

K.D. Sullivan: From Park Bench to Publishing House

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At 15, K.D. Sullivan was homeless, hungry, and sleeping on park benches in Honoluluâ??s Aina Haina neighborhood.

In one of her most vulnerable moments, she was penniless, sitting huddled near a McDonaldâ??s she frequented, when the owner of a nearby restaurant noticed her and invited her inside, offering the girl a bowl of Hawaiian noodle soup known locally as saimin.

More than five decades later, Sullivan still remembers that bowl of soup as a pivotal moment.

â??That bowl of soupâ??that was the first moment of kindness I can remember in my life,â?• she said through tears, her voice quivering. â??It was a small thing, but it changed everything.â?•

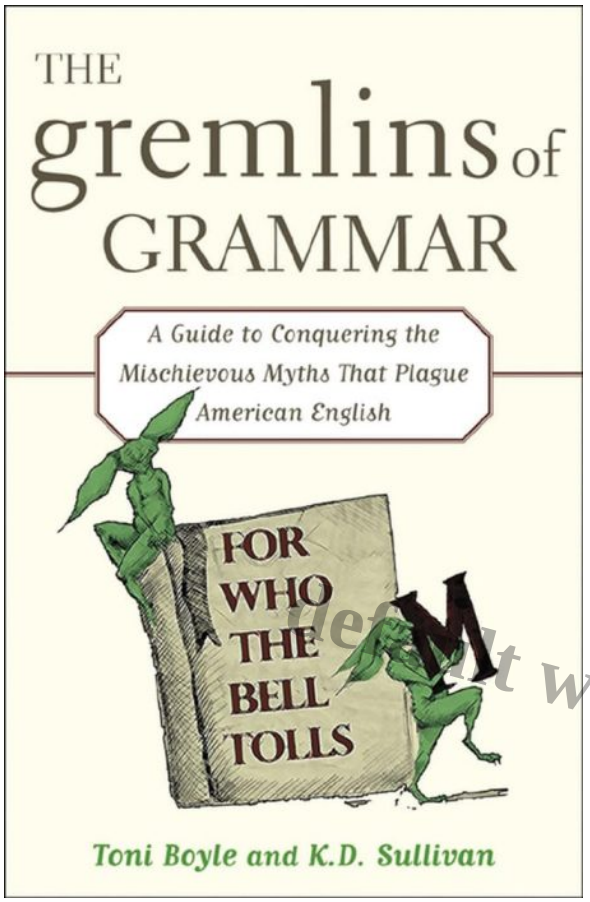


K.D. Sullivan at home on Potrero Hill. (Photo by Gideon Rubin)

Sullivan, 72, has spent more than 45 years in a career that includes founding and selling an editorial services company, co-founding and later selling a publishing company, authoring seven books, and consulting on hundreds of titles for authors and high-profile clients.

A high school dropout, Sullivan is largely self-taught. She passed the GED exam at 16 and has since taken a few classes at City College of San Francisco and College of San Mateo. She learned the basics of proofreading from a book.

â??I do regret in some ways not finishing high school and not going to collegeâ??but maybe not for the reasons you would expect,â?• said Sullivan, whose given name is Katherine Dianne.



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Grammar isnâ??t always serious. (Photo courtesy of Amazon.com)

â??What I regret most is that I donâ??t have a shared experience that almost everyone does,â?• she said. â??It may sound silly, but when they talk about going to the prom, going to high school sporting events, high school graduation, and what it was like going off to college, I donâ??t have that frame of reference.â?•

Sullivan was nine when she moved to Hawaii from Albuquerque, New Mexico, with her mother to escape an abusive relationship. But she found the Aloha State in the late 1960s to be inhospitable. Hawaii had just been declared a state in 1959, and newcomers from the mainland were not welcome, she recalls.

She felt mistreated by teachers at her high school, but her complaints to the local school board were ignored. She decided to drop out, despite her motherâ??s warning that she would kick her out of the home if she persisted. Sullivan decided to live with the consequences and was homeless for six months.

She recalls panhandling and taking odd jobs to get by. â??It was very hard. I was hungry, I was mad, and I was vulnerable, but I never thought it was hopeless. I always just looked for the next solution,â?• she said.

She found her solution in a job as a nanny, which provided shelter, income, and stability. â??I struggled, but I survived, and that gave me confidence thatâ??s never left me.â?•

Reconciliation

It took years for Sullivan and her mother to reconcile. But in 1971, two days before her 18th birthday, Sullivan visited her mother at her new home in San Francisco. She decided to stay and found an apartment on Potrero Hill that has been her home for 47 years.

Soon after returning to San Francisco, Sullivan married and had a son but found herself in need of income to support herself and the boy after a divorce.

Sullivan taught herself to proofread and started her own business, becoming the first proofreader ever listed in the San Francisco Yellow Pages. That work led to assignments with McGraw-Hill and helped establish her credibility with publishers.



K.D. has lived on Potrero Hill for decades. (Photo by Gideon Rubin)

A friend who ran a wine magazine offered her work proofreading, but not knowing what the work entailed, she hesitated. Nevertheless, she took her friend up on the offer. Sullivan soon realized she had a knack for catching errors, a facility she traced to her experience typing up and editing her motherâ??s college papers.

She first built and sold an editorial services company, Creative Solutions, which she sold in 2005. Five years later, she co-founded and served as CEO of Untreed Reads Publishing, which she sold in 2022.

She then launched We Know Publishing, a still thriving venture aimed at helping authors shape their ideas and get their books to more people.Sheâ??s a prolific author as well.

Sullivan has authored or co-authored seven books. Her first, â??Go Ahead â?¦ Proof It!â?• was written to help people learn proofreading on their own.



Sullivanâ??s creative output keeps growing. (Photo by Gideon Rubin)

Her subsequent works, including â??McGraw-Hill Desk Reference for Writers, Editors and Proofreaders,â?• â??A Cure for the Common Word,â?• and â??The Gremlins of Grammar,â?• all follow a similar self-help approach.

Sullivan said she encourages people to trust their instincts, keep learning, and find a way forward when it appears all doors are closed.

â??K.D. has impressive skills, experience, and knowledge, but whatâ??s especially notable is the personal interest she takes in her colleagues and clients,â?• said Karen Mead, a friend and protÃ©gÃ© of Sullivan who has worked with her on several proofreading and copyediting projects. â??Sheâ??s also thoughtful, kind, reliable, and punctual, all traits that I particularly appreciate.â?•

Grammar still scary

Despite her years of editorial experience, Sullivan admits sheâ??s still intimidated by grammar. â??I donâ??t know most of the grammar rules, but I usually know when something is right. If you ask me why a comma goes somewhere, I probably canâ??t tell you the rule, but I can tell you whether it belongs there.â?•

Her experience as a publisher and author led to consulting roles with high-profile clients including Genentech and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where she provided publishing and editorial guidance.

Even so, her lack of a college degree turns off some potential clients and employers. â??It didnâ??t matter that I had all those books published, that I had built up and sold a business, that Iâ??d worked with places like Lawrence Livermore and Genentech,â?• Sullivan said. â??None of that mattered. Thatâ??s why I started (Untreed Reads), because I didnâ??t have a choice.â?•



Time to relax for K.D. Sullivan. (Photo by Gideon Rubin)

Sullivan said the publishing industry has changed over the past few decades. Fewer publishers offer advances or long-term support, and many authors are now assuming responsibility for editing, production, and promoting their work, she said, noting these changes have fueled the growth of independent publishing.

Sullivan said her family is her greatest source of pride. Her granddaughter is Taevin, a student at the University of San Francisco, and her grandson, Paxton, is a senior at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

â??When you come right down to it, the thing Iâ??m most proud of would be my son and my grandkids,â?• Sullivan said.

â??Theyâ??re thoughtful, caring, wicked smart, incredible people, and being part of their lives as theyâ??ve grown up has been amazing.â?•

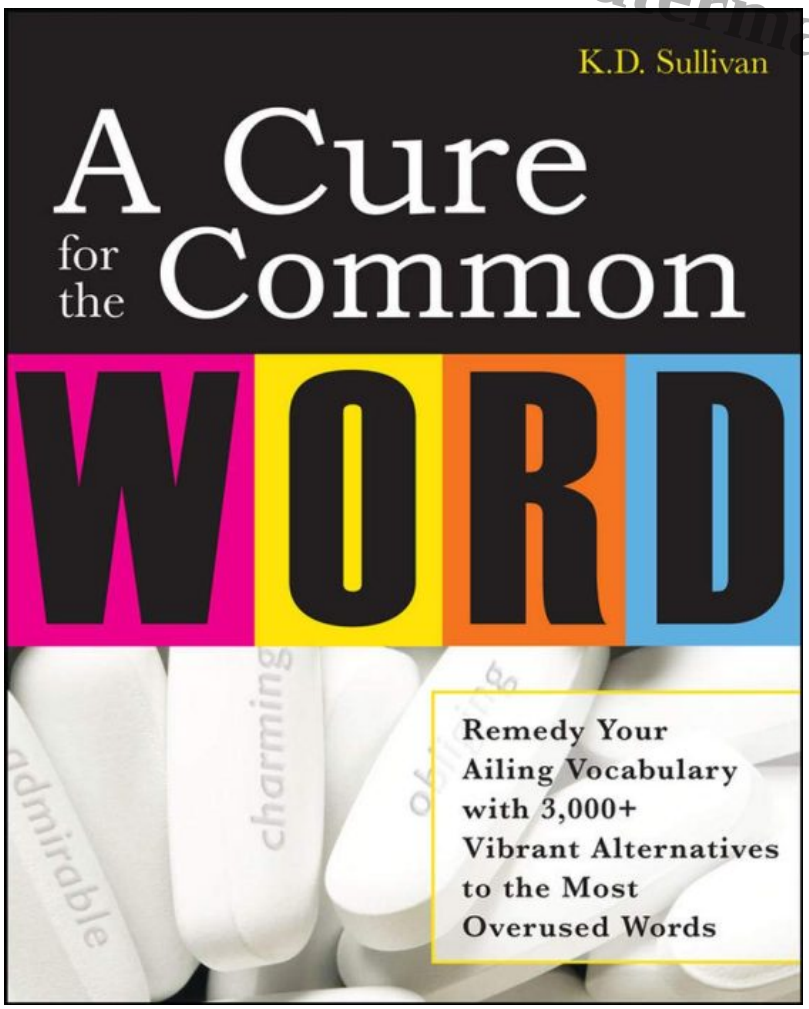
Staying fit

Sullivan has neatly cropped brown and gray hair. She enjoys walking around the city and spending time with friends and family. Sheâ??s recently started Tai Chi and Qi Gong classes and plans to start indoor rock climbing. She has been caring for her mother, who turned 93 in December.

â??Everyone of the people Iâ??m drawn to at my age is still curious,â?• Sullivan said. â??Theyâ??re interested in conversation, not just the weather.â?•

Sullivan said she remains grateful to the restaurant owner who offered her the bowl of saimin, noting that she wants others in need to know they should never be afraid to ask for help. â?•People are usually eager to help, so donâ??t be afraid to ask and donâ??t be afraid to offer help.â?•

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A guide for writers (Photo courtesy of Amazon.com)

Asked what she would tell the restaurant owner today if she had the chance, Sullivan paused before saying, â??Thank you.â?•

â??I wish I had thanked her more in that time, but I would say thank you for seeing me, for offering that kindness when you didnâ??t need to,â?• Sullivan said.

â??Thank you for changing my life.â?•

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