

Freedom Writers: Truly no child left behind

By Joanne Laurier
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Freedom Writers written and directed by Richard LaGravenese, based on the book, *The Freedom Writers Diary*, by The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell

“At 16, I’ve probably witnessed more dead bodies than a mortician,” says a Woodrow Wilson High School student, before matter-of-factly describing a life in which gang and domestic violence are everyday occurrences. Many such lives fill one of the school’s freshman home rooms in Richard LaGravenese’s new film, *Freedom Writers*.

Novice teacher, 23-year-old Erin Gruwell (Hilary Swank), steps into Room 203 at the Long Beach, California, secondary school barely two years after the 1992 Los Angeles riots during which minority neighborhoods exploded following the acquittal of the police who had brutally beat Rodney King. One of the worst in US history, the upheaval produced more casualties—54 dead and 2,000 injured—than any civil unrest since the Civil War. The revolt spilled over into Long Beach, located in Los Angeles County.

Erin finds herself “stuck in a classroom full of troubled kids who are bused in from bad neighborhoods.” Room 203 is a volatile mix of African American, Latino, Asian and white freshmen, who are classified by the school’s callous administration as “unteachable.” Homelessness, drug abuse, histories of criminal activity, incarcerated family members and gang involvements are but a few of the ills crushing the students. They sink or swim in an “undeclared war” in which contending gangs vie for the status of “Original Gangsters (OGs)” in the ‘hood. Options offered by parole and probation officers are school or juvenile hall.

Demurely attired, Erin becomes the subject of bets among the students on her longevity as the guardian of their classroom, which is viewed as nothing more than a holding pen. (“My P.O. [probation officer] hasn’t yet realized that schools are just like the city and the city is just like prison...Latinos killing Asians. Asians killing Latinos.”) For most, the start of a new day “is the continuation of a nightmare.” While others fear the 1994 California ballot initiative, Proposition 187—ironically, the police code for a murder—because “if this proposition passes, it may murder the opportunities for immigrants like me to succeed.” (Designed to deny illegal immigrants social services, health care and public education, it was passed then overturned by a federal court.)

The daughter of a civil rights activist, who idealistically wants to teach at an integrated institution, Erin is shocked at the level of self-segregation among her students and the hostility between the different ethnic groups. After intercepting a racist drawing depicting a black student with exaggerated features, she is provoked beyond control. With justifiable outrage, Erin cites the

role similar caricatures of Jews played in the Holocaust.

Although ignorant about the European atrocity, Erin’s students have all lost friends in the “undeclared” wars, rooted in poverty, frustration and alienation, in their neighborhoods. While they have not been sensitized to large social and cultural events, they are walking encyclopedias about their own disenfranchised universe. (“Gangs don’t die, Ms. G. They multiply.”)

Creatively building on what is familiar to her students, Erin makes relevant the alien—and foreboding—world of history and literature. Shakespeare’s Montagues and Capulets become modern-day Latino and Asian gangs, and Anne Frank, victim of the Holocaust, gets adopted as one of the pupils’ own. Taking the place of OGs are new heroes like Miep Gies, who courageously hid the Frank family from the Nazis during World War II, and Jim Zwerg, a white 1960s civil rights activist beaten to within an inch of his life for defying bus segregation in the Deep South. “Miepmania” rules as students become inspired by the words of writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Who so should be a man, must be a nonconformist.”

A casualty of war—whether at the hands of a Nazi soldier or a policeman in America—they begin to understand, is a universal tragedy.

Inspired to write daily in a diary, each student is free to record anything: a drawing or a poem, feelings or events in the past, present or future. As the “unteachables” coalesce intellectually and emotionally, they adopt the group name of Freedom Writers, in honor of Freedom Riders like Jim Zwerg who rode buses to challenge the limits of intolerance.

Director LaGravenese explains in the production notes why he was attracted to the true story of Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers: “In this country we dismiss kids who aren’t showing up for class or aren’t doing well and say they can’t learn. We never take that step that Erin Gruwell took to find out why and learn about the life they’re living on the streets, the poverty and the violence they face everyday. After reading their words and hearing their stories you realize how can they possibly be thinking about homework or showing up on time?”

“To me, the whole point was being able to tell a story that showed their lives and how a teacher listened and respected them enough to figure out how to teach them instead of letting them fall through the cracks.”

While the story of a committed teacher making an imprint on tough, poor kids is a fairly familiar one, *Freedom Writers* benefits from its intimate collaboration with the real-life Erin Gruwell, as well as its cast of young actors whose own lives often mirrored those of the characters they played. Swank herself suffered

through a brief period of homelessness and poverty after the break-up of her parents' marriage when she was a teenager.

Erin's bureaucratic opposition, Imelda Staunton's Margaret Campbell, chills as a 30-year educator, who, fearing and disliking the underprivileged kids, warehouses books rather than make them available to the "unteachables." She and some of the teachers yearn for the old Long Beach high school before the flight of a portion of the white, middle-class student body from desegregation.

They're more than willing to stick the inexperienced Erin with a classroom tantamount to "a dumping ground for disciplinary transfers, kids in rehab or those on probation, for whom death seems more real than a diploma." But as news spreads about her unorthodox methods, she begins to attract students from the honors program. One such transfer is a black girl, whose Advanced Placement teacher believes she holds "the answers to the mysterious creatures that African Americans are, like I'm the Rosetta Stone of black people." When she asks why the honors curriculum lacks diversity in its reading requirements, the answer given is: "We don't read black literature in this class because it all has sex, fornication, drugs and cussing."

Freedom Writers is not a perfect piece and suffers from a certain lack of imagination, particularly in its linear storytelling and uninspired cinematography. But its compassion and uncompromising emotional thrust largely compensate, making it one of the few recent films that elevate and move a viewer due to its genuinely democratic sentiment. It stands against Bush's odious and misnamed No Child Left Behind Act in favor of an egalitarian view of education, bringing to mind an outlook championed so passionately by the remarkable American educator Horace Mann (1796-1859), who wrote in 1848:

"Now, surely, nothing but Universal Education can counter-work this tendency to the domination of capital and the servility of labor. If one class possesses all the wealth and the education, while the residue of society is poor and ignorant, it matters not by what name the relation between them may be called; the latter, in fact and in truth, will be the servile dependents and subjects of the former.... Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery."

One of the vindications of Gruwell's enlightened educational approach lies in the writings of her students, compiled in the book, *The Freedom Writers Diary*, which so moved the film's creators. Each entry stands on its own, as the following sampling demonstrates:

Diary 85 quotes from a pastor in Nazi Germany who famously "summarized the outcome of what happens when no one takes a stand. 'They came for the trade unions, but I was not a trade unionist, so I didn't respond. Then they came for the Socialists, but I was not a Socialist, so I didn't respond. Then they came for the Jews and since I was not a Jew, I didn't respond. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me.' Next to this quote was a picture of the concentration camp. I looked at that picture for a while repeating the words in my head. The more I thought about it, the more I cried."

Diary 78

"An innocent young man is now a criminal mind,
Having nightmares of murders every single time.
But this time you'll think this fool should see the light,
but he's jumped in a gang and they nickname him 'Snipe,' ...

"He goes to Wilson High with a messed-up trail
and meets a guardian angel named Erin Gruwell.
He learns about the Holocaust, Anne Frank and the Jews.
Now the time comes that he should choose....

"But people say it's hard to see.
This life of emotions is all about me.
All this is true, because I'm not a liar
Just a brokenhearted male with a label—Freedom Writer!"

Diary 43 " '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* by Vincent Guilliano, 1991]

" 'Yet gathering for one fatal moment / The power to blow the top clean off the world / Oh to last the blink of an eye and leave nothing / But nothing unmoved behind you.'

"We all thought that Ms. Gruwell's lesson was really powerful and all, but us? Lightning and thunder? Not likely. The below-average sure-to-drop-out kids? Please, ever since I can remember, we've been put down and stepped on, and now all of a sudden we have the potential to change the world?...

"But it wasn't until Miep's visit that it finally made sense [The Freedom Writers raised money to bring Miep Gies to Wilson]. I remember talking about how much we admired her for risking everything to take care of Anne and her family. She said that she had only done it because it was the 'right thing to do.'

"Someone stood up and said that Miep was their hero.

" 'No, you're the real heroes,' she answered. There she was, one of the most heroic women of all time, telling *us* that *we* were heroes.

" 'Do not let Anne's death be in vain,' Miep said, using her words to bring it all together. Miep wanted us to keep Anne's message alive, it was up to us to remember it.... That's when it all became clear. Anne's message of tolerance was to become our message.

"At that moment, I became like the fire, and like the lightning and like thunder."

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