

The Dr. Deming I knew. Interview with Marilyn Monda, Owner, Monda Consulting. By Lukas Cap, ASQ Human Development and Leadership Division

I am pleased to share with you this brief conversation with Marilyn Monda who was mentored by W. Edwards Deming early in her career. Marilyn provides us with some rare insights into what it was like to work with Dr. Deming.

LC: How did you get to meet Dr. Deming?

MM: I first meet Dr. Deming working in Navy Civil Service in 1984 when we were trying to increase the number of sailor engineers re-listing in the Navy. We thought maybe the engineers would be more likely to reenlist if their jobs were more rewarding. We thought a quality improvement program would help with this.

To this end, we contacted Dr. Deming and he answered his phone, himself. At the time, we did not recognize how important he was. He asked “have you been to one of my seminars?” and we said “no”. He said “I will come and give you one.” Our goal quickly changed from engineer reenlistment to applying and teaching quality improvement in the many processes that exist in our working Navy. This is how my relationship with Dr Deming began and over the years he became my mentor. I was privileged to travel with Dr Deming to clients, work with him at his home, and assist him at over a dozen of his famous 4-day seminars (Editor’s note: Dr. Deming was Marilyn’s mentor between 1984-1993.)

LC: What was it like working with Dr Deming?

MM: It was always a great experience. Dr Deming was humble, inspiring, humane and had a curious mind. He was 84 when I first meet him. When he found out I had an advanced degree in both statistics and psychology he decided he wanted to work closer with me. Dr Deming was interested in psychology and its connection with his System of Profound Knowledge. I often spoke about psychology with him and facilitated his psychology working groups at the end of the seminar day. I will never forget how accessible he was to anyone who came to his seminars. His seminars were 4 days long. He spoke for 6 hours every day and while he had a break people would line up to ask him questions which he always answered. He always loved to learn.

LC: Why do you think that Dr. Deming’s message about quality is important today more than ever?

MM: Dr. Deming’s teachings focus on people, process and continual improvement. It is obvious, to me anyway, how very important Dr. Deming’s message is in today’s world. I see this in my work a lot. People don’t focus on the bigger picture of the system that they work in. When they do, they are often surprised at how quickly they can improve their processes, become more competitive in the workplace and give people the pride in work that they deserve. This I learned from Dr Deming and I apply it in my practice every day.

LC: What was your most memorable moment working with Dr Deming?

MM: There were so many, but one I will never forget was when he was reviewing and editing a section on the difference between analytical and enumerative statistics that I wrote. He told me he really liked the graphic I developed to describe it, that it was elegant. I was so proud that I had pleased him with my work. I still use that graphic to this day when I teach about how to best interpret data in the application of research findings.

LC: If you could explain Dr. Deming's most important concept from your point of view, what would it be?

MM: For me, the most important concept is the System of Profound Knowledge. The System of Profound Knowledge consists of four parts: Appreciation of a System, Knowledge of Variation, the Theory of Knowledge (how we learn), and Psychology. It is a fully integrated system that provides what a leader needs to know to be successful, grow their team, increase intrinsic motivation in the workplace and improve the work processes of their organization.

LC: Could you tell us a funny story about Dr Deming?

MM: Dr. Deming worked in the basement of his modest 3-bedroom house in Washington DC. His desk was right next to the washing machine! His bookcases down there were cinder block and wood like a college student. Perched on the top plank was his award from the Emperor of Japan. Dr. Deming had a temporary, part time secretary (her name was Cecelia Kilian) -- who was with him for 40 years! Her. She wrote a book called W. Edwards Deming, which gives a nice history of his life.

LC: Thank you for your time

MM: My pleasure