minimum amount of courses I needed in math to graduate.
94 L: I can understand that!
95 K: And took all my classes in whatever I felt was you know, so I took two philosophy classes.
96 I took four psychology classes, I took the equivalent of lit trad I and II.
97 L: Ok.
98 K: But they didn’t call it that but it was essentially that.
99 L: Like an English class.
100 K: Oh it was great, it was great.
101 L: Let me see what do we have next. So what would you recall as some political or world event that impacted your education as a student?
103 K: The Vietnam war.
104 L: Yeah.
105 K: I started college as a very conservative student, I had campaigned in my county for Barry Goldwater in 1964, and I was a right-winger anti-communist because that’s what I grew up with.
107 L: Yeah!
108 K: You know it was like, as someone said the American religion in the 1950’s was anti-communism, so it was certainly part of my family, my community, my parish, and I remember going down I was doing some volunteering down in Harlem tutoring kids on Saturday morning with a friend of mine who was, whose parents had met working for the Catholic Workers, so he was as leftist as I was a rightist, and I remember walking back from our tutoring walking along the streets of Harlem at like 10 o’clock in the morning arguing over the Vietnam war. That first summer in between freshman and sophomore year I got a job with this, through this program with the archdiocese of New York called Summer in the City, so this would have been summer 1967, so it was a pivotal year in history, as well as for me personally. And I was living and working in the lower east side of Manhattan and I saw for the first time poverty, I saw for the first time people who were subjected to systematic oppression, it was a mainly Puerto Rican neighborhood but not exclusively, and it turned me around. So by the end of that summer I was ready to join Fidel.
121 L: Oh gosh.
122 K: So I was, I was in ROTC, I got out of ROTC on conscientious objector grounds so really it was that experience in the lower east side that really opened, as I saw it, opened my eyes to you know the hypocrisy that underlied a lot of American society. Because I had only seen things as a middle class white guy, and now I saw, you know a little bit because I was living with you know, had friends down there, working with kids and so on, and it just was a real transformative moment.
127 L: When you realized how privileged that you had been?
K: I was privileged and I was also blind to how other people were living and that affected my life, still does.

L: It’s almost as if once you see that, you can’t, there’s no going back

K: No going back

L: You can’t, you know you can’t ignore that

K: No. So it did you know it changed my, you know like, I remember when I resigned, when I got out of ROTC I wrote a letter to my parents, my father was really disappointed, but he also he accepted you know he didn’t reject me or anything but he was disappointed because who’s gonna fight the communists? That was the way it was phrased, and you know he meant it sincerely you know and I remember writing this long thoughtful letter to him about where I was.

L: So what about as a teacher, going back to the same question, what were some political or world events that impacted your career as a teacher or how you look at things as a teacher and an educator?

K: I guess the biggest thing that’s affected me in terms of being a teacher has little to do with psychology, and it’s the environmental crisis, the way we’re, we I mean not just the United States, but industrial society while it has given us a lot of goods it’s also depleting and destroying the environment and that’s my major concern politically and you know I don’t have a chance to teach climate change or anything like that but that’s you know that kind of ecological perspective is really important to me

L: Yeah

K: And you know I think there’s, I’m not pessimistic, but it’s a source of real concern that we may not do enough to prevent serious consequences from climate change.

L: No yeah absolutely that was something I noticed actually, moving from New Hampshire where, you know the northeast is very, well not very, but I mean more eco-friendly I would say, and moving here you know, where’s the recycling, where are the recycling bins? It threw me off

K: Yeah, yeah but you know even where I came from, lived in, I grew up in Middletown New Jersey which is a very conservative republican area

L: Yeah

K: Climate change and environmental things are not a political topic, everybody’s on board

L: Yeah

K: So like New Jersey is really strong like in solar panels, solar energy, and so on

L: Yes, yes

K: But not so much in Texas, although in some respects Texas is doing alright, with solar and wind, despite the idiocy of our politicians, and I won’t redact that

L: No. Ok, let me see, so for our next question, how long have you been teaching?

K: 39 years

L: 39 years, ok

K: 35 of them here

L: Wow I didn’t realize you’d been here that long

K: Yeah since 1982

L: So you’ve really seen, you know, the school, how its changed

K: Oh yeah, yeah

L: Wow that’s crazy

K: It’s crazy, the new buildings, you know I walk, I can walk across campus like the
beginning of the semester I was walking across campus from here to the SB Hall for class and I just started remembering all the faculty members that I’ve known that have died, I think it’s a long list now. But a lot of good people that have been here

L: Yeah I mean if you’re there that long you know, I’m sure that you knew a lot of people

K: Yeah

L: Wow, so I guess the next question was how long have you been teaching at university level but

K: Yeah 39 years and I taught at Seattle University for 4 years

L: Ok, ok

K: And then I came back here in ’82 and I’ve been here ever since

L: Ok. What stands out to you as the most formative experience that you’ve had as a teacher?

K: The most formative experience I’ve had as a teacher, hmm, I guess there’s not one thing that stands out but it’s getting to know some of the students you know on a more personal level over the years you know once in a while there’s a student I mean you know I try to be, I don’t play favorites or anything like that

L: Yeah

K: But every once in a while there’s a student that really has a gift and that you know I feel a strong obligation to try to cultivate that student’s talents and sometimes that does happen, you know you see a student that’s, boy I wish I were that bright, or talented, so that’s really enlightening for me. The other thing that, one of the things that drew me back to UD was the fact that you know you do have these common educational experiences that students here, you know I don’t think that students here are that much different than students elsewhere in terms of raw ability, but the expectation here is that you take learning seriously for its own sake, and that’s a gift and that’s why I returned and why I have stayed.

L: So I guess kind of piggy backing on that, what are some differences that you have seen in respect to students from when you started teaching to now to 2017?

K: You know sometimes it’s said oh students are not as good as they used to be, I don’t think that’s true I think that’s nonsense. My relationships with students have changed as I’ve gotten older and they’ve stayed the same age, I remember when I first walked in to a classroom like up at Seattle University, I wasn’t that much older than the upper division class of the upper division students

L: Oh wow that must be so weird!

K: It was really weird, I wanted to sit in the back and wait for the teacher to show up. You know and its different being someone who is like 30 teaching 22 year olds and someone who’s over 60. So my relationship with students has changed partly as a function that you know that as I’ve aged and you know I’m dealing with people of the same age in the 18-22 year age range, that relationship has changed because now I can say well you guys are younger than my youngest kid, you know in your class right now. And that’s, that’s weird. Not weird, its, I’ve also met students who tell me that “oh you taught my mother” you know so that’s, so my relationship has changed as I see students more now as the way I view my own children than I used to. I don’t mean that in a patronizing kind of way like I think of them as kids but I think of them you know when I see the classes and the students I think of my own children, and I couldn’t do that years ago. So the students are different but it’s not because they’ve gotten better or worse I mean there are different issues, you know you have the internet and cell phones and all that stuff, but I haven’t, to me that hasn’t been that
significant a change, its opened up new possibilities and created some difficulty but its, I think students are equally talented, equally serious, equally able to write as they were 30 years ago, you won’t hear everybody say that I don’t think L: That’s a positive, I like that, you know we get a lot of flak as millennials that we’re certain things, we’re that, you know K: You know part of that is “you kids” “kids these days”, but old people always say that, it’s part of the you might say archetype of being older, you see the younger generation as defective, where you didn’t see yourself defective when you were young L: No, hindsight is 20/20 I guess K: Yeah or sometimes its misty L: So going back to, kind of University of Dallas and your other experience in Seattle, is there anything or what have you noticed at UD as opposed to where you taught in Seattle about like it could be like the students, the environment, is there anything that kind of struck you as different? K: Yeah the students up there they were, they could have fit onto UD’s campus there’s no problem with that in terms of like their abilities or what they look like, so on so forth like that. They did tend to be, tended to be more practically oriented and they didn’t have the advantage of a common curriculum so it was hard to make connections with psychology and other stuff, like I couldn’t just say you know Achilles you know and because they wouldn’t have, maybe some of them would have read The Iliad but the rest of them wouldn’t have L: Yeah that’s very true I wouldn’t have thought of that K: Yeah or I can say you know, well Aristotle’s 4 causes, now I know most of the students in the class haven’t had like that but they know they’re gonna get it and they expect to get it. So I think it’s the common curriculum the core curriculum that really does make a difference outside of the core and it does shape students in a way that’s distinctive. L: Ok, and so just for the final question, is there anything else you would like to add about anything we talked about, anything education or your experiences as a student or as a teacher? K: I guess I would add this because it’s not something you asked about that I’ve, even though you know this is a teaching university I’ve had enormous freedom to do research and to write on any topic that I want. I haven’t been in a situation where I have to do some kind of statistical analysis, I know people that have, you know if you’re not doing “real science” you’re not doing anything, but we don’t have that kind of pressure, and so I’ve had opportunities to be creative, to try to be creative at any rate, in ways that I might not have had elsewhere. L: Kind of greater independence in what you wanna pursue? K: Greater independence yeah and I feel that you know Dr. Donald Cowan when he was president talked about UD as a community of learners. So I see myself more as a learner than as a teacher, that’s why I said in that class you know “I don’t know what this mind means!” L: Yeah K: I mean you know that’s true though it’s an exploration for me it’s not something that I’m just you know jot out the old notes every semester, try to think things through, and that’s really what makes teaching a delight L: Yeah I’m sure that you learn a lot too by teaching K: I do, I do
L: So that is all the questions that I had if you had do you have anything else or anything that you can think
K: No that’s all for now, that’s a wrap
L: Alright

Acquired permission before the interview but did not remember to record it, so I went back and obtained it again from Dr. Kugelmann and captured it on tape
L: So I just have to tell you that I have your permission to write down everything that you said and to store the interview in the oral history archives
K: You have my permission to do that
L: And to interview you?
K: And to interview me, signed, Robert Kugelmann
L: Thank you so much