

### **The Students of Room 203**

Following the L.A. Riots and the O.J. Simpson trial, the mood in our city was unsettling, and on our first day of high school, we had only three things in common: we hated school, we hated our teacher, and we hated each other.

Whether it was official or not, we all knew that we had been written off. Low test scores, juvenile hall, alienation, and racial hostility helped us fit the labels the educational system placed on us: "unteachable," "below average," and "delinquents." Somehow, Ms. G recognized our similarities, and used them to unite us. She gave us books written by teenagers that we could relate to, and it was through these books that we began to realize that if we could relate to a little girl who lived on the other side the world, fifty years before we did, we could certainly relate to each other.

We felt like Anne Frank, trapped in a cage, and identified with the violence in Zlata Filipovic's life. We were so inspired by the stories of Anne and Zlata, that we wrote letters to Miep Gies, and to Zlata, in hopes that they would come to Long Beach and share their stories with us. When Miep visited us, she challenged us to keep Anne's memory alive and "passed the baton" to us. It was then that we decided to begin chronicling our lives.

We began writing anonymous journal entries about the adversities that we faced in our every day lives. We wrote about gangs, immigration, drugs, violence, abuse, death, anorexia, dyslexia, teenage love, weight issues, divorce, suicide, and all the other issues we never had the chance to express before. We discovered that writing is a powerful form of self expression that could help us deal with our past and move forward. Room 203 was like Anne's attic or Zlata's basement, it was our safe haven, where we could cry, laugh, and share our stories without being judged.

We decided to call ourselves the Freedom Writers after learning about the Freedom Riders who fought against segregation during the Civil Rights Movement. When we began writing these entries as a simple English assignment, we had no idea that they would one day be collected and published in a book, *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

Since graduation, we have kept our promise of trying to change education. We are pursuing our undergraduate and graduate degrees, many of us at California State University, Long Beach, while continuing to share our story and mentor students across the country about what it's like to receive a second chance.

We have created this website because we want to form a community like the one we

formed in Room 203, where people feel safe, accepted, and understood. We hope that [\*The Freedom Writers Diary\*](#) will inspire you to succeed academically, change your community, and share your own story.

- The Freedom Writers