

Lecturer and Faculty Director Christina Villarreal

Born and raised in California, Christina Villarreal, Ed.M.'05, ended up exactly where she one day imagined she'd be: working in schools as a teacher (in middle school and high school), principal, and then professor. Villarreal spoke to Ed. about her warrior mother, the joy of teaching middle schoolers, and why she's known as V or Dr. V on both coasts.

What childhood memory has had a lasting impact on you as an adult?

I carry the painful and important memory of losing my mother to cancer at a very young age. She thought she had bronchitis because she had been coughing. When she and my dad returned from the doctor, they were holding hands with the most solemn expressions on their faces when they told my little brother and me that she had been diagnosed with lung and bone cancer. The doctors told her she had very little time to live and that she should just focus on trying to “enjoy” her life. I remember her refusing this advice and saying, “How can I enjoy my life knowing that I am leaving behind my husband and kids?” So she fought. Hard. She made a choice. Rather than spending her last few months on a beach, she underwent extreme chemotherapy in New York. She then agreed to an experimental treatment in Japan, which actually started to work for the first few treatments. ...The day after my [11th birthday], we flew to Japan to bring my mother home. A week later, my mother died in my father's arms. One of the most important lessons I learned from this experience was the inextricable relationship between courage and fear; my parents were both terrified, unsure of what was going to happen, and in that fear, I witnessed them both exercise strength and courage.

What did you want to be as a kid “when you grew up”?

I am definitely someone who can say that I am living and breathing my dream. For as long as I can remember, I have always wanted to be a teacher. While I knew since at least second grade that I wanted

to be teacher, I did not develop the political clarity that drives my passion for teaching until 11th grade. Up until that point, I had experienced a solid mix of different types of teachers — some were great and caring; others were jaded, disengaged, and terrible. I also had not yet experienced a history class that reflected my culture and ancestry. That changed with my 11th grade history teacher, Mr. Dwyer. For the first time in my life, I was taught a history in which I could place myself and my ancestors. Additionally, it was the first time that I felt fully seen and loved by a teacher; Dwyer was genuinely interested in my life and experiences as young, mixed-race woman of color and he treated me with dignity and respect — and was also just hella funny.

Why teach middle school?

When I entered the Teacher Education Program as a student, I was stubbornly sure that I would become an 11th grade U.S. history teacher; you simply couldn't tell me otherwise. Then I couldn't get a job! That's when my friend Niloy asked if I was still looking for a position. He had an inside lead on a friend leaving a middle school history position in Oakland. I had no desire whatsoever to teach middle school, but I reached out and applied. It was, and remains, one of the best decisions of my entire life. To this day, seventh grade is hands-down my favorite grade to teach. I had the honor and privilege of working with some of the most brilliant, hilarious, honest, resilient, loving, and generous young human beings on the planet — many of whom I still keep in touch with and consider my family.

You give much of yourself to your students. Why?

I often share that I am the most alive when I am in the classroom. There is something so deeply sacred about the relationships and

communities that I get to nurture and co-construct with my students and I don't take a moment of this work for granted. Building upon Professor Cornel West's notion that “justice is what love looks like in public,” I believe that social justice teaching is what love looks like in classrooms. Beloved communities are not established overnight. On the first day of class, I tell my graduate students the same thing I told my former seventh graders: “I can't teach you until I know you.” I explain that all of my courses are designed for my students to experience an individual and collective journey. The syllabus is merely a skeleton shaped by my lived experiences and expertise, and the muscles, tissues, tendons, and heart come from my students.

Who decided you'd be called V or Dr. V by your students?

I've been blessed with a number of beloved nicknames growing up. In middle school, my friends called me \$hortcake (yes, spelled with the money sign because I grew up listening to Too \$hort) and in high school my friends called me Tina-Chris. When I started teaching, my students called me Ms. V. It became a huge part of my identity as an educator and person. I was thus faced with an important decision when I moved to the East Coast. I vividly recall a conversation that I had with a group of my students before I left. One of them asked me, “So, now that you're gonna be on the East Coast, are they gonna call you Christina? Or are you still gonna be Ms. V?” I'll never forget realizing how much being Ms. V meant to me. I choose to go by “Dr. V” here as a way to honor them and all the ways that they taught and loved me.

