

The Freedom Writers Diary is the



amazing true story of strength, courage, and achievement in the face of adversity. In the fall of 1994, in Room 203 at Woodrow Wilson High

School in Long Beach, California, an idealistic twenty-four-year-old teacher named Erin Gruwell faced her first group of students, dubbed by the administration as "unteachable, at-risk" teenagers. The class was a diverse mix of African-American, Latino, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Caucasian students, many of whom had grown up in rough neighborhoods in Long Beach. In the first few weeks of class, the students made it clear that they were not interested in what their teacher had to say, and made bets about how long she would last in their classroom.

Then a pivotal moment changed their lives forever. When a racial caricature of one of the African-American students circulated the classroom, Erin angrily intercepted the drawing and compared it to the Nazi caricatures of Jews during the Holocaust. To her amazement, the students responded with puzzled looks. Erin was appalled to discover that many of her students had never heard of the Holocaust. When she asked how many in her class had been shot at, however, almost all of them raised their hands, and began lifting their shirts to show their scars. This initiated a battle-scar show-and-tell that left Erin Gruwell shocked and inspired to take advantage of the powerful energy she had sparked.

After realizing her students were all too familiar with violence, she introduced them to *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. Reluctant at first to read these texts, the students of Room 203 were soon comparing their lives to those of Elie,

Anne and Zlata, teenagers who, like them, were surrounded by violence. The students could not believe the intensity of their connections to these stories. Each student began to keep his or her own anonymous diary, recording tormenting stories of drug use, struggles with physical and mental abuse, and reactions to Erin and her unconventional teaching methods.

From the moment they named themselves "The Freedom Writers," in honor of the Civil Rights leaders, the Freedom Riders, the students of Room 203 changed from a group of apathetic, frustrated students to a closely knit, motivated family. They raised funds and arranged for Miep Gies, the courageous Dutch woman who sheltered the Frank family during World War II, to visit them in California. Soon after, Zlata Filipovic responded to the Freedom Writers' many letters inviting her to Long Beach, and spent five days with them, swapping stories of their experiences. The visits from Gies and Filipovic reinforced the Freedom Writers' beliefs that voices can be heard, change is possible, and that their words have the power to affect people throughout the world.

The Freedom Writers have continued on their mission to teach tolerance and share their story of success. In 1997 they organized an "Echoes of the Soul" fundraising concert to help pay for a trip to Washington, D.C., where they toured the Holocaust Museum and presented their diary to Secretary of Education Richard Riley. In 1998 they won the Spirit of Anne Frank Award and traveled to New York for the acceptance ceremony. In the summer of 1999, The Freedom Writers achieved one of their most far-reaching goals; they traveled to Europe and visited Anne Frank's house in Amsterdam, the concentration camps in Germany and Poland, and their friend, Zlata Filipovic in her native Sarajevo, Bosnia.

For more information on the Freedom Writers or to sponsor an EGEP program, please contact:

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