‘Old School’ Teacher Has Passion for Empowering Students

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NORWALK, Calif. – June 17, 2010 – Dr. Robert Kreger was born in San Diego, California to middle-class American parents. His father was a Navy veteran who fought in the Pacific during World War II, and according to Kreger, was a very strict disciplinarian “who didn’t tolerate any monkeyshines at all by my brother or me.”

As a teenager, Kreger became frustrated with his father’s style of discipline and became rebellious. In his senior year of high school he rebelled enough to get expelled on the very evening of the senior class banquet.

Reasonably concerned, his father threatened nearly every day to toss Kreger in the Navy in order to make him “a man.” Kreger’s argument was to go to college. He promised his father that he would be a serious student. Ultimately he prevailed, and started at community college in 1964.

Three semesters later it became very evident to him that he was certainly not as serious a student as he thought he was going to be. On Monday, March 7, 1966, he made a $5 bet with a college buddy to see who could become a U.S. Army Special Forces Green Beret faster. From that point, he was damn quick to start the action.

On the same day, he quit school and without telling his parents went straight to the admissions office and withdrew from his classes. On Tuesday, he signed the paperwork and took the oath to join the Army - and still had not told his parents. Then on Wednesday morning he got up and told his parents that he was leaving for boot camp at Ft. Ord later that afternoon.

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His parents were left utterly speechless. The situation at that time in Southeast Asia and the U.S. involvement, along with the fact that he joined the Army, not the Navy, didn’t really help his parents understand his decision. Perhaps somewhat helpful was the fact that they did not know that their eldest son had just joined the Army, in the middle of the Vietnam War, on a $5 bet.

Off he went – partly to prove himself “manly” in the eyes of his father. After training, he spent two years in intense combat in Vietnam and, after six years in the Army serving as a Special Forces Green Beret and as a Rifle Company Commander, in 1972, as a senior captain, and as the Vietnam War was winding down and American society was changing, he and the Army parted company.

He spent from 1972 to 1979 in Illinois going through meaningless jobs and meaningless relationships trying to readjust to civilian life and trying to get rid of the aftereffects of the war. In the summer of 1979, he nearly lost his life in a fire while working a “terrible job” at a power plant. This was a wake-up call for him. When he recovered from his injuries, he told his wife at that time, “I didn’t go through hell in Vietnam for two years to die in a power plant. I’m going back to school.”

At the age of 34, Kreger returned to school; once again to a community college in Des Moines, Iowa. As many re-entry students feel when they go back to school, he was terrified that he might not be prepared and wouldn’t succeed. And yet he stresses, “Education saved my life. Going back to school and feeling the power that comes through education utterly took my breath away.”

Toward the end of his bachelor’s degree in business at Eastern Illinois University, geography Professor Doug Meyer asked him if he had a job. Kreger had sent out hundreds of resumes unsuccessfully. Like so many other students, Kreger took Meyer’s geography classes only because they satisfied requirements and fit his schedule. However, Meyer saw something in Kreger that made him special.

Meyer looked into his eyes and said, “I think you would make a good geographer. Let me help you get into graduate school.” Kreger had no idea what graduate school was, but Meyer made a couple of phone calls and, voila, in 1980, Kreger found himself a master’s student at the University of Illinois.

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As a graduate student, Kreger could almost physically feel himself changing, growing and becoming more confident and stronger academically. He was becoming macho in a different way from what he had wanted to prove to his father when he was 18 or from his Army years as a Special Forces soldier. He was being empowered and transformed through education. “It was the best thing that ever happened in my life,” said Kreger.

In 1983, he received his master’s degree. During 1987, while working on his Ph.D. at Illinois, Kreger’s wife’s job transferred her to California. Kreger, naturally, returned to California with her at that time and subsequently completed his doctoral program from the University of Illinois in 1989 while teaching in Los Angeles part time as a “freeway flyer”.

By then he had taught at UCs, CSUs and community colleges. With solid teaching experience and many options to choose from, he just fell in love with one of the community colleges where he had taught part-time: Cerritos College.

Because of the commitment that faculty and staff make – even in the 1990s and still now – to student success, Kreger stressed, “I feel very privileged to work here at Cerritos College.”

He is challenged to challenge other people – unlike many jobs he gets to meet nearly 300 new people every four months and challenge them as he was once challenged.

“And along the way, if students learn a little geography that’s fine, but my main goal is to teach students to become better people, better family members, better friends, and better citizens,” he said. He surely is old school – but in a good way.

“In my classroom, everyone is there for one reason – to leave empowered,” he said.

To Robert Kreger, the excellence in teaching is the privilege to challenge and make a difference in the minds of others.

Cerritos College serves as a comprehensive community college for southeastern Los Angeles County. Communities within the college’s district include Artesia, Bellflower, Cerritos, Downey, Hawaiian Gardens, La Mirada, Norwalk, and portions of Bell Gardens, Lakewood, Long Beach, Santa Fe Springs and South Gate. Cerritos College offers degrees and certificates in more than 180 areas of study in nine divisions. Annually, more than 1,200 students successfully complete their course of studies, and enrollment currently averages 23,000 students. Visit Cerritos College online at http://www.cerritos.edu/.

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