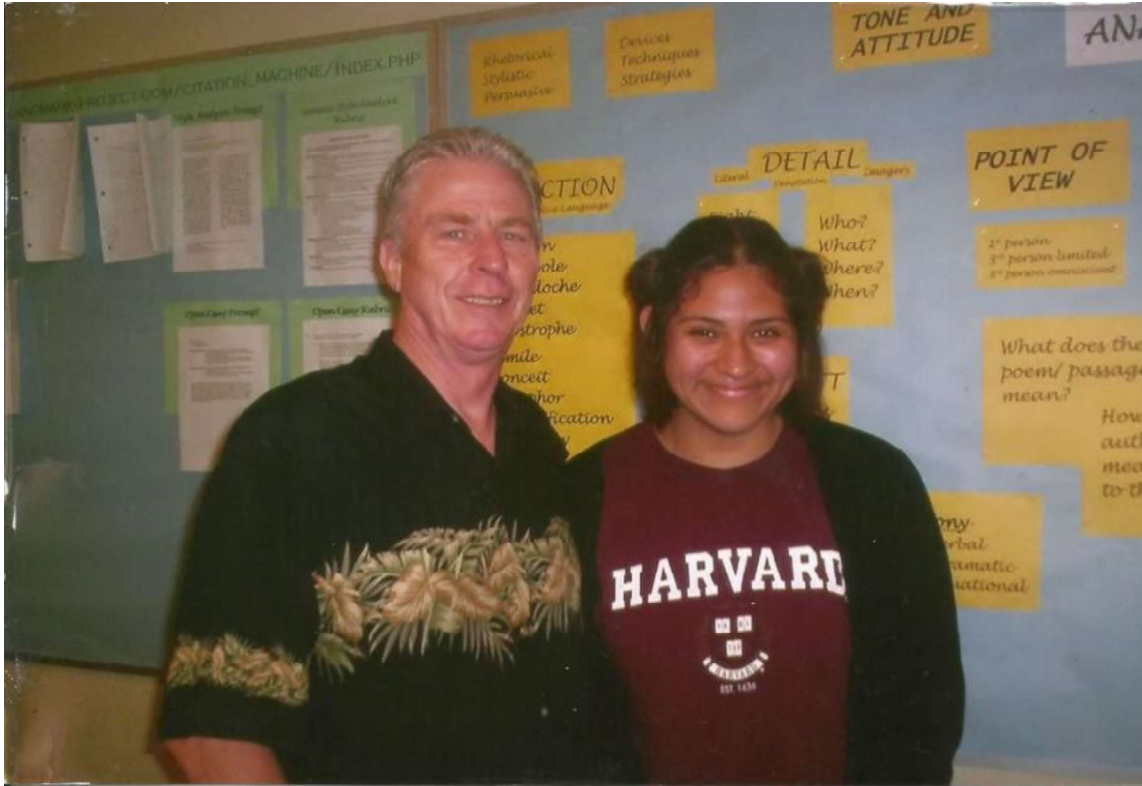


Los Angeles Times

OBITUARIES

Bill Roberts, influential Santa Ana High teacher who propelled students to Ivy League schools, dies



Santa Ana High School English teacher Bill Roberts poses for a photograph with student Gloria Montiel in 2005.
(Courtesy of Gloria Montiel)

By [PRISCELLA VEGASTAFF](#) WRITER
JAN. 21, 2021 12:02 PM PT

Gloria Montiel knew she wanted to attend Harvard University since she was 12, but the path to her dream college appeared unattainable. The Santa Ana High School student did not have legal status long before being a Dreamer was a cause.

Her parents, both restaurant workers, could neither offer her the support — financial or firsthand experience — she would need in becoming the first person in her family to attend college, let alone Harvard.

Disillusionment and apathy were all elements of Montiel's education up until she met Bill Roberts, an English teacher at Santa Ana High. Roberts offered more than just a curriculum to the predominantly low-income and Latino student population. He fostered acceptance and empathy while requiring diligence, accountability and most importantly: self-belief.

Roberts played an instrumental role in helping these students shatter stereotypes and attend prestigious universities such as Yale and Cornell. As for Montiel, she is believed to be one of the [first students](#) from the school to attend Harvard. Accepted in 2005, Montiel has since [helped others](#) pave a similar path.

“It's been really, really hard, but at the same time I see the beauty in what he started,” she said of Roberts. “The belief he placed in me is a gift I keep moving forward. Now it's my turn to give it to somebody else.”

Roberts, who taught at Santa Ana High for nearly 30 years, died Christmas Day after battling prostate cancer for five years, his wife, Jeri, said. He was 75.

Roberts started his career at private Catholic schools, including Damien High in La Verne and St. Anthony High in Long Beach. He taught history and coached basketball until he transferred to the Santa Ana Unified School District, where he stayed until he retired.

“Bill saw their potential,” Bob Dukus, a Santa Ana High science teacher who befriended Roberts in 1989, said of the school's students. The two hit it off and Roberts recruited Dukus to help lead Santa Ana High's Quiz Bowl, an academic sport akin to “Jeopardy!” “He was there to support them 100%. A lot of our kids need that and Bill was one of the main ones who did that.”

Although Roberts didn't earn any districtwide recognitions, he was revered by many, even those who weren't his students. He believed that in order to be a successful teacher, he needed to convince students that he genuinely cared

about them. His charismatic leadership, witty remarks and drive to teach beyond the curriculum captivated students.

His wife said he would go to Librería Martínez, a local bookstore in Santa Ana, and buy novels he felt would be meaningful to his students. “I wish I could have been in his classroom so I could see how he encouraged them to be such wonderful, critical thinkers.”

Bill Duffy — a retired professional basketball player who heads one of the leading basketball agencies, BDA Sports Management — credits Roberts for establishing a strong foundation for success. Duffy still remembers how his heart swelled with pride when Roberts told him he reminded him of former Long Beach State All-American Ed Ratleff, who played for Team USA in the Munich Games and had a five-year NBA career. Duffy was 14 at the time.

“When you’re a kid and coach says you remind him of someone who is already at a high level, it reinforces your belief in yourself and gives you confidence,” Duffy said.

During his final days, Roberts received flowers and nearly 100 letters from his former students. Many told Roberts how he helped them find their voice and ultimately changed their lives for the better.

“Truthfully, I felt very powerless for most of my life until you became my teacher,” Stephanie Mendez, a 2007 Santa Ana High graduate, wrote in her letter.

She recounted her upbringing, living below the poverty line and coming from a broken home without any real parental figure for a majority of her turbulent teenage years. She was frequently truant, so much so that she toyed with the idea of dropping out of school. Maybe she wasn’t cut out for education, she wondered.

Roberts thought otherwise.

Pep talks between the two helped her change the trajectory of her life. She became the first in her family to graduate with bachelor’s and master’s degrees

from Cal State Long Beach. She has since worked for ABC News, E! Networks and now freelances for magazines such as Teen Vogue and Spin.

Roberts is survived by his wife; his son, Ryan; his daughter, Erin; and four grandchildren.