

Sapere Aude — Dare to Be Wise: **13 Marcia G. Ory**

CHILDHOOD

Full name: Marcia Gail Ory

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

I was born in Dallas, Texas in 1950, making me an early baby boomer. Perception is often different than reality. When I was growing up, I thought Dallas was a small town because I lived in a somewhat insular community (the park cities) within the larger Dallas metroplex. With this parochial vision, I also thought anything north of Highway 635 might as well have been Oklahoma. I grew up in the typical 1950s two-parent household with two siblings and was pretty much free to bike to school and play outdoors after school till the dinner bell. I was rather shy as a kid but had a supportive family and a small group of close friends. Relative to other school friends, our family income was much less. Things we bought were likely to be wholesale or on sale, a buying preference that has followed me throughout my adult life. Yet, while growing up, I never felt poor or deprived and sought pleasure in small everyday things like biking and playing board games. My parents often had market shows at the Adolphus Hotel and I can remember running up and down the halls with my siblings, and later on doing more daring things like riding motor bikes without a helmet, trestle jumping, going on nighttime cemetery visits, having Chinese car fire drills, and hitchhiking. On reflection, it scares me a bit to realize how I had no sense of danger as a kid or teen and how this might be common in every generation. Many of you may know I had polio as a toddler which affected mobility in my left arm, but I never felt or defined myself as disabled. Two early

life events helped shape my world view about community life and politics: (1) being on the parade route when President Kennedy was shot in downtown Dallas and (2) participating in civil rights events in early 1960s.

What did your parents do for a living?

My parents were an interesting regional mix with very different personas. My mom, Esther Ory, was a fast-moving northern from Bayonne, New Jersey whereas my dad, Marvin Ory, was a slow talking southern gentleman from Anniston, Alabama. Both grandfathers died relatively young right before the depression impacting my parent's educational opportunities. My dad was a traveling salesperson but when not traveling he was a full-time stay-at-home dad who modeled the importance of graciousness and finding a common connection with people of all backgrounds. My mom didn't have an outside paid job but did the bookkeeping and often helped my dad when he traveled. With her can-do attitude and unwavering optimism, she was an early inspiration for successful aging, even before I understood those terms academically. When my parents traveled, they left us with a kind black housekeeper/nanny, Effie Burr, who we considered our second mom. Many years later I endowed a student scholarship in her memory to enable an African-American high schooler to attend college without worrying about the burden of college tuition.

What about your education?

I went to a school where most students were expected to be college bound. I actually spent more time on homework in high school than in college, often working late into the night setting the stage for my later work life habits. But in Dallas in the 1960s being college bound for girls still meant looking for a MRS

or working in a traditional female oriented occupation. At the time I knew I wanted to be an exception to this rule.

What kind of educational environment did you grow up in?

Neither of my parents, who came of age during the depression, had the opportunity to go to college but they were keen on idea that education was important for success in an ever-changing world. Their dream (as second-generation Americans from Eastern Europe/Russia) was that all three of their children be well educated and working in professional fields.

What were your interests in high school?

During high school I was interested in journalism and worked on the school newspaper. I was not into music and actually gave up the opportunity to see the Beatles as I wondered why anyone would want to see a bunch of insects.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree.

In 1976 at 17 years of age, I began my undergraduate career at the University of Arizona. I wanted to go somewhere different from all of my friends. But I came back to Texas after one year as UA was too much of a party school for my tastes. Even at an early age, I realized the inherent dangers of poor lifestyle choices such as party drinking and sunbathing all day. I didn't have any specific major in mind when back in Texas. Second semester sophomore year at Texas I had to declare a major and simply thought about which courses I liked best. I ended up majoring in sociology with a minor in psychology. I particularly liked my deviant

behavior course for its focus on how norms and sanctions influenced personal and group behaviors.

What inspired you to get your master's degree?

I actually got two master's degrees almost ten years apart in two different but related fields. It was obvious to me that an undergraduate degree in sociology was unlikely to result in a high-level professional job even in the early 1970s. Thus, I headed off to graduate school at Indiana University-Bloomington in Sociology for a BA to PhD program in 1971. I loved my first year especially courses in social psychology and sociology of organizations and the opportunity to do a master's thesis on criminal justice issues. By my second year I developed an interest in family sociology and left at the end of the first semester with a terminal master's degree awarded in 1973. After my first experience as a faculty member in a School of Public Health, I decided it would be advantageous to have a Master of Public Health degree. In 1981, I enrolled in the accelerated MPH program at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. It was a fast-moving year crammed full of coursework and new experiences. Going to Hopkins provided degree legitimacy in public health as well as an introduction to a wide array of gerontological and geriatrics issues.

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

I was not in residence at Indiana University very long but was impressed by the breadth of knowledge and kindness of Sheldon Stryker who introduced me to the field of social psychology. With my interest in norms and sanctions, I was drawn to the Kinsey Institute and became part of the

NIMH fellowship program led by Martin Weinberg. During my MPH at Hopkins, I learned a lot from Pearl German whose telephone number famously ended in 6565 to reflect her double commitment to public health and aging. I also got an appreciation of social and behavioral risks factors from a public health perspectives from David McQueen. I would say it was my fellow graduate students and the networking that these programs afforded which made the greatest impression upon me, especially in the Hopkins program.

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

Given the short time I was in both masters programs, my lessons learned were more general but have lasted a lifetime. Foremost, what one gets out of an educational program reflects one's efforts as well as the fit and context of that learning. Second, there are many pathways to success, which can unfold over time, as evidenced by my two master's degrees. In retrospect, it's often the environment and culture versus classes that have the greatest impact. Formal education is just one point in time, but the connections made during this time can last a lifetime.

Now tell me about your doctorate work. Again, what inspired you to go on, instead of getting a job out of your master's degree?

At the time I was also engaged to a fellow University of Texas student who I first spied in the 1960s, Raymond Carroll. We didn't match for same graduate schools, and he headed off to close-by Purdue University to study statistics. After a near fatal "fall asleep on the road from Bloomington to West Lafayette" episode, I switched to Purdue University for the doctoral program in the Department of Child Development and

Family Studies which was a nice mixture of developmental and cognitive psychology and family sociology. My dissertation was on norms and sanctions associated with fertility decisions. It was a topic closely alighted with early 1970s concerns with overpopulation. It is noteworthy that 50 years later the concern is now with a dwindling American population.

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

I am thankful for my doctoral advisor, Richard Kerkoff, who generously took me in as a transfer student and provided needed support without pushing that enabled me to finish my degree program remotely.

I will be forever indebted to Joanne Earp, a new assistant professor in the School of Public Health Department of Health Behavior, who brought me on board as a research associate while I was finishing my doctoral degree. This position enabled me to work on my first NIH collaborative project and learn about incorporating social science concepts and methods into clinical research. I credit her for teaching me how to think and write in public health research terms and helping guide me through my final dissertation work. I was also fortunate to interact with Gordon DeFries who sparked my interest in self-care and formal health care delivery issues. His care and attention to older colleagues was instructive for forming intergenerational collegial relationships. Of all my early life mentors, the most constant in my life was Joanne Earp. For over 50 years, we were friends and colleagues over time and space and had the pleasure of seeing each other's careers blossom.

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

I learned important life lessons in my transition from graduate school to my first job and how expectations didn't always pan out. I moved ABD to the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill with my husband who graduated in a speed-breaking three years and got a tenure track offer in a prestigious department. I didn't realize how hard it would be to finish a dissertation while simultaneously looking for a job in an area and era where spousal hires were low priority for faculty positions. For these reasons, I always encourage graduate students to finish their degrees before embarking on new jobs.

What factor or set of actors contributed to your pursuing an academic career and becoming a researcher?

Although there were public health giants such as Guy Stewart and Godfrey Hochbaum in the department, after getting my PhD, I realized that there would not be a tenure track faculty position for me at UNC. With my competitive nature, I decided to take a risk and head off on my own in search of an academic career that would lead to a tenure track position which is what most of my cohort at the time was getting straight out of their doctoral programs. Thus, I embarked on a five-year+ academic journey that included a post-doc position at the University of Minnesota, an initial faculty appointment at University of Alabama-Birmingham School of Public Health, and second post-doc at Johns Hopkins. These years changed my professional career trajectory. I learned about family impact analysis from Robert Leik and Reuben Hill at the Family Studies Center at the University of Minnesota and social gerontology and long-term care from Nancy Eustis in the School of Public Affairs. At the

University of Alabama-Birmingham, I learned academic life could be fraught with infighting, but there were many things to learn from colleagues. Richard Windsor introduced me to different designs for evaluating health promotion and disease prevention programs and public health interventions. I published my first article on diabetes care perspectives with Jennie Kronenfeld whose ability to conceptualize, analyze, and write papers was a skill I wanted to master. It was also Jennie who later introduced me to AAHB. I embarked on a second post-doc fellowship with Eveyln Goldberg to examine mental health issues among older adults. This led to a unique opportunity to study the impact of animal-human interactions during the bereavement process. What I learned from these academic vagabond years, was that whereas post-docs and entry-level academic posts were an opportunity to explore new ideas relatively free of burdens, they were not an end in themselves; rather, they were a beginning to a new career opportunity. While early in my Hopkins post-doc position, I had the opportunity to apply for a rare job opening in the federal government and position-shared for a while transitioning to the Behavioral and Social Research Program at the National Institute on Aging/National Institutes of Health.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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

In reflection, it was my 20-year stint at the National Institute on Aging that jump-started my professional life. I imagined I would only stay for a few years and then move on to academia. However, being at the center of groundbreaking behavioral and social research on aging was personally and professionally life changing. This experience

also enabled me to jump-start a post-government academic career. In 1981, I moved back to Texas to be closer to my husband and my 75-year-old widowed mother. Being a University of Texas graduate and living on the east coast for twenty years, I was a bit hesitant to live in College Station but told myself I could be happy if there were resources such as national public radio, a community food market, an active Unitarian church, and like-minded people. I soon found out that my 30-year-old stereotypes were no longer true. College Station was a welcoming community and coming back home wasn't looking backward, but moving forward. Unlike my first academic position in Chapel Hill, I was able to negotiate favorable terms in my late-life career change at the relatively new Texas A&M School of Public Health. Although my content areas remained the same as areas I led at NIA, my research perspectives changed from guiding the discovery of best practices for improving the lives and well-being of older adults to studying what it would take to get evidence-based research programs translated into practice. I was fortunate to be tapped by Robin Mockenhaupt to direct a Robert Wood National Program Office on Active for Life. This was one of the first national efforts to examine how evidence-based physical activity programs could be scaled and sustained in real-world settings. Implementation research has become one of my major research foci whether I am studying chronic disease self-management, dementia caregiving, fall prevention, opioid overdose prevention, or promoting physical activity. I am pleased to be a founding member of the National PRISM-RE-AIM Consortium, which I see as making a major contribution to furthering our understanding of evolving implementation science theories and methods. It's also gratifying that implementation research and community engagement are now major themes at annual

AAHB conferences. Furthermore, it is great to see so many faculty and students from Texas A&M involved in AAHB and attending the annual meetings.

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

Working with Matilda Riley and Ronald Abeles solidified my understanding of how the many social and behavioral determinants of aging interacted with biological factors to influence health and functioning over the life course. I am most proud of the seminal work and associated books on Self Care in Later Life with Gordon DeFries and Aging, Health and Behavior with Ronald Abeles which laid the foundation for aging research in these areas. Additionally, being at NIA gave me the opportunity to lead collaborative efforts such as the Frailty and Injuries Cooperative Studies of Intervention Techniques, Behavioral Change Consortium, the Health Maintenance Consortium, and special initiatives on Dementia Special Care Units and Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer's Caregiving Health. This was a fortuitous time to be in government service with rapid growth of the research infrastructure and movement toward interdisciplinary team science. My experiences at NIA generated life-long research interests and revealed the power of collaborative networks.

My career highlights have certainly been acknowledgements from the field, and I was especially proud to be named an AAHB Research Laureate in 2016. In 2023, I penned a piece in *Generations*, the American Society on Aging journal special issue on How We Talk About Aging on "Perspectives of a Social Gerontologist: Aging with the Field." This provided an overview of my life perspectives and career accomplishments. At the end, I mused about three future goals: (1) to have at least 500 peer reviewed articles

published; (2) obtain one more large grant to cap my grant-making career; and (3) mentor the next generation of aging and public health scholars. I'm proud to say that I have achieved the first two and continue to savor my mentoring experiences. Best of all, some of my early Texas A&M mentees, like Lisako McKyer and Matthew Smith, are now established scholars in their own right and actively engaged in mentoring the next generation of AAHB scholars.

At nearly 77, my future goals are more ethereal. I want my projects to make a difference in people's lives. I want to improve understanding of how to foster intergenerational relationships and living experiences. Moreover, inasmuch as quality of life has become more salient with age, I strive to create work and living environments that are both fun and productive for myself and others. Toward this end, I take pleasure in my research to practice roles such as working with community members to get Bryan/College Station named as a Dementia Friendly Community or providing support for community leaders to make Bryan's downtown area a more walkable area for all.

Were there any projects or studies you thought would lead to something interesting, that just didn't pan out?

I was really excited to have the opportunity to lead the RWJF National Program Office on Active for Life®: Increasing Physical Activity in the 50 Plus. Although this initiative was well executed, unfortunately, it was short-lived as the Foundation changed its focus to childhood obesity. Although we didn't get what we anticipated to be 20 years of funding, this initiative spurred my interest in translational research and taught me that successful academic researchers are ones with diverse funding portfolios.

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

My basic intervention philosophies have been shaped by a lifetime of experiences in aging and public health. First, is my adage "Healthy Aging Should be the New Normal." Ageist stereotypes are health hazards and need to be combatted at every level. Second, building on my Active for Life initiatives, I've coined a phrase that should guide the development and testing of public health interventions. "Active for Life: Every One, Every Day, Every Age." Interventions need to reach all people mitigating health disparities, be built into people's everyday life, and be available across the life-course. And finally, for me, my motto is that it is never too soon to benefit from an evidence-based intervention, and never too late to introduce age-appropriate lifestyle or technological interventions.

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

I think it is important to target manuscripts/outputs to appropriate sources. I advise my junior colleagues to study in advance of submission what a particular outlet publishes, its credibility in the field, and match with a particular topic and approach. Just as important is quick follow-up to reviewer responses and always having an idea of the next submission outlet, should the first one not be a good fit. Most of all, persistence is important!

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

My go-to advice for new investigators or student researchers is to keep one's eye on the big picture and academic prize (e.g., promotion/tenure) and not get caught up in every little annoyance, of which there are likely to be many. And – to work in teams to magnify ones productivity.

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.

From an organizational point of view, standing up for someone who is publicly maligned is challenging. However, I think it is important to stand up for colleagues who are being unfairly treated. The tricky part is not being confrontational but providing support in a non-threatening way. Sometimes this backfires. I did this for a colleague in “political” trouble, and my supportive comments ended up in the public media. I am still happy though that I supported my colleague, at a time when support was crucial.

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

I would like to be remembered as a leader in the aging and public health field, having contributed to research and practice that has changed lives. In particular, I would like to be remembered for my team's national evaluation of the chronic disease self-management program (CDSMP). This was one of the first studies that demonstrated how evidence-based programs for older adults could meet the triple health care aims of better health, better health care, and better value. These findings contributed to the now

national role of such programs through the aging services network.

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?

I think the price for success is often single-minded focus, accompanied by long work hours, whether in industry or academia. With fixed hours in a day, this limits time for self and nurturing for others. Yet, I think pathways to success are different when first starting out than when more established, and at later stages being generative is especially rewarding and less time consuming.

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?

I have been married for over 50 years to Raymond Carroll. This is an achievement in itself these days, especially given the 20 years of commuting marriage during the 1980s and 1990s. This long-lived marriage has given me a sense of stability, along with treasured family connections. Additionally, my mom was a model for healthy aging, helping me to cast away stereotypes about aging and older people. She and her wide circle of friends gave me a deep appreciation of how aging-related problems could be recast as opportunities for action.

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

With job security and accumulated resources, I have the luxury of travel. I've been to all 50 states as well as seven continents, enjoying new experiences and global friendships. I

especially value our trips to Australia and South Africa. Other personal pursuits are listening to National Public Radio, reading (actually listening to audiobooks) and watching good mysteries on Public Broadcasting Service and BritBox.

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 probably choose to spend an evening with Rachel Marin from Wild Card. She has interviewed so many interesting people from different walks of life and has wonderful insights into what motivates people. I'd love to trade wild card queries with her to understand myself and others better.

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

I love what I am doing now as a tenured full professor of public health. But I have already planned for my off-ramp. I am the director of a public charity, Healthy Across the Generations, and when fully retired can see providing community resources to further healthy aging.

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

I have over 500 titles in my Audible book account. Other than murder mysteries which are a nice diversion from troubling real-world conflicts, there are three recent books I have especially enjoyed reading. I loved *The Names* by Florence Knapp, which is a vivid account of life's different trajectories based on one seemingly inconsequential event, revealing how people's actions also can change history. I also liked *The Correspondent* by Virginia Evans, as it

reminds me of the importance of staying in touch with colleagues and friends over time and space, and the lost art of letter writing in our fast-paced world. I also appreciated *The Horse* by Geraldine Brooks for its perspectives on current and historical themes about people, animals, and places that are timeless.

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

I'd like people to understand that I love problem-solving and sometimes I am quick to jump to conclusions and offer advice and direction. What is really important to me is that everyone learn to face their own challenges and find workable solutions that fit their individual contexts and settings.

Editor's note.

Dr. Ory joined the Academy in 2010, was named a Fellow in 2013, and received the highest award given by the Academy, the Research Laureate in 2016.

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