
www.coolcatteacher.com/e121

VICKI: Today's show is sponsored by Powerschool. I use their student information system and learning management system but do you know they have brought it together in one unified classroom? Stay tuned at the end of the show for more information.

Hello remarkable teachers, today is a very special episode honoring Karen van Duyn who has spent 41 years teaching. I really debated on cutting the show down because you know we like to keep the show right around 10-minutes. But you know what? She's been teaching 41 years. I think we can add 3 extra minutes to the podcast today. Episode 121, what I learned from teaching for 41 years.

00:48

VICKI: Today we're at the NNSTOY conference, go to nnstoy.org and we're talking to Karen Van Duyn. She was 1999 Indiana State Teacher of the year. But she's been teaching for 41 years. And today is going to be sharing wisdom with all of us about what she's seen in teaching.

Karen, now I've heard some teachers who say, "It's harder than ever to teach." We've never had these problems before. Almost kind of like a pity party approach to how hard it is today. Do you agree or disagree?

KAREN: Ah, both.

I agree that teaching is a real tough profession. I was recently talking with some of my fellow staff members. And I just told them, teaching is hard. You can use that as an excuse or you can use that as a challenge. I've always chosen to use it as a challenge.

It's interesting that throughout my 41 years, I can say that some of the behaviors may have changed in my students. But when you get down to basic needs, it's been consistent with young adults all through my teaching career. Trying to look into my classroom and say "this student isn't doing his homework" and trying to figure out why comes down to basic level needs - maybe Maslow's, I don't know. The basic level needs that all human beings have.

So, he's acting out because he really needs attention because he's not getting any anywhere else. It might boil down to the student who is trying so hard to be perfect that they stress themselves out. So, there's been a real consistency which is really encouraging to teachers because you can know that whatever you're establishing now for your ways of dealing with those types of students can last you at least 41 years.

03:03

VICKI: So, how do you keep a positive attitude? Because you know that's a struggle. There are a lot of people who swim in toxic waste and when we get toxic, it is a waste. We waste all of our energy on being negative.

KAREN: Right, and sometimes being a teacher-leader, you get involved with all kinds of the outside elements. But the glory of being a teacher-leader is that you're still a teacher. And when you walk into that room, you can see the faces, you can talk to them before or after class on the way in and out, you know what's important, and then you know that

whether they tell you or not that you are important to them. So that's a great way to stay positive.

Having fun with your students is just, of course, the best way to stay positive. And knowing that they will return that favor to you.

Many times in my career I thought I'm just giving and giving and giving. But as I get to this point in my career I have lots of kids giving back. Whether I have students who have graduated, alumni contacting me and saying "thank you." Because teaching is a profession of delayed reward.

VICKI: Totally. *(laughter)*

KAREN: You know, they hate you while you're grading their papers. A couple of years later, they're saying "thank you." But, even the kids that I have now offer me so many things. "Do you need help with this?" or whatever. And it's just gratifying and hard not to say positive.

04:37

VICKI: So, Karen, what do you think the biggest mistake when you look back that you've made some point in your career?

KAREN: Listening to administrators that thought I didn't know how to do my job.

VICKI: Really?

KAREN: Yes.

VICKI: You've had people who thought you didn't do a good job?

KAREN: Definitely. Definitely. And that led to my ... because I'm reflective in nature. What am I doing to cause this? What am I doing? And not realizing that it was really their issue. Not mine. And it was probably the best experience I could have had teaching because it reminds me to stay true to what I know in my heart what I need to be doing for my kids. And if they don't see that as correct, maybe they will come to that.

VICKI: So was this before or after you won state teacher of the year?

KAREN: After.

VICKI: After! So, after you won one of the best teachers in the whole country someone thought that you were not a great teacher?

KAREN: It's interesting because then sometimes you're a threat to administrators. And that is what we're working with now at NNSTOY is trying to create a system of advancement for teachers and teacher-leaders so that they can be perceived as not a threat to the current organization of education but a help. And so, in just the meeting a little bit ago, strong administrators will work with teacher leaders and weaker administrators will be threatened by them.

VICKI: Yes.

KAREN: So, and I can't guarantee that's all it was. I can't guarantee that I was not doing something that triggered that criticism. But, to my mind after serious reflection, I could not so I decided I have to stay true to what I know I need to do.

06:27

VICKI: If you could travel back in time and talk to yourself that first year, Karen, what would you say?

KAREN: As a first-year teacher?

VICKI: Yes.

KAREN: When I was a first-year teacher, there were two options for women and careers. It was a teacher or a nurse. There were only two girls in my small rural graduating class who even went to college. So, I was thinking, you know, this is my option if I want to be a career person. However, I don't think I've ever not wanted to do the job. So, maybe I would tell myself, "It's going to be a long haul but when you get to the end you're going to have just a treasure trove of experiences and relationships and a right-hand drawer" - which is where I kept all my thank you notes.

My top right-hand drawer overflowing and being refilled. Emptied out. And refilled.

So, when I talk to student teachers as a keynote address, I actually took the top right-hand drawer out of my desk and brought it and set it down on the table next to the lectern and I said, "I brought my right-hand desk drawer here to show you that you need one as you teach and to remind yourself of the good things that you've done" and also to drive my sub crazy because she's going to wonder which kid took my drawer.

07:53

VICKI: *laughter* So, as we finish up, what kind of encouragement would you give to a teacher who is listening to the show today and they love the kids. And really, they love teaching. But there are just other things that have them down right now. And they're just wondering if it's worth it. What do you say?

KAREN: Ah, to the young teachers on my staff right now, I'm telling them all the extra things floating around in this universe about teachers will change and it will get better. Because soon there aren't going to be teachers because of the situation. The shortage is going to have to hit bottom. And things will turn around. Respect will grow. Salaries will grow. Because I have to tell them that they might have to make more money than this as a teacher someday.

Your own pride and that sense of respect will really be there. So, I ask them to love what you're doing in that room. And if you do, you have to stick with it. Because everything swings. And if it's swinging downward now, it will swing upward. And if not, I know there are large numbers of organizations like NNSTOY that are working hard to make that happen.

09:12

VICKI: So as we finish up. I'm curious. You're obviously right still at the height of your teaching ability.

KAREN: *laughter* I hope so.

VICKI: It's obvious. Have you ever known anybody that maybe should have retired a few years ago. And when is the point that you know, OK, I need to find another way to encourage teachers besides being in the classroom. When is that point?

KAREN: Well, it's probably pretty timely because I just made that decision for myself.

VICKI: *gasp*. No!

KAREN: Yes. I just retired June 1st after 41 years, I thought, "that's enough." But, I'm looking for ways. I would love to mentor new teachers. And I would love to find new position to do things like that. But...

VICKI: How did you know it was time?

KAREN: I'm not sure it is.

VICKI: You're not sure?

KAREN: My heart is still there. I was five years ago thinking I'm stuck in this rut. And then our school went one to one. And then I thought, "here's a brand new challenge for me. I can learn a totally new way of teaching online." We don't have snow days anymore, we have e-learning days. And I can talk to my kids in my pajamas. And, it was you know, a whole new way to refresh things.

But I do think there's a point where your energy starts to fade. Just because of age. And I did not want to have one day in the classroom that I was not doing the very best job. Because kids don't deserve even one day of that.

And so, when I saw that -- OK, I'm getting all the papers graded but it's taking me longer or it's taking me ... I'm unable to get to the ball games because I'm grading the papers and it's taking me longer and I want to support them out of the classroom as well. Some things like that. And so, I just thought... I don't want to decline.

And the other teachers I saw decline should have gone earlier. And I said the only thing that would make me leave is my concern about the quality of what I'm giving the kids. And I don't think it has hit a bad quality yet, that's why I want to go now.

11:34

VICKI: Oh, what a hard decision.

KAREN: I know.

VICKI: We're both tearing up because we both love the kids so much. And we just want to do it forever but there is a time you have to say, I'm done.

KAREN: The kids were so good. They surprised me the last day with a big celebration with a big celebration of my last day. They brought my friends because I ride a Harley...

VICKI: You ride a Harley?

KAREN: My friends that brought my Harley down and drove it around the school. And cheering. And bringing the Harley in on the stage. And cause that is something they identify with.

But, to have them give back. Those types of ways. To know that you've made that difference. And when a teacher lasts too long, that's not the way. I think that I felt weird about the celebration. But as I pondered on it, I think that too many times we don't have situations where kids see teachers celebrated.

VICKI: Oh really? Yes. Because if they've hung on too long, everybody's kind of like -- we're celebrating that you're gone.

KAREN: Exactly. And teachers should be honored as difficult and uncomfortable as it is. Kids should see that service was valued and that other people thought they'd done something for those kids.

VICKI: Yes. And that teaching is a great profession.

KAREN: It's a wonderful profession. It certainly is.

VICKI: OK, this is one time I wish that we renamed the show, the 30-minute teacher because I could go forever and talk to Karen Van Duyn. I'll be sharing her information in the show notes. Forty-one years, Karen, thank you for all that you've done and all that you're still doing because many times after we leave the classroom we still -- you're still doing it because you're encouraging all of us teachers who are in the classroom. And, it is all about the kids. It's really not about us. It's about them. And when we're unselfish and we love them, we have to step back and look at ourselves and ask ourselves "are we best for our children?"

VICKI DAVIS @COOLCATTEACHER

KAREN: And that will be our gift as well.

VICKI: This summer, PowerSchool announced the Unified Classroom. The Unified Classroom brings together the teacher's grade book, learning management system, student information system, and assessment in one powerful platform with just one log in. Take a look at the unified classroom from PowerSchool at coolcatteacher.com/powerschool.