

# EMILY GRIFFITH

## HELPER OF “ALL WHO WISH TO LEARN”



Emily Griffith

*EMILY GRIFFITH, founder of Denver's Opportunity School, completed her formal education with the eighth grade. Colorado State Normal School (now the University of Northern Colorado) gave her a complimentary teaching diploma when she had already taught for over twenty years. But she had plenty of natural expertise. Griffith was one of the most influential educators in our state's history. She was a natural teacher and community leader. She believed education was the key to improving society. Her dreams live on in Denver to this day.*

### BEGINNINGS

Emily Griffith was born in Cincinnati, Ohio on February 10, 1868, to a poor family. She began working at the age of seventeen as a teacher in a small Nebraska town. Like other teachers, she “boarded around.” This meant she lived with her students’ families for weeks at a time. She realized that the parents often were not well educated. They could not read, write, or do simple math well. She saw that being uneducated led to poverty and problems. She felt that education was the way to save people from passing on those troubles to their children.

### DENVER AND A DREAM

Griffith’s family moved to Denver in late 1894. As the eldest of four children, she felt the need to help provide for her struggling family. In the mid-1890s Denver was recovering from the Panic of 1893. This financial crisis took place when the government stopped buying silver. As a result, 435 mines closed in Colorado and 45,084 people lost their jobs.

By 1895 things were a little better, but the city was still struggling with racism and poverty. Griffith believed more than ever that every person had a right to public education. She felt that education should be available for people of all ages, races, and backgrounds. She just wasn’t sure what she could do about it yet.

In Denver, Griffith began working as a substitute teacher, and later taught full-time. In 1904 she was asked to be Deputy State Superintendent of Schools. She served under the Superintendent twice for a total of six years. She left both times because she missed the classroom and working directly with students.

She also felt a desire to help adults who wanted to learn. So many people worked during the day or were stuck in their jobs because they didn’t know a particular skill. For years, Griffith pushed her idea to open a school to educators, businessmen, and reporters in Denver. She began teaching night classes at the Twenty-fourth Street School where she taught eighth grade during the day.

### DREAMS COME TRUE

After years of trying, Griffith’s dream became a reality in 1916. In May of that year, School Board Superintendent Carlos M. Cole decided to have the Longfellow School remodeled. It would be renamed “Opportunity School” as Griffith had hoped. She would be principal, and the school would serve old and young, during the day and at night. Classes began September 9, 1916. The words “PUBLIC OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL — FOR ALL WHO WISH TO LEARN” are inscribed on the building.

Staying true to that motto, Opportunity School molded its programs to fit students' needs. During the world wars, classes were added to aid the war effort. New training programs filled the need for training in welding and mechanics. After wartime, training was provided to those who needed new skills to keep their old jobs. Griffith always tried to offer classes that would be of the most benefit to her students.

### **MORE THAN A FULL-TIME JOB**

Emily Griffith was not a teacher who worked only when classes were in session. Even before the opening of her school, she reached out to her students and their families in exceptional ways. This service continued at Opportunity School.

She brought people into her home and gave bowls of homemade soup to hungry students. She passed out nickels to help her students get home on the streetcar. She visited the sick and helped those who needed a listening ear or a way to a better life. She worked with the police and started a home for children getting out of the judicial system. Her kind of education was a twenty-four-hour-a-day job.

### **MOVING ON**

By the time Emily Griffith retired in 1933, Opportunity School had been open for seventeen years. More than 100,000 students had gone through the school. Over the years she had been offered many jobs. People even wanted her to set up similar schools in foreign countries. She turned those offers down, preferring to make a difference at home in Denver.

In 1933 Griffith left her school and Denver and moved to Pinecliffe, Colorado, with her sister Florence. The next year Opportunity was renamed the Emily Griffith Opportunity School in her honor. The sisters lived together in a simple mountain cabin. With no electricity, telephone, or indoor plumbing, they lived on Griffith's \$50-a-month pension.

On June 18, 1947 their bodies were discovered in their cabin. The two women had been murdered, and the people of Colorado and the nation were shocked. The murderer was never found, and the crime remains unsolved to this day.

### **THE DREAM LIVES ON**

In 2000, Denver Mayor Wellington Webb honored Emily Griffith with one of ten Millennium Awards. The awards honor people and organizations who have "made the most significant and lasting contributions to the citizens of Denver since its founding." Chosen from over 200 nominees, Griffith's impact is still felt strongly in Denver. Thousands of students graduate from her school every year. Her dream lives on as shown by the continued success of the Emily Griffith Opportunity School.

BY MAYA D. WRIGHT

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### **FURTHER READING:**

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