

# Meeting Nel Noddings

by Lynnette Haley O'Stewart and Carol Garboden Murray

## Care Colleagues

We, Lynnette and Carol, met at a NYSAEYC conference in 2014. Lynnette was writing her dissertation and she was presenting a workshop called *Who Cares in Child Care*, which Carol attended. Carol had just started writing a book about care. We connected over our passion for care, and discovered that we shared a favorite author: Nel Noddings. Just about every year, at the annual state conferences thereafter, we met up and continued our care conversations. We discussed our admiration for Nel Noddings, and the validation we felt as we read her work and learned about the history of feminist ethics and the theory of care. In 2018,

Lynnette finished her dissertation, “*Measuring Care: A Mixed Methods Study of the Professional Practices and the Ethic and Fidelity of Care of Early Childhood Educators*,” and in 2019, Carol finished her book, “*Illuminating Care*,” soon to be published by Exchange Press. As a celebration, we decided to email Dr. Noddings and tell her how much she had influenced us as early childhood teachers, scholars and humans. Nel kindly wrote right back and invited us to join her for a conversation at her home in New Jersey.

near the Atlantic Shore. We walked through her yard, passing birds and butterflies feasting on flowers and seeds in her gardens, to a big front porch where she greeted us and invited us in from the blazing sun. Nel reached into her refrigerator and retrieved a bowl of chilled pasta salad, mixed with cucumbers, herbs and onions she had picked from her garden, and we shared lunch at her dining table. Lynnette said, “Nel’s home feels like a nest of care.”

As we ate and chatted, we could see the blue ocean beyond the window ledge lined with lush potted plants. Her black and white cat, Angel, curled up and spied on us from the living room. When we finished eating, Nel

## Nel’s Home, A Nest of Care

On a humid July day, we met Nel Noddings at her house in New Jersey



Lynnette Haley O'Stewart, Ph.D., is the director of early childhood initiatives at Niagara University, a private Catholic university in the Buffalo-Niagara region in New York State. She is also the vice president of the New York Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators.



Carol Garboden Murray, M.Ed., is the educational director of The Abigail Lundquist Botstein Nursery at Bard College in New York. She is the author of books and many articles for early childhood teachers. Learn more about her soon to be published book on facebook at [Illuminating Care: The Pedagogy and Practice of Care](https://www.facebook.com/Illuminating-Care-The-pedagogy-and-practice-of-care-104805841277144) <https://www.facebook.com/Illuminating-Care-The-pedagogy-and-practice-of-care-104805841277144>

## About Nel Noddings

Nel Noddings, Ph.D., is an American philosopher and educational researcher in the field of care ethics, which she pioneered. She has enjoyed a long career in education, beginning in 1949, as a teacher and later a school administrator and college professor. Noddings is the Jacks Professor Emerita of Child Education at Stanford University. She is a mother of 10 children, and an author of 20 books and over 200 articles and chapters. The emergence of care ethics as a distinct theory is often attributed to Carol Gilligan, author of “*In a Different Voice*” (1982) and Nel Noddings, author of “*Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Education*,” (1984) who were the first to research and write about care. Since that time, they have been joined by many scholars and philosophers as the work of care ethics has spread to include the study of feminist theory, gender studies, economics, theories of justice and morality, educational philosophy, welfare and social reform.

suggested we take a glass of wine upstairs to the corner balcony, where we could catch the breeze and talk some more, and then she could give us a tour of her library and office. Carol later reflected, “Nel’s way of being with us in her home gave me a model for how I hope my school feels to children and families. I want everyone to be welcome and comforted by the presence of caring people, surrounded by living plants and animals, shared food, and thought-provoking conversation.”

Lynnette added, “With Nel, there was beauty all around us and it was alive, not covered in plastic. Nel and the life around her is engaging, accessible and down to earth.”

## A Living Example of Dialogue and Care

Nel believes dialogue is a central principle of care, and she lives it. Sitting with Nel, we experienced the art of conversation—the ebb and flow of talking and listening that is central in relationship building. Nel shared stories about her relationships with well-known authors, theorists, and scholars, as well as her connections with family members and neighbors. The ways she spoke of everyday interactions with all types of people on sidewalks and grocery stores—about kids, pets and politics—was extraordinary. It grounded our conversation in real examples of a caring life. Talking with Nel impressed upon us the potential of living life like a conversation, which mirrors the way we care for one another in our intimate interactions, as well as in ordinary daily encounters. Caring, according to Noddings (1984) is universal in all its applications.

One might think that the domestic life—family, kitchen, garden, plants and animals—would sit in contrast to the intellectual life of the philosopher

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and writer, but in Nel’s case these elements are elegantly blended. With Nel’s life work, and in her life itself, we receive a model for how mind, heart and hand can be integrated, complementary, aspects of a well-lived life. In her books, Nel challenges educators to make schools less institutional and more home-like, and to lean on care ethics as a model for excellent teaching.

In “The Challenge to Care in Schools,” Noddings asked the question, “Can we make caring the center of our educational efforts?” (Noddings, 1992). She then suggests that in order to do so, we should consider a quote from John Dewey: What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy (Dewey, 1902/1990). Building on Dewey’s philosophy, Noddings advocates that a teacher should envision their classroom of students as a large

heterogeneous family. Nel compels us to consider how the teaching profession might change if we were to make happiness a central goal of education.

## Nel’s Current Work

In Nel’s home, the walls are lined with books. Intellectually and physically nimble at age 90, she moved up and down the stairs, and from room to room, as she gave us a tour of her library. A special shelf near her writing table was reserved for philosophy—the works of John Dewey, Martin Buber and Jean-Paul Sartre. We enjoyed browsing the history books, the books she is currently reading and the collection of feminist and care ethics authors, which included Nel’s own works. We stood near her writing desk, neatly covered with notes hand-written on unlined paper, as she described her concern about the increase in polarization in our society. Currently, she is collaborating with

her friend Stephen Thornton on a book titled, “Constructing a Morally Connected World.” Nel believes that care can prevent further alienation and can be a cure for the polarization our country faces.

“Meeting the other in a caring fashion includes meeting people we disagree with politically,” she said. “Thoughtful people with opposing views can always find something to talk about—

“How are the kids doing? Where did you go on vacation this year? Sometimes we just connect with one another because we are both walking our dogs on the same sidewalk. You can find all sorts of things to talk about. The current climate is bad, and it is going to get worse if we do not keep finding connections with those who believe differently than we do.”

## Nel’s Care Stories

Nel told us that as a young teacher, she was fortunate to have principals

who helped her think about the true purpose of education. She remembers working in the West End School in Woodbury, New Jersey, where the principal, John Stouffer, was particularly kind, and known for setting children on his knee and chatting with them. She said some of the other teachers would complain, “What good is it to send children to the principal’s office? All he does is love the kids!” Nel saw that care was exactly what the children needed. After receiving attention and tenderness from the principal, they felt they belonged, and they were better able to learn and to participate in school life.

Lynnette asked Nel if she could tell us why she became so interested in researching care ethics. Nel replied that it is probably because she was trying to make sense of her own life. She went on to explain that she completed her college work and got her teaching certificate at age 20. She also got married that same year, and shortly thereafter began having children. She described her husband,

Jim, as a true partner in child rearing (which was rare in the 1950s and ’60s). When they moved to California, Jim was the one who encouraged her to pursue a doctorate at Stanford. She and Jim had five children, and Nel only stayed home from work for two years. She remembers hiring an elderly woman to come into the house to care for her children and pick up where she left off after breakfast, while she went off to work. Once their first five children were in elementary school, Nel and Jim adopted five more children, three of whom were from Korea. She and Jim were compelled to adopt because of the influence of one of Nel’s favorite authors, Pearl S. Buck, who founded the Welcome House for Korean-American orphans in 1949.

## Early Childhood Teachers as Care Ambassadors

We told Nel about our work and our mission to unite education and care, and to lift up care as a model pedagogy. We talked about how teachers

### Reflecting on Care Through Nel Noddings’ Theory of Care

**Modeling:** How do we make care visible in our relationships with children, families, colleagues? How do we demonstrate care as a core value and model for living?

**Dialogue:** How do we practice care as a conversation? How do we listen? How do we care in a way that respects the dynamic of give and receive?

**Practice:** How do children show us what they care about? How do we give children meaningful practice caring for self, others, plants and animals?

**Confirmation:** How do we care from the inside out, so that children can meet their own goals, rather than goals imposed upon them? Nel Noddings describes confirmation as the act of encouraging the best in others.





feel pressure to focus on academic skills, and the fact that care is often not a named value. In our society, and even in early childhood, care is viewed as something anyone can do, as a custodial task, or beneath educational goals. Nel smiled and said, “Care is really so simple, but it is also profound.” She told us that when we talk to others about care, we can draw upon the application of care theory.

“You can explain that you are not just emphasizing care because you are working with little kids, but because care is a relational model for learning, because it applies to the whole life span, and is central to human development.”

Nel is known for describing care as an essential element in a strong society, and assailing a sentimental view of care as soft or mushy. She validates the care work of mothers and fathers and early childhood teachers as an indispensable foundation; in her words, “Care is the resilient backbone of human life” (Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*). As we teach babies, toddlers and young children, we are at the nucleus of care. Care of our youngest citizens is the original care, the starting place for the model of care which has become a full moral and ethical discussion in education, philosophy and society.

We left Nel filled with gratitude for her remarkable generosity. Not only has she contributed profoundly to the world through her body of work on care ethics, but she welcomed two early childhood teachers into her home, and engaged us in a direct relationship of inquiry and care. We are honored to illuminate Nel’s work in the early childhood community, and to be care ambassadors.



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### Books by Nel Noddings

Nel Noddings is the author of 20 books and over 200 articles and chapters on care ethics and educational philosophy. These are some of our favorites.

*Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984)

*The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (1992)

*Philosophy of Education* (1995)

*Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (2002)

*Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (2002)

*Happiness and Education* (2003)

*Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach* (2006)

*Peace Education: How We Come to Love and Hate War* (2011)

*Education and Democracy in the 21st Century* (2013)

*Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (2013)