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1987

### Interview with Donna Cooper

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*Fort Hays State University*

Donna Cooper

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**Master Teacher - Donna Cooper**

presented to  
Dr. Allan Miller  
History of American Education  
Tuesday 6:30

Interview  
December 3, 1987

prepared by  
David Sulzman

### **Master Teacher - Donna Cooper**

Donna Cooper is currently teaching at Hays High School in Hays, Kansas where she is Head of the science department. Donna has been teaching for twenty years - eighteen years in the Hays community. Donna's career can be seen as one of complete devotion to the task of educating in a truly caring way. It is quite evident Donna enjoys her work and is interested and concerned for her students. Donna received the Master Teacher award in 1986 and though she is somewhat apprehensive about the new title she has acquired as a Master Teacher - she surely typifies a Master Teacher as is evident in the interview that follows. Donna is an eloquent speaker and it was truly a pleasure and honor to interview her.

The interview took place around 9:00 p.m. December 3, 1987 in Donna's class room and preparation room. Donna was preparing media for the next days Microbiology demonstration and amidst the kettles boiling on the stove and adjusting the pressure on the kettles, the interview proceeded.

David: Donna, what schools have you attended - grade school, high school and college?

Donna: Going way back, I started grade school in Sulfur Oklahoma which is in South East Oklahoma. I attended first, second, and third grades there. Then we moved to the big city of Ardmore and that was like moving from Victoria to Hays. Went to school there from third grade through my sophomore year of high school then my mother decided to move - she got her guidance and counseling certification and it was an opportunity for her to move, so we moved to Chickasey, Oklahoma. Which is in west central Oklahoma and its probably about forty miles west of Norman University. I spent my last two years at Chickasey High which is comparable to the size of Hays High School. In high school I started working for a doctor, an ophthalmologist - and I was a bookkeeper and chief flunkie. One Saturday morning I assisted in surgery as he had a Terechium transplant scheduled and his nurse was sick. He asked me to assist as I knew what all the tools were and where they were. The doctor said " Oh Donna you can do it, if I ask for something you can just hand it to me," so I did it. We put the eye drape on and he got out the syringe - I do not know why I hadn't anticipated he would have to give a shot in the eyeball, after all he was going to cut it open. He have the man a shot in the eye ball, the eye ball! (Shudder) We went ahead with the surgery and about one half hour into the surgery I began thinking about the shot in the eye ball and I fainted - right over the tray. He did not ask me to do anymore surgery and he was not surprised when I did not go on to Medical School. His previous assistant had went on to Medical School and I had considered it but I changed my mind.

I attended college in Chickasey, my mother was a teacher and funds were tight - so it was cheaper to go to school in Chickasey. It was a womens college and I had not anticipated going into Biology at all, but my mother insisted I get a liberal arts background and since she was helping to foot the bill I agreed to a liberal arts background. I got into some Biology classes and I really enjoyed them and I had a marvelous Biology teacher and I just kept taking more and more Biology classes. Thats how I wound up being a

Biology teacher - if anyone would have told me I was to be a Biology teacher in High School I would have thought they were crazy, no way, not me.

On graduating from college I had a National Science Foundation grant on Pharmacology Research and I had one offered from Kansas University Medical School and one from the Baylor Medical School. I chose Baylor and I was married right after graduation in June and I was suppose to go to graduate school in Houston in September and my husband was going to stay in Oklahoma. I went to Texas and moved into the nurses dorm on campus - went to enroll and they told me they had discontinued the masters program, but they said your credentials are so high we just decided to convert your grant to a PhD grant. I said well how long is that going to take, they said probably four to six years. I thought hey wait a minute there is a big difference between a masters and a PhD program and I asked them what would happen if I did not complete it within a six year period. They told me all National Foundation Science funds would have to be repaid - now this was a full stipend, a full ride - we are talking alot of money. I gave it some thought and decided I couldn't do it because Pharmacology Drug Research is pretty lab oriented and I am a people person. So I went back to Chickasey where my husband was working and it was the first week of the end of September in the fall - what was I going to do. They had offered me a job there at the High School where I had done my student teaching, but they already had an instructor of course, so I decided to go to the University of Oklahoma and get some hours and the head of the Department noticed I had my teaching certificate and offered me a teachers assistantship. I taught a Zoology lab and a Physiology lab in addition to taking some hours - I had never even had Physiology so it proved to be quite a load. That was quite a way to get your feet wet. I was burning the candle at both ends. I did that for one semester, because at Christmas break I had a wreck and I feel that it was just because I was to tired. I was commuting fifty miles to and from school. Second semester I decided not to commute and I worked as a volunteer in the Public Library - I got alot of good reading done.

My husband was transferred to Lincoln, Nebraska. There were no teaching positions open but they needed substitutes, so I put in my application. After two months I went down and I took my application out. I enjoyed teaching at North East High School, but going down town to the central city high school - which was in about 1966 - there was a great deal of racial unrest and I had two girls stab each other

in my classroom one day when I was substituting. There were armed police at every door, you locked your door when you went into your class - and I just said this is not for me - this is not teaching. Substituting gave me a splitting headache as there were no materials readied and what seemed like a thousand different projectors - which I had no experience with. North East High School had an opening in May so I decided to give it a try plus the money was over twice the amount of the job I had taken to fill the void. I got into the teaching and I loved it, I really enjoyed it. I taught a traditional Biology and it was a nice easy getting into the mainstream of things - figuring out the projectors and so on. I taught there one year and my husband was transferred.

We moved to Salina, Kansas and they did not need a Biology teacher but they needed an English teacher, so I taught Junior High English since I had a Liberal arts background. I taught Junior High English for one year and my husband took a job in Hays, Kansas - twenty years ago. So twenty years ago I was teaching English in Salina and I finished out my contract and commuted to Hays every weekend. I got a job in Hays that fall and was teaching Junior High general science at Kennedy Junior High School. That was an interesting experience as at that time Kennedy had a nun for the principal and the only protestant faculty members were myself and one other. I chuckle about it now. I enjoyed the experience. In 1968, I moved to Hays High and I have been here ever since! I have been teaching for twenty years.

David: Donna, what awards have you received during your teaching career? Is the list quite lengthy?

Donna: No not really. I think probably the first award I won was from the Junior Science and Humanities Symposium several years ago and I had a student involved in independent study and he had a project which won the regionals in the Science and Humanities Symposium, and won the Kansas Junior nationals and won in both so I received an award in that.

Then I was elected as a Master Teacher to represent Hays High and I really didn't have much else until I was elected to Master Teacher of the district a year before last in 1986. Then I was selected for the Presidents award for Excellence in Teaching Science - I was nominated for this a few years ago but I did not get the mass of paper work completed for it, so I told myself if I was ever nominated again I would do it. I was very pleased with the Presidents Award.

David: Donna, what is your definition of a teacher.

Donna: I think a teacher shares information, and leads. You can not make the child learn you have to turn them on , you have to show them. I think you have to make messes, you can not have an immaculate lab and be showing them things - especially with teaching different classes. So, I am very hands on oriented and as a person I try to give kids exposure to seeing, doing, and trying different things.

David: What were the qualifications for the Master Teacher Award?

Donna: I was nominated to represent Hays High and then my name was submitted to the district. I was chose to represent the district and U.S.D. 489 in the state competition.

David: Donna, how do you define a Master teacher - is it different from your definition of teacher?

Donna: I don't know - it seems as though I have this label as master teacher and I thought my gosh I am the same teacher I was before the award - maybe I have a few more things I do with the kids, but I don't know - I don't know what a master teacher is. When I went to Washington D.C. it was really interesting to meet the people and see what they were doing and supposedly they were all master teachers. I think what I was excited about and confirmed about is that they all love what they do - they don't mind coming out to the school at nine o'clock at night or six o'clock in the morning. They like the kids, they like their subject and they like the diversity of the job - it would be nice if it payed more but it doesn't and I like it any way. So, I don't know what a master teacher is other than a person who has a devotion and love for what they are doing and for the kids. I think there are alot of master teachers out there that don't have the recognition or the title.

David: Donna, as a teacher what do you think the smaller communities should do about its loss of the younger populace to the larger cities?

Donna: I don't know, I have thought perhaps I should read a little bit more on economics or understand the economic undergerting of a community. There have to be jobs available, but yet there also has to be a quality of the environment for those who are wanting such. This is what I like about Western Kansas and I am sure both my husband and I could make more money in some other part of the country, but

there is a closeness to the natural environment and quality of life here that I value. I don't know as though the younger generation values it as such, as my son who is a freshman is much more money oriented than I ever was. He has asked why I ever went into teaching when the pay was so low and I said I wasn't really thinking about the money. That shocked him. I knew I would make a living and have what I needed, but I really didn't set out to make a lot of money.

David: Donna in your teaching experience were any special classes or unique educational services offered - or are there educational services you feel that should be incorporated?

Donna: I would like to see a more intensive methods (teaching) course. I really don't feel that beginning teachers have enough meat, have enough teaching experience and preparedness. I would like to see at Fort Hays a one hour methods class expanded into a three or five hour class. In the course I taught David, as you know we just glanced at some of the areas - we barely took a tip off the ice berg. An incorporation of preparation of sample lessons, doing demonstrations, and a bit a more hands on. Documented observations would also be good and then the student could come back and share what had happened. It could be a lot more hands on and tie it together a lot more. It would create more ready beginning teachers.

David: Donna, if you can put it into words what is your method of teaching?

Donna: Oh my gosh! One of my colleagues is a super organized super structured individual and when I watch him pull it off it just looks like hey that's the method. But, when I get up there - sometimes I ramble, I let the kids talk a lot instead of me talking all the time. The lecture class doesn't work for me. I think you have to get the kids involved and develop a rapport with them and I have to have an easy enough pace that they can talk about something they experienced without it interrupting and without me getting uptight. But there is a situation where you have to maintain enough control over the class so they can listen and participate in this to, so there has to be structure to it. You have to be organized and know where you are going. You have to have your time line and I don't stand up there and read the book to them and sometimes the kids don't read the book, but those that do read it have the questions. I think they are going to remember it more if it is a story type presentation, but that's my style.



- David: What teaching aids have you incorporated and how did this change teaching over what you were doing previously?
- Donna: I like to start with some type of visual, but it is probably because I am very visually oriented. I like to start with a film strip, or with pictures, or with specimens and ask the kids what it is - what do you know about this and we draw from that.
- David: Describe a typical school day?
- Donna: My day starts at 5 a.m. then I get my sons around and ready and then I am at school by 7 a.m. Then the school day begins - school is out at 3:05 and I usually stay at school until about 4:30 or 5:00. I try to do what I need to at this time as I try to take as little home as possible. Then from 5:00 to about 9:00 that is family time. Three out of five days I am back up here after 9:00 and I stay about an hour and a half. Then about 10:30 I head home and then I take an hour for Donna - I read or do what ever I feel like doing - I need that hour for myself. On Saturday mornings I sleep in until about 10:00 - thats my day to catch up!
- David: Do you feel competency tests should be given for promotion purposes?
- Donna: I don't know how you would. I don't know how it would work. Who would be able to determine competency. Perceptions would be different. Who is going to determine, what tests are you going to give. I don't know.
- David: How much weight should tests such as the ACT or SAT be given for college bound students and do you think there needs to be such a test?
- Donna: Yes, there needs to be such a thing as I think students need to be held accountable. All of us need to be held accountable - adults as well as students and I think that is a way of testing their accountability for information that they have assimilated. The problem is that some kids have a real fear of tests and don't do well on tests, but are very intelligent and very hard workers. They don't receive the awards that maybe they should. So, thats a problem but at the same time life is not fair and there has to be some basis - maybe those individuals by virtue

of their hard work and pulling themselves up by the boot straps and not having the benefit of some scholarships maybe they will come out ahead. I do think tests of that nature are needed.

David:           What is the atmosphere of the educational program that you are teaching in? ( loose, strict, cold, warm )

Donna:           I don't think its strict and I don't think its loose. I think there is structure imposed by the instructors and not by the administration. The administration can be coined supportive - any thing that we can justify and anything that we would like to do our admisistrators are behind us. We have had good funding, good support for trips, good support for activities. We have good administrative backing. Our teachers have a structured program and demanding program. I think its a nice balance, but it is alse we have a very experienced staff.

David:           Donna, what are some rules of the school today that are different from when you began teaching and have they changed much?

Donna:           Oh yes - I have been in long enough to see the pendulum swing and swing back again. Now is more like what it was when I began teaching - very rapidly after I went into teaching it really became violent, racial unrest, movements for freedom - moving from structure into individualized studies. A movement making the curriculum pertinent and away from the traditionals. Let individuals expand and find themselves, alright , so we went all the way into the hippie era and back to the conservative - emphasis upon the basics, the three R's. I don't think we have swung all the way to conservative yet, I wish it would stop right now and have smaller fluctuations but it won't. This would be a good time to go into teaching as there is alot of stability.

David:           Donna what are your comments to this statement, " Our education system is turning out academically fine individuals - but they have no mechanical abilities." Do you feel industrial education (dexterity types) should be part of the childs education? Should it be mandatory?

Donna:           Yes and No. It is going to depend upon the individual needs of the child and what they want. For example, a chemistry

lab allows each student hands on experience. It would be less time consuming if the teacher just did the lab and the students observed and this would satisfy some students - what about the doers? If we are a public educational system we have to have moderation in both, I think there has to be exposure - but I think there has to be a choice, but not be required.

David: How have your teaching habits changed compared to when you began teaching?

Donna: I can't see that I have changed a whole lot. My teaching habits have not changed - I probably do more with the kids but my habits have not really changed.

David: Do you feel teachers should conduct themselves in a certain way in the community - is there a code of ethics and morals they should follow?

Donna: I think so, but then again I have been called a "Miss Goody ToShoes," mostly by my husband. I get irritated at teachers who don't show good conduct but they are adults and I hope that they do it somewhere other than school. I don't think that is a problem normally - individuals who do not act with discretion don't stay in long. The kids have expectations and if they think your conduct is not up to snuff they are going to tell you about it.

David: How do you handle discipline problems?

Donna: Normally I don't have them. I have expectations and I expect them to behave as ladies and gentlemen. People have feelings and I expect everyone to respect others feelings. I encourage them to be supportive of fellow students and I try to be supportive. I can usually handle problems with a passive look, if it continues I move closer to the student, and if the student still does not calm down then I may physically move him to another part of the room.

David: Donna what do you think about a weighted curriculum? Giving the more advanced subjects more weight than the easier subjects.

Donna: I think the curriculum should be weighted, I think the students that are taking the classes that require the work, the study, and the preparation should have consideration.

We are turning out valedictorians who did not take any of the advanced classes. If we are acknowledging grades and academics I think there needs to be a weighted curriculum. If nothing else lets have an A+ being worth more than an A and so on.

David: Describe todays student and have they changed from yesterday?

Danna: David, kids have not changed - kids are kids. They are motivated differently - economic conditions influence them. Kids are kids.

David: What proportion of your students go on to college?

Donna: To take a guess I would say around 50%. In the past it was probably higher then that, but then with the economic conditions the way they are it is getting smaller.

David: Do you feel it is the High Schools responsibility to ready a student for college? Is curriculum geared toward college preparation?

Donna: If a student selects those classes. We have several modules the students can take, and they know what classes to take if they are going to college and the ones to take if they want to get through. The kids track themselves.

David: Have you had any outstanding students?

Donna: Oh I have had a lot of outstanding students. I enjoy seeing them and enjoy hearing what they are doing.

David: Donna can you tell a childs socioeconomic status by their actions?

Donna: Not by their actions but I can tell by their grammar.

David: Do you feel a childs socioeconomic status has much weight on a childs education?

Donna: Oh sure - a child has to be encouraged if they are going to finish high school or even college. Let me ask you, " When did you decide when you were going to college David?" - I was always going to college - Many kids never consider going to college as they had not been exposed to education and culture. So, if you are talking about socioeconomic

status I think you are talking about a lower educational standard, but many of them do not wish to do anything different from what their parents did. I think this community is atypical as there are very strong family ties to keep kids with in the community, but also to keep them in a more uneducated situation - that is what I see. That is the minority, but it does exist and that is what I would have to regard as our lower socioeconomic class.

David: Do you think a dress code should be incorporated?

Donna: Oh no!

David: Do you think if for example one girl has every fashion accessory she could possibly want and another girl has to just get by - does that make a difference in the schooling process for those girls?

Donna: Kids will take care of it.

David: Is there much competition between Hays High and TMP as far as the kids, teachers, and funds are concerned?

Donna: Not between kids and not between the teachers, but some of the older alumni go back to a state of rivalry. But as far as the kids - there is no rivalry. After all, they have pretty much grown up together. They did discontinue the football rivalry which was a very good idea - the kids could handle the competition, it was the alums who were causing all the trouble.

David: Why are you a teacher? What sparked your interest and what is your drive?

Donna: Well I like kids, I like science, and I like the diversity of the job. I do like the vacations, but usually I am going to school, teaching at camps, or doing something up here at school. I had a marvelous teacher who really influenced me. I simply like teaching.

David: What do you feel you get from teaching? You give a lot but what do you get?

Donna: I think kids appreciate it, they never say thank you per-say, but I think they appreciate the effort. I don't know - the monetary rewards are very limited, but then again I really like teaching - I am happy teaching.

David: What is it - What makes you a master teacher?

Donna: I don't consider myself a master teacher David!  
That is the thing I don't think that I am any different from many many other teachers. But, there are some individuals in the teaching profession that should not be and those are the ones who don't like kids, don't like their subject matter, that don't want to work and are lazy, and that don't have high moral standards. So, I guess a Master teacher is an individual that is dedicated, that loves her subject, that likes kids, has a high moral base, and that thinks kids are important to our society. So, I think I am doing something important!

David: Where do you see education heading in the future ( positively or negatively) and do you for see any problems?

Donna: There are problems with funding. Real problems with funding. To bad they didn't include education in part of the lottery fund, as was originally planned.

Positive or negative movement? I think it is positive - but maybe it is just because I am an optimist - why would I be a teacher if I were not an optimist and thinking kids are the greatest things.

David: In conclusion...

Donna: OK!( whistles and screams are heard )

David: If you were asked by someone for example myself, whether they should go into education or not what would you tell them?

Donna: Fantastic - go for it David. I think you would be a good teacher!