

A Passion for Social Studies

BY CAROL CUMMINGS



Dr. Kay Gandy

KAY GANDY LIFTED UP A BRIGHTLY COLORED QUILT EMBELLISHED WITH A PLUSH MAP OF THE UNITED STATES. WITH A SMILE SHE POINTED OUT "MR. MIMAL," AN IMAGINARY ACROSTIC OF A MAN WHOSE OUTLINE IS COMPOSED BY THE BORDERS OF MINNESOTA, IOWA, MISSOURI, ARKANSAS, AND LOUISIANA.

She began to share a story of MIMAL's travels across America, in a visual description of the various states. This was just one example of the creativity she imparts to her students in her social studies education classes. Dr. Gandy has truly developed the art of inspiring students to have an interest in and love for social studies and geography.

Dr. Gandy, an assistant professor of teacher education at Western Kentucky University, is no stranger to sparking the attention of the youngest students. In her previous career, she spent twenty-seven years as an elementary teacher in Louisiana. Twenty years into that vocation, in 1996, she discovered her passion. "I was bored one summer, and I found a brochure on summer workshops for teachers buried in the principal's garbage," she said with a grin. "This particular workshop was sponsored by National Geographic and was to be held at Louisiana State University."

She attended the workshop, and the course of her life changed drastically from that point forward. "It literally changed my life," she said. "I learned more about how to present geography to students, and it ignited a passion in me."

This passion drove her to go on to obtain her doctorate in curriculum and instruction in 2002 at Louisiana Tech University and to travel the United States, doing conferences and presentations. When she retired from elementary teaching in 2003, she made the move to Kentucky and WKU with a desire to teach and inspire a future generation of young teachers.

Dr. Gandy's imagination is filled with creative ideas to make learning about geography a fun experience. Her resources include a set of fifty cookie cutters, each one in the shape of a state. She has also demonstrated U.S. geography by baking a cake, outlining the borders of the United States in the icing, and setting the students loose in decorating the country's landforms. Under her direction, chocolate chips become the Appalachian Mountains, blue icing is used to outline major rivers and lakes, and Snow Cap candies are carefully placed to represent the Rocky Mountains. In short, she makes it hands-on and fun.

That workshop in 1996 was only the beginning of a relationship with National Geographic. "National Geographic started a Geography Alliance in every state," she explained. "After being asked to serve as a coordinator for the Kentucky Geographic Alliance (KGA), I submitted a \$50,000 grant proposal to the National Geographic Society Education Foundation to transfer the operation of KGA from the University of Louisville to WKU." She not only received the grant, but has received an additional \$50,000 to continue running the KGA. Under the umbrella of the Kentucky Geography Alliance, she offers workshops for teachers and provides content, technology, and ideas on how to make geography come alive for students. Her work with these teachers is also hands-on. "We hold a GPS [global positioning system] treasure hunt on campus, and we grid an entire classroom with yarn."

Professor Gandy's passion for Geography has taken her across the United States and around the world, to locations that include South Africa, China, Germany, the Yucatan, and New Zealand. In 2006 she and Dr. Darrell Kruger,



Illustrations by Lindsey Looft

from Illinois State University, received a \$70,000 Fulbright Group Projects Abroad grant to take eleven secondary and middle-school social studies teachers to South Africa for a month. Still, her most rewarding travel experience took place in 2002, when she served as a teacher-guide representing the National Geographic Society in a trek across America with *American Frontiers: A Public Lands Journey*.

In the trek across America, the Public Lands Interpretive Association, an Albuquerque, New Mexico-based, non-profit organization that provides interpretive and educational resources to the public, mapped out a Canada-to-Mexico trek that took place exclusively on public lands. A unique project, the trek was designed to highlight the beauty, the accessibility, and benefits of the public lands in the western United States. The journey involved two groups of travelers, one of which started north from the Mexican border, and the second of which headed south from Canada. With a route that lay entirely on public lands, the trek was a feat that had never



Quilt embellished with a plush map of the United States

before been accomplished. The trek began on July 31, 2002, and ended two months later when the two teams literally met in the middle at Wasatch-Cache National Forest near Salt Lake City, Utah, on September 27.

To demonstrate the different ways people get about on our public lands — and to stay within the sixty-day limit of the journey — trek participants used numerous creative modes of transportation for this historic border-to-border journey across America. Participants hiked and backpacked, and they rode horses, mountain bikes, ATVs, and dual-sport motorcycles. They rafted, canoed, drove pick-up trucks, motorboats, and 4WD vehicles, and even spent a few leisurely days on a houseboat. All along the way, the two teams attended special events, round table discussions, and visited schools and communities to learn about public land issues. And, of course, they saw some of the most spectacular scenery of the American West. Their journal entries eloquently describe the feelings public lands awoke in them and also the daily routine of the long trek.

Inspired by the American Frontiers project, the National Geographic Society designed a new geography curriculum around the theme of public lands. Aimed at teaching school-aged children the beauty and the benefits of America's public lands, this curriculum was written to follow the trekkers along the two-month journey, highlighting the diversity and grandeur the nation's public lands. Gandy and the other teachers on this journey wrote lesson plans to contribute to the new curriculum.



A quilted teaching aid purchased in Africa



Students learning to use GPS tracking technology

When Dr. Gandy began her new career in training teachers at WKU in 2003, she discovered that some of her students were experiencing difficulties in their field placement activities. As part of their degree requirements, the students have to teach social studies units in elementary classrooms. This can be quite difficult when elementary teachers spend the majority of class time on subjects other than social studies.

Dr. Gandy explains, "The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 1991 enforces accountability of Federal funding by requiring States to implement statewide accountability systems. These policy mandates have affected how teachers plan their core subjects in elementary schools." Because elementary students are not tested on social studies in Kentucky until the fifth grade, many teachers choose to focus on other subjects to improve test scores. This leads to a recurring theme that puts social studies on the back burner while teachers spend their time teaching language arts and math — subjects on which students are tested earlier in their elementary years.

Drs. Gandy and Kruger have, over the past two years, charged students in their social studies methods field experiences to collect observation data on the teaching of social studies in both Kentucky and Illinois. "More than 400 students have observed in fourteen schools whether or not social studies is being taught, how it is being taught, the content of each social studies lesson, the length of each lesson and time of day the lesson is taught, the methods

used to teach each lesson, the materials used to teach each lesson, and the assessment used for each lesson," Gandy writes. Students completed a checklist for each of their twelve to fifteen days in the field.

Having received permission from the teachers and principals of each school, students also collected contextual factors on each teacher such as gender, race, and years of teaching experience. Finally, students summarized their findings and made inferences about the teaching of social studies. Below are some the observers' findings to date:

An average of thirty-seven minutes is devoted to each social studies lesson that is taught.

Social studies is taught about twenty percent of the days of field assignments.

Economics is the most neglected strand of social studies being taught in the elementary classroom.

Worksheets are the number one tool of choice, while textbooks are only used fifteen percent of the time to teach social studies. Falling behind worksheets and textbooks were the more hands-on options of maps, software, and games.

"Since social studies is not a core testing area until the fifth grade, some teachers will decide not to worry about it, since their students are not being tested on it," Gandy explained. "The problem is that all prior years are held accountable for fifth grade test scores."

Her experience in another state allows Dr. Gandy to see great benefits to being a teacher in Kentucky. "I tell my students to be proud to be in a state that is a leader in education reform," she said. "Kentucky is definitely a leader, as it requires higher standards than the federal No Child Left Behind mandate. Our students get excellent experience, mentoring, and feedback."

Kentucky has already taken steps to ensure that all subjects, including social studies, are being taught. "Core content standards are now broken down by grade," Gandy said. "Really good teachers will integrate social studies into other subjects, and good principals make sure teachers are doing that. My social studies methods class encourages future teachers to be creative in the way they teach. Can you tell me one subject that doesn't relate to social studies? From math, to economics, to science, you can find social studies at the core of everything students learn." ■



Snapshots from Kay Gandy's National Geographic sponsored trek across America

