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Erin Gruwell: Catalyst For Change

Abstract

On the evening of February 19th, 2008, we had the distinct honor and pleasure of meeting Ms. Erin Gruwell, teacher, motivational speaker and author of *The Freedom Writers' Diary* and *Teach With Your Heart*. Upon being introduced, Ms. Gruwell focused the attention of the audience on her greatest passion, the students. After asking the teenagers to stand and be recognized, she ardently requested that the adults in the room purchase a copy of her book *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, for every student present so that they might be inspired by students like themselves.

Keywords

teaching, freedom writers

Author Statement

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Erin Gruwell: Catalyst For Change

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On the evening of February 19th, 2008, we had the distinct honor and pleasure of meeting Ms. Erin Gruwell, teacher, motivational speaker and author of *The Freedom Writers' Diary* and *Teach With Your Heart*. Upon being introduced, Ms. Gruwell focused the attention of the audience on her greatest passion, the students. After asking the teenagers to stand and be recognized, she ardently requested that the adults in the room purchase a copy of her book *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, for every student present so that they might be inspired by students like themselves.

Erin Gruwell attended UC Irvine with the intention of being a lawyer, but upon witnessing the LA Riots on television, her path in life changed dramatically. Through the unblinking eye of the television screen, she watched a young boy and his father bond over a stolen television set freshly acquired from a neighborhood electronics store. On this afternoon, witnessing countless acts like this, Erin realized that for better or worse, education begins in the home. At that moment, Erin decided that the best way to combat this type of social unrest was to fight battles like these from within the walls of the classroom.

Leaving the safety of her suburban existence, the landscape of Erin's commute changed from neatly manicured lawns to graffiti-scarred buildings. Instead of smiling parents kissing their children as they saw them off to school, Erin was now in an unknown land punctuated by sad-faced men drinking out of paper bags as they lingered in doorways. Upon her arrival at Wilson High School, she was greeted with the knowledge that she would be teaching the "throwaway" kids: the lowest performing students the district had to offer. As she stood in front of this class of "unteachable and unreachable" streetwise kids in her polka-dotted dress and pearls, she realized that although they lived in the same city, their worlds were vastly different.

Somehow, she would have to find a way to break down the barriers in order to connect with these students. After many failed attempts, Erin decided, out of desperation, to try a different approach. With her own money, she bought each student a set of books written by, about and for students. Her hope was that these books would allow students to connect with literature in a way that they never had before. Perhaps authors like Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic, with their real-life tales of fear and desperation, could help her to make a connection with these students whose lives were filled with similar trials. To make it official, she hosted a classroom celebration where she and the students made a "Toast for Change." They vowed to make a positive change in their lives in exchange for a Border's bag full of books handpicked just for them.

Initially, the students were reluctant to read as reading had always been a struggle for them. However, once they became engrossed in Anne Frank's real-life nightmare, so similar to their own, they were hooked. They became invested in her experience and the ultimate outcome of her life. One particularly difficult-to-reach student, Maria, stormed into the classroom one day, threw her copy of Anne Frank at Erin and demanded, "Why didn't you tell me?" Maria was devastated to find out that Anne died at the end of the novel. It was at this point Erin knew that these stories were having an overwhelming impact on her students' lives.

As Erin spoke of the connections she made with students like Maria, her eyes filled with tears. The audience was visibly moved by her journey and the passion in her voice. She spoke of the importance of teaching to each child, and using the "power of education to equalize an unfair playing field." She took kids who were tired of being poor, tired of being hungry, and tired of surviving day to day, and taught them to look outside their own world and develop compassion and empathy for humankind.

Introducing these students to people who were similar in age and experience taught them the power in books and in words. Students, who had previously been afraid to pick up a book, let alone read one, became authors of their own lives, dubbing themselves "The Freedom Writers." Erin Gruwell looked at what her students had instead of what they lacked. What started out as a classroom full of future drop-outs, gang bangers and teen mothers became a place of authentic learning. At the close of her presentation, Erin Gruwell charged each person in the room with the responsibility of becoming a catalyst for change. The impact of this message was obvious when newly purchased copies of *The Freedom Writers' Diary* made their way to the students she had so passionately recognized at the beginning of the evening.