

MoATA Hall of Fame Spotlight

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Karen Fennell, MS, ATC, LAT

Hall of Fame Inductee 2016

By Katie Sniffen, MS, ATC

Career Beginnings

Karen Fennell grew up in East Peoria, Illinois. She gained her first exposure to sports medicine when the local sports medicine clinic would provide injury evaluations and screenings at her high school. Although she recalls being intrigued by someone telling her she had tight hamstrings, Karen actually had a passion for architecture at the time and attended Illinois Central College in 1987 to start her studies. When Karen's friend on the volleyball team tore her ACL, she got to work helping her recover by helping her get around campus and giving her rides to doctor's appointments. In the process, she became familiar with the team's Graduate Assistant athletic trainer, Mary Boutman. It didn't take long for Karen to switch her major to Physical Education. When she transferred to Illinois State University in 1989, she was enrolled as a double major in Secondary Education and Athletic Training to fit the model of becoming a high school athletic trainer and educator. Karen eventually switched to a full-time athletic training bachelor's degree and continued at ISU to pursue her master's degree in Athletic Training. During her graduate studies, she was a Graduate Assistant at Bradley University where she began to encounter many physicians, physical therapists, and subsequent mentors. Once she completed her Master of Science in 1993, she moved to St. Louis and has never left.

Karen recalls applying for close to 150 jobs after graduate school. She remembers interviewing for a job with baseball and wrestling at SIU-Carbondale. At the time, she knew it was a long shot for a female to be hired to work with two male sports, but she remains glad that she pursued so many opportunities.



Advice for Young Professionals

“Don't sell yourself short.” Karen elaborates by saying that we all make sacrifices to do what we love but underselling yourself will only lead to frustration. We need to stand up to the inequities. She encourages YPs to start documenting and sharing our worth/value models as a means of showing all the work we're doing as the “hub of the wheel.”

Karen also feels strongly that YPs need to view themselves as health care professionals and that the services we provide are health care services in an athletic realm. She envisions a setting in which the athletic training room is a health care facility, not an extension of the locker room.

Karen further encourages YPs to share what they're doing to help spread ideas and practices. She is adamant that the skills we possess as athletic trainers make us more marketable than many other professions. Our skill set is so easily transferable, and we should take advantage of the diverse opportunities this enables us to explore.

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She was not hired for that particular position and received a letter from the university indicating “budget constraints” prevented them from hiring a female. However, she later learned that Ed Thompson (head athletic trainer at SIU-C) was so impressed with her resume that he kept it, and when a position at St. Louis University opened up, he passed it on. She got a call from SLU asking if she was interested in the position. It wasn’t glamorous. She made \$19,500 living in the city with a car payment, but it became home for seven years.

Mentors

Karen considers many of the athletic trainers and physicians she’s encountered throughout her career as impactful mentors. There was a time when she wondered if she would ever know a hall of famer and now is extremely grateful to consider many HOF members her mentors. Among them are Kathy Schniedwind, Bill McGehee, David Draper, Bob “Doc” Bouman, Dr. Robert Burdge, Dr. Joseph Ritchie, and Dr. Steve Stahle.

Memorable Moments

Karen reflects on the idea of burnout stating that “this is the way it is” was engrained in athletic trainers from the beginning, leading to the inability to say, “no”. She recalls that while working in Conference USA, she was the only athletic trainer traveling with three sports throughout the year, across all seasons. She was curious about what her peers were doing and decided to survey the athletic trainers in the conference. That Fall she showed the data to her Associate Athletic Director, demonstrating her value and worth compared to the conference norms.

In the summer she was called into a meeting with both the Associate AD and Athletic Director; she thought she was about to lose her job. Instead, she received a raise. She jokes that although her responsibilities were not decreased, they certainly made the sacrifices hurt less.

Karen emphasizes that this experience highlights the need not only to demonstrate athletic training’s worth and value, but also to look at our peers to ensure our salaries and work environments are maintaining a high standard. Karen also alluded to the inequities she and many of her female colleagues experienced during this time. She recalls a colleague working with women’s basketball at another institution comparing herself to her male counterpart. He got a car as part of the men’s basketball staff. She was not offered the same compensation.

Contributions to the Profession

Karen has served the profession at the local, state, and national levels in a variety of capacities, consistently bringing tremendous passion, energy, and effort.

Karen feels that although she’s been inducted into the Hall of Fame, she still has a lot of work to do, so perhaps her legacy is still yet to be determined. Having just been named the MoATA president-elect, she intends to lean on her fellow Hall of Fame members for guidance and feedback.



Are you a Young Professional Athletic Trainer in Missouri? Join our Facebook Group at [MoATA Young Professional Athletic Trainers](#) to engage with peers about the transition to practice and professional socialization. Also follow us on Twitter [@MoATA_YP](#) for information on upcoming events and relevant news!