



# The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them

By *The Freedom Writers*

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**#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER & NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE**

**Straight from the front line of urban America, the inspiring story of one fiercely determined teacher and her remarkable students.**

As an idealistic twenty-three-year-old English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, Erin Gruwell confronted a room of “unteachable, at-risk” students. One day she intercepted a note with an ugly racial caricature, and angrily declared that this was precisely the sort of thing that led to the Holocaust—only to be met by uncomprehending looks. So she and her students, using the treasured books *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* as their guides, undertook a life-changing, eye-opening, spirit-raising odyssey against intolerance and misunderstanding. They learned to see the parallels in these books to their own lives, recording their thoughts and feelings in diaries and dubbing themselves the “Freedom Writers” in homage to the civil rights activists “The Freedom Riders.”

With funds raised by a “Read-a-thon for Tolerance,” they arranged for Miep Gies, the courageous Dutch woman who sheltered the Frank family, to visit them in California, where she declared that Erin Gruwell’s students were “the real heroes.” Their efforts have paid off spectacularly, both in terms of recognition—appearances on “Prime Time Live” and “All Things Considered,” coverage in *People* magazine, a meeting with U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley—and educationally. All 150 Freedom Writers have graduated from high school and are now attending college.

With powerful entries from the students’ own diaries and a narrative text by Erin Gruwell, *The Freedom Writers Diary* is an uplifting, unforgettable example of how hard work, courage, and the spirit of determination changed the lives of a teacher and her students.

The authors' proceeds from this book will be donated to The Tolerance Education Foundation, an organization set up to pay for the Freedom Writers' college tuition. Erin Gruwell is now a visiting professor at California State University, Long Beach, where some of her students are Freedom Writers.

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

When Gruwell was a first-year high school teacher in Long Beach, CA, teaching the "unteachables" (kids that no other teacher wanted to deal with), she discovered that most of her students had not heard of the Holocaust. Shocked, she introduced them to books about tolerance. A first-person account by the likes of Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic, who chronicled her life in war-torn Sarajevo. The students were inspired to start keeping diaries of their lives that showed the violence, homelessness, racism, illness, and abuse that surrounded them. These student diaries form the basis of this book, which is cut from the same mold as *Dangerous Minds*: the outsider teacher, who isn't supposed to last a month, comes in and rebuilds a class with tough love and hard work. Most readers will be proud to see how these students have succeeded; at the end of their four-year experience, the Freedom Writers as they called themselves, in honor of the Freedom Riders of the 1960s had all graduated; Gruwell now works at the college level, instructing teachers on how to provide more interactive classes for their students. Recommended for youth, education, and urban studies collections. ADanna C. Bell-Russel, Lib. of Congress, Washington, DC

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About the Author

**ERIN GRUWELL**, the Freedom Writers, and her nonprofit organization have received many awards, including the prestigious Spirit of Anne Frank Award, and have appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Prime Time Live*, *Good Morning America*, and *The View*, to name a few. All 150 Freedom Writers went on to graduate from Wilson High. She lives in Long Beach, California.

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Freshman Year

Fall 1994

Entry 1 -- Ms. Gruwell

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 naive. 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 facade 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 predominately 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 envelope. Instead, I'd be teaching freshmen--"at risk" freshmen. Hmm . . . not exactly the assignment I was hoping for.

So, starting tomorrow, it's back to the drawing board. But I'm convinced that if Sharaud could change, then anyone can. So basically, I should prepare myself for a roomful of Sharauds. If it took a month to win Sharaud over . . . I wonder how long it's gonna take a bunch of feisty fourteen-year-olds to come around?

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Russell Love:**

Now a day people that Living in the era where everything reachable by connect to the internet and the resources within it can be true or not require people to be aware of each info they get. How a lot more to be smart in acquiring any information nowadays? Of course the answer is reading a book. Studying a book can help men and women out of this uncertainty Information especially this The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them book as this book offers you rich facts and knowledge. Of course the knowledge in this book hundred % guarantees there is no doubt in it as you know.

#### **Jacqueline Gore:**

In this age globalization it is important to someone to get information. The information will make anyone to understand the condition of the world. The fitness of the world makes the information quicker to share. You can find a lot of personal references to get information example: internet, classifieds, book, and soon. You will see that now, a lot of publisher that print many kinds of book. The actual book that recommended for your requirements is The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them this reserve consist a lot of the information of the condition of this world now. This specific book was represented just how can the world has grown up. The terminology styles that writer use to explain it is easy to understand. The writer made some exploration when he makes this book. This is why this book suitable all of you.

#### **William Nelson:**

On this era which is the greater man or who has ability to do something more are more treasured than other. Do you want to become considered one of it? It is just simple way to have that. What you must do is just spending your time very little but quite enough to get a look at some books. One of several books in the top collection in your reading list will be The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them. This book that is certainly qualified as The Hungry Mountains can get you closer in turning out to be precious person. By looking way up and review this book you can get many advantages.

**Dennis Sellers:**

As we know that book is significant thing to add our information for everything. By a reserve we can know everything we would like. A book is a group of written, printed, illustrated or maybe blank sheet. Every year ended up being exactly added. This guide *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them* was filled with regards to science. Spend your time to add your knowledge about your technology competence. Some people has diverse feel when they reading some sort of book. If you know how big good thing about a book, you can experience enjoy to read a guide. In the modern era like today, many ways to get book that you just wanted.

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