

Oral History of Karen Fassio

Interviewed by **Mario Juarez** for the Microsoft Alumni Network

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Preface

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Karen Fassio as conducted by Mario Juarez on August 8, 2024, at Microsoft Studios in Redmond, Washington. This interview is part of the Microsoft Alumni Network's Microsoft Alumni Voices initiative. The goal of this project is to record the institutional history of Microsoft through the recollections of its former employees, so that the information may inform and inspire future generations.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word captured through video rather than written prose. The content reflects the recollections of the interviewee. The following transcript was edited by the Microsoft Alumni Network, which holds the copyright to this work.

Interview

Karen Fassio: My name is Karen Fassio and I started at Microsoft in March of 1999. I was a contractor before then, but I started at Microsoft in '99 and exited the company at the end of '22. So I was there just short of 24 years. And I entered the company as a level 58 marketing manager, really sort of learning everything there is to know about global marketing and exited the company as a director in the Global Partner Solutions space.

Mario Juarez: Awesome, awesome. Tell me where are you from? Let's begin at the beginning and have some background on who you are. So where were you born? Tell us about your childhood.

Karen Fassio: I was born in Olongapo, Philippines. I am a product of the Vietnam War. My parents met in the Philippines. My father was military, in the Navy, and eventually my family migrated to the Philippines at the close of that experience. Most of my adulthood has been in the United States, and so I came from, where my family lived, was in the Washington D.C. area, so I was exposed to a very, very early version of the internet at that time as a sixth grader living just outside of the Washington D.C. proper area.

Mario Juarez: Where were you born?

Karen Fassio: I was born in Olongapo, Philippines and I'm sorry, can take a minute here?

Mario Juarez: Yeah, please. I would love to hear the story.

Karen Fassio: So the story about where I was born, do you want me to contextualize that more?

Mario Juarez: I want you to feel comfortable with everything, but I am looking to get to know you. What I'm really interested in here is in your earliest phase of life, what were the defining experiences, what values were instilled in you. Because everyone that we've talked to, it's very interesting because it turns out that especially these high... Great, notable people like yourself are marked by values and experiences early on. So I'm interested, that's the line of questioning that I've got here.

Karen Fassio: Yeah, okay.

Mario Juarez: So you were raised... Did you spend time in... You were raised in-

Karen Fassio: No. I was born in the Philippines, so I was born in the Olongapo Philippines, but my family migrated when I was very young. I was six months old when we came to the United States, and I was essentially a product of two very unique immigrant experiences. My

father from Canada of Italian descent and then my mother, certainly from the Philippines.

There was always multiple languages going on in our family and I only learned the one, but we were exposed to this very different sort of Western, Eastern culture thing all the time. And so it was a big part of our family value system to be in community. We had our meals together, there was always something about cousins and family and visiting across the country, taking these long trips and cars and station wagons to eat lumpia and make pancit and all the things that our Filipino mothers and aunts did while all of our military fathers were in the living room wondering what they were talking about in the kitchen.

Mario Juarez: And they'll never know.

Karen Fassio: And they'll never know.

Mario Juarez: They'll never know.

Karen Fassio: There's a lot of laughing though.

Mario Juarez: Do you have siblings?

Karen Fassio: I have two, I am the oldest and I have a brother and a sister.

Mario Juarez: A lot of laughter in your family?

Karen Fassio: A lot of laughter, yes. But Filipino culture is a lot of singing, so a lot of music, a lot of singing. Karaoke was sort of a very big deal in my family and I wish I sort of learned a little bit more about the fearlessness of taking that mic on stage and singing those songs from them, but it was always fun to have that around.

Mario Juarez: What were the values that were non-negotiables in your family?

- Karen Fassio: Family first was absolutely a non-negotiable. As an immigrant family from the Philippines, there was always this sense of helping back, reaching back, never losing touch with the challenges that they were experiencing living in an undeveloped country. So that was always very present for us. Anytime there was a challenge in weather systems, we knew that that could impact rice production and livestock and have very real detrimental impact to our direct family and our communities that we were connected to in the Philippines. So family first was very important for us.
- Mario Juarez: Yeah. So rain and rice crops on the minds of a... So you were just basically like every other American kid?
- Karen Fassio: Oh, sure.
- Mario Juarez: Thinking about rainstorms in the Philippines and typhoons.
- Karen Fassio: Yes.
- Mario Juarez: That's an interesting worldview. Was that imparted by your parents, was it the community? Tell us how that very specific sort of mindset of-
- Karen Fassio: So that mindset of family first was instilled by my parents, by my mother in particular, but both of them together made sure that we always thought about and considered what we could give back to our family. And that included things, certainly financial support and helping others achieve education, but also in sending balikbayan boxes back, which is a pretty sort of standard Filipino practice of sending treats and other things that were needed or just things to send a smile across the oceans.
- Mario Juarez: Oh, that is fantastic. So here you are, the eldest firstborn child of immigrant parents. You carried responsibilities that family first comes with responsibility, I'm assuming. Talk to me about the role of responsibility in... That was imparted in you from the beginning.

Karen Fassio: Responsibilities, carrying family first values and certainly as a firstborn daughter included always sort of thinking about... Having the responsibility for making sure my siblings were well taken care of and that I thought about my actions and the things that I was doing so that I could be an example for them. And it also included thinking about how I can do things that would benefit more, more than just myself. And so that was something that just... I didn't realize it at the time as a young person, but as I started moving up in my career and moving and doing things in my day to day, that value just kept coming back over and over again. So I'd say that that was a big part of being that family first, firstborn in my family.

Mario Juarez: What kind of kid were you?

Karen Fassio: What kind of kid was I? I was the kind of kid that always had to be first. I always had to... I studied a lot. I was self-motivated to learn, and I felt I was also very responsible. I felt very responsible for what I was doing for my family, for my siblings. Less about myself generally, but usually in how I could support them with what they needed and help them become more secure and more confident in how they were living their lives.

Mario Juarez: What did you love to do when you were a kid?

Karen Fassio: I loved to read and write when I was a kid. I was insatiable when it came to content to read and consume and learn about. I was a forever student.

Mario Juarez: And I bet you had good grades.

Karen Fassio: Yes, I did. I had good grades. That was very important to me.

Mario Juarez: Where'd you go to school? Where'd you go to high school?

Karen Fassio: I went to high school in-

Mario Juarez: What was the name of your high school?

Karen Fassio: The name of my high school was Bladensburg High School in Maryland just outside of the Washington D.C. area. It was a school that had a very, very diverse population and there was a lot of, what's the right way to say this? Economic challenges in the space where we lived. And so I didn't realize that at the time that being a part of talented and gifted programs in that school was something extra special. But looking back, I can see that having that access and having the ability to sort of ply the sort of natural studiousness that I had allowed me to move in that environment with resources that weren't available to a lot of people.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. Was it a place where there was poverty, crime, drugs, mixes of all of these things? Give me the... Paint the picture for what the school life was like.

Karen Fassio: Yes. So to paint a picture of what school life was like at Bladensburg High School there... It was, as I mentioned, a very diverse population and there were a lot of single parents, a lot of crime. We actually had a couple of incidences of people who were assaulted, murdered. It was challenging to thrive in an environment like that because you're always mixed about what does success really look like? Do I need to be... How do I protect myself? How do I stay focused on what's important when you're just trying to survive day to day, you're just trying to go from school to home. So that was the environment all the time.

And the teachers there, you could tell were just there to... They were commuting from over an hour away to support this kind of environment. And so having to see the police in the hallways on a frequent basis when you would see kids that were hauled away from time to time, or one day they had an everyday family life and the next day we don't know where their parents went. It was sort of the day to day in that space.

Mario Juarez: What did you take away from that?

Karen Fassio: I took away from that experience how to find pockets of support and that there is an ecosystem of things that you need to do in order for you to make it to the next level and to not let those things sort of get in your way.

I'll also share that most of the people that I was friends with, that I had associations with, we didn't have mentors. We didn't have anyone who was really in professional jobs. These were people just day to day, 9:00 to 5:00, blue collar, a lot of single mothers. And so we would find our own version of what success looked like and needed to find our own models and mentors because they just simply didn't exist around us. I had a family that was one of the few that had both parents, and so my family ended up being a model for my friends in a lot of cases because that just simply didn't exist for them.

Mario Juarez: I am struck by this gigantic contrast between the many other people that we've talked to and what you're telling us here. Because when I talk to most of them, they often say, "I know I was privileged. I know that I was lucky." And that's an awareness that they did not have the experience that you had. And one thing that I sense out of your experience is that you must've had to learn how to protect yourself and how to protect your heart very early on. Is that a true statement and can you reflect on that?

Karen Fassio: Oh, Mario Juarez. I don't know how to say this one back.

Mario Juarez: Just say what comes to mind.

Karen Fassio: Going through an experience like that where there is just this complete range of all the access and none of the access, it was startling. I felt a responsibility to be successful and to do my best work because I did feel like I had a very special access, a special role coming to a company like this, for sure.

So what I had to learn to protect myself, oh yes, that came from childhood. But it also was a way of teaching me a new way to be, where I could be a lot more expansive because this company has all the expansive access. And so for someone like me who didn't have access, wasn't brought up around it, didn't know any of the sort of protocols or rhythms of how things happened to learn it here, what a life education that was. And allowed me to impart it to other people that were from my community, from my family, so they could learn through me.

Mario Juarez: Awesome. So you made it through high school. Where'd you go to college? Did you go to college?

Karen Fassio: I did not go to college.

Mario Juarez: You didn't go... Yeah. Why?

Karen Fassio: Can I take a pause for a moment?

Mario Juarez: Of course. And you can pause anytime in any way and if you want to change the flow or the tone of the conversation...

Karen Fassio: I am going to go with it because I know we're trying to seek out some unique perspectives.

Mario Juarez: Yeah.

Karen Fassio: And I feel like I have one.

Mario Juarez: I think you have.

Karen Fassio: But it takes a lot to talk about it.

Mario Juarez: I understand, I do understand that. Post-high school, what happened? Yeah, take your time.

Karen Fassio: Well, my senior year of high school I got pregnant. There was a lot of pregnant teenagers in my high school and I ended up being one

of them despite Talented and Gifted Programs and AP classes. And I made the decision at the time to take care of my son and put him family first. He was my focus. I remember an experience going to my guidance counselor with this news and the first thing she wanted to do was show me the path to assistance. And I sort of looked at that option and thought about my son to come and realized that I needed to show him a different path. I needed to show him a different way.

Mario Juarez: What was your vision?

Karen Fassio: Well, I had two, really. The first vision was you don't have to accept the narrative that they give you. And then the second was, I don't need to let any of this define me.

Mario Juarez: Right.

Karen Fassio: And I wanted him to see that, that you can define your own path.

Mario Juarez: What's his name?

Karen Fassio: His name is Tony.

Mario Juarez: Tony. And where is he now?

Karen Fassio: My son, Tony, is the analytics director of demand planning at PACCAR. I'm so proud of him.

Mario Juarez: So your son is very successful? Congratulations.

Karen Fassio: Thank you.

Mario Juarez: That is amazing. I am touched. This resonates for me. I'll just tell you, this resonates for me because my mother had four kids when she was divorced in 1960. She had four kids under the age of four and she was making 1,500 bucks a month. And she wanted to be a developer, what we would now call developer. At that time she was

called a [inaudible]. So she was one of the first women in data processing.

Karen Fassio: Wow.

Mario Juarez: And we went through the life of... We lived in Cleveland and we would stay in a house until they kicked us out over and over again and move from place to place to place. And she was this insane rebel. And so these lessons and kind of what life was like, it resonates for me, what that was. And I am just so impressed to do what you did because it is so unbelievably hard and-

Karen Fassio: Well, kudos to your mom.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, yeah, kudos to her. And she raised four kids, but as you know, it wasn't rainbows and unicorns. I mean, there was dark times, there was shadows as times where she was desperately alone and it took a toll on her. And I'm not saying in any way, and we don't really need to go far down this road unless you want to talk about it, but I just want you to know how moved I am.

Karen Fassio: Thank you

Mario Juarez: And how totally impressed to do what you did. And then so how the hell did you find your way to Microsoft?

Karen Fassio: Yeah, yeah. So how did I find my way to Microsoft? I had an amazing mentor who I worked with formally at another company. I'm not sure if I can mention it, but-

Mario Juarez: You can, yeah. It's good.

Karen Fassio: I was at Adobe before coming to Microsoft, so there's some backstory there because I started in the industry as a receptionist. That was an amazing job. And found that I loved customers, I really loved talking to customers, and I was really good at it. And one thing led to another, I started becoming manager of teams, and

then I started really wanting to get into the work of how to relate to customers more, and that turned into going into marketing roles. Because I just showed that I had an appetite for learning and I used that drive that I had to keep doing the work that turned into a marketing career. So my entry into Microsoft was through a mentor that I met at Adobe, who was my manager at the time, and we also became very good friends. She came to Microsoft and recruited me over to be a marketing manager for her, and back in 1998.

Mario Juarez: Wow. So it sounds like marketing found you.

Karen Fassio: Marketing found me, yes.

Mario Juarez: Tell me more about that. Tell me more about... Was there a moment when you realized, "Oh, this is the path," or was it more gradual? Tell us how you became a marketer.

Karen Fassio: Well, becoming a marketer felt like a very natural thing because while I was also really good at understanding the customer, I was also really good at how we should speak to them. And I was put in a position of being a trainer for other people who were also doing this work, which then led to, well, why do we have to keep retooling the marketing when I can just work on the teams that are doing it in the first place so we can just get to better product from the start.

So I thought if I'm going to be doing the things that are talking to customers every day, how can I be a part of actually telling, like shaping the story from the beginning? And so my background in not only becoming a trainer for that work, but also then participating in campaign development and how should we message, and let me give you insights on what customers are saying because I'm on the phone with them every day, is what sort of naturally turned into my marketing career.

And so when I came to Microsoft, my very first job that I couldn't believe I actually had this job to do was to sell the world through

these global international training initiatives that were training IT professionals on Microsoft's big wave of 2000 Technologies. That was my first job. So not only was I enabling skilling and helping people to learn these products so that they could be serving their customers and their businesses smarter, I was also applying a marketing way of doing it through these enablement initiatives. So I was in a job, the dream job for me at the time.

Mario Juarez: And I'm thinking of your life story, I'm thinking how this notion that what you were focusing on is empowerment. I mean that you mentioned earlier you were a natural learner, you can't get enough. You see the importance of that and then this becomes your primary job. Do you view that as part of your great inherent wisdom or was it luck or just some kind of supernatural serendipity?

Karen Fassio: Ooh, do I think getting this dream job was supernatural serendipity? Yeah, I do. I actually have this belief system that I believe that there is a legacy of grandmothers that would... Been leading me from the beginning.

Mario Juarez: Tell me more.

Karen Fassio: So I have been a natural teacher, and I love the concept of creating ways to empower people. That's why this mission of Microsoft's is so resonating, for me personally. It is ever fuel. And what skills can enable, the kind of access it can enable is exponential. And so when you have a platform like Microsoft's that is global and first moving and a mission that is driving it to empower at the heart of everything, that just brought everything together for me, and then someone who comes from a place of lack of access to now a sea of it, oh my goodness. We just have a menu of things that we can do. Pick, pick, pick, bring it all together, boom, out the door, and next thing you know, you've got hundreds of thousands of people that have their lives changed forever.

Mario Juarez: Talk about your progress. I mean, there had to have been clearly highs and lows, but you get into this role and it works and you get traction. Talk about your successes, what happened and how did it feel?

Karen Fassio: My successes in that role were the things that set me up foundationally for how to be successful in this company over the 24 years after. The working with other very smart, very driven people, the ecosystem of partnerships that you can unlock because you can create access points for them, and then the ways to communicate out into the world through stories that they're sharing with each other or partnerships that will carry your message even further out into the ecosystem than you ever could. They can get into the nooks and crannies of conversations that a big name like Microsoft can't get into.

It was just this idea of just constantly unlocking access, access, access over and over again and just pushing, pushing for more. And I know, it can sound like an aggressive thing to do, but it's just the way you do it. Shared ambitions, shared goals, shared vision, shared storytelling. We don't need to fight about this. We're all trying to accomplish the same thing, saying big, amazing things and look at the impact it's having on the people that we're actually able to serve. We have people that earn certifications that now built their careers so that they can advance in their own careers in the ways they're impacting their families and their communities. You can also impact how they get placed in other organizations, how maybe they even pursue their own businesses and become entrepreneurs and the next startups, I'm sure many of them did The next startups of the future.

It was all of these things that were just sort of creating catalysts for more, catalysts for change and in allowing people to achieve their highest potential. I just loved being a part of that nugget of idea and forward energy. And so that's what it sort of taught me is that

enablement, skilling, getting people access to things that they can learn... So they can keep learning and fortifying themselves. That's the core, that's the biggest, the hardest crank on the flywheel of change.

Mario Juarez: Beautifully said. That's awesome. Let's go back. I want to go back to your arrival in the company. Tell me, describe for me those first steps, and you don't have to explain them all, but just the pieces that stick with you that are still in your mind of when you first interviewed and when you got the job offer and when you arrived in the front door, and how did it feel? Was any of it a surprise? What was it? Just tell me about your first contacts as a candidate and as a prospective employee. I can't imagine what that felt like.

Karen Fassio: My first feeling as a prospective employee. I was so excited for the chance and I was so nervous for my ability to do it because I also felt the importance of it. I knew this was an important company. I knew that it was something that was going to influence lives forever, and I really wanted to be a part of that.

And I knew that I didn't have the typical background of most of the people that were going to be around me. So there was a lot of, okay, can I get them to see what I can despite not having sort of the typical credentials that usually walk into a place like this. And so there was that sort of, like, ooh, let's get super courageous and also believe in what it is that you can contribute to. So I remember gearing up for it and doing my studying, doing the work to learn about the role and about the impact that this was going to require of me, but I also understood the stakes of what that interview was going to be for me personally and for my family.

Mario Juarez: Where was the interview? Paint the picture for me. Bring me into the room. Where were you? Who was there?

Karen Fassio: Oh, let me remember the room. Yes, yes. My first interview at Microsoft was in the training and certification business, and it was

in one of the newer buildings at the time, RedWest, and it was an interview where I was going to be speaking with five or six different people, and I knew it was one of those interviews where they're going to grill, grill, grill and really make sure that you knew your stuff.

At the same time, I felt very comfortable with the content, so I wanted to certainly impress, but I also felt like I know this. So the team that I spoke with I think also felt very confident in me after having gone through a couple of informationals and at the end of the day, well, at the end of every interview, what was really wonderful is they each took a moment and just said, "I just want you to know that there's no question you belong here. We want you here." And so without telling me you got it, right, because you can't do that, they left me feeling like they really wanted me to be a part of this work that we were doing. So I felt very inspired and also it gave me sort of a note of how I should behave when I am interviewing others.

Mario Juarez: Wow. And then you get the offer. How'd you get the offer?

Karen Fassio: Ooh. The offer. My manager. I received the offer through my manager who, she's the one who recruited me over. I remember I definitely cried. It was an emotional moment for me, and I shared this with her and someone else who was on the interview panel that I know I need to do the work to have a good career here, but I feel some relief that I'll now be able to really provide for my family's future and I'll be able to bring more people forward.

Mario Juarez: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. And it seems like you've made pretty good on that promise. It wasn't a promise, it was probably more an understanding. How did it feel when you began? Tell me about your early experiences like the formative... Was it a shock to come here? Was it like coming home? Was it something that you had or had not imagined? Tell me what it was like in the very first steps that you took as a Microsoft employee.

Karen Fassio: Those first steps as a Microsoft employee, I felt... I was so excited. I was so proud. I was so proud of myself for having done it, but also the team I got to be a part of. I was proud of the mission that we were doing. I felt like my purpose was really aligned with the work I was being hired to do. When you say you would do this work for free kind of thing and feeling, wow, I actually can have a career doing work I love to do, with people I really admire and respect.

There is shock there, let's just get real about that, because this is a hyper fast moving environment and it was filled with highly energetic, very young people. I came from a company where the founding fathers were research park scientists, and they look the part. And then I walk into a meeting where the CVP is maybe 28 years old, and I just felt, wow, there is so much potential, so much energy, so much new happening here, and I just felt energized every day to be a part of it. So that was a little of that shock value.

And then just the discipline, the rigor that we operated in. Again, big learning for me in particular, but the language and the speed and the processes that all enabled us to be able to work together fast and efficiently. It was really amazing to be a part of all of that because I could see the value of having appropriate systems infrastructure to get the best out of people, to really get all the stuff out of the way so that you could do your best work.

Mario Juarez: You come in as a 58, I'm guessing you got promoted fairly consistently. Tell me about the evolution of your career, and not so much in terms of job levels, but in terms of what you did and what you're proud of. I'm just interested in the achievements that you feel really great about and where those led you.

Karen Fassio: When I think about the progress of my career, the evolution of that really turned into something that got me closer and closer to ecosystems and communities. The start of it being in a training and enablement, certifications, the things that empower the individual and then knowing that you would eventually be a part of, well,

taking that insight and then being a part of how you affect collections, collections of people that then turn... In businesses and then turned into communities and then turned into ecosystems.

So as my career moved forward, actually the first stages of that turned more, like, let's really get into fundamentals. So education, training, certifications, that's a fundamental. And then I moved into licensing, where it's just fundamental business return on an investment, hard, hard metrics and helped you learn the innards of how this company makes money. And then having that sort of evolve into now let's talk about the communities of IT professionals. So every time I sort of just moved into a space where it was learn fundamentals, then learn scale, and then learn how to really execute things that can go out and have impact in big ways, big communities, big new moments that you can deliver and celebrate through communities.

So that's where, as my career moved on, I kept bringing more of those kinds of practices, learning more of those practices, and then using that as a way to create a differentiator and added value to the things that I could bring to the next level of my career.

Mario Juarez: What were your latter roles in the company? The last two, three years of your career, where did all that growth take you?

Karen Fassio: All of that growth that I had in my careers took me to the Global Partner Solutions space. So this is the partner ecosystem community. This is hundreds of thousands of IT businesses of all shapes and sizes that are taking Microsoft technologies, adding their special magic on top of it and then taking that into enterprises, customers, organizations, school systems. It's this true full ecosystem impact work. And so my role, it was in helping to bring all of the goodness that Microsoft had between its readiness and its go-to-markets and its incentives and helping to articulate that in a way to partners so that they understood all of the things

that Microsoft's trying to do to partner with you so that you can do more and affect your customers in better ways.

Mario Juarez: The theme, every time I have one of these great conversations, I always see these obvious through lines in life. It's so interesting to me that the girl that was about community and empowerment and access, you started down here in this little corner of Maryland and seems to me like those, and this is my language, you tell me your language, is like what was the theme? What actually was at the core of your professional growth? I'm not even sure there's even a question in there, but it's just such a powerfully cool thing and that it kept scaling.

Karen Fassio: Yes.

Mario Juarez: Is that a true statement? I mean, give me your version of that observation of this, the through line of your career.

Karen Fassio: Yeah. A through line of community through my career, it is interesting looking back on that because I wouldn't have known it at the time, but it seemed to be a central pulling thing for me. Access and community, access and community.

So pivotal thing that happened to me when I became a director in the Global Partner Solutions group, I had this responsibility through all of our digital work to help partners understand this cloud transformation thing. I mean, we had so many people that were just, "Azure, no one's going to... No one would ever..." But the message wasn't coming through. And yeah, it was on proving ground admittedly at the time. And so my epiphany was we actually have to teach these people. We need to teach these communities, these partners, what this is really all about. We can't just keep throwing out messages to them. We need to take them through it.

And so I started an initiative, it was outside of my job, but just because I had a passion for them getting it, and it was this program

called Cloud-Ready, and we did an experiment around that to take it to some partners to help them learn, let's just take you through all of the details of this and the opportunity and how to shape your business around this, actual instruction on how to do it. And we put hundreds of partners through that because you operate that kind of scale, to start, and then we could feed that insight back into all of our big massive digital engines and empowerment engines. So it was... Created this self-education, this ongoing education, infinite education of out, in here's what we know, here's what you know, bring it back in so we can keep teaching you smarter and better.

And then as we were doing that work, learned... Could see that there were no women in the room that were also participating in this opportunity to learn. And so this is where I partnered with a friend and now co-founder of an organization called Women In Cloud. That's where that came from, was we need to help empower more women that are in tech. We need them to see their share of this trillion-dollar opportunity. It is there for all of us to be able to participate in. And so we also need to help instruct and create community and access for women that are also trying to figure out their way through these waves of innovation and opportunity again.

And so we shaped a community around that so that we could not only surround them with education and insights, but we could also surround them with a community of people of Microsoft that could also help empower them too.

Mario Juarez: Can you tell me a story, a moment or an incident that highlights for you that this program was actually doing something that mattered? Any stories there? I mean, I imagine you have multitudes of them, but just...

Karen Fassio: So the stories that made me realize this really mattered and was having impact, I'll just name maybe one or two.

One was just the stories of women who through the work that we did through Women In Cloud, had access to certification and training so they could be competitive in the job market. They would have an entry point into a career in tech where they didn't know where to start or where to begin, that wasn't in their network to even learn and understand that. So when I get the stories back of, I'm in the certification program, I'm sponsored in by my company or I'm sponsored in by another company who doesn't know anything about me, but because they're sponsoring this initiative through Women In Cloud, I feel supported to be able to take these next steps.

Mario Juarez: Did you actually get those kinds of messages?

Karen Fassio: Yes.

Mario Juarez: How did they come?

Karen Fassio: So the stories would come when we host our events online through our social media. We would also have gatherings for people that are taking the certification. So they also had a check-in. They could see other women that are doing it, maybe even struggling with it, but also taking that step betting on themselves.

Mario Juarez: That must have felt profoundly great to you. I mean, I just... Give me your words. How did that feel to see that was working?

Karen Fassio: To see how much that sort of support through community was working for people was one of the things that sort of validated over and over again the power of community. It was a sense of pride in them for having just taken a chance, believing us, believing that we have their best interests at heart, but also that they're not alone, that there are others who are on this journey of making a difference and being in tech. And to see that there is this wonderful generous access point that they can take advantage of just continues to just create inspiration for me over and over and over again. And

hopefully as we're getting inspired, we're putting it right back in and it just creates this great infinite cycle of energy and support.

Mario Juarez: Great. That's an external perspective. I'd like to just shift it a little bit to talk about what it meant for you, these dynamics that you're speaking of. They're external, it's great, but boy, I want to talk about what did it mean for you, especially early on to be a woman at Microsoft who's not fitting the mold. And you can be as frank on this as you like, but when you look back on the early first five years of your career, what was the state of affairs for unconventional people being put into the mix of this company? How is that... How do you assess that?

Karen Fassio: The state of affairs for people who don't fit the mold was very challenging. It was an environment that didn't have a lot of patience for not getting things right away or being too far outside the norm. So there was a balance of needing to figure out how to fit in very, very quickly. And there were moments where it definitely was frightening to be in an environment where you were so outside of what you saw inside the room.

Mario Juarez: Any in particular? Do you have any moments that stick for you?

Karen Fassio: Well, it was something that I observed and it still sticks with me today, and these were people who were, we were working on something that was about a big launch. It was a really important initiative. And I remember this one colleague who I admired completely... Who I admired and I thought was incredibly brilliant and smart and was putting forward a new idea into the room. And we were in a packed conference room, as we often were, and I remember that one of the other peers in the room heard his argument, went through a bunch of lengthy debate, came to a standstill in what we were going to do, and the gentleman who was challenging him just said, "So, tell me, what school did you go to? I need to know if I can believe your numbers." I was like, what? In

front of everyone, I just... And I was like, wow, okay. That's what we do.

Mario Juarez: That had to have felt incredibly disempowering to you.

Karen Fassio: Yes, it was. Because it just came... I was like, why is that the criteria now for how we're going to... Whether or not someone's believed?

Mario Juarez: Yeah. Yeah. And that wasn't even gender-specific. Did you encounter any sorts of... My observation is just mine and you can share yours, was that Microsoft was always the poster child for what was called unintentional bias. But I think that's maybe that's a little bit of a cover for a little bit more intentionality than people wanted to do, but that's my mind. How did you view the company that you arrived, post-millennium, as in terms of what kind of a place was it for a woman to work?

Karen Fassio: As a woman working in this company, well, especially for someone who is BIPOC and coming from the way I sort of came up into the company, I definitely felt alone and isolated. I didn't want anyone to know my story, because I didn't know that I could trust them with it. It came with a lot of bias and that was something I was very careful about who I disclosed that with and what the real intent of them being trusted with that insight. And that we didn't have language or a safe place to go to that would help people sort of work through that, to have a chance to be curious and learn more and realize that the diversity of perspective is actually what makes us stronger. It was more of quickly comply.

And as a woman in tech, because you didn't see very many of us in the room and there was a lot of language around football and calling audibles and just so many things that just couldn't contextualize around the things that the way we spoke and the way that we related to each other. It made it feel like bringing your whole self in that way, so your natural self in that way was going to create too much of a barrier for you to be really heard. So you had

to learn their language first and then maybe you could pull yours forward too.

Mario Juarez: But you had to learn to protect yourself. Did you have to learn to protect yourself? And how, what did that entail?

Karen Fassio: I did have to learn how to protect myself at times because it was, to me, I had a... I felt a huge responsibility to make it in this company for the sake of my community and my family and my son. So the stakes were very high for me personally. And I was very nervous about putting myself out there all the time, forward first all the time. It was a community of other women though, that helped to give me strength and support and confidence to be able to do it more often. But there was a period of time of having to limit what I shared and be very choosy about where I would stick my neck out, who I would put my support behind because there were consequences for choosing wrong.

Mario Juarez: Who were your heroes? Tell me about your heroes.

Karen Fassio: Inside the company, there are several heroes I can speak of. One in particular is Gavriella Schuster. Gavriella is the person who recruited me to the company and she is just someone who has big vision, has this sort of inward desire to empower. She let me be me, and that's what allowed me to just, in those times where I sort have a natural tendency to, "Ooh, I got to dial it back a little bit, or I got to play it safer here," it was her words and her support, because she's a force of nature, to just get in there and get it done and get in there and take everything you do and the way you do it. Don't hide it, bring it out. And she was the one that really motivated me and inspired me and supported me in doing that.

Mario Juarez: Wow. What a great asset for you to have. Who else? Who was instrumental in your success? And I mean, yeah, I'll just leave it at people. We can talk about other larger factors here. So you had Gavriella, anybody else?

Karen Fassio: There was another manager. Her name is Lee Anne Caylor and she was someone who... She pursued me to come to her team. I didn't have the confidence to be able to do what it is that she wanted me to do. She was bringing a new team together and she wanted me to be on her flagship team. And what I really enjoyed, what I did enjoy about Lee Anne's leadership is that she was unafraid to get into the nitty-gritty of issues and champion them all the way up. So as things were uncovered, as things needed to change, she was the one who sort of cleared the path and made it so that I could shine through. So it's another thing that I sort of carried forward in my approach to leadership when it was eventually my turn.

Mario Juarez: So you became a leader, you started managing people, hiring people.

Karen Fassio: Yes.

Mario Juarez: How did that feel? Talk to me about... Paint the picture of you finding your leadership voice and your leadership style. What happened?

Karen Fassio: My first role becoming a leader, I was a group manager on a team of program managers and becoming a leader of a team of peers that were once peers is a special development. Leadership development. Because you are wanting to make sure that you have a new vision, an inspiring vision of what you'd like to bring people forward to do, but also be respectful of the relationship and the expertise and the work they have been doing, which you just happen to be given that leadership opportunity versus them.

What I learned through that is the frequency of communication and transparency and the value of transparency. I was not going to approach this as if this opportunity that I was having for myself as something that was just mine, I wanted to make sure that they felt themselves as a part of this new way of us enabling our business and working together.

So the very first things that I wanted to do was get their insights on what kind of team do we want to be? And I feel like I'm an example of how you can move up and do more things in this company. What do you want to do? Because I want to help you do it. And that's how we're going to build things forward and we're going to do it through the work that you do and then move up and on. Keep contributing to this company and let's keep... I see you all as not only peers from my past, but peers of the future. So let's just keep learning and growing and creating trust between each other so that we can continue to have the impact that we want.

Mario Juarez: So why did you leave Microsoft? Tell me about the close of the book.

Karen Fassio: Well, there was a shift in the organization and it was sort of a time for me to decide whether or not I wanted to continue at this point in my career. So I was also a part of... So I was going through that reflection point about where can I make some new impact and is this something that I should do entrepreneurially on my own as a consultant in the ecosystem? So there was also a shift in the company at the time, and so I was also a part of some of the layoffs that had happened. So it was a good time overall to sort of re-reflect on things, and then when the layoffs happened, I was a part of that so could jump that entrepreneurial engine that I was already brewing inside of me.

Mario Juarez: Yeah, I could imagine that was actually a nice little burst of wind at your back there.

Karen Fassio: Yes, it was.

Mario Juarez: I mean, you can choose how you view those things. How do you regard the company? Overall? I mean, give us a retrospective of I mean, first of all, congratulations on an incredible, absolutely unique and amazing career. My mother would've been... She

would've liked to know you. Talk about the company and your view of the company as a force in your life and a force in the world.

Karen Fassio:

How do I feel about Microsoft? Microsoft still has my high admiration just because it is at the precipice of so much of the new that we're introduced... That's being introduced into the world and I feel like it has the right intention and spirit of empowerment still embedded within it.

The mission of Microsoft, I mean, let's just really think about what it is. A planet of empowered people. A planet of empowered people. Everyone having access and being enabled through what can be delivered through technology. I find that incredibly inspiring and given the way I feel about community and people and unleashing access, I still see Microsoft as being a big force in that. And for someone like me who believes in the power of empowerment, it is something that any one of us can bring into our day to day and infuse into how we do our work every day, relate to each other, relate to external communities, internal communities. It's this wonderful thread that can just keep evolving and keep creating more energy behind it.

So my feelings about Microsoft continue to be so positive. I still talk about Microsoft all the time, because I'm in the ecosystem translating a lot of things that are being said, but also helping to create that, helping them see the possibility that the things that you can do, being a part of an ecosystem that Microsoft represents.

I love seeing the things that is being spoken about when it comes to the gravity of what it means to advance things like AI and where it's going to be applied and let's get all the way back into policy and programs and ways that we're going to relate culturally with all of this embedded. It's more than just let's win a market. Let's do this carefully, let's do this thoughtfully, let's do this with more perspectives embedded. And the fact that Microsoft continues to invest in communities and actually keeps going back and back, how

much further can we go to affect school systems and all the different ranges of abilities and geographies and some of the biggest issues that we face in our society, let's factor those into the way that we're conducting ourselves and the ways that we're bringing things into the world.

So yeah, I am super inspired by it and I am a big fan and continue to be.

Mario Juarez: I want to double-click a little bit on one concept and you've elaborated on it so good. I think there's even more there. Empowerment. It's like such a buzzword and I wonder if you can translate the notion of empowerment into what does that mean in terms of actual human experience and boy, somebody that came from where you came from, you know. So share for us, what is the true meaning of... Actual meaning of human empowerment?

Karen Fassio: I think the actual meaning of human empowerment is highest best use and enabling people to access their highest best use is the center of that. The tools that we can use to make that easier to do, the ways that we can translate technology so that more of us understand it, it isn't reserved just for the elites and the ones that know all the background code. There needs to be accountabilities across the board so that more of us can access it. That to me is what enable... That's how I know you've empowered.

Mario Juarez: What happens in the world when people are empowered?

Karen Fassio: When people are empowered, you start to see real long-lasting change happen. You see different faces in the room. You see technology that isn't so scary for people anymore. You see it available in all of the easy ways that it should be. You see new innovations you never heard before. You see words you've never seen before. You see more people that are constantly giving inspiration and sharing inspiration so that we can just keep all this momentum going. You see things moving forward. And I think you

also see more of us questioning sameness. We are constantly asking why and why not.

Mario Juarez: Yeah. Well, I see a brilliant young woman who found a way to achieve, make your dreams come true, and to fulfill your responsibilities in the world. You strike me as a person who has a lot of gratitude in the way that you live your life. Talk to me about gratitude and maybe it's cousin, which is the obligations that come with what you know.

Karen Fassio: Oh, wow. I have gratitude that can start all the way from the beginning. For my father who purchased that Commodore 64, the only one in our whole neighborhood, got us connected to the internet through a dial-up system and put that in front of kids without any instruction on how to use it.

I have gratitude for that manager who hired me to be a receptionist in a software company back in the day and hired me because I said something in the interview to the effect of, "I always need more to do." I have gratitude for people who have had the patience to teach me and let me try things without over indexing on too much instruction, which sort of let me play. And I have gratitude for a company that has had the kind of leadership that was willing to try new things and hear from a perspective like mine.

And I also have gratitude for these amazing leaders, women leaders in particular who saw something in me that was completely outside the norm, took a chance and just let me be me.

Mario Juarez: What burdens do you carry in terms of the responsibilities that you know have because you know you're so lucky?

Karen Fassio: Well, the responsibility that I feel is that my representation matters a lot. I think about a little kid in Prince George's County, Maryland who didn't have anyone who looked like me doing what I do and thinking about how this me being here could be enough for them

to give themselves a chance, change their narrative and not accept what they're seeing around them.

I also feel the responsibility of what it meant to be in this company in particular because we're on a global platform and what we do matters a lot. The way that we show up for people, especially outside that Microsoft domain, it means a lot to people. They're always watching us. They're inspired by what you're doing, and many times you are the highlight of their year that you took the time to have a conversation with them. Understand the gravity of that, the impact you have because you're at this company at this moment in time. You hold in your hands the ability to inspire them to their greatness. Take that, truly take that responsibility seriously.

Mario Juarez:

If you had a platform right now to talk to every person that's coming in the company, man, woman, age, nationality, along this line of responsibility, what would you say is your mandate? If you're... If I'm talking to someone who's just walking in the door, I want you to urgently understand this is your responsibility, what is Microsoft's responsibility with where it stands today?

Karen Fassio:

As a person who is starting at Microsoft, please understand that you have the power of a company that is affecting everyone in the world actually. This isn't hyperbole. This is what you actually get to do every day. Everything you do impacts millions and millions of people actually. So take that with so much gravity and responsibility, please.

I was thinking about this earlier on in my career that there really aren't very many places you can go where you sit on levers that affect the world. And in a company like this, you really do. And you can take it as far as you want. You don't need to just stick to the standard demographics. You actually can reach far, far deep into communities. And not only people today, but think about the people 10, 15, 20 years from now, your work impacts them actually.

I didn't quite understand that when I started and now that I look back on 24 years, yes, absolutely you do.

I would also say that you have the ability to bring communities together. They will listen to you. You have a lot to say, you know things that many people don't quite piece together or understand. And you can bring communities together to not only hear your perspective on things, but to also gain insights and maybe even come up with something new. Maybe even come up with something better than what you originally started with or your boss told you is where you needed to start.

You invite people to the room, they will come, they will come, and they're going to be very excited to do so, and you'll be the highlight of their day, of the year. They will be talking about you to their parents, to their family, to their communities, to their investors. Your meeting with them, the work they're going to do with you will be part of their journey forward. So have fun with that.

Mario Juarez: Awesome, awesome, awesome. What else? Anything else that we didn't talk about? I have one other question.

Karen Fassio: Sure.

Mario Juarez: So your son, his name is-?

Karen Fassio: Tony.

Mario Juarez: Tony?

Karen Fassio: Mm-hmm.

Mario Juarez: Tony. And how old is he now? He's like 20?

Karen Fassio: He's 35.

Mario Juarez: 35.

- Karen Fassio: I have a granddaughter.
- Mario Juarez: You have a granddaughter?
- Karen Fassio: Oh my gosh. She's spicy.
- Mario Juarez: Oh, I wonder where she got that from.
- Karen Fassio: She's two and half and she's a little spicy.
- Mario Juarez: When did your son realize what a badass his mother is?
- Karen Fassio: Wow. I'm trying to think about this. One of the first times, I think, when he started to go, "What do you do exactly," was when I was a featured speaker at one of the Microsoft conferences and my topic was being written up in some of the industry periodicals that he sort of learned about and was like, "That's my mom." And I'm like, "That's what we do, baby." And then maybe another one was when we received a Washington State Proclamation for Women In Cloud and we were honored by the entire Senate, Washington State Senate for the work we were doing, and he sort of realized, "You're doing more than just a 9:00 to 5:00 there." A little bit.
- Mario Juarez: Yeah. How wonderfully gratifying for you that you know did right by him.
- Karen Fassio: Thank you.
- Mario Juarez: I can't imagine there's anything bigger than that.
- Karen Fassio: I just love seeing him. It's fun to have them reach back and ask me questions about business stuff and technology and actually have this great conversation around it, I'm like, oh, finally. Finally, we can talk tech together.

- Mario Juarez: My brain is hurt a little bit by the notion that you have a grandchild because it just seems like you have so many miles ahead of you. What's next?
- Karen Fassio: What's next for me is I want to continue to work in ecosystems. I love the idea of inspiring people to use technology to their best advantage. And so right now it's about two things. It's about helping to empower women, continue to empower women through access, through bringing a constellation of partnerships together in support of that mission. And I want to see a billion dollars of impact unlock through women entrepreneurs. That's what I want to see. That's my big ambition there.
- Mario Juarez: This story is not finished. But this interview is.
- Karen Fassio: No, this story is not finished. No, it's not finished. I have a granddaughter who needs all the access.
- Mario Juarez: Yeah.
- Karen Fassio: For all the other granddaughters out there.
- Mario Juarez: That needs some inspiration, which I'm, yeah, no doubt that you're going to provide. All right.
- Karen Fassio: Thank you so much.
- Mario Juarez: Thank you. Awesome. That was so good.