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A M O N G

F R I E N D S

# Once and always a teacher

## Guest column



SuzAnne C. Cole  
is a Houston writer.

By **SUZANNE C. COLE**

Driving past the college where I used to teach, I notice cars flooding into too-full parking lots, and suddenly, inexplicably, sadness floods me. Instructors are preparing lesson plans and lectures; students are shopping for books and binders and worrying about schedules. School bells are ringing again — but not for me. By choice, I am no longer part of this scene.

It's been almost four years since I last taught at Houston Community College. I thought then that I was just taking a break to finish a book. However, the interruption has become permanent. My husband has

retired, and I've realized that, to be free to write and to travel with him, I probably will never again stand in front of a class.

It's a sensible choice, I tell myself, remembering what I never liked about teaching. When I was in school in the '50s, girls considered only three occupations — secretary, nurse, teacher. Since I couldn't master the hooks and wiggles of shorthand and was not particularly brave about blood, teaching it became. I chose English because it was easy — and because I admired **Madge Gibson**, my senior English teacher, called "Mighty Madge" outside the classroom, both a jest because of her 4-foot, 10-inch

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# Teacher

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height and a tribute to her power over hormone-addled seniors.

My teaching career began when I was 20. As a student, I taught a summer session of recalcitrant students, most of whom had failed English the previous year. By the end of the course, I questioned the wisdom of my career choice, but I had no alternatives. At 22, newly married, a substitute teacher in a rough high school, I was so naive my students locked me out of the classroom. To add to my humiliation, when I sought help from the office, the secretary mistook me for a student and refused my request for a key.

Seldom as a substitute did I get to teach the literature I loved; usually I found myself teaching remedial grammar — and sometimes gym. "That's not my field," I would protest. "That's OK," a cheery voice would respond. "You're young enough to keep up. Wear pants and be on campus in 30 minutes."

So I went back to school for a junior college teaching credential; when our sons were in preschool and kindergarten, I started teaching at HCC, where opportunities to teach literature expanded and discipline was easier. But still there were problems: students who loudly complained when they received the grades they earned; students who didn't believe that writing clear, coherent essays or reading literary masterpieces was important.

Grading exams, daily work, and six to 10 essays per student each semester plus reading their journals absorbed time I'd rather have spent with my family. Classes usually were too large to offer the individual attention some students needed. Administrative paperwork and committee responsibilities consumed more time, time better spent preparing lectures or reading professional journals. My salary was meager.

Some classrooms were barely adequate — overcrowded, freezing or steaming, poorly lit. And I never had an office. Instead, the trunk of my car became my mobile desk, a cardboard box, my file cabinet.

And yet I also remember the joys of teaching. The first day of class, rows of unfamiliar faces, knowing what I wanted to teach, wondering what I would learn, eager for our mutual adventure to begin.

My admiration and respect for some of the men and women I taught over the years is boundless; I only hope I conveyed that regard to them. Blue-collar workers adapted to new technology so they could keep their families housed and fed. High school rebels and dropouts, realizing nothing good would happen unless they made it happen, obtained GEDs and enrolled in college.

Older women, with children raised and husbands occupied, decided it was their turn. They came nervous and insecure; to witness them discover a capacity for learning and growth was an honor.

Foreign students dared to obtain college degrees while still maintaining their own culture. To teach these students, to channel their longing, resentment, hope and anxiety into written expression that satisfied convention without sacrificing distinctive voices was a pleasure.

I miss them and I miss my colleagues — celebrating each other's triumphs and honors; sharing teaching techniques; attending state, regional and national conferences; even the banter in the workroom as we cursed the photocopy machine.

The sight of start of school starting will always will make me feel restless and out of sorts; I can only remember that, in one way or another, all of us teach. We teach others by living our lives as authentically as we can. Perhaps it is no more possible to retire from teaching than it is to retire from life.