

Sapere Aude — Dare to Be Wise: **12 Gary L. Kreps**

CHILDHOOD

Full name: Gary Lowell Kreps

Tell me about where you were born and how you grew up.

I am a native New Yorker, born in Queens and raised on suburban Long Island. I'm the eldest of three (with two younger sisters). My parents encouraged me intellectually and culturally.

What did your parents do for a living?

My father was an entrepreneur, building the international air freight industry. He was generous, witty, intelligent, and hard-working, with a great sense of humor. He told engaging stories about his hardscrabble years growing up in Brooklyn during the great depression, overcoming poverty, hunger, and prejudice. He also talked about his interesting travels during military service and with his international work. I have tried to emulate his outgoing, can-do traits over my career. My mother was a driven caring person, both homemaker and health care provider, offering physical therapy at home to help patients cope with degenerative diseases and disabilities, while raising her family. She taught me a lot about ethics, empathy, and respect for others.

What about your education?

I attended good public schools, but I was inattentive, finding classes boring and constraining. I got into trouble for not following rules. I did just enough work to get by in most classes. I wanted to pursue topics of personal interest. However, I was intellectually curious and became an avid

reader to learn a lot on my own. During junior/senior high school I was interested in social change, especially emerging controversies such as the Vietnam war and civil rights; I developed concern for fostering social justice and health equity, which turned out to be central goals of my later scholarly work. I worked many part-time jobs even before entering junior high school, delivering newspapers home-to-home, completing neighborhood chores for a fee, and later, working in a warehouse and food service (fast food, a pizzeria, an ice cream shop, and as a busboy, dishwasher, waiter, and valet parker for a nearby catering agency). I learned early about working hard.

After graduating from high school, I briefly tried higher education, enrolling in a small business college in Boston, although I wasn't very interested in studying business. I spent more time fraternizing with friends in Boston than on my studies. I dropped out before the end of my first semester and returned home to New York where I worked as a clerk for my father's company, Jet Air Freight. I learned a lot about office work and earned a regular, albeit modest, salary, but it didn't take long for me to realize this was not the kind of work I wanted to pursue. I longed for a more exciting and socially relevant path in life, which I eventually found with my career.

Two college friends I kept in touch with from Boston invited me to take a road-trip to the west coast over their summer break from college, so I quit my office job we drove in my car across country to San Francisco, where my friends returned home to continue college and I stayed in San Francisco. Within a week I met two young women, Annie and Stephanie, who planned to hitch-hike to Washington state for jobs they set up at an apple orchard near Wenatchee. We agreed to drive together in my car, and they would help me get a job at the orchard. When we arrived at the apple orchard in rural Monitor,

Washington I was hired to pick apples, and they began working in the orchard's fruit packing plant. Annie moved into a small picker's cabin in the orchard with another fruit picker, while Stephanie and I moved together into our own one-room cabin. Stephanie became my primary life partner. We've now been married for 53 years, have raised two kids, and have had many adventures traveling the world together.

At the end of fruit-picking season, Stephanie and I returned to San Francisco, moved into her small apartment, and she went back to her job at the American Conservatory Theater. I began working loading and unloading cargo planes at San Francisco International Airport, while also returning to college at City College of San Francisco (CCSF). From CCSF I transferred to the University of Colorado (CU) where I earned my BA and MA degrees and then went on to the University of Southern California (USC) to earn my PhD degree. By this time, I developed a genuine curiosity to learn, especially once I began studying human communication.

What kind of educational environment did you grow up in?

My parents encouraged me to attend college. They both overcame difficult conditions as first-generation immigrants during the great depression to attend college. Their broad knowledge about world history, politics, and culture helped me to become an independent thinker, an avid reader and writer, and a seeker of social justice which became a major part of my professional career. My father graduated from Brooklyn Tech High School and then enlisted in the Army during World War 2, serving as gunnery flight instructor. This may have fostered his interest in the airfreight industry. After army discharge, he studied engineering at NYU on the GI Bill. My own interest in information technologies

may have been influenced by my father's education. My mother earned a scholarship to study biology at Brooklyn College, enrolling after graduation to study physical therapy at the prestigious Mayo Clinic where she helped develop specialized PT programs for people with disabilities. She instilled in me her love of helping people in need.

What were your interests in high school?

I was more interested in extracurricular activities, such as sports, debate, theater, and writing than I was in classes. I joined several social cliques related to these activities, teaching me about communicating with people from different backgrounds, an important part of my career work as an educator, consultant, researcher, and social advocate. A major event that shifted my high school education occurred during my senior year when I was in a serious highway car collision, landing in a local hospital where my broken bones were set and I was placed in a large uncomfortable body cast. I missed the last few months of high school but was able to graduate with my senior class. This experience taught me about communication challenges facing hospitalized patients, the complex healthcare system, and coping with the discomfort and stigma of disability, which shaped my later professional interests in studying healthcare and disability.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree.

While loading planes at San Francisco Airport I became asthmatic due to cold, damp, and dusty conditions leading to serious asthma attacks and admission to San Francisco General Hospital with a collapsed lung. Even after good care I was unable to return to the demands of loading planes and

increased my class load at CCSF to study biological sciences and theatre. I became a hard-working student and earned high grades. At this time Stephanie and I got married.

From CCSF I applied for and was offered a scholarship to attend CU, where I continued my studies. At CU I merged my interests in biological science and theater with classes in human communication. I was impressed with the relevance of communication studies, declaring as a communication major. I am still excited about the relevance of communication in everyday life!

What inspired you to get your master's degree?

I was so enamored with studying communication that after completing my BA degree I wanted to take more communication classes, and became an MA student at CU. After completing my MA degree, I still wanted to learn more, especially about health communication, motivating me to seek doctoral work. I was offered a fellowship to USC's communication PhD program in communication, where I enrolled. Stephanie also enrolled at USC to pursue an undergraduate degree in cinema studies. I was able to begin teaching classes related to communication and health at both USC and nearby Chapman College, started my own communication consulting firm, and offered health communication in-service training courses at local hospitals to health care providers, helping to expand my expertise in health communication.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

My faculty at CU and USC supported my interests in health communication but had

limited expertise in this new area of study. There were no courses on health communication, so my faculty advisors encouraged me to develop my health communication expertise with my own research and writing projects, even arranging for me to design and offer classes on health communication. At USC I was invited to lead a federally funded grant project studying the influences of health communication education on students. USC also supported my travel to major communication conferences where I collaborated to establish the first health communication interest groups, nurturing my health communication research and teaching.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that influenced your educational and professional development?

I became self-directed to guide my own research and educational, developing expertise in health communication during graduate studies as an independent scholar, enabling me to follow my own academic interests as an emerging health communication scholar.

Tell me about the relationship you had with your major advisor.

My PhD advisor at USC was an expert in organizational communication who was very supportive of my interests in health communication, recognizing the importance of research in this emerging area and encouraging me to build my unique expertise. He was only a few years older than me and treated me more like a colleague than a student. His encouragement was crucial in having other faculty provide me with unique teaching and research opportunities.

Tell me about what you studied as a student, and what led you down that path.

I applied principles from my communication classes on interpersonal, intercultural, media, and organizational communication to health communication. Every class I took expanded my understanding of health communication. The ability to design courses, conduct research, and introduce professional health communication training programs fostered my evolving academic career as a health communication educator and researcher.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Let's move beyond your education time and talk about your career.

Embracing challenges became a key part of my career. While transitioning from PhD course work to dissertation research, I was contacted by a USC communication doctoral program alum about my interest in an open Visiting Assistant Professor position in applied communication in his department at Purdue University Calumet campus to replace a faculty member who had died. He had spoken to the Chair at USC about me, who had strongly recommended me for the job. Applied communication includes several important communication application research such as organizational, business and professional, intercultural, political, and health communication. I was not considering leaving USC, but the academic job market was tight. Purdue was a well-known, respected university with a strong communication program. This opportunity could offer me a career jump from graduate teaching assistant to a full-time professor. It also featured my interest in health communication. I took the risk and accepted Purdue's job offer, initiating my academic career as a college professor. Despite several challenges that had to be navigated, I

accepted these challenges to jump-start my academic career with this position at Purdue.

It was an adventure for me to move from LA to the Calumet region outside of Chicago to complete my dissertation research out of residence and to move alone without my wife, but I enjoyed the new faculty role at Purdue and learned a great deal about the academic enterprise. The Purdue faculty welcomed me, provided me with great advice about negotiating life at Purdue and the Calumet region and enabled me to introduce a well-received course in health communication. I also taught organizational communication courses to engineering and technology students at Purdue who had extensive industrial experiences that enriched the course. I successfully analyzed and then defended my dissertation data during my first semester out of residence. The dissertation received a major award from the International Communication Association (ICA) and was published as an article in the prestigious *Communication Yearbook*, jump starting my emerging research program.

During my second year at Purdue my faculty line was not renewed due to university budgetary constraints, teaching me about the uncertainties of university funding. Resilient as always, I applied for and accepted a new Assistant Professor position at Indiana University in Indianapolis (IUPUI), my second major full-time faculty position. This was a solid tenure-track Assistant Professor position. I was given credit towards tenure for my years at Purdue and at Chapman College. Best of all, they were excited at IUPUI about my work in health communication and were eager for me to begin offering courses on this topic there.

IUPUI was an excellent fit for me because this large urban university was a major health profession educational center, with research-active medical, dental, nursing, and allied health schools, as well as five busy hospitals on campus. I began collaborating

with these health programs as a researcher, and adjunct faculty member, and was appointed as Director of the IUPUI Interdisciplinary Health Sciences Program. I received funding to conduct an important health communication research project on nurse retention at Wishard Memorial Hospital on campus (the major public hospital in Indianapolis) and received funding to conduct a multi-year Youth Wellness health promotion intervention study in collaboration with the Indianapolis Public School System. I flourished professionally at IUPUI, was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure at the end of my second year there and received the University Faculty Member of the Year Award too. I had the opportunity to learn about department administration leadership as the Acting Communication Department Chair while the regular department chair was on annual sabbatical leave, directing administrative tasks like moving the Department offices to a new refurbished building and designing important educational modifications.

My professional growth over three years at IUPUI was profound, with seminal funded research projects that opened doors to future research funding for me. I published important studies about my research projects and co-authored my first book, which became one of the most influential health communication texts, *Health Communication: Theory and Practice*. This book helped establish me as a founder of the field of health communication, helped increase my disciplinary recognition, and made me attractive for recruitment to other universities.

I was recruited to join the faculty at the prestigious School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University in New Jersey, bringing me closer to my extended family in Long Island. I was able to direct PhD dissertations and established the

Health Communication Research Group; I also conducted large-scale funded health communication studies and introduced new undergraduate and graduate courses concerning health communication at Rutgers. While I missed having many health care systems and schools right on campus like at IUPUI, I learned a lot about academic life at Rutgers. My colleagues were supportive, especially my Department Chair who recruited me to Rutgers and had strong interests in health communication. He and I collaborated on and published health communication projects together. In addition, my wife and I had our first child, Becky, while living in New Jersey, really starting our family life.

I began receiving recognition for my health communication book opening new exciting opportunities, including being recruited for a prestigious one-year federally funded IPA Special Expert appointment at the National Cancer Institute (NCI), which I accepted. NCI bought out my contract from Rutgers for a year so I could direct a large evaluation research project for NCI. I evaluated adoption and use of NCI's Physician Data Query (PDQ) online cancer information system that provided state-of-the-art geographically matrixed cancer information about clinical cancer research programs, research findings, treatment summaries, and recommendations for all major forms of cancer to guide cancer care around the nation.

I learned so much at NCI that year about PDQ, health information dissemination, online media, and the federal research enterprise by working across multiple federal agencies (NIH, CDC, AHRQ, NLM, FDA, and more). I was provided with abundant resources and support for my evaluation research efforts, enabling me to grow as a scholar and become a leading expert in the use of health information technologies. I published and

presented my NCI research findings broadly. I also proposed introduction of the Health Communication Interest Group at the National Communication Association (NCA) that year, becoming founding Chair of the new Health Communication Division, now one of the largest divisions at NCA. The many connections I made that year with leading researchers and public health officials increased my ability to work with federal agencies and compete for future research funding.

NCI invited me to continue working with them after my year there, but Rutgers wanted me to return to my faculty position. We moved back to New Jersey for my fourth year at Rutgers, which became my final year there. I published a new well-received book about organizational communication that led to being recruited to join the Communication Department at Northern Illinois University (NIU) as Director of Organizational Communication. NIU offered me a large pay increase and appointment as a tenured full professor at the end of my first year there. Given this generous offer, we moved back to the Midwest for my new position at NIU.

I spent seven productive years at NIU, was appointed as Director of the departments graduate studies program and as Affiliate Professor of the NIU Gerontology and International Training and Consultation programs, expanding my research interests in both aging and global health. While at NIU I began a corporate side-job as Vice President for Research at an advertising firm I co-founded, Denton, Kreps, and Weckerly, Ltd, where I developed leadership skills and conducted many important field studies. My publications grew, as did my reputation as a health communication scholar. While in Illinois, my son David was born, completing our family.

My opportunities at NIU sparked my interest in academic administration, especially when invited to apply for and then

offered a position as Professor and Executive Director of the Greenspun School of Communication at UNLV. In this role I became the chief academic officer of a large communication school that included a range of academic programs, extensive media production studios, a large journalism program with strong ties to major urban newspapers, an active advertising and public relations program, and an English as a Second Language program serving immigrant students. This was a big change for me from focusing primarily on my own research and teaching to become an academic administrator serving a large diverse faculty and staff and reporting to the UNLV Provost and President. I worked closely with major donors, with fund-raising becoming an important new part of my expanded responsibilities.

The UNLV School of Communication was endowed by the powerful Greenspun family who controlled the *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper, the major Las Vegas cable television system (with a broad lineup of news, entertainment, and public service channels), casinos, and the residential community of Green Valley (an affluent suburb of Las Vegas). The family provided me with many connections to introduce innovative community partnerships for research programs addressing key social justice issues (homelessness, poverty, spousal and family abuse, childhood education, and health issues such as HIV/AIDS, addiction, and sexually transmitted diseases). We used school media production facilities to televise government meetings, produce relevant television programs, contribute stories to local newspapers, and place many students in government, media, PR and advertising, gaming, and social service organizations.

I was able to accomplish a lot at UNLV but also found it challenging to run a large school and maintain my own active

research program and publish about all my new community-based research projects. Life became complicated for me at UNLV with a new university president who planned to divert support from the School of Communication to a new Greenspun College of Urban Affairs at UNLV leading me to begin looking for new positions. Luckily, I was recruited for an exciting new position back in my hometown area of Long Island as the founding Dean of the new School of Communication at Hofstra University. I was offered the job at a significant salary increase, and we moved back to the east coast. My parents were happy to have us back to help provide support for my father who had been diagnosed with stomach cancer.

Hofstra was different from the research-focused public universities I had worked with as a smaller elite private university. It boasted a spacious tree-lined campus that they referred to as a public arboretum, had top sports, recreation, entertainment, and media production facilities, and even hosted the New York Jets' football team's offices and practice facilities on campus. Their new School of Communication was seen as a major new jewel for the university, equipped with impressive film, television, and radio production studios and staff that they were using to establish partnerships with major New York television channels, film production units, radio stations, and newspapers. I was able to apply my broad media production and partnerships experience at UNLV to build programs of excellence at Hofstra.

Before long, however, I learned there was more interest at Hofstra in building their media industry reputation than in academic excellence in communication. My primary tasks as Dean were to expand media partnerships and raise funds to continually upgrade the stellar Hofstra media production facilities, not to advance communication

research which was my goal! There was limited interest in health communication or in graduate education, so I began to seek a more substantial academic home where I could work on important health and social justice issues.

My experience at NCI helped me resolve this issue! NCI was planning a major new research program focused on health communication with their "Extraordinary Opportunity in Cancer Communication Research" initiative. I was invited to be the founding Chief of NCI's new Health Communication and Informatics Research Branch (HCIRB), a job focused directly on health communication research. This was an opportunity to advance health communication science dramatically with supportive NCI leaders who were eager to build exciting new health communication research programs. I had to learn a lot about NCI regulations, programs, and acronyms, especially related to their large research funding programs but my NCI colleagues helped bring me up to speed. I was able to recruit outstanding health communication scholars to join the branch who helped me build an extensive portfolio of national cancer communication research programs that made health communication a central part of federal health research.

One of the first programs we introduced at NCI was the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) research program that fielded nationally representative annual surveys examining how segments of the American public accessed cancer information, evaluating the effectiveness of the information they found and tracking how the information was used. HINTS was carefully designed to articulate with other large federal surveys and was grounded in a strong theoretical framework to not only track how information was disseminated but was also designed to test and expand health

communication knowledge. HINTS has become a well-established federal research program conducted regularly now over more than 20 years. NCI made HINTS instruments and data widely available to researchers to conduct studies with HINTS data on different populations by analyzing unique sets of variables, leading to hundreds of HINTS studies that are widely reported and translated for application by public health programs. I am very proud of the HINTS program and have built on this national database since leaving NCI by expanding the research program around the globe.

Another major research program we established at NCI was the innovative Centers of Excellence in Cancer Communication Research (CECCRS) initiative which funded large health communication research centers around the nation to expand health communication knowledge and develop the next generation of health communication scholars. I worked closely with the initial research centers and learned a lot about building large health communication research programs. In addition to CECCRS we built a large portfolio of health communication research projects that helped reduce the national burden of cancer. Whereas I learned so much at NCI by founding HCIRB, my work was exhausting (the war on cancer never rests!) and I felt constrained by the daunting federal bureaucracy as well as my opportunities to pursue my broader health research interests beyond cancer. I also missed working closely with students, leading me to return to the academy by joining the faculty at George Mason University (GMU) where I was able to help build a vibrant new health communication program and establish a world-class PhD program emphasizing health and risk communication.

GMU is a unique university that thrives on innovation and social relevance leveraged by its location in the DC metro area

near major federal agencies. The university established many federal partnerships and recruited major scholars from federal agencies to build GMU programs of excellence. The university administration wanted to expand their communication programs and hired me to chair their Communication Department, providing new senior faculty lines for me to fill and significant support to build research centers, facilities, and equipment.

At GMU I recruited outstanding new research-focused senior and junior faculty to the department who helped implement new research centers, exciting new research programs, and important educational and research partnerships. While at GMU I expanded my research program to focus on global health and other relevant health issues. I recently retired from GMU and was named Distinguished University Professor Emeritus but continue to work on important ongoing health and risk communication projects.

What has been your proudest research or other professional accomplishment to date?

I am proud of explicating health communication processes with my Relational Model of Communication and Health Outcomes that describes key factors enabling coordination in the delivery of care to improve health outcomes. This model has been tested many times, extended, and is recognized as an important health communication model. I am also proud of health informatics work that describes essential dissemination of relevant health information through multiple digital channels of communication. I extended HINTS research internationally with the INSIGHTS research programs to track spread of health information globally. I have examined strategies for bridging the digital divide to reduce health disparities and studied ways to integrate use of innovative and humanized

digital communication channels, with the use of message tailoring, AI, and communication convergence, can counter misinformation, reduce confusion, and guide informed health decision making. I am proud of encouraging adoption of multi-method health communication research methods and designs by triangulating qualitative and quantitative research methods. My health communication studies illustrate multi-phase use of multiple methods to collect relevant audience and needs data, intervention development and refinement data, and conduct formative and summative evaluation of the influences of health intervention programs, policies, and technologies. I have also promoted the use of powerful and innovative research methods, such as the Critical Incident Technique, and spurred adoption of Karl Weick's powerful theoretical model of Social Organizing across multiple contexts.

Tell me about your philosophy that guides your research chain of inquiry and your other academic pursuits?

I enhance health outcomes with relevant and sensitive health communication to address serious societal health problems, seeing health communication as a crisis discipline to resolve health issues with evidence-based communication programs, practices, policies, and technologies.

Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle?

I advise young scholars to pose relevant research questions to examine crucial societal health issues, study issues they feel passionate about, and identify the best ways to address these issues by carefully planning studies to build upon previous research. Ask

questions concerning what the best research methods are for your studies, including how to use multiple methods, to answer your research questions, and then identify the best venues to disseminate your research.

What single best piece of advice would you pass along to a new investigator or student researcher-in-training today?

Self-reflection is a critical factor in developing strong relevant research programs. Strive to develop unique research niches that reflect your strong interests and goals.

Describe the most courageous thing you have had to do in your academic career—perhaps something that put you at risk for the sake of standing up for a principle.

I have maintained my commitment to health communication inquiry even when it was not expedient. I have worked across diverse disciplines and sectors of society, with multiple research methods, theories, and paradigms to address important health issues. I have embraced taking risks by following my heart and intuition to promote innovation and adaptation.

When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

I hope I am remembered as a committed scholar and social advocate who addressed serious health challenges faced by vulnerable populations to enhance health and wellbeing.

Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success. To what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?

My work has led to many personal and professional rewards and have paid few prices.

LIFE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA

Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life and what have some of those impacts been?

My family has strongly influenced my personal development, encouraging intellectual curiosity, fostering my drive to promote positive social change, and enhance public health.

What are some leisure time activities for which you have a passion?

I enjoy international travel. I have had rich opportunities to travel internationally, at times with my family, on extended professional trips around the globe. Travel fostered my interest in world cuisine. I enjoy preparing exotic dishes at home. I have also become an active social media influencer as an advocate concerning important health and political issues.

If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, contemporary character or historical figure, who would it be and what would you want to talk about?

I'd like to speak with Mahatma Ghandi about the challenges he faced and how he overcame them, as well to learn how he thinks we could address current and future societal issues.

If you weren't doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?

I would write about important social issues, which I now do with my social media advocacy.

Which three books outside of academia would you recommend for others to read and why?

I recommend the innovative animated book *Maus* by Art Spiegelman concerning his father's experiences as a Jew during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Poland, Robert Heinlein's powerful science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, about a human raised by Martians who returns to earth as an adult, and Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse 5*, presenting the chaotic and challenging experiences of an impressionable young soldier, Billy Pilgrim, during World War 2.

Share something about yourself that you believe is misunderstood by others.

I am not a workaholic. I am just passionate about my work. I like to relax, travel, watch TV, cook, read, eat good meals, have fun with friends, and generally enjoy family life. Since retiring I am relaxing more and working less, a trend that is likely to increase over time!

Editor's note.

Dr. Kreps joined the Academy in January 2003. In 2010 he earned the title of Fellow and in 2015 was selected as the 14th Research Laureate of the American Academy of Health Behavior for his contributions to health behavior research.

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.