

In this issue, we memorialize Karen Pryor, who guided so much of our collective behavioral learning for decades. Her wisdom and generosity live on in our hands as we strive to help each other and the animals we serve. ~ Editor

In Memory of Karen Pryor (1932-2025)*

Ken Ramirez

The behavior community lost a true pioneer, a trailblazer who popularized positive reinforcement in animal training. Her name was Karen Pryor. She was a writer, an innovator, a trainer, a scientist, a government advisor, the leader of a movement, and a mentor to many.

Karen spent her childhood curious about the world around her. She was endlessly fascinated by observations of birds in the forest, butterflies in the meadow, and lizards near the lake. In her public memorial, her daughter Gale shared that Karen was “reinforced by a sense of wonder about the world around her.” She carried this trait from childhood until she passed away in January 2025. That sense of wonder led her to be an innovator, always on a journey of discovery, and eventually led her to share those things with the world as a prolific writer and sought-after lecturer.

Karen graduated from Cornell University with a degree in biology. In the 1960s she found herself in Hawaii as her first husband led in the creation of Sea Life Park, a combined research facility and public display park. She was asked to initiate the dolphin training program there, even though she knew little about dolphins and was only passingly familiar with exotic animal training principles. Karen immersed herself in her new position, made friends with the pioneering marine biologist Ken Norris, and read the works of B.F. Skinner and applied all that she learned to become the best “porpoise trainer” she could be. Those experiences are the subject of her book, *Lads Before the Wind: Adventures in Porpoise Training*, which featured an introduction by world-renowned ethologist Konrad Lorenz.

But she had already become a successful author; in 1963, she published the book *Nursing Your Baby*, which is still in print more than 60 years later. That book guided many women through breastfeeding strategies and showed a great understanding of behavioral principles as they are applied to human learners. Karen demonstrated more than just great knowledge of behavior, but she knew how to write about them in clear, understandable, and witty prose.

Her experiences at Sea Life Park led her to participate in several scientific studies that looked at behavior acquisition in marine mammals, her most famous study was one on creativity that she conducted with dolphins at the park. She became active in working with the tuna fisheries to find ways to prevent dolphin entanglement in tuna nets. In the 1980s, her accomplishments caught the attention of President Reagan, who appointed her to the Marine Mammal Commission. Her impact on the marine mammal scientific community was profound, culminating in her publication, *Dolphin Societies: Discoveries and Puzzles*, which she co-edited with Dr. Ken Norris in 1991.

But Karen's most famous book, *Don't Shoot the Dog: The New Art of Teaching and Training*, was first published in 1984. She wrote it as a guide to help people be better parents, teachers, and coaches and to assist them in teaching their household pets. It was not written for dog trainers, and Karen did not particularly like the book's title; that was her publisher's suggestion. Although the book did assist people in learning new ways of dealing with their partners, kids, and students, it caught on with the dog training world. Positive reinforcement training was not new to the dog training community, but Karen's writing made it more accessible, helped people to see that aversive tools were not needed, and popularized the concept of "clicker training." The book became a worldwide hit, being translated into 27 languages, and still in print today.

Don't Shoot the Dog made Karen a well-known name in the dog training community, and she was asked to write articles and speak at conferences about dog training. She recognized a need for a unified place to get consistent and scientifically accurate information about positive reinforcement training. That eventually led to the creation of Karen Pryor Clicker Training which is an organization that represents the effective use of positive reinforcement training. From that grew the influential Karen Pryor Academy, responsible to date for certifying more than 2,600 professional trainers worldwide, which is increasing yearly. She developed the popular ClickerExpos, an annual positive reinforcement conference for scientists, professional trainers, and training enthusiasts to collaborate on new and cutting-edge training ideas and discoveries. Throughout her life, she continued to spread that knowledge to human learners and eventually co-founded TagTeach International.

The list of Karen's accomplishments is far too great to enumerate here. But this can be seen in the outpouring of love, gratitude, and appreciation demonstrated in the celebration of life that was done in her honor in mid-January. Speaker after speaker shared how collaborative Karen was in seeking input and ideas from everyone. She readily promoted others who had made achievements in positive reinforcement, whether in the public sector or the scientific community – she did not care where good ideas came from and elevated anyone who had important things to share. She wrote an essay on *Being a Change-Maker* that was referenced and quoted by many who attended the memorial in her honor. In that essay, she shared her philosophy regarding spreading the word about positive reinforcement with those who disagreed with that approach. Karen was kind and quick-witted but did not suffer fools and was eager to gently nudge anyone into the limelight whose work she admired.

Perhaps the most telling is the number of people whose lives she changed, even without ever meeting them. She was a trailblazing "influencer" before social media made that a common term. She changed people's and animals' lives by making positive reinforcement and welfare-based animal care THE way to approach teaching and training. Thank you, Karen; your influence has permanently changed the face of animal care and training. Your legacy lives on; may you rest in peace.

*(A similar memorial article was originally published in *Operants*, 2025, Issue 1, pp. 30-31.