

In Memoriam: Katrin Kohl

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Sarah Gregory] Hi, I'm Sarah Gregory, and today, in the studio, I have Dr. Nina Marano, CDC's Immigrant Refugee and Migrant Health Branch chief, and, calling in from Puerto Rico, Dr. Steve Waterman, CDC's Dengue Branch chief. We'll be talking about the life and public health contributions of our late esteemed colleague, Dr. Katrin Susanne Kohl. Dr. Kohl died suddenly and tragically last year at the age of 54. We all mourn her terrible loss. Welcome, Dr. Marano and Dr. Waterman.

[Nina Marano] Thank you. Thanks, Sarah.

[Steve Waterman] Thank you. I think I can maybe start by saying a couple words about Katrin's background. She was born in Duisburg, Germany, where her father was a prominent architect. And she attended medical school, both in Austria and finished up at the Free University in Berlin in 1991, and also received a PhD, and later earned a master's degree of public health at Tulane University. Katrin joined CDC in 1997 as an Epidemic Intelligence Service Officer. She was a foreign citizen officer—there's always a few in each class—and she matched with the Louisiana Department of Health. Worked, you know, on infectious disease and sexually transmitted disease epidemiology with her supervisor, Dr. Tom Farley, who is a well-known figure in public health, later became the New York City Commissioner of Health. And I'd like to share a quote that Tom made about Katrin was that, "The Louisiana Health Department staff just fell in love with this wonderful German woman who made disease investigation a happy, exhilarating experience." I think that's...that's a good way to start talking about Katrin.

Nina, can you tell us about some of her work afterwards with the Brighton Collaboration?

[Nina Marano] Yeah, she began working with the Immunization Safety Branch in 2000, and she was the person who started and coordinated the Brighton Collaboration, which was an effort of about 800 participants in 80 countries worldwide to enhance vaccine safety. So, this global initiative was designed to improve the rigor of immunization safety science at a time of great public controversy and vaccine hesitancy. And with her communication and diplomacy, she worked to persuade policymakers across the global immunization community. Her efforts resulted in the publication of the first set of the Brighton case definitions in the journal *Vaccine*.

I wanted you to tell us about her friendship and collaboration with Dr. Bonhoeffer.

[Steve Waterman] Yeah, I'd like to add to that Brighton Collaboration story. Jan Bonhoeffer was her partner on the project from the European Union, and Katrin told me stories about how the two of them were a great team, working together late into the night, as they were so enthusiastic about this project. And that was sort of typical of Katrin's zest for life and work. And one nice note is that Jan later became the godfather to Katrin's daughter, Clara.

If I could just give one other story before we talk about her life with our common CDC Division of Global Migration and Quarantine. As I mentioned, Katrin was a medical student in Berlin. And she was deep into her medical books one evening, when her parents called and said, "Tell us what's happening. The Berlin Wall is coming down!" And Katrin didn't really know this was

happening, but she jumped on her bicycle and pedaled off to the Berlin Wall and was part of this important moment in world history.

So, Nina, can you tell us about Katrin's leadership in the Division of Global Migration and Quarantine?

[Nina Marano] Yes. As our division's deputy director, she helped Marty Cetron, who's our division director, oversee quarantine and border health responses for a lot of the major emerging infectious disease outbreaks since 2009. She worked on Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, she worked on H1N1 influenza, she worked on the West Africa Ebola epidemic in 2014, and then, in 2016, on the Zika epidemic. And in her role, she also strengthened the unit that you became the head of, Steve, the U.S.-Mexico Unit, that focused on binational and border health. So, because of her international experience, she really was our champion and leader for the World Health Organization's 2005 International Health Regulations, where she really played a major role in educating federal and state agencies, and liaising with the WHO member states around transparency and collaboration in international diseases and outbreak reporting. Since all of these diseases that I've just mentioned, those pathogens don't respect borders, and we're all in a very small planet, dealing with these diseases.

So, Katrin was a phenomenal problem solver. She was willing to tackle the most formidable problems that we faced every day. I can remember her willingness to dig in on multistate investigations of highly mobile travelers with multidrug resistant tuberculosis, and her leadership in coordinating with WHO and the European CDC on the Zika risk country classifications. And I think what made her so effective in doing her work was she had a very, very disarming and ebullient personality, and she had the skill to bring together people with very diverse viewpoints and was able to get them to reach technical and public health policy consensus in a way that I don't think I've ever seen anybody as effective as Katrin in doing this.

And on a personal note, I knew that she could solve just about any problem I could present to her, so I would go to her office and I would get the benefit of her time and wisdom. And if I was really lucky, I could also count on a beautiful cup of espresso from the little machine in her office, along with many helpings of pistachio nuts that she kept in her office for visitors (which her husband, Gene, told me was really his idea to put those pistachio nuts there).

[Steve Waterman] I had lots of cups of espresso in her office, as well. It was great!

[Nina Marano] So, tell us how you met Katrin, Steve, and tell us about her work in the U.S.-Mexico Unit.

[Steve Waterman] Right. Well, Katrin became the deputy director at DGMQ 10-plus years ago, and she was my sort of day-to-day supervisor, along with Marty Cetron. And she would travel to San Diego to work with our unit, and just like the Louisiana Health Department, people just really immediately took to her. We had a small unit of 10 or 12 people and she would socialize with us after work. She would occasionally go out for drinks. She was more of a white wine drinker, but because San Diego is a...become a craft brew hub, we would take her to the nearby Stone Brewery and we got her hooked on a German weiss-style beer called White Rascal.

But in the work sense, with our unit, she played a really key role in developing the unit's first strategic plan. We were a new unit and we had an important mission working with Mexico and a

lot of different state partners on both sides of the border. And, again, she was just a natural leader, in the best sense. She would listen carefully to the issues that we were trying to strategize on, and she could go right to the heart of an issue very quickly. She had this capacity to make people feel comfortable talking about what could be difficult topics. We might get stuck or go off on a tangent, and she would magically get us back on track. She wasn't just sort of refereeing the discussion, she would make suggestions that made sense to everybody, and we seemed to be able to move forward. She was a great part to the unit and lady...later supervised the unit after I left.

[Nina Marano] So, how did you and Katrin hit it off as friends?

[Steve Waterman] Yes, well, again, she was my supervisor, and I would come to Atlanta, as the lead for the unit, fairly often. And Katrin invited guests at CDC from out of town, very often, to her home, to have dinner with her lovely family. And it's amazing—she could always seem to come home from work and put together a lovely dinner, with a nicely set table. Things were sometimes a little bit chaotic with the kids, but it was great fun. And she really wanted to get to know people, and it was more than just sort of asking “How's the family?” She really had a genuine interest in people.

And so I was in Atlanta one time, and we really first bonded, I think. We had gone to a retreat in Lawrenceville, which is outside of Atlanta, and were driving back together, as it turned out, and we started talking about our children. And we both found that we had these handsome, smart sons, but they sometimes made life difficult for us. And we struggled a little bit in dealing with their rebelliousness and not willing to comply with parental orders about use of computers and so forth. And so we just had a wonderful time chatting on the way back. And Katrin actually started talking about how, during her childhood and adolescence and young adulthood, she would sometimes be quite mean to her...to her mother, and could say mean things. And she just recalled how her mother would take it in stride. And Katrin always knew how much her mother loved and supported her. And we both took that as a lesson in parenting that was important for the two of us. So, that was sort of how we got to be great friends.

[Nina Marano] So, Steve, tell us about Katrin's relationship with her mom and her brother.

[Steve Waterman] Yeah, I got to actually meet her mother and brother. They live in Europe, but I was in a international medical meeting in Austria, and it just happened to be around the time of Katrin's mother's 80th birthday, for which Katrin was coming to celebrate at her mother's summer home on the island of Majorca. She said...she asked me...she invited me, very graciously, to stop by and be part of that celebration. And so I accepted and flew to Majorca on the way back and met her in the airport and I rented a car and we drove to this lovely house in Majorca. And one little story I think really just says a whole lot about their family is we arrived just at the same time that her brother, Christian, and his wife were arriving. And immediately, Katrin and Christian rushed up to each other, and greeted each other, and hugged, and started whispering in each other's ears little family demonstrations of affection. And it was just so obviously...obvious that they were just delighted to be reunited and, you know, later had lots of fun conversations with her mother and brother and his wife. Christel didn't speak fluent English, but we could...we could communicate pretty well, and it was just clear, it was just such a loving, nurturing environment that was part of this household.

[Nina Marano] So tell us about the time she met your father.

[Steve Waterman] Right. So, the other way around, when she came to San Diego, again we would get together after work sometimes. And she got to meet several of my family members, including my father, Tom, who's about 90 years old at the time, and...but still going strong. And he's a character, very wise and witty, and sort of an earthy type at times, and also a retired architect. And Katrin's father, who she just adored who had passed away a couple of years ago, was also an architect, and she just had a good relationship with my dad.

So, the funny story I like to tell is that Katrin would often talk about how Americans would mispronounce her first name. And my dad said "Well, I have got a way to make sure that they get it right. In the future, just explain that your name does not rhyme with the word 'latrine.' It's not 'Katrine.'" So, she just...she laughed really heartily at that and would remember that several times later. Her laughter always just was wonderful to hear.

So, Nina, can you just give us some insights on your end about what made Katrin so special?

[Nina Marano] Yeah. You know, we held a memorial service for Katrin at CDC, and I'll talk about that a little bit later in the conversation, but during that service, one of her coworkers, who of course knew her and loved her, as we all did, but Yoni Haber, who really knew the family very well, she spoke for everyone when she discussed Katrin's, you know, wisdom and her scientific mind and her contributions to the public health community. We all know that Katrin was so proud to work at CDC.

But there were some traits that made Katrin really special. And I think we'd all agree that her beautiful and contagious laugh, that everyone noticed, that musical, rolling laugh was one of her best traits—beautiful and so sincere. And there were the other little things, you know, that she was very straightforward, and she was able to process and remember every detail of conversations and events. She was very honest, she didn't 'sugar coat' anything that she felt needed to be said, she was very comfortable delivering, you know, some things that sometimes were hard for people to hear. But she was very direct and we appreciated that. She had a very special and unique fashion sense, and it did range from her aunt's "hand-me-downs" to very spectacular European designs. And the way she would answer her telephone with her accent, which I'll try here, but I won't come close, "Katrin Kohl. Hello." And her funny little clip-on glasses that we always teased her about.

[Steve Waterman] Yeah, I remember her fancy European outfits. She was quite the stylist!

So, Nina, what would Gene, her husband, want everyone to know about Katrin?

[Nina Marano] Yeah. I spoke to Gene. He's, of course, very aware that we're doing this podcast, and he had some things that he really wanted people to know. First of all, that Katrin entered the world determined to make it a better place. And when she was nine years old, she didn't just play with dolls, she had a doll orphanage. And her goal was to go to Africa and work with Albert Schweitzer. And she had told Gene that when she got into CDC, it was like a dream come true.

And Gene told us that Katrin used to love making lists, and so he made a list of the things that made Katrin happy:

- Her family and friends
- Her dogs: first Decca, and then Kika

- Traveling
- Gardening
- Good, but sad books
- Her Volkswagen
- 2 latte macchiatos every morning
- Reading to Clara and Alexander, her daughter and her son
- Laughing
- Beating Gene at ping pong. She could be very, very competitive, as we all know. She even beat, apparently, Steve at table hockey one time.

[Steve Waterman] Oh yeah, yeah! Didn't have a chance.)

[Nina Marano]

- Great movies
- Germany and Austria, where she was a citizen because of her father
- Beautiful things
- Swimming with the kids
- Skiing
- Being a mom and a step mom
- Pre-20th century classical music
- The Atlanta Botanical Gardens
- Contra dancing—we even have a beautiful photograph of her contra dancing
- The New York Times
- Coffee ice cream
- Jeremy Irons
- And 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzles.

Apparently, Steve, you had a comment about visiting the Kohl-Spiegel den.

[Steve Waterman] There was always a jigsaw puzzle halfway being done there and pieces all over the place. So, yep, that was one of her favorite things to do.

[Nina Marano] Above all, I think Gene would want everyone to know, he went out of his way to ask me to tell the audience that, Katrin, above and...above all, was a loving and caring mom, an amazing wife, a wonderful and beloved friend to many. But I think the hardest part about Katrin being gone is that sudden death is the hardest on the people who are left behind. And one of her coworkers summed it up by saying, "Katrin touched so many people in her life and we know her heart would be broken if she knew how much sadness and heartache she left behind when she departed so early."

[Steve Waterman] Yeah, Nina, can you tell us about some of the visible remembrances of Katrin at CDC?

[Nina Marano] We miss Katrin every day. There's beautiful photographs of her all around our offices and hallways. We have a memory book with photos of Katrin with her family and with the many public health colleagues whose lives she touched. The book contains all the tributes

from her memorial service, which was held at CDC, and hundreds of letters we received from her friends, families, and colleagues around the world. And we planted a tree in her memory in CDC's memory garden, with a plaque.

[Nina Marano] So, Steve, just tell us, who's going to miss Katrin?

[Steve Waterman] Gosh! Well, in one real sense, the many thousands and perhaps millions of people whose lives she helped make better through her public health career. But in the more immediate human sense, the hundreds of us—and she had friends all over the place, not just at work, but in the community and internationally—and we were just so lucky to have known her. I mean, of course, her family misses her the most, and I know it's still a hard situation for Gene and Alexander and Clara, her mother and brother, in addition, of course. And we continue to send them our heart-felt condolences as we remember the times that we spent with Katrin. She would have affected the lives of many other people, I think, if she'd lived a full...full adult lifetime.

But I'd like to sort of end by recalling that Marty Cetron, our Division of Global Migration and Quarantine director, quoted at the memorial service, this extraordinary memorial service that was held at CDC, attended by people from around the country and the world. Marty quoted the poet Majira...Maya Angelou. The quote is, "I've learned that people will forget what you said or what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." And that was so true of Katrin.

[Sarah Gregory] Thank you for having this conversation with us today, Dr. Marano and Dr. Waterman. You, the listeners, can read the January 2019 article, *In Memoriam: Katrin Susanne Kohl (1964–2018)*, online at [cdc.gov/eid](https://www.cdc.gov/eid).

I'm Sarah Gregory for *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.