

Profile story for Ms. Karen



After leaving her husband of 21 years, Karen Cottrell had two goals: Become a teacher, and build her dream house. It would take six years and seven different states before she accomplished the first goal.

Living as a homemaker on her farm in Illinois, Cottrell would spend time taking care of her four daughters, raising animals, remodeling her house, and doing volunteer work in schools and the community. However, Cottrell was not happy with her marriage. Cottrell said her husband did not seem to care about being a husband and father.

As a result, at the age of 41, Cottrell decided to divorce her husband and embrace a new life where she had to learn how to support herself financially.

Striving for a classroom

With rich experiences of volunteer work in schools, Cottrell tried to find a job as a teacher. However, no classroom teaching job was available around Illinois

at that time. To make money, Cottrell became a full-time driver and teaching assistant at a middle school.

“I was the first person that the students saw, and I was the last person of their school day,” Cottrell said. “I picked them up to take them to school, I went inside to work with seven teachers, and at the end of the day I took them home.”

Although she was so close and familiar with students, Cottrell felt kind of sad.

“I wanted to have my own classroom,” Cottrell said.

Struggling for the classroom goal, Cottrell left Illinois two years later and started her long journey.

Cottrell had been to Alabama, Missouri to look for available positions, but in vain. Finally Cottrell returned to Illinois, and schools told her that if she wanted to teach, she had to go to places “where there are second-language students.”

California, New York and Texas were the three states with the largest number of second-language learners at that time. Cottrell decided to go to California, where she had a brother.

After intensive trainings and certifications, Cottrell’s effort paid off. She finally got her position as a classroom teacher at Del Rey Elementary School in California in 1999, six years after her divorce.

“It was all my classroom,” Cottrell said. “And it was a second-language classroom.”

As a result, Cottrell started as a teacher for second-language students, and her teaching career has been that way ever since.

Cottrell feels grateful toward her students, for they fulfilled her dream of being a classroom teacher. Though working with second-language students is challenging, Cottrell thinks it is incredibly rewarding. Every time students make progress, Cottrell feels a sense of achievement.

“I just fell in love with working with second-language people,” Cottrell said.

Becoming a student again

Cottrell didn't imagine that she would leave her classroom one day until she made a move to Arizona in 2005 because of daughters. She worked with Native Americans on the reservation there. As her teaching experiences accumulated, she also began facing new challenges.

Cottrell became increasingly aware of how important and difficult it is to improve the writing skills of second-language students. Writing is essential for further study, but it presents new barriers for teaching.

"I wanted to know how to connect with students to get them to write because we don't teach writing like we should," Cottrell said.

With this purpose in mind, Cottrell asked for a year off and returned to school again to earn her master's degree in Language, Reading and Culture from the University of Arizona. She completed the two years' worth of learning in just one year, because she did not have the money to spend two years away from work.

Being a student again renewed her passion for being a teacher.

"I think teachers need to be students, because you need to remember what it's like to learn something you don't know," Cottrell said. "When you forget that, you have forgotten an important part of what a teacher does."

She stressed that a teacher should make sure that students truly digest the knowledge.

"No matter how much I might get it, if I can't give it to you so that you get it, I'm not done," Cottrell said.

Cottrell got back to California in 2009 with improved teaching skills and new ideas. However, then she encountered the 2008-2009 financial crisis, when nearly all schools were cutting their payroll.

As a result, Cottrell lost her classroom again.

Make the classroom home

Columbia is the place where Cottrell returned to the classroom, and 2017 is the sixth year Cottrell stays in Columbia.

After earning teaching certificates in seven states and moving over and over again throughout the country, Cottrell now has her classroom with second-language students in Frederick Douglass High School. She teaches Writing, English, U.S. History and Personal Finance for second-language students, quietly polishing the routine of her life.

Her changing life experiences have left her with great versatility and creativity, which students and co-workers appreciate.

“She is very flexible,” said Susan Nordberg, Cottrell’s co-worker.

“Besides teaching English, she also created a sewing room where she teaches students how to sew. She has many creative methods to teach,” Nordberg said.

Cottrell is patient and helpful toward kids.

“It takes a big deal to make her mad,” said Karen Hines, another co-worker.

“It is amazing,” Hines said. “She has really close individual relationships with students.”

When students have problems— even if some are not related to the class Cottrell’s teaching— Cottrell tries to help solve them. She’ll assist with practical life problems like driver’s licenses, or help revises grammar mistakes for students in her finance class.

“I like her,” said Diego Rodriguez, a 12th-grade student. “She knows how to communicate with us.”

Cottrell wants to make her classroom a safe and peaceful place for her students. She slows down the pace of her class to help the students make progress step by step.

In one class, Cottrell and another two teachers patiently guided each kid to input their names, emails and skills into the computer to make a simple resume. When these were almost done, the 40-minute class came to the end.

It is hard for these students to start learning English in a foreign country, let alone get a diploma in high school; some of the kids were even away from schools for several years before they arrived in U.S. and returned to classroom. Cottrell patiently waits for her students to grow.

Dream House

Even as she focuses on helping students with their goals, Cottrell still has her second goal: She dreams of building her own house. She had remodeled others' houses for money for years. She planned to build a little house for herself before she gets too old.

Cottrell doesn't like things that are wasteful. She has embraced a lifestyle that never refused to move and change these years.

She once lived in a 16-foot-long and 7-foot-wide trailer pulled by a truck for more than five years when she was poor, and she found out she also enjoyed that. Cottrell said she designs the house as an efficient and inexpensive one. It will be built with light metals and can be put both on wheels and the ground.

Inside the house, Cottrell plans to open her own studio and let her students embrace it.

Cottrell likes doing stuff and wants to start her online business selling crafts before she retires. In fact, she had already put that idea in her teaching. In her sewing class she encourages students to start their own businesses. They held a sale in her sewing class last year where students sold their work. She believes her teaching job and her creative side have both allowed her to build unique, close-knit connections with her students, and hopes that her dream house will one day make that bond even stronger.

"We can start a little community," Cottrell said. "We have different cultures altogether, and we have peace with each other."