

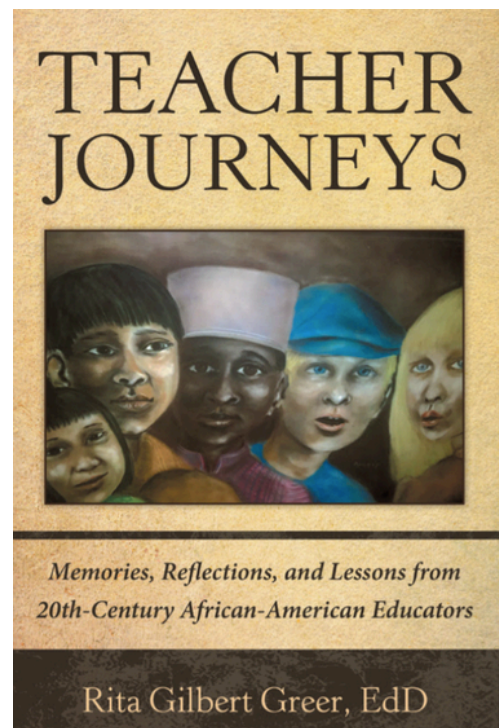
Dr. Rita Gilbert Greer is a three-time graduate of the University of Louisville, earning her bachelor's, master's, and doctorate in education from the College of Education and Human Development. Dr. Greer continues to expand on a prolific career in Jefferson County Public Schools, and contributes to education throughout Kentucky in a number of ways. We sat down with Dr. Greer to discuss her recently published book, "Teacher Journeys: Memories, Reflections, and Lessons from 20th-Century African American Educators."

CEHD: Can you talk a bit about your book? What was the inspiration behind this work?

RG: I had such great teachers my entire K-12 experience. They were generally Black teachers who worked in segregated schools, and they felt a duty and responsibility to the children that they taught. I realized that it was really important to me to tell the stories of some of those teachers and administrators. I wanted to put those stories down, so that individuals could read about what those teachers did and why they did it, what worked, what didn't work, and what helped them.

Another inspiration for this book was that I still feel this need to recruit minority teachers. I think all children need to see individuals in classrooms who look like them. African American teachers are not only good role models for Black kids, they are good role models for all kids.

Educators must have a feeling of responsibility. The teachers in my book share their feelings of responsibility [to their students]. I fear that with everything that is going on in today's world, that teaching, in some cases is just a job. Teaching can never be just a job. Our allegiance and responsibility is to provide opportunities for students to grow and be successful. That commitment can never be "just a job." One of the things that I really wanted to showcase throughout my book was the caring attitude and creativity that my teachers had for their students. I know that they didn't have the kind of technology and all of the "stuff" that we are dealing with now. But, when we come back to in-person classrooms, one of the things that I found to be most effective for children's learning is the relationship that is built between that teacher and that child. The relationship and connection make all the difference in the world and speaks to whether or not that student will respect that teacher and move forward... whether or not they will trust that teacher to guide them to move ahead. In terms of inspiration for my book, first, I focused on questions regarding recruiting minority teachers, then recruiting all teachers, and finally, how do I show what these teachers have done, and things that those who are considering a career in teacher education can look at and follow?



CEHD: In your book, you talk about what it takes to be a great educator. What makes a great teacher?

RG: I still say, not everyone can be a teacher. I do not believe that teaching is for anyone and everyone. I believe that teachers have specific talents and skills and beliefs and attitudes. Good teachers have talents, skills, and creativity. They pull kids in and push kids forward and give them what they need in their brains and nourish what is in their hearts in order to help them be successful. That is what my teachers were about when I was in school, and that is what I want today's teachers to be about. We have to teach kids how to dream, how to aspire. We have to teach kids how to believe in themselves, and how to hold on to that belief through hard times and hardships. We have to give kids hope. We have to do that as teachers, and we are going to have to do that even more so as we see what our communities and our country is going to look like in the future. I lived in one room in an alley, and I have a doctoral degree. So, you can't tell me that because I am Black and poor that I cannot achieve. That is bonkers. And I know better. Our students should know that too.

CEHD: As we think about moving out of COVID, and the idea that the landscape of our country could look very different after this year, what do you think comes next for students and educators in this country?

When we come back to in-person classrooms, one of the things we have to keep in mind is the importance of the relationship that is built between teacher and child. That makes all the difference in the world and speaks to whether or not that student will respect that teacher and move forward... whether or not they will trust that teacher to guide them to move ahead.

I am writing another genre of book about the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been thinking through what we do now when we come back to in-person schools after we have had kids at home on computers for so long. These kids are likely going to come back with monstrous problems. I am trying to think through how to write about those issues, and how to talk to teachers and community members about what we need to do as educators. What are teachers going to do when these kids come back and they have lost a year of schooling? How do we handle that?

The other piece of that is what our teachers need to know. I truly believe that our teachers do not know how to conduct teaching through a computer. The question is then what do we do now to update our teachers and help them to understand and use the technology that they have available. We need to prepare them to continue instruction, because right now I feel like they are winging it. If you aren't 25 and you haven't been on a computer every day, you don't know, you are trying to build that plane while you are flying it. I am 72 years old, I wouldn't have known how to do that. I have a computer, a phone, an iPad... all of it. But I still would not know how to teach in that way. I know our teachers are struggling, and they are trying to do their best. Now that we know this is a possibility, and we know our kids have now utilized all of this technology, we have to figure out how we are going to adapt our training for teachers. We have to provide more professional development for teachers in the use of technology, so that if this happens again, we are ready. You have got some kids out there who love this technology and do not want

to come back into a traditional classroom. So, how do we support that child? How do we use the technology and build an infrastructure in our schools so we are still setting our kids up for success and helping our teachers to grow, not grumble? Teachers grumble when they do not know, and when they know, they do not grumble. So, give them the skills and the knowledge they need to help the children they are going to teach.

CEHD: What comes next for you?

RG: I am 72 years old. So, I have to do something to keep my mind going. A few years ago, I had a stroke. Actually, I had a stroke while in the middle of writing this book. I could not remember anything after my stroke. I couldn't even figure out how to get from my house to the downtown Louisville area. I couldn't remember the streets. My therapists gave me all kinds of games to play and crossword puzzles to complete in order to get my memory back. One night, I woke up in the middle of the night and in my head, I was writing a book. I saw the pages flashing by and knew that I was reading and writing my own book. I woke up the next morning and told my husband, "I think my memory is coming back." I could see in my head the things that I had written and the names of people I had spoken to. That had not happened since before my stroke. It took about nine months of hard work to regain my memories to finish the book.

With that being said, I think what is next for me is to continue talking to young people about teaching. I don't want to have to call people. So, I started working on some little odds and ends projects to keep me going. Writing this book about teaching in a post-COVID-19 world is on the horizon.

Learn more about Dr. Rita Gilbert Greer and her work at <http://teacherjourneys.com/index.html>

Interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

