



Photos courtesy of Dr. Jacqueline Kerr

Dr. Jacqueline Kerr

FIGHTING FOR CHANGE

By Judith A. Habert

Dr. Jacqueline Kerr has a proud Scottish heritage as part of the Kerr Clan. A topic I found most interesting to learn about. They have their own unique tartan which has changed over the years, but the current one is red, dark green, and black. Having little knowledge of Scottish history, okay, to be honest, I have no knowledge. It was interesting to begin this interview by learning the story of this amazing woman's heritage. The Kerr clan was known for being left-handed. This may seem like a strange fact to even mention, but this may have been one of the reasons that the Kerr Clan became known as great warriors. The Kerrs built their castles with the staircase going the opposite way so that when they were fighting, they had a unique advantage. All members of the clan were taught to fight left-handed, regardless of whether they started off as righthanded warriors. They became known as fearsome swordsmen because most of the people that fought for them were ambidextrous. So, if they were injured on their left side they could continue fighting with their right hand.

Dr. Kerr's parents moved from Glasgow, Scotland to London, England when they got married in the sixties. "I never actually ended up living in Scotland, but my dad's job actually took us all around the world. My

dad was an accountant and a financial advisor for Unilever, which is an international fast-moving consumer goods organization similar to Proctor and Gamble in the US. We lived in Australia, Sweden, Nigeria, and Indonesia. As an adult, I lived in France and Germany. I came to the U.S. in 2004 for my postdoc because there was a professor in my field of study, in public health, who was one of the leading researchers in my specific area of research. I was really excited to come to study under him." Dr. Kerr's plan changed when she met her husband, Burt, and she ended up staying in the U.S. which hadn't been her intention.

Years passed and Dr. Kerr was married, had two young children, Callum and Catherine and she had acquired a position as a professor at UCSD in the department of public health. "In 2018 I left my position at UCSD. At the time I didn't really understand what was going on. All I knew was that I was extremely stressed. I experienced suicide ideation and panic attacks. I took a three-month leave of absence and spent that time in therapy

Because it's not self-care alone, sure that helps you manage the stress, For example, hiking in nature helps me. When I went back, I just realized that nothing had

changed. The demands of the job were still the same."

Her job was extremely demanding. "Most people don't realize how stressful the job of a research professor can be. Often people think teaching is an easy job, but, when you are a research professor, you are bringing in your own salary. I had a group of about 40 staff and students. I was responsible for bringing in money for research and their salaries as well. I was bringing in \$10 million grants to the university. There is constant pressure to bring in more funding to keep the group going. This along with teaching, doing my administrative tasks, my mentoring, and my work in the community." Dr. Kerr's research projects were based on building age-friendly cities. She also served on the California AARP livable community committee. "I was really trying to give back to the community since we were learning so much about them through our research."

Dr. Kerr was living a life as a full-time working mom, professor, fundraiser, mentor, wife, researcher, and community liaison. When you break down how much was on her shoulders, it is easy to understand how stressful her life was at the time. "My daughter was five and my son, who was nine, is high functioning on the autism spectrum and was struggling with the public school system, which was unable to meet his needs. So, when I burned out and left my position at the university, I was able to give him the attention he required, and it allowed me to find him a more appropriate school that would give him a more positive learning experience."

Women of Distinction

Before making that decision to leave work, Dr. Kerr had spoken to many moms who went through the same situation, and they often shared identical feelings to hers. "I spoke with one colleague who had moved on from a full-time position to start her own business. I was curious what her defining moment was when she decided to leave her job. She said that she knew it was time to move on when she found herself crying on the way to work. At the time, when I asked her, I wasn't at that point, so I figured I was still okay. But it wasn't too long before things changed. I was crying on the way to work and, crying on the way home too because both places made me feel so inadequate."

Working moms are often faced with the fact that they are completing a lot of different tasks but feel as if they are not great at any of them. "I was just feeling like a bad mom, a bad wife, a bad friend, a bad colleague, and a bad manager. This is a tough position to be in, but it wasn't until afterward when I started to read and learn more about what I was going through, that I realized that I needed to ease up on myself. I had never considered myself a perfectionist, but I realize that was exactly what I was and why this mindset was causing me such anguish. I knew I wasn't perfect but when I read the definition, I realized that this was what I always strove to become. A perfectionist is often an individual who never felt good enough. This is when I put a lot of work into myself and my relationships. I learned a lot about how I could be a different sort of parent. I think that was a big part of it for me when I became a mother, I had an unrealistic view of what a mother should be. With the

help of therapy and a lot of in-depth reading on the subject, I started to realize that I felt so inadequate because I was not meeting the expectation in my mind of what type of parent I wanted to be and at the time I didn't know any other way of being a parent."

Dr. Kerr learned through coaching and studying her son's unique way of learning that part of the problem was understanding how to communicate effectively with him. "His brain works differently from mine, and we would often have crossed wires in our communication. I learned to think outside of my head, and to let go of being this sort of controlling parent. When I started to read about how I could be a better manager, I realized that these things make it hard for moms to be managers in the first place. So I learned about the maternal wall, I learned about the motherhood penalty versus the fatherhood bonus and I just started sort of feeling this outrage. This led me to read about burnout and suddenly it all clicked. I finally realized that this was the answer. I wasn't losing my mind. I wasn't a bad mom or researcher or wife I was struggling with burnout."

Coming from this public health perspective Dr. Kerr started to truly understand the obstacles that existed for other moms in my same situation. "I realized that it went beyond learning to be less of a perfectionist. I realized that the workplaces needed to change. I very much see it as this equity issue because that's the biggest difference. Yes. Anyone male or female can experience job burnout from the perspective of being exhausted and overworked. But the other reasons for burnout are; when there's a lack of reward, when there's injustice, or when

there are value conflicts. Those are all the things that affect moms and, those are the things that aren't in our control. We don't control the fact that we are not paid and promoted equally. And so that's what I've come to realize. We need solutions that are individual, organizational, and cultural because we simply must change the societal expectations for moms."

Dr. Kerr made it clear when she pointed out how advertisements often represent moms as superheroes when in reality it's such a lonely place to be and you feel guilty all the time. Women deserve equal pay and promotion opportunities and for those in



power to not hire a single man or woman over a mom, because they fear that 100% of their dedication could not possibly go into their work life. The reality is that often the mom is the more diligent worker and manages time better than anyone young and inexperienced. Think about all of the actual skills that go into being a mom, most companies should be thrilled to have this type of individual on their team.

Dr. Kerr admits that she is seeing some action in a positive direction. "There are many companies doing diversity equity inclusion initiatives, but it is so closely tied to mental health that approaching the two issues together will make the combined task more important. There are more guidelines available now informing us what we need to

change the workplace, to support all women, and it becomes clear that what we need in society is better affordable childcare and paid leave for all caregivers.”

One of the problems is that childcare is viewed as a woman's burden, that the job of a mother is to do everything possible to make sure their children are safe and happy. At the same time, they must perform their job to an even higher level so employers will say you're doing a good job, and not bad mouth you for having to go pick up your child from school or leave work if your child becomes ill.



“When I left the university, I was just feeling so lost, from one minute racing against the clock to do everything there is to do each and every day to feeling a bit lost. This is an important part of burnout that needs to be considered. If you then leave your job, you lose your identity and that's almost when it gets worse because your inner critic takes over. Leaving reinforces the thought in our heads that we are failures. That we could not be superwoman. I needed input from other women and so I decided, with a friend, to start interviewing older women who had worked to ask about their lives.”

Dr. Kerr decide to start a podcast called “Women Behind the Wrinkles.” “I suddenly realized during these interviews that so much has changed, yet nothing has truly changed. The status quo has remained. The predictions for global pay equity are

almost, over a century or two centuries still to come. Part of me feels very despondent about that, but part of me also knows that I can function in a public health way to elicit change, it becomes a mission for me to get the conversation to progress past encouraging women to practice self-care. Because it's not self-care alone, sure that helps you manage the stress, but it's just a Band-Aid. It doesn't change any of the structural inequalities. And we know what to do about those structural inequalities. There's this one book by a professor at Harvard, which is literally going through all the research that shows what we should do. One example requires that we have structured interviews. You can't just let a biased manager go out and ask a candidate, whatever question they fancy, because then what happens is they hire people that look like them, and basically that's going to be more white men. Research shows that we have only 8% of fortune 500 CEOs that are female, less than 20% of news sources employ women and only 24% of the Senate are women. We are not represented in the places where we can influence society, yet women-run companies are three times more profitable, and female physicians are more likely to save a life in the ER, than a male physician, but they are also 250% more likely to attempt suicide. I'm in the top 1% of most vital scientists worldwide, and I'm a burnout survivor, so it's not as though we are not capable.”

These statistics are staggering when you consider that in some ways we have come so far, but in other ways, nowhere near far enough. Listening to Dr. Kerr it becomes obvious that workplace systems in place in our country just don't work. One fact that Dr. Kerr mentioned shows a critical need for change in our country. “In the U.S., the government allots approximately \$500 annually per child on childcare. It is \$14,000 on average per year for other countries. We are also the only developed country without paid leave, and it is not like there aren't examples from elsewhere around the world that prove this can work.”

As bad as COVID was for our country one thing was gleaned from it and that is we realized that remote work can work and often does work better than having onsite employees. Hopefully, this new way of working can help with childcare issues going forward, but it is a small factor in comparison to how broken our system appears to be. I had heard of Mom Burnout and have experienced it myself while working two jobs and having three young children at home.

I can recall sitting on the floor of my living room hysterically crying because I was totally exhausted and didn't think I could survive another day. So, Dr. Kerr's issues hit me hard to think some 25+ years ago, I was going through such difficult times and moms today really don't have it any easier at all. What a sense of loss there is for all the brilliant minds we cannot benefit from because our society doesn't value moms the way they should.

The recent statistics are scary when you look at how many women were forced to leave their jobs because of COVID. As of February 2021, news reports placed the number at nearly 3 million women who either lost their job or were forced to leave a position to provide childcare and homeschooling. Not only is it a horrific statistic, but it also left many women feeling like failures, when the reality is they were all heroes for the selfless decisions they were forced to make.

“Although the pandemic opened the door for remote work opportunities, if it's only the moms that stay in remote work, then they are going to be even more disadvantaged. To a certain extent, we have gone back to the 1950s. We do need to keep engaging men in this conversation. I think dads are an important ally in this fight for equality in the workplace. They need to step up and voice the fact that their family needs these benefits, and it affects the men as well since they're expected to be the provider and they don't feel comfortable taking paternity leave. So even if it were available, they probably wouldn't take it. A change in the cultural norms must change around that. I think that some of the positionings that we're trying to bring about change go even beyond moms. These changes regarding paid leave are needed for all caregivers. If a male CEO is faced with, for instance, his wife getting cancer, he will become a caregiver at some stage in his life, so paid leave then becomes a necessity for men as well as women. A lot of what I write about and talk about on my current podcast “Overcoming Working Mom Burnout” is very much from the mom and the woman's perspective. But for example, in a TEDx talk, I'm presenting in March, I am trying to engage men and present their perspective too. I understand men have the pressure of being a provider. So, this is disadvantaging you too, and I understand we're all burned out and we should all be worried about this.”

Since leaving her position at UCSD, Dr. Kerr has continued work as a consultant and a grant writer. She also now hosts her pod-

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cast "Overcoming Working Mom Burnout" where she shares behavior change guidelines to help people work out how we can make positive change. "I have to say that many companies are trying to help with self-care benefits, providing access to coaches, and apps to help their employees meditate to alleviate the stress, but they need to do more. The thing companies could do to help is to advocate for legislation for women, for childcare subsidies, and paid leave. I feel that until we have more women who are actually in the C-suite and become the decision-makers much of this will not change. One of my podcast guests said it really well. She believed that too many people see it as a pie, and if I give you a piece of the pie, then I get less of the pie. I think that is the concern for men feeling like if they give away their benefits to women, then they're going to lose out. Instead, let's build a bigger table and put more seats around it. I see so many women who make their way to that table and discover the seats broken, and their voice is still not heard. In some instances, women are warning others, don't take a seat at the table unless there's another seat for another woman because you are going to need some support and solidarity in what you're going to do."

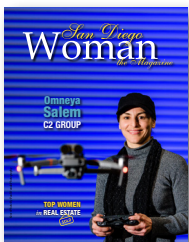
Another point that Dr. Kerr expressed is that there are many different types of burnouts. "Yes, job burnout is recognized by the World Health Organization but there is also parental burnout, caregiver burnout, and emotional burnout, which I believe a lot of women of color experience. They are exposed to racial trauma and daily microaggressions. When it comes to parental burnout, the research shows that countries like the US have higher rates of parental burnout because the philosophy is individualism. Our country's philosophy is to be independent, do it for yourself, and don't ask for help. Many other countries treat the upbringing of children as a family affair. It takes a village to raise a child and when we try to do it alone, we experience greater incidents of Mom or Parental burnout. Research has shown that the US is at a disadvantage from that perspective."

I asked Dr. Kerr for some tips on what women should look out for to help avoid burnout. "The first suggestion I have if you are beginning to feel overwhelmed is to ask for help. I feel this is most important. Ask for help from everyone around you friends, family, and your employer. Ask your employer to subsidize a coach because personal development is professional development."

I think being proactive is also important. In job interviews ask important questions, for instance, inquire as to the number of female managers within the company for which you are interviewing. I think when employers start hearing those types of questions from prospective employees, they will see the importance of a diversified staff. You will get the employers' attention because they will feel that the lack of diversification in this manner will help them win over a superb candidate. We are recently reading more and more about switching our work week to a four-day model and remote work positions. Pose these questions as well."

There is some encouragement and signs that things are getting better, but it is imperative to realize that this is an important issue that needs change, and we all need to take responsibility for helping to make that change a reality.

To learn more, visit her website at www.drjacquelinekerr.com/
Or listen to her podcast "Overcoming working mom burnout"
Her TEDx Talk will be on YouTube soon but contact her through her website and she'll send you a link when it is released.



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