

Ms. Williams' students become family

35 years.

Same grade.

Same classroom.

Same chalkboard.

Same school.

This is Ms. Williams.

Colette Williams taught fourth grade at West Elementary in Tooele, Utah, for 35 years.

The colorful walls were filled with collectible items like McDonalds happy meal toys, stuffed Mickey Mouse keychains and the names of each county in Utah.

"Everything in my classroom had a story behind it," Colette said. "And with those kids, there are stories all around you. Everyday you've got a story or more than one. You show me an object and I can tell you a story for it."

Being an educator was built into Colette. Both her parents, extended family and three to four generations back were teachers.

Colette was eight years old teaching her four-year-old brother how to tell time. "So when he got in kindergarten the teacher went, 'What's with this?'" Colette said. "And he could tell time. [The teacher] says, 'I've never had a kid tell time in kindergarten.'"

Her teaching instincts were clear from an early age, as she naturally took on the role of an educator with her younger brother.

Beyond her career as a teacher, Colette's roots run deep in Tooele, where she has lived in the same red brick house her entire life—since the day her parents brought her home in 1956.

Apart from going to college in Logan and serving a mission in Honduras for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she has called Tooele her home.

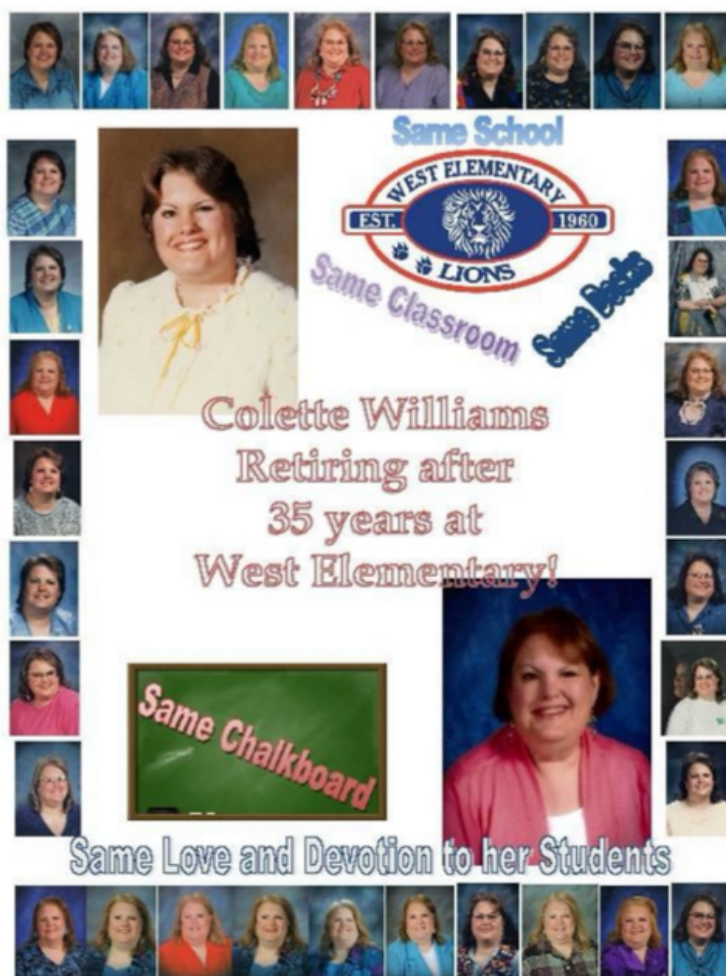
In her classroom, she channeled her love for Utah's history into her teaching with designated days for students to learn. These included Pioneer Day, Native American Day and Mountain Man Day.

Along with these celebratory days, every fourth grade student left her class at the end of each school year with a booklet about all things Utah. These books were inspired by her own fourth grade teacher, Rowe Harrison.

Rowe had his fourth graders create their own Utah booklets, which Colette then incorporated into her curriculum. Fourth grade was Colette's favorite year in school, which she credits all to Rowe.

Annie Droubay, one of Colette's students in 2013, enjoyed how the Utah history assignments completed throughout the year were used to create the booklet, because she loved the history aspect.

However, the designated days of celebration of Utah history stopped. "When I retired it was gone," Colette said. "I mean, no Native American Day. No Pioneer Day. No Mountain Man Day. Nope. They didn't have any of that stuff."



Logan Castagno is another student from 2013, whose favorite memories from the curriculum was Pioneer Day.

“It was so fun to get to do, you know, something that was just our grade and it took up the whole day,” she said. “We just got to have fun with our friends and all that was possible because of the effort that [Colette] put into our class and into getting things organized.”



Even though fourth grade curriculum changed when Ms. Williams retired, the students she had will always remember how she made them feel.

Logan explained she's been working in the education field for nearly two years now, and it is difficult to come across a teacher that is loving, kind and cares about their students the way Colette did.

“There was also a time in fourth grade that I fell at recess and skinned my knees on the blacktop so, so bad and I was crying,” she said. “I didn't want to cry in front of the secretaries and I was trying to hold it in and be brave. [Colette] was crying more than I was just because seeing me that way hurt her so much because she cared for me, and she loved me the way that she did.”

Annie loved how her classroom was unique, with reflecting her teaching styles and personality. She explained she liked how Ms. Williams integrated an “old school” style of teaching with more modern style. She wrote on a chalkboard yet used a projector as well. Similarly to Logan, Annie also remembers how Ms. Williams made her feel.

“Despite being one of the crazier kids, she was always relatively patient with me,” Annie said. “She did her best to make sure that not just me, but every student understood what we were learning.”

Colette's deep care for her students, as Logan and Annie recall, reflects the warmth she brings to every aspect of her life.

Cristi Morton is in the same LDS ward as Colette, and talked about how Colette teaches church lessons to the women at Tooele County Jail, as well as having previously taught in their ward adult class.



"She's really informative. I mean, she studies the lesson, and she can give the lesson without even looking at nothing," Cristi said. "She gets emotional a lot of the time, because I think she's, I don't know, maybe it's because she's so humble."

As Colette shares her knowledge about the LDS church to others, it is apparent the church is important to her. She doesn't know where she would be without the gospel. Yet, when she came back from her mission, over the course of 30 years she visited the LDS temples around five times. It hurt her to go.

She didn't like going to the temple because in the temple at that time, you made promises that closely dealt with being a spouse. Colette has never been married.

"Not marrying, I guess to me, really, it's not ever having been in love," she explained. "Not experiencing, what does that feel like. So when I see other people have what I consider it looks like true love, those people I'm kind of jealous of."



However, now Colette is a temple worker, and the verbiage in the temple has changed. She explained that instead of making certain promises with your husband, it is now more focused between the individual and Jesus Christ.

"I sit and I look at the changes that the church has made... in the temple ceremony and stuff like that," she said. "I'm going, 'Thank you, Heavenly Father, you did this for me.' I mean every, every little change... Everything all goes back to Christ, and I'm going, 'That's me.'"

Colette gets emotional, tearing up talking about how she's never been married. Her dad always told her, "Don't settle Colette." When she was going to college, she was in home economics and elementary education classes, where there weren't any men. She had fun with the guys she was friends with, but says she was their "[Dear Abby](#)." She was a friend, but not a girlfriend.

People say to her, “Oh, Colette you can still find somebody,” in which her response is “No, because I want the remote. And they look at me and go, ‘What?’ And I said, ‘Excuse me. I’m in charge of the remote. You’re going to marry somebody, they’d want the remote.’”

One of her friends gave her a shirt that describes exactly how she feels. The shirt says, “I’ve yet to meet a man who deserves to be as happy as I can make him.” That’s exactly how Colette feels.

She is resolved to never being married, and is OK with it because she doesn’t have any wishes or dreams for that anymore.

“So that’s easier to handle because it’s not even a hope or a wish,” she said. “You do with what you’ve got. I’ve got to enjoy life. Find joy in everything, and that’s what I’m doing. You have to get over the hard times. And to be honest, if that’s my [Gethsemane](#), I’m pretty blessed.”

Her pride and joy has been what she has accomplished as a teacher with educating her students. She takes the utmost pride in what her students as individuals have accomplished too.

“I’m not pursuing a permanent career in education... but her form of teaching and her way of running her classroom will forever have inspired me,” Logan said. “It’s set the bar for what I want my future kids’ teachers to be like and it really taught me how much love does have a place in the classroom, and laughter has a place in the classroom.”

The environment in Logan’s fourth grade class was a feeling of community. Despite having classes with a lot of the same people throughout all of school, fourth grade was different because the social cliques were broken—they were non-existent in Colette’s classroom.



Pictured above are students from the graduating class of 2022, including Logan—far left—and Annie—in the grey cap—who had Ms. Williams as their fourth grade teacher. Colette went to see her Tooele High School graduates walk the halls of West Elementary during graduation week to commemorate their accomplishments and see how far they've come.

“[Colette] is one of the teachers that has inspired me, as I have been working towards becoming a teacher,” Annie said. “I reflect back on how she taught and I remember how I felt as her student and it encourages me to be like her, and to have the same impact on my future students that she had on me.”

Colette fostered a welcoming kindness that was a once in a lifetime kind of academic experience. Not everyone is as lucky to say they had the best fourth grade teacher—but her students indefinitely can say that.

Despite never being married and having kids of her own, Colette has students who have become like family, and she has positively impacted the lives of countless individuals throughout her teaching career.

“Parents would say, ‘I’m proud of my kids,’” Colette explained. “And that’s what I’d say. I’m proud of my kids.”