Dr. Carol Cantrell has made a life of defying expectations. Picture a tiny girl with a Dickens tome in her lap, a young white teacher from the West at a black college in the South when MLK was killed, or a passionate professor completely redesigning courses from a feminist perspective, and you will glimpse the defiant energy of Dr. Cantrell.

Born on June 23, 1941, her childhood covered vast spaces, both physically through a number of moves and mentally through her voracious reading. Born in St. Louis, she grew up in Wyoming, running up and down hills or telling stories to the neighborhood kids under the honeysuckle bush. “In many ways,” she says, “we were very rich, even though we didn’t have much money.” After her father became sick, the family moved to Denver. Although she didn’t remember her high school favorably, her parents encouraged her education, and she knew early on college was the way “to get out of there, and have a different kind of life.”

She won a scholarship to Valparaiso University in 1959, where she thought she wanted to study mathematics until she took a few courses. She eventually switched to English and earned her Bachelor’s degree, moving swiftly into graduate school at Northwestern University on a Woodrow Wilson fellowship. She stayed at Northwestern to complete her dissertation on Dylan Thomas in 1967. “I have no passion for Dylan Thomas, then or now,” she admits. “In some ways, I wish I’d waited because I had no idea what I was doing, but I had a wonderful life there.” Her fellowship required a teaching, so after graduating she taught at Virginia Union University, a small, black college in Richmond, VA.

“I was very high-minded,” Cantrell laughs. “My grad program assumed you would go to a prestigious school when you graduated, and something in me rebelled at that.” She was teaching at VUU when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. The tumultuous time reminded her of the privileges she was afforded in her own life. “I wanted to do something more than write about Dylan Thomas,” she says.

Having spent part of her childhood in Denver, she applied for other teaching jobs in Colorado and was hired at CSU as an associate professor of English. In 1969, CSU’s English department was an exciting place to be. She compares the stuffy academics at Northwestern to the new English faculty; “I realized nobody here knew what a professor is, in the way they knew at Northwestern, so that meant I, as a woman, could be a professor. At CSU, in the basement of Eddy, we wanted to change the world.” And even though the basement of Eddy was a bit of a dump, she asserts, “the great thing about the facilities was the people in them.”

Cantrell was very influential in starting CSU’s Women’s Studies program, developing courses, planning syllabi, and involving other disciplines. The prospect of looking at all knowledge from a different vantage point was “hugely life-changing.” After teaching a literature course one semester with a borrowed reading list that solely contained books about “solitary, angry men”, she knew it was her mission to broaden the scope. Through literature, she maintains “you are able to see the world through other people’s eyes, experience the world in a different way.” Studying and teaching modern literature helped her “share the revolution in perspective that [feminism] offered.”

For many years, Cantrell was the graduate coordinator of the English department, scheduling and teaching exciting courses and fighting for funding. She thrived on imagination and creativity, and the department thrived with her. “The world is out there to be explored and to be envisioned,” she proclaims, “and it behooves us to accept that invitation.”