The Freedom Writers Diary

How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them

The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell

Foreword by Zlata Filipovic

Broadway Books
New York
To our incredible teacher Ms. Gruwell,
Who taught us to believe in ourselves

To Anne Frank,
Who inspired us to write

To Zlata, our friend,
Who passed us the torch

To our beloved Miep,
Who recognized the hero in each of us

To the Freedom Riders,
Who paved the way

And,
To kids everywhere,
Whose lives were lost to senseless violence but whose spirits live on.
Dear Diary,

Tomorrow morning, my journey as an English teacher officially begins. Since first impressions are so important, I wonder what my students will think about me. Will they think I’m out of touch or too preppy? Or worse yet, that I’m too young to be taken seriously? Maybe I’ll have them write a journal entry describing what their expectations are of me and the class.

Even though I spent last year as a student teacher at Wilson High School, I’m still learning my way around the city. Long Beach is so different than the gated community I grew up in. Thanks to MTV dubbing Long Beach as the “gangsta-rap capital” with its depiction of guns and graffiti, my friends have a warped perception of the city, or L B C as the rappers refer to it. They think I should wear a bulletproof vest rather than pearls. Where I live in Newport Beach is a utopia compared to some of neighborhoods seen in a Snoop Doggy Dogg video. Still, TV tends to blow things out of proportion.

The school is actually located in a safe neighborhood, just a few miles from the ocean. Its location and reputation make it desirable. So much so that a lot of the students that live in what they call the “hood” take two or three buses just to get to school every day. Students come in from every corner of the city: Rich kids
from the shore sit next to poor kids from the projects . . . there's every race, religion, and culture within the confines of the quad. But since the Rodney King riots, racial tension has spilled over into the school.

Due to busing and an outbreak in gang activity, Wilson's traditional white, upper-class demographics have changed radically. African Americans, Latinos, and Asians now make up the majority of the student body.

As a student teacher last year, I was pretty naïve. I wanted to see past color and culture, but I was immediately confronted by it when the first bell rang and a student named Sharaud sauntered in bouncing a basketball. He was a junior, a disciplinary transfer from Wilson's crosstown rival, and his reputation preceded him. Word was that he had threatened his previous English teacher with a gun (which I later found out was only a plastic water gun, but it had all the makings of a dramatic showdown). In those first few minutes, he made it brutally clear that he hated Wilson, he hated English, and he hated me. His sole purpose was to make his "preppy" student teacher cry. Little did he know that within a month, he'd be the one crying.

Sharaud became the butt of a bad joke. A classmate got tired of Sharaud's antics and drew a racial caricature of him with huge, exaggerated lips. As the drawing made its way around the class, the other students laughed hysterically. When Sharaud saw it, he looked as if he was going to cry. For the first time, his tough façade began to crack.

When I got a hold of the picture, I went ballistic. "This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust," I yelled. When a student timidly asked me, "What's the Holocaust?" I was shocked.

I asked, "How many of you have heard of the Holocaust?" Not a single person raised his hand. Then I asked, "How many of you have been shot at?" Nearly every hand went up.

I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum.

From that moment on, I would try to bring history to life by using new books, inviting guest speakers, and going on field trips. Since I was just a student teacher, I had no budget for my schemes. So, I moonlighted as a concierge at the Marriott Hotel and sold lingerie at Nordstrom. My dad even asked me, "Why can't you just be a normal teacher?"
Actually, normalcy didn’t seem so bad after my first snafu. I took my students to see Schindler’s List in Newport Beach, at a predominantly white, upper-class theater. I was shocked to see women grab their pearls and clutch their purses in fear. A local paper ran a front-page article about the incident, describing how poorly my students were treated, after which I received death threats. One of my disgruntled neighbors had the audacity to say, “If you love black people so much, why don’t you just marry a monkey?”

All this drama and I didn’t even have my teaching credentials yet. Luckily, some of my professors from University of California–Irvine read the article and invited my class to a seminar by the author of Schindler’s List, Thomas Keneally. Keneally was so impressed by my students that a few days later we got an invitation to meet Steven Spielberg at Universal Studios. I couldn’t believe it! The famous director wanted to meet the class that I had dubbed “as colorful as a box of Crayola crayons” and their “rookie teacher who was causing waves.” He marveled at how far these “unteachable” students had come as a junior class and what a close group they had become. He even asked Sharaud what “we” were planning to do next year as an encore. After all, if a film does well, you make a sequel—if a class surpasses everyone’s expectations, you . . .

. . . dismantle it! Yep, that’s exactly what happened. Upon my return from Universal, the head of the English department told me, “You’re making us look bad.” Talk about bursting my bubble! How was I making them look bad? After all, these were the same kids that “wouldn’t last a month” or “were too stupid” to read advanced placement books.

She went on to say, “Things are based on seniority around here.” So, in other words, I was lucky to have a job, and keeping Sharaud and his posse another year would be pushing the enve-
matically under the Nazi occupation, so did Zlata’s during the war in Sarajevo. Suddenly, Zlata’s focus switched from her studies and watching MTV to the closing of her school and the destruction of the national library. As the war progressed, she experienced and chronicled food shortages, artillery shelling, and the death of children.

In 1991, at the age of eleven, as Zlata watched her once peaceful city erupt in war, my students witnessed Los Angeles literally burn in the wake of the Rodney King verdict; as Zlata dodged sniper fire in the streets where she once played, my students dodged stray bullets from drive-by shootings; as Zlata watched her friends killed by the senseless violence of war, my students watched friends get killed by senseless gang violence. In Sarajevo, Zlata described how soldiers used a “black crayon of war” to put an “S” on Serbs, a “C” on Croats, and an “M” on Muslims. I think my students could argue that they, too, have experienced a “black crayon” of sorts, labeling them with a “W” for white, a “B” for black, an “L” for Latino, and an “A” for Asian.

I think my students will be able to identify with the teen protagonists in all of the books I’ve selected. But since the books won’t arrive for a while, I’m going to have them read short stories and plays that they’ll be able to relate to. I think they’ll be surprised how life mirrors art.

Diary 24

Dear Diary,

5:00 A.M.—The sound of my alarm clock woke me to a dark room this morning. The sun wasn’t out yet, so I decided not to get up. My clock saw things differently and kept beeping.

So I thanked my clock by throwing it on the floor. The beeping stopped. As I looked over to see where the clock had landed, I realized I, too, was lying on the floor. Why? Because I don’t have a bed. I turned on the lights so I could get started on my day. I walked past the closet mirror in the room to get my clothes. The mirror showed my sleeping space—a thick blanket and a pillow.

The mirror’s reflection also revealed that the room does not belong to me. It made me feel sad. Almost at the point of crying. I grabbed my clothes from the closet and walked down the long hallway to the bathroom. During my shower, I cried. Tears mixed with the water streaming down my face. I welcomed the pain that came with the tears. It’s the only way I can deal with my current situation. The room, hallway, and bathroom don’t belong to me. This is not my home. My mom is down the hall sleeping in a room, but this is still not my home. I don’t have a home anymore.

5:30 A.M.—I’m out of the bathroom, done with my shower, and ready to go. I have to remind myself that today is the first day of my tenth-grade year at Wilson High School. I should be happy that I get a chance to see my friends after not seeing them all
summer. But, I wonder if my friends’ summer was as bad as mine. That summer was the worst in my short fourteen years of life. It all started with a phone call that I will never forget.

My mom was crying, begging, and pleading; asking for more time as if she were gasping for a last breath of air. Though I never paid attention to “adult matters,” this time I was all ears. I never wanted to see my mom cry.

As she hung up the phone, she turned around to see me standing there confused and scared. I didn’t know what was wrong. She quickly held me as tight as she could, hugged me, and said that she was sorry. She began to cry again, this time more so than when I walked in. Her tears hit my shirt like bullets. She told me that we were going to be evicted. She kept apologizing to me, saying she failed me as a mother and provider. She was a month behind on the rent. The landlord was already money hungry, so it made the situation worse. I was only fourteen and too young to get a job. The only job I could get in my neighborhood was selling drugs—so I decided to pass.

While kids were having fun enjoying the summer, I was packing my clothes and belongings into boxes and wondering where we were going to end up. My mom didn’t know what to do or where to go. We had no family to lean on. No money was coming in. Without a job, my mom didn’t have enough money to get another place. What to do? No father to help out, just a single mom and her son.

The night before the sheriff was supposed to pay us an unwelcome visit, I prayed to God for a way out of this madness. Sad and depressed, I attempted to get some sleep that night in the hope something would happen.

The morning of our eviction, a hard knock on the door woke me. The sheriff was here to do his job. We were moving all our stuff out as fast as we could. I started to look up to the sky, waiting for something to happen. I looked at my mom to see if she was all right because she was silent moving the stuff out.

Our pastor had a friend who had a nice, big house where he lived by himself. The pastor’s friend, who was informed of our situation, welcomed us with open arms. The arms of a stranger were a lot more comfortable than the arms of the sheriff.

6:00 A.M.—I’m waiting for the bus. Flashbacks of this summer pass through my mind like a song repeating itself over and over again. I try to tell myself it could have been worse. Nothing like this has ever happened to me. I started to think the situation was my fault because I always asked for the top video games every Christmas and birthday. I should have asked for something less expensive; something we could afford.

6:45 A.M.—I’ve ridden one bus to catch another bus that will now take me directly to school. School...why bother going to school? What’s the use of going if I don’t have a place to live? When friends ask how my summer was, what am I going to say? I was evicted from my apartment? I don’t think so. I’m not going to tell a soul what happened. I knew everyone would be wearing new clothes, new shoes, and have new haircuts. Me? With outfits from last year, some old shoes, and no new haircut. I feel like it’s hopeless to try to feel good and make good grades. There’s no point to it.

7:10 A.M.—The bus stops in front of the school. My stomach feels like it’s tightening into a tiny little ball. I feel like throwing up. I keep thinking that I’ll get laughed at the minute I step off the bus. Instead, I’m greeted by a couple of my friends who were in my English class last year. At that point, it hits me. Ms. Grubwell, my crazy English teacher from last year, is really the only person that made me think of hope for my future. Talking with my friends about our English class and the adventures we had the year before, I began to feel better.
Diary 25

Dear Diary,

Damn! School just started and I have to go to the hospital again. This time I have to have sinus surgery. The doctors say I will be out of school for a week or two. I hope they are right.

I am frequently hospitalized for a lung disease called cystic fibrosis. CF has been a constant part of my life. My breathing sucks! I have coughing attacks every five to fifteen minutes that last about five minutes each. I lose my concentration and I can’t even breathe. The lack of oxygen gives me a migraine. My weight is also a problem. Since I can’t digest what I eat, I can’t gain weight. I have to take pills to help digest my food and perform breathing treatments. If I don’t, I get severe stomachaches. Most of the time I end up losing weight.

I have been on a transplant list for over six months, and I probably only have a few years left to live unless I receive new lungs. It makes me wonder if I will survive this. I know I will, but it’s a tough, scary road ahead for me. Anything can happen to me, and hopefully I will be prepared.

I’m sure going to miss school and my friends. I’m really going to miss Ms. G and her class. Last year when I was in the hospital she bought me a two-foot card and everyone in her class signed it. She even came to the hospital to visit me.

I don’t know what kind of assignments I’ll miss, but I hope it isn’t much. I hope the surgery won’t keep me out for more than two weeks. I would hate to be out of school longer than that, because school is one of the only things that I love doing.

Diary 26

Dear Diary,

Today I walked into my fifth-period English class and all of the desks were lined up against the wall. On the chalkboard read *Twelve Angry Men* and under it listed the characters in the play. It looks like she wants us to role-play. With my luck I’m probably going to be the first person she picks. Why did I have to be transferred into this class?

Everyone in here seems to know everyone else; just like that TV show *Cheers*, where everybody knows your name. Well, I don’t really talk to people and I’m sure nobody knows my name. I would like to keep it that way.

“Oh my God . . . she’s going to pick me to be a character, I know she is . . . great, just great, she’s looking at me.” Now everybody will know my name. I immediately stick my head into my backpack to search for something, anything, to look like I’m distracted. I can’t take this; I don’t need this kind of stress. Phew, she passed me up, I guess I got lucky this time. I hate talking in front of people, and all this teacher does is talk. She calls on people to answer questions; like they could give a smart answer right off the top of their head. Why can’t she talk monotonously through the whole class period? Why couldn’t she just be boring like my other teachers?

Diary 27

Dear Diary,

Murder, taking a life, stealing a soul, the one thing you can never repay or apologize for. Lately the word murder has been a shadow hovering over my life. Everywhere I turn, I see the O. J. Simpson trial all over television. Ms. G is having our class read
without one. The next day, as my friend and I stood in line to board the bus, we were asked to step out of the line and let others aboard. We were actually being denied the right to participate in the field trip because we were not wearing ties by that same teacher that had talked to us a day earlier. I was in complete shock. I had worked so hard to get to the awaited moment only to be told that I could not participate because of my appearance.

Confused and disappointed, my friend and I went home. The next day was very hard, as everyone asked why I didn't attend the field trip. Actually, what really bothered me was how everyone was bragging about how fun it was. A little while after the incident, I met with Ms. Gruwell and the other teacher who prevented me from participating in the event. Ms. G put up a hell of a fight! Apparently she felt that I had the right to go, too, just like everyone else, and that I was wrongfully discriminated against because of the way I was dressed. Even though the teacher eventually apologized to me for his blatant discrimination, I forgave him but didn't forget. To think that I was denied something because of the fact that I was not wearing a tie but was still following the dress code disgusts me. From now on, I will walk with my head in the clouds and dream of when people will stop judging books by their cover.

Diary 30

Dear Diary,

“Four eyes,” “Blind as a bat,” or worse yet, “Coke bottle bitch” were the mean comments I heard all through my childhood. I would come home from elementary and middle school in tears every day because my classmates or even strangers would harass me. I even begged my mother to let me change schools because people made fun of me too much. Their ruthless comments shaped my personality and turned me into a shy, insecure, quiet girl. I was always alone because I was afraid of making friends and then finding out that they made fun of me behind my back.

Just recently, I was sitting in my science class, when I heard the girl sitting next to me making rude comments about my bad eyesight. I am very sensitive when it comes to my eyesight and somehow she sensed it. I tried to ignore her, but she started writing on my jacket. I got up and I said, “You know what, I’m fucking tired of this.” I couldn’t believe I said that, because I used to just brush off what people said. She said, “Shut up, you blind bitch.” When I heard her call me that name, I lost it. I slapped her! It was as if she represented all the kids throughout the years who had made fun of me. All of the anger that had built up in my heart throughout my childhood years was released at that moment. I was so furious that I blacked out. Literally! My mind went blank. My science teacher separated us and I was shaking uncontrollably. I don’t know what happened to me next.

When I told Ms. G about the fight, she told me about one of her students named Sharud, who was teased because he had big lips. She said she found a mean drawing of his lips and it made her lose her cool. After yelling and screaming at the class, she said the incident woke her up and made her become a better teacher. Maybe this incident could make me a better person, too.

Diary 31

Dear Diary,

The bell rang and everybody walked into class. All the desks were up against the wall. There was a table full of plastic champagne glasses and bottles of apple cider all around the room. I thought, “What the hell is going on? Are we having a party?” I saw Ms. Gruwell waving her arms around like a crazy lady, but no one was reacting to her caffeine high. We all knew the effect caffeine had on Ms. Gruwell.
Throughout the class period, things began to change drastically. Ms. Gruwell stood on the desk and began to talk about "change." I thought, "What is this lady trying to do?" What does she mean by "change"? Then people started crying. I thought to myself, "Why is everyone crying?" I didn’t understand.

Ms. Gruwell passed out books and bags from Barnes & Noble. When I saw the look on people’s faces, I felt like jumping up for joy. I wanted to start reading them at that very moment. I was so occupied with one of my new books that I missed the whole idea of what we were supposed to do with them. The book had never been opened and the pages smelled like a new car. I started reading Night by Elie Wiesel, and I can’t wait to get started on The Wave by Todd Strasser, Anne Frank’s diary, and last but not least Zlata’s Diary. At first I thought we were going to have to do a lot of book reports. Then she told us about the "Read-a-thon for Tolerance." What the heck is Ms. Gruwell talking about? She said we’d have fun because the stories are about kids in similar situations. We were all teenagers who were going through a difficult time in our lives. Some of us succeed and others don’t. That is just how it is, and all I wanted to do was be one of the people who make it.

I have always been one of the kids that needed to change—I can’t even try to deny it. My mom is no help because I can’t do anything wrong in her eyes. I am “Mommy’s little girl” no matter how badly I am doing in school or what type of drugs I’ve tried. My dad is just the opposite. He’s never cared about how bad I’m doing—or how good, for that matter.

Everyone changes as they get older, no matter if it’s good or bad. So I guess I was offered an opportunity that not many people have. I got a second chance to change my life for the better. I thank God that he sent an angel to give me that chance to change.

I was always known as the person that was going to be a druggie, or get pregnant before I turned fourteen and drop out. Now I have the chance to prove them wrong.

Diary 32

Dear Diary,

A year has passed since two of my friends died. Now, everyone respected those two. Those guys were the most loved cholos of the barrio. That’s how I wanted to be when I grew up. All I wanted to do was impress them. While I was in school one day, they were killed while trying to commit a robbery. To think I could have been with them.

After this incident, I started to see life from a whole new perspective. I had been taking the wrong path all along. Now my best friend and I are the oldest cholos in the barrio. It was pitiful that all the older guys were either six feet under or living behind bars. As the weeks went by, I slowly changed my ways. I didn’t want the younger ones to look up to me when I was a loser. I had done so much to hurt my community and now it was time to do something to help it.

Now the young ones are looking up to me as a role model, so I try my hardest to give a straight image on how things should be, and make them see right from wrong. My neighbors adore me. I have a warm feeling deep down inside, as if I am the “chosen one” in the barrio. But it hurts me to know that it took the lives of two dear friends for me to turn my life around.

I guess it’s never too late to change in life. If I did it, others should be able to as well. It really all depends on how badly one wants to change. I’m lucky to have another opportunity at a clean start.

It’s just too bad the two cholos were never given the same opportunity.
Dear Diary,

"You can't go against your own people, your own blood!"

Those words kept ringing in my mind as I walked down the courtroom aisle to sit in a cold, empty chair next to the judge. I kept telling myself, "Get your shit together, you don't want to contradict yourself on the witness stand, your homie's future lies in your hands." I was convinced that I had to lie to protect my own, the way I was always taught to do. As I walked through the courtroom, I kept my eyes focused straight ahead, afraid to make eye contact with anyone. It was so quiet that the only things I could hear were the steps I took walking across the marble floor and my heart.

As I sat in the chair, I felt as if I was exposed to different eyes. Those eyes, in some strange way, were touching a part of me that was deep inside, everyone was waiting for my reaction.

When I sat down, I noticed that the courtroom was divided. On one side, there was my family and my friends. Most of them are from one of the most notorious gangs in California. They had all come because they were worried about what the other side might do to me after the verdict. Even though they were there to protect me, I didn't feel safe. I guess it was because they couldn't protect me from the one thing I was actually afraid of, the guilt I had inside. But all I had to do was look in the eyes of my people for them to reassure me that I had no choice but to take care of my own. I had to protect Paco no matter what went down. We all knew, that no matter what, I wasn't going to rat on my homeboy. He would give his life for me, without hesitation, the same way I would give mine for his. All I had to do was sit there and lie about what had happened that night. The night when Paco was only baring, once again, that he would do anything for his main girl.

He was only protecting me, and sending out a warning not to mess with me again.

On the other side of the courtroom were the family members of the guy who was being falsely accused of murder. Those people, his family and his friends, of course, were looking at me with rage. I knew why, but I didn't care. I wasn't afraid of them. They were our rivals and they had it coming. They had already killed one of our friends, and they had jumped me a couple of weeks before. Then one person on his side caught my eye. Her look wasn't filled with rage, there was a strength and sadness, which made it painfully familiar. She looked at me, tears rolling down her cheeks, and hugged the little girl on her lap.

When I saw her tears, a little voice inside of me whispered very quietly, "Doesn't she remind you of someone you love more than anyone else in the world?" I tried to ignore the little voice, but then the voice spoke louder. It told me this woman was my mother, and that little girl was me. I couldn't help but stare back, imagining how life would be for that little girl without her father. I pictured her waiting for her father to come home, knowing he wasn't. I pictured her visiting him, and not being able to touch him because of an unbreakable window, and I imagined her wanting to unlock his cage, knowing she couldn't. The same memories I have of my father in prison. The woman looked at me again, and I could see that she was suffering the same way my mother suffered when my dad and brother went to prison. I wondered how they could be so different. My mother is Mexican and this woman black, yet the emotions that made them cry came from a heart that was tearing apart the same way.

Throughout my life I've always heard the same thing: "You can't go against your own people, your own blood." It got so engraved in my head that even as I sat on the witness stand, I kept thinking of those same words. "You can't go against your own..." Yet, my so-called familia, my so-called people, had put
me in the worst position of my life. My feelings were starting to change, I began to have second thoughts. I was convinced that I was going to lie before I entered the courtroom, before I saw the woman, before I saw the little girl, but now I wasn’t so sure.

Suddenly, his lawyer interrupted my thoughts by busting out with questions. Who shot the guy? Then I looked at my friend. He was just staring at me with a smug look on his face. He wasn’t worried about anything even though he was guilty, even though he knew I had witnessed everything. When he shot the guy he looked at me and said, “This is for you.” He knew I was going to lie, he knew that I had always had his back before, so I had no reason to turn on him now. I turned to look at him, and my eyes stared getting watery. He was surprised, as if it wasn’t a big deal, but this time it was a big deal.

Then I glanced at my mom, she shook her head, and it was as if she knew that I wanted to say the truth. I never told her what actually happened that night, but she knew my friend had done it. When she had asked me what I was going to say, I told her, “I’m going to protect my own... you know how it is. You have to know, you and every other person in my family taught me about my own.”

“I know how it is, but why does it always have to be that way?” She never spoke that way to me before, after all, my father is in prison and most of my family is in a gang. I always figured that my mom accepted how things were. That’s just the way things go when you’re in a gang. Then she asked me, “How does it feel to be sending an innocent person to prison? You probably feel like that man that sent your father to prison knowing he was innocent, you know, he was only protecting his own, too.” And for the first time in my life, the image of my mother made me believe that I could change the way things were. Because at that moment I looked eyes with Paco and said, “Paco did it. Paco shot the guy!”

Dear Diary,

You’re going to be so disappointed in me. Actually, I’m more disappointed in myself for the way I’m tricking people into believing that I’m something I’m not. Since I’ve been in Ms. Grunwell’s class, everyone thinks I am “Little Miss Goodie Goodie.” It never fails; she always uses me as the “good” example. I’m seen as the kind of student that is quiet, has good grades, and is the teacher’s pet. The strange thing is that while everyone around me is changing, because of our “toast for change,” I seem to be the only one who’s not going anywhere. It’s hard for me, because I have a lot of people who always tell me that I am smart, and that I seem to have it all together, and they sometimes wish they were like me. If they only knew that on the inside I am just barely keeping it together.

I am living a lie. I am struggling with a deep secret—being a “closet drinker.” I walk around with my water bottle pretending to be better than what I am. Deep down inside it hurts me that I can’t bring myself to tell anyone about my problem. I do want to change, but it’s so hard. It’s so hard for me to change because I fear that people will not like the sober me. I’ve been doing it for so long, it’s just a daily routine like getting up in the morning, going to the bathroom, and brushing your teeth.

I can’t keep on hiding the fact that I am an alcoholic. I’m hiding it from my mom, Ms. G, and all of my friends. I know I need help, but how do I go about getting it? It has got to be hereditary because not only do I have this problem, but my grandfather, my dad, and his mom had this problem also. I guess I was going to end up with it myself sooner or later.

Let me tell you about my day. I woke up craving orange juice with a little hint of vodka. Guess what I did? As usual, I went
Dear Diary,

When we began our lesson about the importance of racial
tolerance, I had no idea that that lesson would be a life-altering
experience. After reading Night and Anne Frank: The Diary of a
Young Girl, I guess you could say I knew about the Holocaust, but
I was not prepared for what I was going to be faced with today.

Ms. Gruwell had been talking for a long time about bringing
in a Holocaust survivor named Gerda Seifer. Well today, we actu-
ally met her. Like Anne, she is Jewish and was born in Poland and
she didn’t meet Hitler’s standards of purity either. During World
War II, Gerda’s parents made her go into hiding with a Catholic
family. She was forced to live in a basement where she could
barely stand up. She could hear the SS soldiers marching outside,
waiting for their next victim. She is the only survivor in her fam-
ily. Luckily, she was spared from a camp.

Just as Anne was trapped, Gerda was trapped. Neither Gerda
nor Anne could lead normal teenage lives. They lost their inno-
cence due to uncontrollable circumstances. Whenever they ven-
tured outdoors they faced the possibility of being captured by the
Gestapo. Jewish people had to wear a yellow Star of David, which
distinguished them from others. They were forced to attend spe-
cial schools isolated from other children. They were ridiculed and
tormented throughout the war.

Unfortunately, I know exactly what it feels like to not be
able to go outside, not because of the Gestapo, but because of
gangs. When I walk outside, I constantly glance from side to side
watching those standing around me. Since I feel out of place, I
often put on a façade so that I fit in. Maybe if I look and act like I
belong they will not confront me. It is disrespectful to look a gang
member in the eye. Imagine what would happen if a prisoner in a
concentration camp insulted a Gestapo—they would get killed
instantly. After the stories I’d heard from Gerda, I can guarantee
that I won’t repeat the mistakes of others.

It amazed me how I could empathize not only with Anne
Frank, but also with a Holocaust survivor. I’m glad I had the op-
portunity to hear about the past through Gerda. She is living proof
of history. This experience will help me pass on the message of
tolerance that Anne died for and that Gerda survived for.

Dear Diary,

To a fifteen-year-old, the only heroes I ever read about ran
around in tight, colorful underwear and threw buildings at each
other for fun. But today, that all changed. A true hero leapt off the
pages of a book to pay my class a special visit. Her name is Miep
Gies and she is the lady Anne Frank wrote about in her diary. I
can’t believe that the woman responsible for keeping Anne Frank
alive in the attic came to speak to us in person!

As I entered the Bruin Den teen center, I could feel the ex-
citement. Many of us stayed after school yesterday to make wel-
come signs to decorate the walls and several students got to
school really early to help set up a big buffet. We wanted every-
thing to be perfect.

After the proper introductions were made by Ms. Gruwell,
she made her entrance. Everybody stood up and cheered as Miep
made her way into the hall. I was thrilled to see her in person after
seeing her portrayed in movies and reading about her in the book. No colorful underwear needed—she was a true hero.

After she settled in, Miep began to talk about how she was delighted to meet us. She described to us firsthand how she hid the Frank family from the Nazi soldiers and how she found Anne’s diary. When she described how the Gestapo captured Anne and would not allow Miep to say good-bye, it made all of us emotional. She told us about how she tried to bribe the officers into letting her friends go, but they threatened to kill her.

My friend who was sitting next to me was crying. Since we’ve been studying the Holocaust, it has made him think about all the people he knows who have been killed. His best friend accidentally shot himself, and to this day, he still has nightmares about his death. Miep told everyone that not a day goes by where she doesn’t think about Anne.

When she said this, my friend stood up and told her she was his hero. Then he asked her if she believed that she was a hero. We expected her to say yes, but I think she surprised us all. She said, “No. You, my friends, are the true heroes.” Heroes? Us? Having her say that made me realize more than ever how special my classmates are. Like she said, we are the heroes and it is up to us to let the younger generation know what’s going on. It sure feels good to know that for once in my life my friends and I are doing the right thing.

After she finished and we all had the opportunity to give her a hug or have her sign our books, I realized how lucky we were. Most people will probably never have the opportunity to hear her story in person like we did. A legacy left by one girl, carried by one woman, was passed on to a new generation of teens who have the chance to make a difference like Anne’s diary did.

Now after meeting Miep, I can honestly say that my heroes are not just made-up characters—my hero is real.

Diary 43

Dear Diary,

“If you could live an eternity and not change a thing or exist for the blink of an eye and alter everything, what would you choose?” This was one of Ms. G’s questions after we read this poem.

Moment

Let him wish his life
For the sorrows of a stone
Never knowing the first thread
Of these
Never knowing the pain of ice
As its crystals slowly grow
Needles pressing in on the heart

To live forever
And never feel a thing
To wait a million lifetimes
Only to erode and become sand
Wish not for the stone
But for the fire
Last only moments
But change everything

Oh to be lightning
To exist for less than a moment
Yet in that moment
To expose the world to every open eye
Oh to be thunder
Ms. G did what she does best; she talked to anyone who would listen to her about our accomplishments until we had made some headway. They were talking about letting us have our own class. Everyone is worried. I've caught a couple kids crying about it, actually someone probably caught me more then once. All I can think about is us not being together. What would we do? Who would we turn to? As if high school isn't hard enough, this would make it ten times harder. Right now, I have my comfort zone, I have a place where everyone accepts me and I accept everyone, and I can't be without this for the next two years.

It's been a hard time for everyone. We have to keep working in class, although we don't know if we are going to be together next year or not. These teachers can't break our chain, we are linked, not by our hands, but by our hearts and we will always be together. I'm scared, very scared. I hope everything works out.

Dear Diary,

School's almost over, and I just found out that we get to have Ms. Gruwell next year! It's great news for all of us. She fought hard to keep us together! I've been lucky to have her for two years. My mom says, "I've hit the lottery in education." She's the best teacher I've ever had. She truly cares about us and never judges us based on appearances. Now I get to be in her class my junior year!

I have a lot of friends who are in honors English and they've become quite interested in what my class has been doing lately! There have been questions about our field trips and the dinners we attended. After all the years my friends who had made me feel stupid, all are now interested in my class. After all, they used to call Ms. Gruwell's class the "Ghetto Class" because of all the minorities. They have always made me feel like a dumb white boy because I'm not in their honors classes. Well, it looks like they're the losers because they don't know how great this class really is and how many friends I have made because of it. We have had many guest speakers and travel to museums and social functions. I view things much differently than my friends do because of my new experiences, but hey, they're still my friends.

I told my friends that there was going to be room for a couple of more students in Ms. Gruwell's class. I found out they had all signed a waiting list to get into her class the very next day! If my friends are accepted, I hope they will treat Ms. Gruwell and the other students with respect. If not, I'll have to regulate because as far as I'm concerned, they're the ones on probation in my "Ghetto Class"!

ANNE FRANK HOUSE
ANNE FRANK STICHTING

To Faculty and Students of Wilson High School

Amsterdam 6 April 1996

Dear Students,

I thank you with all my heart for the wonderful time I could spend at your institution. The interest and consideration, both by teachers and students, impressed me immensely. Without any hesitation I state that this visit has been one of my most unique experiences. Several of your faces have been engraved in my heart.

With warm regards

[Signature]
Dear Diary,

When I was born, the doctor must have stamped “National Spokesperson for the Plight of Black People” on my forehead; a stamp visible only to my teachers. The majority of my teachers treat me as if I, and I alone, hold the answers to the mysterious creatures that African Americans are, like I’m the Rosetta Stone of black people. It was like that until I transferred to Ms. Gruwell’s class. Up until that point it had always been: “So Joyce, how do black people feel about Affirmative Action?” Poignant looks follow. “Joyce, can you give us the black perspective on The Color Purple?”

Maybe I am just looking at this all wrong, maybe I should feel complimented. I mean, I am being trusted to carry the weight of millions of people’s voices, right? Wrong! I don’t feel complimented. How the hell should I know what the black perspective is on Affirmative Action or The Color Purple? What is it, magic? Black people read, and proof, we miraculously come to the same conclusion? The only opinion I can give with some degree of certainty is my own.

I know some people would say “Now, Joyce, it’s not everyday one finds an African American in advanced placement and honors courses.” People think that I should know that better than anyone else, considering I’m in these classes. As if I don’t notice, or better yet, could forget I’m the only black person around. Hum, must have slipped my mind.

I remember the teacher I had before Ms. Gruwell. Let’s just say for a teacher she isn’t very tactful. I dealt with all sorts of rude and stereotypical statements, but one day she took it too far. I was in class looking over our reading list for the year, along with our essay assignments, when I noticed a saddening lack of diversity. I asked her why, and her response was “We don’t read black literature in this class because it all has sex, fornication, drugs, and cussing.” Whoa there, slow down lady, a simple “it’s inappropriate” would have sufficed. But no, she had to take it to the extreme. I almost overlooked the blatant ignorance of her statement, but did she have to say it in front of the entire class? I mean, ouch!

I held my tongue, until lunch, when I told my friend. Her response was that I should tell my mom, tell the principal, tell the superintendent, but tell someone. I told my mom when I got home. I tried to tell her in a nonchalant, offhand sort of way. Can’t you just see it, me at the dinner table in between swallows of chicken and broccoli casually mentioning the day’s events.

“How was your day, Joyce?”

“I don’t know, the same, I guess.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, I had lunch with Alisa, and took a chemistry quiz. Oh, by the way, my English teacher’s a bigot.”

There’s a brief pause, followed by fork clinking and jaw dropping. She just looked at me. Then she asked me what I did. And I told her, “Not a damn thing!” Well, actually I can’t curse in my mom’s presence, so I said, “Nothing.” The next day I was called to the principal’s office and there was my mom with a list of books written by and about black people. I was told that my teacher has been contacted already and the principal personally
apologized for her words. My mom gave me the list of books and sent me off to class with a kiss and a hug.

OK, what was I supposed to do? Walk into class with a smile and my new book list and present it to the teacher like a shiny red apple? "Mrs. Bigot, I just wanted to present you with this list of wonderful books. I hope they are all free of drugs, fornication, sex, and cussing. Furthermore, I want you to know that I hold no grudge against you, and I am really looking forward to your enlightening lectures for the next two years!" Yeah, right. I couldn't imagine another term with this woman, and as long as I stayed on the honors English track I would be stuck being the spokesperson for the rest of my high school career.

I told Alisa about my dilemma and she told me all about her English class. She told me that her teacher actually earned the title of educator. She puts everything into her classes, cares and listens, and above all else, refuses to label people. I wasn't really interested in all the other things, I just knew I wouldn't have to keep sending Gallup polls out to Negroes all around the country.

And that is how I found myself starting my junior year in Ms. Gruwell's class. It's my personal tale of mystery and misgivings, hatred and heroism, scandal and sacrifice. Well, actually it's a tale of how one woman, with an blind eye to stereotypes, had the eraser that took "National Spokesperson for the Plight of Black People" off my forehead. She replaced it with "Spokesperson for Joyce Roberts."

Diary 55

Dear Diary,

For the past month, we have been studying different American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson wrote about being self-reliant. He once wrote, "Who so should be a man, must be a nonconformist." Our class is really intrigued by Emerson because Ms. Gruwell is encouraging us to be independent thinkers and to question authority. I am amazed at how much his philosophy applies to me. For the past four years I have blamed myself for something I couldn't control. It was just one of those unexpected tragedies, that just smacked me over the head as soon as I turned around. I have constantly blamed myself for the death of my grandmother.

I was only twelve years old when my grandmother died from severe burns that were allegedly inflicted upon her by my father. She was burnt from head to toe. Allegedly my father had poured kerosene on her and lit the kitchen stove. She caught on fire immediately. When I saw her, she had blisters all over her body and all her hair was burned off. Her skin was black and it was peeling off. She had tears running down her cheeks. I could smell her raw, burnt flesh.

I felt like my heart was about to burst and my stomach was going to erupit at any moment, because I had a feeling she was going to die. The thought of losing the two people I loved most in the entire world made me feel dead inside.

The helicopter came and took her to another hospital. My aunt and I stood there until the helicopter disappeared. I felt so weak that I could hardly stand. I looked at my aunt. She was shaking. I didn't want to go home, I knew that eventually I would have to face my dad. As I approached my dad's house. I saw a scene that looked like an angry mob was ready to strike at anytime. I could see my dad standing in the window with a machete in his hand. I hated him. He made me tremble with fear because I knew he had tried to kill my grandmother. The crowd was yelling at him, and he was yelling back.

Finally, the police came and knocked on the door. I stood there, trying to move so my dad wouldn't see me, but my feet had control, and they wouldn't let me move. Tears were running down my cheeks. I watched as they handcuffed my father, read