

Laura Stephenson Carter

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Interviewed by Michael Tabasko

Tabasko: This is the oral history with Laura Stephenson Carter, former Editor-in-Chief of The NIH Catalyst. We'll start with some background information. Can you tell us where you were raised?

Carter: I was raised in the Northeast United States. I lived in a variety of states—born in [Princeton,] New Jersey, lived on Long Island; then [Southport,] Connecticut; then [Croton-on-Hudson,] in Westchester County, New York; then [Rensselaerville] in Albany County, New York; then up near Buffalo, New York, and back to New Jersey, in Basking Ridge. I tell people we're from the Northeast.

Tabasko: Very good. You have an intimate connection with the Huyck Preserve and Biological Research Station in [Rensselaerville] New York. Can you tell us about that and how that has influenced your family and you?

Carter: The Huyck Preserve is a 2,000-acre nature preserve and research station. It was founded in 1931 by my great aunt, Jessie Van Antwerp Huyck. The property originally belonged to my great uncle, Edmund Niles Huyck. [The Preserve was] originally 500 acres and had beautiful waterfalls, lakes, and ponds. Before he died, he said no one person should be allowed to own this land and it should be available for the public. He died in 1930 and in 1931, his wife created the Huyck Preserve and opened it up to the public. There are beautiful trails to walk on. In 1938, [the board of directors] added the research station. There was a biologist from Cornell University who was invited to do an assessment. His name was Bill Hamilton. He recommended that a research station be started and that researchers be allowed to do natural history research at the Preserve. The Preserve has grown to about 2,000 acres now. It's still a research station. In the 1930s, people who got their career starts there include famous biologists like Eugene Odom, whose textbooks you can still get in college ecology classes; Donald Griffin, who discovered bat echolocation; and a number of other people. The research program is still going strong. Members of my family have been on the board of directors. There are community members as well. I was on the board of directors for quite some time and was chairman, president, and held other roles. There are still a mixture of family members and community members who are on that board, including a scientist from the American Museum of Natural History. I'm in the process of writing history of the Huyck Preserve and Biological Research Station.

Tabasko: Can you tell us what your parents were like? What did they do for a living?

Carter: My father was a [Princeton-educated] chemical engineer. He worked for M.W. Kellogg Company in New York City and [later] Allied Chemical [first in Buffalo, New York, then in Morristown, New Jersey]. One of the reasons we moved around so much was [because] his job locations changed. Then after he retired, he worked

for Bechtel down in [Louisville,] Kentucky. My mom was a stay-at-home mom. She never went to college, but we were always impressed that she could do the New York Times Sunday crossword puzzle in pen! I don't know many people who could do that today. Anyway, she had her hands full raising six kids. I'm the oldest of six. I have two sisters and three brothers. My parents had the three girls first so we could do the housework and wait on my brothers hand and foot. My sister Elizabeth owns her own business, a bookkeeping business out in Colorado. My late sister Annette worked for Elizabeth's business, and she also did a number of other jobs. My brother Kenny was a truck driver. My brother James is a truck driver. My brother Lee had a variety of jobs. The only ones of us still living are Elizabeth, and James, [and me].

Tabasko: Did your parents encourage your interests? What was expected of you growing up?

Carter: We were expected to do well in school. Because my father was an engineer, I had an interest in science, so I'm sure he encouraged that. But mainly we were expected to do well and help around the house. We had all kinds of chores to do.

Tabasko: What were some of your experiences in the community and at school growing up?

Carter: I was a member of the Brownies [and Girl Scouts] so I went to [scouting] activities. At high school and also in college, I worked for the school paper. In high school, I was in the debate club, which was strange because I was very shy. I didn't like to talk, so I don't know why I joined the debate club. [I was also in the musical Kiss Me Kate as a member of the chorus. I had several jobs in high school—babysitting, waitressing, and working in the store at the nearby V.A. Hospital.]

Carter: What caused you to choose a career in science journalism and did you face any resistance or challenges?

Tabasko: Well, I always loved writing. From the time I was young, I would write stories. I did a comic book series with a friend in fourth grade. I just loved writing. I love science, too. I didn't know what area to focus on in science because there were just so many different fields. I couldn't make up my mind. Then I realized I loved *writing* about science. In college, I actually interviewed some science majors who had gone to Woods Hole, which is a research station up in Massachusetts. I realized I loved writing about science more than I liked doing science, but I didn't go to graduate school until much later.

Tabasko: Do you remember the name of the comic strip that you began in fourth grade?

Carter: No, I wish I could. I wish I had some copies. We moved so much that I guess we didn't keep that.

Tabasko: How did you choose Upsala College?

Carter: Upsala College was in East Orange, New Jersey. We lived in Basking Ridge, which is about half an hour away. I was originally going to go to school and commute to it, so we were looking at schools in the area. I was impressed with Upsala because it had a strong science program. It was also a small college. I liked that, but the

thing that really impressed me was in the science building, which was fairly new at the time—On the top floor, they had offices and labs for seniors who were science majors. I thought that would be really cool to be able to one day have my own lab. By the time I was a senior, I had switched to psychology as a major, so I never actually got to do the labs. But it was those private labs that impressed me.

Tabasko: You majored in psychology and biology, is that right?

Carter: Yes.

Tabasko: You graduated from Upsala in 1974 and started your master's program in science journalism nearly 20 years later in [1991]. What did you do during that intervening time and how did you get into journalism?

[During college, Laura worked in the college bookstore; as a counselor for an after-school program and swim instructor at the local YMCA; as a camp cook for two summers; and as an assistant to a retired economics professor who loved to "lecture" about economic theories.]

Carter: Right after college, I went to work at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York as a management trainee, and I did a number of different things. In the management training program, you got to rotate through different areas. I worked in check processing. The first thing I did was write a procedure manual. It was not exactly journalism. It was going into a nighttime operation where people process checks—things weren't done online the way they are now. I sat with everybody to learn their jobs, and then wrote about it. It was over a summer, and at the end of the summer, I had a big procedure manual to present to management. Later on, I was [a job analyst] in the personnel department, where we evaluated requests to create new jobs in different departments. I would go learn about what that job's requirements were and then write a job description that would be approved by a committee. There was a whole process. During that time, I had to write a job description for word processing secretaries. At the time, we didn't have computers. This was back in the late 1970s, but people were beginning to produce word processing machines, which were like early computers. Then secretaries were slowly being replaced by these word processing machines, so fewer secretaries could do the work for the executives. At first, we didn't have anybody [at the Fed] for me to observe so I could compare it to what was being requested. So I went and did an interview with a vice president at another bank in New York. Although it was connected to my job, I realized later that was like doing journalism because I had to go interview somebody and then write about what they told me. I actually got into trouble for that because it turned out I wasn't supposed to contact higher level leadership at outside banks without permission. But I didn't know that—I just did what I had to do. After personnel, I was part of a management consulting team at the Federal Reserve Bank, where we [evaluated] secretarial services, word processing, records management, and other things. [I supervised the Records Management Department after that.] I later went back to check processing in a different office and was an assistant chief. Then we had a credit restraint task force that I got into in the late 1970s, where the Federal Reserve was trying to figure out how to crack down on credit.

I had my first daughter in 1980 [and second daughter in 1982] so I stayed at home with the kids for a number of years. I did a lot of volunteer work, including being head of the State Public Affairs Committee for the Junior

Leagues of New Jersey, where we lobbied for women and children's issues, homelessness [legislation], and family leave. We testified before committees in the New Jersey State Legislature. Really, we were working at a professional level, even though it was volunteer work. Then when my kids were in fourth and fifth grade, I decided to go to journalism school in New York. We lived [in Short Hills, New Jersey] near New York. [Geoff], my husband, became the stay-at-home parent at that point so that I could go to graduate school. After graduate school, I started doing freelance work. Then we moved up to Vermont, and I found a job at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center [Lebanon, New Hampshire] in the public affairs office. Later, after about five years there, I transferred to the medical school and was associate editor at Dartmouth Medicine Magazine.

Tabasko: Did being a woman make a difference to your career choice or progression?

Carter: Well, probably, because I took that time off to raise the girls, so I had a break in my employment. However, I was doing professional level volunteer work and the Junior League helped us craft resumes that showed how the volunteer work tied into paid employment. Being a woman, yes, I did have a break, so my salary didn't increase as quickly as [that of] my male colleagues.

Tabasko: Did you start your science journalism career at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center?

Carter: It was slightly before because I graduated from NYU [New York University] in 1992. I was doing freelance work. I wrote a children's book on plastics recycling, and I was writing chapters for biology textbooks. I also wrote for some professional magazines. Then in 1994, we moved up to [Norwich,] Vermont. Dartmouth is right across the river from where we lived in Vermont. I applied for a job at the public affairs office at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. Interestingly, I found out that the job I was filling used to be held by Annie Proulx, the Pulitzer Prize winning writer. She had worked for Dartmouth and the Medical Center for a number of years before moving out west to continue to work on her novels. I always felt like "Oh, I'm following an Annie Proulx's footsteps." Now if I could only write a novel and win a Pulitzer Prize, I would really complete the circle.

Tabasko: Was your first position at Dartmouth Medicine Magazine as associate editor or something else?

Carter: Associate editor.

Tabasko: In that role with whom did you work and how did those people influence you?

Carter: My editor was Dana Grossman, and I learned a lot about magazine production from her. We had other colleagues who worked in the office. We worked as a team. I also started an editorial internship program for students who wanted to learn about medical writing. I started that. But Dana Grossman was my supervisor.

Tabasko: How did those students who were interested in science writing find you at that time?

Carter: Oh, well, they were Dartmouth students. I can't remember exactly; I think we put an ad in whatever the students looked at. Then they applied. We interviewed them and decided who to choose. We usually just had one intern at a time.

Tabasko: I see. While at Dartmouth, what were some topics you worked on?

Carter: Let's see, I worked on the 1918 flu. I also wrote about an astronaut who was a doctor at Dartmouth Hitchcock and was chosen for a Space Shuttle Columbia flight [STS 90, on the Space Shuttle Columbia, which launched in 1998]. I went to [Houston] Texas while he was training at the NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] training facilities and see where they do the spacewalks. They are done in a deep pool, but [the astronauts are] wearing the space gear. I saw [life-size] shuttle models. I actually took my daughter Emily with me. She was in high school at the time, so she got to experience what it was like to be at a NASA training facility. There was an interview going on for the Discovery Channel because they were going to do an episode on this space shuttle. We sat in on a conference call, and they asked Emily some questions because as a student they wanted to know what she wanted to see in a documentary. I don't remember what she told them. I also worked on a historical article about the intensive care unit (ICU) at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. At the time, they were claiming that they had the first ICU ever. But in my research, I discovered that was not true—there had been a number of different ICUs before Dartmouth. Dartmouth had one that included nurses and other people. There was a first there, it's just that they were not the very first ICU. I wrote lots of profiles on doctors and researchers. I wrote a whole lot of things. I just loved learning about what different people were doing. It's hard to say exactly what I worked on. There were a lot of different things.

Tabasko: Just curious, do you remember some of the names the astronauts that you met?

Carter: Well, Jay Buckley was the one from Dartmouth. I'd have to look the other ones up. My work on the astronauts spanned Dartmouth-Hitchcock and Dartmouth Medicine. When I was at Dartmouth-Hitchcock, I helped orchestrate [a live event in which] the astronauts [talked from space with an audience at] the New Hampshire Planetarium and a statewide tour of the astronauts [after the mission]. There were a couple that were from New Hampshire—Rick Linnehan [and Rick Searfoss]. [Crew: Commander Richard Searfoss; Pilot Scott Altman; Mission Specialists Richard M. Linnehan, David Williams, Kathryn P. Hire; Payload Specialists Dr. Jay C. Buckley Jr., Dr. James A. Pawelczyk.]

Tabasko: That is great. Can you talk about how your work at Dartmouth might have prepared you for your time at NIH?

Carter: I was doing medical writing. I was in charge of a couple of different sections of the magazine and learning about how the magazine is put together. This was a bigger magazine than what the Catalyst is. It was a 72-page magazine. It was quarterly. I was learning a lot of things that I would need for the Catalyst and working with volunteer writers, which I would need to do with the Catalyst as well.

Tabasko: Could you talk about how you ended up at NIH and a bit about the hiring process?

Carter: There was a notice in our NYU [New York University] Alumni Association News about a job being open at NIH. I had actually applied to NIH a couple years earlier—not for a full-time job, but they were doing internships. I applied, but then they ended up canceling the internship, so I never got to go. When I saw the job listing for NIH, I was very interested because I had been trying to go there before. I saw the ad and I applied. I didn't hear anything for a long time. It might have been a year, I don't know. Then all of a sudden, I got an email from Christopher Wanjek saying, "If you haven't retired and moved to Florida, you applied for this job a long, long time ago. Are you still interested?" At the time, I had to think, "What did I apply for?" I had to go look it up. I said, "Of course I'm interested." He interviewed me over the phone and then invited me to NIH where I interviewed with members of Michael Gottesman's senior staff in the Office of Intramural Research. I read up on all of them before I went so I could ask questions about their work. I was particularly interested in Richard Wyatt because he studied AIDS. However, he was not at the interview, so I had all my questions ready and didn't get to ask them. Anyway, I was hired. I came to NIH in February 2009.

Tabasko: When you came to campus, where did you work and with whom?

Carter: Well, the first office was temporary quarters in the NIH Library. Christopher Wanjek [my supervisor] and I both shared an office. He worked a slightly different schedule. He left in the early afternoon, so then I had the office to myself. A few months later, I moved to Building 1 where I had an office for a number of years. Then a few years ago, I moved to Building 60, and I was on a hallway with the people in the History Office. That was a great collaboration. I had already been collaborating with the History Office, so it was great to actually be in an office with them. When I was in Building 1, I was in with the communications people for NIH. That was a great interaction as well.

Tabasko: I see. Could you tell us about The NIH Catalyst when you first started and what you wanted to do with it at that time?

Carter: When I first started, the Catalyst had a lot of good information in it, but I thought it looked a little dated. It was not in color in print, and I wanted to make it look better. I also wanted to create some specific departments so that you knew where to find particular articles—for instance, "Research Briefs," the "Recently Tenured" section, a history section ["From the Annals of NIH History"], and some other things that I wanted to add. In 2010, we worked with Medical Arts to do a redesign—changing the masthead to make it look more modern and changing the look of the pages so that the text didn't look quite so condensed. [The new design] gave it more of an airy look. Then we were able to start publishing in color. The cost of color printing had come down over the years, so we were able to afford to do that. The Catalyst was already online, but just as PDFs. We were able to eventually, around 2012, create a website that was what you see today—more modern looking than in the past.

Tabasko: Do you remember which issue or year the first color Catalyst was in print?

Carter: Well, there has always been color online. In print, I think it was 2010, but I'd have to go back and check. [The September-October 2010 print issue was the first to be in color.]

Tabasko: Sure. You've written a lot of stories about NIH research. Could you tell us about a few that really stand out to you and why?

Carter: The 1918 flu. I did a story on the 1918 flu at Dartmouth. I also did one at NIH; that was interesting. I [worked with a writer on] a story about Building 7, which now is no longer standing. It was a building where infectious disease research had been going on. There were actually some people who [got sick] just by being in the lobby. Somehow something got into the ventilation system. [The building was built in 1947 and had a state-of-the-art biosafety system and a special ventilation system. One person was infected with Q fever just by being in the lobby because of a defect in that ventilation system.] I thought that was fascinating. I've worked on stories on sleep research. I did a story called "The Jugglers," which was about how people at NIH balanced their careers with their family life. We had a team of people working on that—some of the volunteer [writers] and I interviewed different people. That was fun. There was a story on the Klebsiella mystery, which was an [antibiotic-resistant infection] that got into the Clinical Center. A patient from [a] New York [City hospital] brought it in. They couldn't stop the spread of it even though special efforts were made to keep that person isolated from other patients. It turned up three weeks after the New York patient was released and several patients died. NIH intramural researchers used rapid genetic-sequencing tools to confirm that the strain had evolved from the original patient and determine how it was spreading. Proper handwashing protocols and other infection-control procedures were strengthened and enforced as a result of that. I found that fascinating. In general, I like doing profiles on different researchers and doctors who work at NIH.

Tabasko: Great. What are some of the most difficult stories for you to write?

Carter: I don't know if it was so much difficult for *me* to write, but I know when I was editing volunteer writers, it could be difficult to convince them that they really had to check their facts. I'd find myself really going through things to make sure all the facts were correct. It could be frustrating working with new writers who didn't realize how important that was. I can't say there was any one story that was difficult, just that in general that aspect of the editing was difficult.

Tabasko: Did you have the same sort of experiences working with the volunteer writers at Dartmouth?

Carter: Yes, we had to convince them. We had one Dartmouth student who was studying to be a novelist, and I had to convince him that this [type of writing] was not a novel. This has to be based on fact, so check your facts. It's not fiction. He is a novelist now, by the way. Then I had a medical student who was writing for us. She kept trying to insert her opinion into the pieces because, being a medical student, she thought she knew better than the people she was interviewing. It was a little tricky to convince her that she might know something, but she's not allowed to express her opinion in a journalistic type of article. You need to quote an expert.

Tabasko: You mentioned taking The NIH Catalyst digital from the PDFs that were previously available. Could you tell us a bit about that?

Carter: Well, like I said, the Catalyst was online already. Before I came to NIH, my understanding is that the Catalyst was not visible to people outside of NIH. But sometime in the year before, it started being available to people outside because I was able to look at it before I came. Anyway, after it became available online, for a while it was PDFs or a very rudimentary type of text that was available. Once we were fully digital in the form it's in now, it was fun to be able to make articles longer than what they had been in print, and to also add some extra articles sometimes. We were even able to link to videos once in a while. We were working closely with the Intramural Research Program website and now integrated into that website. That was an important thing.

Tabasko: Did you have any sense as to the reach of The NIH Catalyst at the time or how many people were reading it?

Carter: Not right away. It wasn't until we started looking at the Google Analytics that we had a better sense of where readers were coming from and how many were reading it. We found that people are interested in particular articles, so we could track which articles people were interested in. They tend to really like stuff about infectious diseases. That always intrigues people. We were printing about 3,000 issues of the Catalyst. Those were spread all over NIH, and they went to some people outside of NIH. We knew how many we were printing, and then for online we got a better handle on as time went on.

Tabasko: One of the things you're known for is training new writers, as you've mentioned. Where do you get these writers from and how do you decide to accept them?

Carter: Well, some of them find us—they write and ask if they can write for us. Some of them are referred by the intramural training office [Office of Intramural Training & Education]. Sometimes we'll put a notice out on one of the LISTSERVS that goes to the fellows and ask for volunteers. We find them in a number of different ways. Some of it is word of mouth—somebody knows somebody who's writing for the Catalyst, and they get in touch with us because they've heard about us.

Tabasko: Okay. Could you describe a little bit about what the volunteer writer training is like?

Carter: Well, first we interview them. Actually, the very first thing we do—if they express an interest—is to ask them to write a short letter about why they're interested in science writing. A letter means an email. We ask them to send a resume, and we ask them to send any samples, if they have them—they don't have to. But having them write a letter indicates that they're serious—if they go to the trouble of writing the letter—and it also gives us a sense of how well they write. Sometimes, for some people, English is not their first language, and you get a sense of if that's going to be a problem. We just know we'll have to work with people, coaching them more. Then as the actual training, we allow them to do research briefs—that's a beginning way to write something. They're coached by Mike Tabasko or me so they can improve if necessary. As they improve doing the research briefs, we'll give [them] opportunities to do other kinds of articles. We'll put out a notice to



the writers saying we need a writer for the Research Festival—or this lecture or that person—and ask who’s interested. Then we’ll coach them and help them along the way if they struggle or need to revise. It’s on-the-job training, more or less. Some of the writers come to us with some experience already. Everybody needs a different level of coaching.

Tabasko: Sure. Could you mention some of the careers that previous Catalyst volunteer writers have gone on to?

Carter: Several have gone on to journalism school. One went on to an editorial job at Nature Magazine in England. Some have gone into communications office jobs—some at NIH, some at other places. Some have gone into policy work. You need to be able to write coherently about science when you’re writing papers to help Congress understand why NIH should fund certain kinds of research. They’ve gone into a variety of different positions. Then some of them have stayed at the bench, but they’re better qualified to write about their work. If they go on to universities, that’s a very helpful skill to have if they write grant applications, so they can explain what they’re doing and why it’s important.

Tabasko: You have a reputation as one of the best editors around. Could you tell us some of your basic tips for good editing?

Carter: Well, first, make sure you have your facts right. Second, think of the questions that you want to ask and be thinking of your audience or what people would want to know. If you’re interviewing scientists, pretend you don’t know anything about their work. I mean, you’ve done a little bit of research, so you have a general idea, but don’t try to impress them with how much of an expert you are, even if you are studying in their field. Let them do the talking. Always be respectful. Always thank people after the interview and leave yourself open—if you want to ask more questions, make sure that that’s okay with them. And have fun while you’re doing it. You’re going to meet a lot of interesting people. Just don’t be nervous. They’re people like you and me, and you’re getting them to talk about what they’re passionate about. That’s really, I think, a fun career.

Tabasko: Great. How do you stay on top of all that’s going on at NIH and choose what goes into each issue of the Catalyst?

Carter: That’s a good question. Well, we pay attention to what’s coming out in the press releases, because often those highlight important things happening at NIH. We pay attention to what’s going on in the news because if we see something that the general news has covered, we know that’s a topic of interest to the general public. The news might cover something that’s happened at NIH itself or sometimes it’s just a general topic. We’ll look and see who’s doing research in that field and figure out how to do a story. We have an editorial board that meets once or twice a year. They will give us ideas [at those meetings], and we’ll also get ideas from them throughout the year. Other NIH people may suggest stories for us to do. They may be aware of something and let us know that it’s something worth covering. It’s a variety of ways. It is hard because there’s so [many] interesting [things] going on. If we’re trying to figure out *when* to do certain stories, we try to make it as newsworthy as possible, and not let too much time go by. We want the news to be fresh, if possible.

Tabasko: How would you describe how the Catalyst is unique compared to the other publications at NIH?

Carter: Well, it covers all of NIH, where some of the publications will cover just a particular institute. It focuses on intramural research. It focuses on news that intramural researchers can use. It focuses on news that the trainees will find helpful. It's also how-to in certain aspects because we'll have new methods and "News You Can Use." If you compare it to the NIH Record, which is also broad coverage of NIH, we focus more on intramural. They'll do some intramural, but they'll do extramural as well and then just feel-good stories about employees. Our focus is intramural. That makes us unique.

Tabasko: In your time at the Catalyst, is there anything that you're particularly proud of?

Carter: Well, revamping The NIH Catalyst into, I think, a better-looking publication. Training the writers—I'm proud of all the writers we've trained. And I'm proud that, as a result of a story we did, we rescued something that's now in the NIH Clinical Center. The story was on Building 7, which I mentioned before is where infectious disease research was going on. I was able to go on a tour with Michele Lyons [from] the History Office just to see what the inside of that building looked like before they completely tore it down. Michele was looking for artifacts that they might use for the History Office. As we went up the stairs to a conference room, I noticed this beautiful window that had an art deco image of a waterfall. It was a big window. The building was going to be destroyed—that window with it. Well, I couldn't let that happen. On the back of the Catalyst, in our "Photographic Moment" section, I had a picture of the waterfall window, and a little bit about its history—who had it installed and all that. I said, "If anybody's interested in this, please let us know, because it's going to be destroyed." John Gallin, who was head of the Clinical Center at the time, saw the story and said he wanted it. He had it removed from the building, brought over to Building 10, and installed on a wall near Lipsett Amphitheater. It's backlit and there's a little history about it on the side, so people know where it came from and who the inspiration was for it. I'm proud of that, too. I'm also proud that some of our stories alerted researchers to work others and led to collaborations.

Tabasko: That's great. What are some of the challenges you encountered at your time at the Catalyst? What are some situations or pieces that you wish could have turned out differently?

Carter: The challenge in general is it seems like there's never enough time to go into as much depth as you'd want to in a story. And also, not enough pages. We're not the New Yorker, so we can't have stories that go on forever and ever. Trying to get things done on deadline [is a challenge]. Working with volunteer writers can be challenging because writing for the Catalyst is not their primary job. Sometimes something comes up and they have to drop out completely and we have to find somebody else to cover a story or just cancel it. The challenges are the timing and finding people we can count on to write—and to write well—about things.

Tabasko: What are some things you've enjoyed doing outside of work throughout your career?

Carter: I like to do hiking, canoeing, snowshoeing, photography, and crafts. I didn't mention that between the time before I started working for Dartmouth-Hitchcock, I was a counselor at a sleepaway camp for girls in

Vermont. I was head of the canoeing department. That's what got us up to Vermont in the first place. I was living up there a couple of summers since [my daughters] were at camp—a different camp than where I worked—and my husband was between jobs. We just wanted something different. We thought, "Oh, let's move to Vermont." There were lots of outdoor activities we could do up there too.

Tabasko: Rumor has it you have a collection of old manual typewriters. How many do you have, and which one is your most unusual?

Carter: I only have about half a dozen. I would have more except I don't think my husband wants a house full of typewriters. My most unusual one is a Corona Model 3—it's a folding portable typewriter. I think wartime correspondents used it because it folded up and fit into a compact case and was easy to take on the road. It's almost like an early version of the laptop. The [top one-third] folds down onto the keyboard, so it's flat when you when you closed it up. It's really cool.

Tabasko: This is manual, it's not electric. Is that right?

Carter: I don't have any electrics. I even have my manual typewriter from college. I had an electric at one point, but they're just so heavy. And now we have computers.

Tabasko: Back to the Catalyst. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catalyst not only kept publishing, but it began a timeline of pandemic-related events at NIH. That timeline will be extremely valuable to historians. How did you decide to do it, and what other impacts did the pandemic have on your job?

Carter: There was so much happening so fast with COVID, as you know, that it didn't seem right just to do an article because that wouldn't really capture everything, and we would have to keep doing articles. I thought maybe a simple timeline might be the way to go because then you could put in a lot of information when things were happening—even links to research papers. There were too many to include in the "Research Briefs" section because then the whole thing would be about COVID. It just seemed like a way to capture what was happening so fast. I knew it would be valuable in the long run because it would be a record of what was happening and when—at NIH and in the country as well. As far as affecting my job, well, of course it meant I had to telework. We had moved up to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, from Maryland just a few weeks before the COVID lockdown. I was commuting back and forth to NIH, but only a couple days a week. When the COVID lockdown happened and we were told we *had* to work from home, it meant I didn't have to commute. That was nice. Then we had Zoom meetings with people, so we were able to stay in touch. I did miss being able to be on campus on a regular basis to be able to interact with people. When you're at communication directors or scientific directors meetings in person, there's time for informal conversation. We would get Catalyst story ideas there by interacting. Well, that informal chatter didn't seem to happen on the Zoom meetings, so that was quite different. In fact, when you asked before about ways we get stories, I neglected to mention that the scientific directors meetings that we went to would also be a source for stories—and sometimes communication directors meetings were a source.

Tabasko: Great. Pivoting to some changes that you might have seen during your time at NIH, how did funding play a role in your work?

Carter: In general, we never seem to really have enough money to be able to hire more staff or do other kinds of things. I'd never worked for the government before so it was interesting that there was this budget crisis every year where you'd be on the verge of a government shutdown—and then at the last minute Congress would say, "Okay, we'll temporarily approve the budget for a few more weeks." There was a government shutdown in 2013, and it lasted 16 days. The Catalyst still published on time, even though we weren't allowed to work during [the shutdown]. It's just the timing was such that we were able to get one issue published and the next one was pretty much complete. By the time the shutdown ended, I think we were delayed a little bit, but we kept publishing, which was interesting. With the funding, we weren't able to have any other staff. That was a problem, so we relied on volunteers.

Tabasko: Were there policy changes that affected The NIH Catalyst?

Carter: I'm not aware of any that really affected us.

Tabasko: Formatting and logistics have changed since you came to NIH. What was the biggest change you saw since you began and what has not changed?

Carter: Formatting and logistics of putting out the Catalyst?

Tabasko: Yes.

Carter: We learned [to use] a new blogging software to put the Catalyst online. That was something we had not been doing before. We were always using InDesign to create the print layout. That didn't really change, I just learned how to use it better.

Tabasko: You go to many workshops and conferences to learn about health and science journalism and are always learning and improving your craft. What are some of your favorites? Do you have a favorite health information outlet?

Carter: Well, one organization is called University Research Magazine Association. They're a group of editors of research magazines at universities and some government agencies. It was always very inspiring to go to those meetings and learn what other publications were doing. There's also the National Association of Science Writers, which always has interesting things going on and they'll put on conferences as well. There's the American Medical Writers Association, which is a little more technical. I haven't gone to their meetings, but I do get their emails and learn from that. Those are the major organizations.

Tabasko: Great. What would you tell someone just beginning a science writing career right now?

Carter: Well, first of all, do what you love. If you love writing, find ways to do it. Consider going into a journalism graduate program especially if you don't have a Ph.D. yet. If you have a Ph.D., you probably don't want to go back to graduate school. It's important to interact with other science writers and join organizations where you can learn more. Find a mentor and just write, write, write—even if it's not science writing, just write for fun. Write a journal, do a blog—just something to keep your writing muscles working.

Tabasko: Where do you see your specialty in 20 years from now?

Carter: That's a good question. Science writing has been evolving all these years. Maybe in the future, we'll get more help from AI [artificial intelligence]. I know there's a lot of fear right now that things like ChatGPT [chat generative pre-trained transformer] might try to replace writers and you can't trust it—but actually, we may be able to partner with AI to help us. But there needs to be a system to be sure that the AI information is correct and that they're not just lifting information off the internet without checking it for reliability. Maybe there will be some kind of certification system for AI so that we know which sources to trust.

The advances are happening so fast in health care. We need to continue to develop reliable ways to communicate that people can trust, because there's so much fear right now and a lot of people don't trust science. As science writers, we need to help people gain trust by explaining things clearly, properly, accurately, and in a way that's fun for people to read. Who knows, maybe science writers will find other ways to communicate—maybe we'll start singing our articles or singing things about science. Maybe that'll catch people's attention. Maybe they're not reading right now, or they're bored listening to long lectures. We'll have to have a Lady Gaga of science writing or something to really spice up the communications.

Tabasko: You're not threatened by the concept of AI?

Carter: No, I think it'd be fun to work with. I've talked to some people who aren't scared of it, but they're using it to enhance their work without letting it write for them. We have to be careful. You don't want the writers to get put out of business, but I think humans are still a little bit more creative than computers. We just have to continue to push the creativity and just *use* the AI to our advantage and not let it replace us.

Tabasko: Do you have any photos, documents, or objects that we can include with your history?

Carter: A lot of the photos are things that are already in the Catalyst. I have a photo of myself and Chris [Wanjek] that we just took. There's a photo of the person that, when I started, was head of WALs [NIH Director's Wednesday Afternoon Lecture Series] and was hired at the same time as me. We have some pictures, some of which were in the Catalyst. But I'd have to think about that. Maybe somebody [could] suggest something in particular—I'm just not thinking of what that might be.

Tabasko: Who are mentors that stand out to you as influencing your career?

Carter: Well, when I was in college, I had several professors in particular who stand out. I had one psychology professor who led an independent study. I did experiments or wrote about a particular theory of psychology and ended up getting a paper published in a journal. While I was in college, I also worked for a retired economics professor and his wife. She happened to work for the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, which I never would have even thought of as a career if it hadn't been for them. I was supposed to be helping the economics professor, but he'd also launch into lectures about economics and economic theory. I felt like he was paying me so I could hear his economics lectures, which was fun. Also, when we lived in New Jersey and I was doing lobbying for the [Junior Leagues of New Jersey] State Public Affairs Committee, I was influenced by a woman named Maureen Ogden, who was in the New Jersey Assembly. She was also chair of the Committee on Conservation, Energy, and Natural Resources and led a number of other committees. She had been a mayor of our town and then went into the legislature. I interacted with her in her office a lot, so I thought that she was a mentor. I felt that Bill Burrows, who led the NYU Science Journalism program—he actually established it and was teaching when I was there—was an important influence. He was the one who drummed into us, “You don't misspell anything in a journalistic type of article. You don't misspell names. You don't misspell locations. And if you do [misspell] in anything you turn in, you get an automatic F.” Yeah, fail. That's why I'm so adamant in my fact checking now, making sure everybody's name is spelled right, because I hear his voice in my head saying, “You get that wrong, you fail.” Then Dana Grossman was an important mentor at Dartmouth Medicine Magazine, because she taught me a lot about magazine publication. She was just a great editor to work for and gave me a lot of freedom and encouragement and so on, so she was important as well.

Tabasko: When you were associate editor, Dana was the editor?

Carter: Yes. Then there are all kinds of people that I've learned from at NIH. You learn something from everybody. Even the writers we coach. You learn from them as well as the people we work for.

Tabasko: Absolutely. That brings me to the end of my questions unless you had anything else to add.

Carter: No, I can't think of anything. It's been fun working at NIH and I look forward to coming back as a special volunteer [in the Office of NIH History]. Thank you for taking the time to interview me.

Tabasko: We look forward to you coming back to NIH!