

Karoline Duffy

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JANET WEBER: This is *Journeys of Learning*, where we talk to students that have taken unconventional pathways to reach their educational goals. I'm Janet Weber, and I'm your host. I'm a counselor at De Anza College, and I created this podcast so that students will feel less alone on their own journeys of learning.

JANET WEBER: We are here with Karoline Duffy, and Karoline and I first met at Foothill College when she came in for counseling, and that was probably six years ago, I'm guessing.

KAROLINE DUFFY: About six ago sounds right. Yeah.

JANET WEBER: So I'm going to ask you to tell us a little bit about your background.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Okay.

I'm Karoline. I'm from the SF Bay Area so I grew up in Palo Alto. I lived with my grandmother for the majority of my life. I went to Gunn High School, and I had originally planned to go to the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film when I was finishing up high school, but I decided against it after, like, some further research and ended up at Foothill College.

JANET WEBER: I didn't know that, that you were going to go to drama school.

KAROLINE DUFFY: I was going to go to drama school. Yeah. But as far as, yeah, background goes, played, like, competitive soccer, got really involved in that until I was about 16 and then decided to stop playing sports and I transitioned into doing belly dancing and voice lessons. So that was kind of fun

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and more up my speed. And then I went to yoga school [laughing] when I was, like, out of high school, and I like animals. I have had dogs, and cats, and lizards all my life. So --

[both laughing]

JANET WEBER: And right now you have a lizard.

KAROLINE DUFFY: And right now I have a lizard named Debo. So yes. I've kept up the tradition so it's been great.

>> INSTRUCTOR: So tell us about your educational journey.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Oh, my educational journey has definitely been a long and windy road. Like I said, I originally thought I have going to go to drama school which that doesn't even really put you towards anything other than, like, that career. But I kind of decided for the cost and just being so far away -- like, again, I'm from Palo Alto and, like, the school was located in Los Angeles. I thought that I wasn't quite ready at the age of 18 to move that far away. I decided against it and to go to the local community college and decided to take some, like, art classes and stuff before, like, take the general education, get your G.E.s done. I took English classes, and art classes. And I was just trying to navigate, like, what do I want to do with my life? I didn't really know.

I have a learning disability. I have two learning disabilities: Dyslexia and A.D.H.D. So those two things definitely do make it more challenging to get through classes that I find very boring. I know everybody has that problem where, like, yeah, it's really difficult to focus, but when you can't stay still and you can't really read super great [laughing]. Learn to read, good school. Like, I --

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JANET WEBER: Yeah. That'll make it hard.

KAROLINE DUFFY: It makes it extra challenging. And I placed into, like, quite low on the math and quite low on the English classes so I did have to kind of finesse my way through it with English 1ST was, like, an example. So it had a real class and then the lab portion. But that took up, like, almost, like, four hours, but you only have to take two semesters of it so it was like okay. This is worthwhile of my time. So trying to take those little things where okay you're investing a little more time in and fortunately, like, I was able to work only part-time. I didn't have to pay rent and stuff. I was able to really get through those G.E.s quite easily.

But when it came to what I wanted to major in it was, like, I guess it will be art. Okay. Well, no. I won't make any money in art. So let me try and do communications. Oh, but I don't really like talking in front of people like this and in this setting, and I don't really know exactly what I would want to do with it. So then I remember I took a bit of a break from college for a while just, like, took a year off. I got, like, pretty interested in, like, music, and got more invested in my art stuff and belly dancing and things. But then decided, no. Like, you've got to finish up school.

So I went back and finished up.

JANET WEBER: Yes. I remember many conversations in my office about what it was that you wanted to do, and finding that right balance of something that you're passionate about but could also make money.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. Not that I'm, like, money hungry or anything.

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I just, like, want to be able to sustain myself. You know, be independent.

JANET WEBER: Mm hmm. To be financially independent.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Exactly. And not have to worry about, like, where my next paycheck is going to come. And not to say that there's not a way that you can do it with all of those fields that I had, like, mentioned, but just personally I know I'm not driven enough to, like [laughing] really push my art on, like, all the social media, and do all the extra stuff like that. It's just not in my personality.

But after coming back, that's when I also went and got involved with the Disability Resource Center, which is where I met Janet, and that exponentially made things easier for me being able to have somebody who was invested in, like, my education that really cared if I finished school, and how my life was going, and I met academic coach Bianca, and she really helped me develop a lot of strategies to be able to keep all of my projects and all of my work in an organized system. And she was also extremely cool, and he was, like, oh, my God, you are, like, an amazing, like, big sister I wish I had. Like, just incredible services provided through that.

JANET WEBER: She was a good example for you.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. She was a great example. And this is Disability Resource Center as a whole was just really, really key in helping me get on track to graduate so highly recommend checking that out.

JANET WEBER: What comes to mind for me right now is how well you worked with your learning difference and A.D.H.D., and I remember your

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notebooks and all the colored pens, and you would, like, draw out your quarter and your week with all the different colors, and projects, and I loved that because that is a really good way to accommodate both of those learning differences; right?

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah, definitely helps a lot to have that organization because it's just, like, my brain is all very jumbled. I'm, like, addicted to, like, TikTok, and I can't stop scrolling on it. And it's like what kind of a way -- I'm trying to describe it. My brain kind of feels like that, like TikTok just constantly rolling around and moving.

JANET WEBER: Mm.

>> STUDENT: So to have something sort of solid and visual right in front of you, like, you're going to get this done, and checking off a list and everything really helps a lot.

JANET WEBER: Yes. And even though the general ed classes were very hard to get through, you were very diligent in sticking with it, and just slowly like you said I had to finesse my way through the general ed.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah.

JANET WEBER: So it was finding the right classes, the right counselor, the right coach, the right professors, the right way to organize your mind, the right accommodation, the right way to study; right?

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. Exactly. Like, just figuring out, like, what worked for me. But that took me a lot longer than, like, other people.

Like, I transferred to Santa Monica College after being on and off at Foothill

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for four years. So when most people were graduating I was almost, like, just finishing up with those two year -- quote, unquote two years that you're supposed to have general education done. So I moved to L.A. when I was 23, and so I was already a year older than a lot of kids that were just starting. Because the Santa Monica College is the junior college, but they had this pilot program to get a bachelor's degree from the community college. And it was focused on UXUI, user experience user interface stuff, and I decided oh, you know, they -- I always wanted to live in L.A. Obviously, like, when I was 18 I tried to go to this drama school. So I always wanted to give it a go and see what's going on down south and decided to move there.

And it was fun. But I would say if you're going to go to a commuter school you're really going to have to, like, put yourself out there to find friends. Like, when I moved to L.A., the fact that Santa Monica was a commuter school made it rather difficult to have a social life and to feel stable in one place so I ended up coming back and finishing up my graduate degree at San Francisco State University. But because of the timing, when I applied I wanted to go into their visual communications and design program, which is quite similar to what I was doing in Santa Monica. It took me a lot longer to get into the program than I originally anticipated. I was -- the timeline is a little bit jumbled because, again, it's a winding road that I don't -- it's a little bit blurry. But I came back and was out of school for at least a semester.

Like, the fall semester I had applied for San Francisco State but I had missed the cutoff so I got into the school in a winter program. But I have accepted in the

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fine arts division instead of into the visual communications thing, which is what I wanted. But again, like, that was, like, through research I was trying to figure out a way to get into the school to at least knock out certain credits that you need to take. Like they have a couple G. E.s that are for the undergraduate division that are specific to San Francisco State. So I had to take four classes or something during that semester. And then I finally was accepted into the department program that I wanted by the summer, and then I had to take summer classes.

JANET WEBER: Again, another example of how well you navigated the system; right?

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. It was very difficult to do so on my own, especially in -- with all of that stuff. I was lucky that I was able to make a couple friends in those summer courses that were, like -- one of my friends, he is very detail oriented and he's just, like, very good at navigating that stuff, and so I kind of linked up with him and we would do, like, study group and really tried to cultivate a little bit of sense of community. And he was able to help me be like okay well, like, we both want to graduate this semester, and this is the steps you need to take. But it took, again, a lot of intrinsic motivation from within.

JANET WEBER: Yeah. I love that you say that. Like, coming from within, and also having a community. That's a really good recipe.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah.

And I was at least fortunate enough to go to SF State for three and a half semesters before we went completely online. So, like, the second half of my

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degree went online in, like, March of 2020, and then I graduated in May of 2021.

So --

JANET WEBER: Okay.

KAROLINE DUFFY: -- I was pretty much online for the entire year, and I took both summer courses and a small winter course. But it definitely was quite the transition. You know, you finally get through all of this education only to be, like, put online and you're stuck in your house and you're going crazy, and family -- I mean, everybody went through it. But I'm just happy I was able to finish up. Went through, like, a bit of a hard time with my partner. And he and I took a break my last semester of school, which made it even harder to finish everything. So I was a lot more proud of myself for getting through it all and finishing.

It's been my journey to get to this point.

And since graduated just have kind of enjoyed traveling a little bit and been applying to a lot of jobs, and --

JANET WEBER: I just want to piggyback on you saying you're proud of yourself. Like, I feel so proud of you because I just remember those times many years ago where it felt like such a long road ahead, and I think you believed in yourself and I certainly believed in you, but I don't know if you knew you would ever get here.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. I definitely didn't know if I was ever going to be able to really navigate the entire system. Because it is very complicated, especially if you're transferring schools, and trying to figure out what classes you

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need, and everything it can just seem so overwhelming. But I am very grateful for, like, all of the people who have helped me get to this point because, like you said, I really didn't think I was going to make it to -- to the end of this road'.

JANET WEBER: And just the way that you did pursue and navigate, like, Foothill College and then going to Santa Monica, and moving there, and trying that school out. And also I remember part of moving to L.A. was looking at your music and checking out if something that you still wanted to do. And moving to L.A. and checking that out, checking out Santa Monica, and trying living in southern California, and realizing that all wasn't for you; and moving back, and getting into San Francisco State, and then figuring out that system, and figuring out how to get all your credits over from Santa Monica. And not only finishing up at San Jose State, but finishing up there through a pandemic [laughing] and then graduating. You just had your graduation a week ago; is that right?

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. They had a 2020 and 2021 graduation for the department, and then they also had one at Oracle Park. I decided not to do the Oracle Park one. I thought it was enough that, like, my family had to sit through the department graduation after a whole year of, like -- being, like, well, you have your diploma on the wall, but here you go again. Here's your second diploma I guess as they handed them out. It was funny.

But yeah. I didn't want to make them go through all of that. But they were very proud to see me walk so it was very good.

JANET WEBER: And your career now is doing product design.

KAROLINE DUFFY: I kind of tried to figure out exactly what road I want

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to go down. Because my degree is quite broad -- visual communications and design -- it does kind of apply to marketing, or re-branding, but product design is kind of like the broader term is what I'm most interested in just because it has a lot of interesting stuff of interviewing people, and then applying artistic layouts and such to make things look pretty and work well.

But I'm, like, trying to find something in marketing. I have an unpaid internship. Since I graduated, I did a mentorship for some underprivileged youth in San Francisco through I Do. I'm not sure if they're open to volunteers yet. I know that they are going to start another program in the fall, but definitely do check them out. They're a great organization, and if you're interested in design types of things you can really help kids learn design thinking through that.

Beyond that, yeah. Check out my website KarolineDuffy.com. That's Karoline with a K.

JANET WEBER: We'll look it up.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah, please -- please do. That'd be great.

JANET WEBER: Okay. My next question is, if you were to go back in time what advice would you give yourself?

KAROLINE DUFFY: I think I would just tell myself when you have to go to those department heads and argue for these credits, especially if you're dealing with, like, transfer credits, just real stick to your guns because if you complain enough about why this really does align with the course that you're trying to replace people will get tired of you and they will eventually sign off on it [laughing].

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But it's that stress. That unknown part. Just try not to let it get to you. As much as it might feel like the world is crashing in, it's definitely not. You're going to be fine. There's always, like, another class you can take, or a supplement or something. Just keep going forward.

JANET WEBER: Yeah. If we were to push it out in a broader sense it's like be persistent with getting the help you need.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yes. Be persistent.

JANET WEBER: Keep working with the people at the college. Eventually you do find most people at the college campuses -- at least at the community colleges, most people really want to help the students.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. Definitely felt like at the community college there was a lot more support than at the state university. I don't know if it was just because of the timing that I went to San Francisco State with the pandemic their heads were in, like, worldwide chaos kind of chaotic event.

JANET WEBER: Yeah.

KAROLINE DUFFY: But I would say, like, really take advantage of your resources at the community colleges, because my experience at the community college was much better than when I went to the state college.

JANET WEBER: Yes. I hear from a lot of my students that they don't find as many resources when they transfer on to a college or university, and that they don't have as much individualized help.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yeah. It definitely isn't as much assistance. It didn't really work for me, but one piece of advice that my partner had given

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me -- because he also went to San Francisco State -- was to find a teacher within the department that you get along with, and really, like, create a relationship with that person. And then they will be able to help you navigate the coursework or, like, what courses you need to take and they'll have more experience.

Sometimes, like, the counselors that they get haven't been there as long as, like, a lot of these tenured professors have been so they don't know as efficiently a route to get you from where you are to graduation. So definitely something to check out.

JANET WEBER: That's really good advice. I like that.

And my last question is: What advice would you give to other students that were also taking the windy path towards successfully reaching their goals?

KAROLINE DUFFY: Just keep pushing forward. Even if it's, like, one class at a time. As long as you keep the momentum rolling I think it's really helpful to get you to where you want to go just really keep pushing and take advantage of all of the resources you have available to you. Get all the financial aid you can get, make sure that you're being diligent about the stuff that you're doing. If you're failing a class, and you know you're going to fail a class, like, try to pull out before you get a double because it can just -- it can be such a pain if stuff like that can happen. Just keep pushing towards, and believe in yourself.

It may seem like it's going to be forever, but you'll eventually get there.

JANET WEBER: I love that advice. Just like you said, even if it's one class at a time, as long as you're moving forward you eventually get there; right?

KAROLINE DUFFY: Exactly. It's, like, I took one class for, like, a couple

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of semesters when I was just, like, really unsure. Like, take a class you're interested in. Like, if it keeps you going to school or, like, keeps you just kind of moving forward with your own goals, whatever those goals may be, just, like, keep trying to better yourself.

JANET WEBER: I love that. And that's what happened with you. I mean, I really saw that in you. You were learning about yourself, you were getting through the classes that you needed slowly but surely, figuring out what you wanted to do, where you wanted to go; and eventually you got there and you got through it, and now you're on your road to becoming a successful designer.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Yes. A successful designer. Woo.

JANET WEBER: All right. Thank you, Karoline.

KAROLINE DUFFY: Thank you, Janet. I can't wait to see you again sometime soon.