

The Freedom Writers Diary



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERIN GRUWELL

Erin Gruwell decided to become a teacher after witnessing the Los Angeles riots in 1992 and deciding that she wanted to teach young people to react in different ways to anger and frustration. In 1993, she began teaching at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, a school known for its ethnic and racial diversity. After intercepting a racist drawing in her class and discovering that many of her students had never heard of the Holocaust, she devoted her entire curriculum to teaching tolerance. Ultimately, she led her group of 150 “at risk” students to outstanding academic achievement. Through her extraordinary dedication to her students, she transformed a class divided by ethnic tensions into a united group, passionate about history and about making the world a better place. She left high school teaching in 1998, the same year that her students graduated, and began to teach at California State University, Long Beach. Gruwell also created the Freedom Writers Foundation, a non-profit organization that aspires to share the Freedom Writers method with other educators. Under the name “Freedom Writers,” chosen in homage to the historical Freedom Riders civil rights activists who fought against segregation in the American South, Ms. Gruwell’s students wrote about their everyday lives in their diaries, which make up much of the book. Through writing, these students found their voices and were able to share their stories of hardship with each other. Over the course of their four years of high school, their achievements were celebrated by local and national media, and their exceptional fight against intolerance was rewarded by institutions such as the Anne Frank Center USA. In 1999, they were able to publish a selection of the diary entries they wrote during their four years of high school, thereby spreading their personal tales of hardship and success through the rest of the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The students’ time in high school is marked by local and national moments of racial tension and violence. In 1992, the Los Angeles Riots were sparked by the acquittal of the Los Angeles Police Department officers who were responsible for the brutal, videotaped beating of Rodney King, an unarmed black man. The riots, which lasted for six days, were the catastrophic end result of decades of mounting police brutality within Los Angeles’s communities of color, and were marked by extreme violence, destruction, and looting. In 1994, California’s Proposition 187 aimed to prohibit legal immigrants from accessing certain public services in the state of California

(including healthcare and education), and was widely seen as a measure to punish immigrant communities—in particular the growing Latino and Asian populations. These events heightened racial and ethnic tensions dramatically, impacting Ms. Gruwell’s students during their early years of high school. At school, the Freedom Writers immersed themselves in the study of the Holocaust, a genocide that took place during World War II, when the German Nazis aimed to exterminate Jews, as well as other populations, such as the Roma, homosexuals, and all political opponents. Victims were deported to extermination camps, where they were forced to work under deplorable conditions and were systematically murdered in gas chambers. The Holocaust ended with the end of World War II, in 1945. Fifty years later, the Freedom Writers were able to meet with several concentration camp survivors as part of their studies. They became personally involved in the legacy of this war through their effort to promote peace and intercultural tolerance.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The students’ diary-writing is directly inspired by the diaries of Anne Frank and Zlata Filipović, two young women who lived through extremely violent ethnic cleansing campaigns. In Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, written from 1942 to 1944, Anne relates her thoughts and emotions during the two years that she and her family had to hide from the Nazis in the Netherlands. In 1994, they were arrested for being Jewish and sent to concentration camps, where Anne ultimately died. In *Zlata’s Diary*, written from 1991 to 1993, Zlata Filipović recounts her life in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a town under siege in the Bosnian war. Both girls denounced the horrors of war and, in particular, the senseless ethnic hatred that led people to behave in such inhumane ways. These books serve as foundational texts in Ms. Gruwell’s class, encouraging her students to embrace tolerance, celebrate cultural diversity, and even develop their own diary-writing practice. An autobiographical account about the Nazi concentration camps ([Night](#) by Elie Wiesel), a novel about gang violence (*Durango Street* by Frank Bonham), and a canonical play about an infamously bitter family rivalry ([Romeo and Juliet](#) by Shakespeare) are all foundational texts in the students’ curriculum, encouraging them to explore different literary genres and relate their personal lives to great works of literature.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the

World Around Them

- **When Written:** 1994-1998
- **Where Written:** Long Beach, California
- **When Published:** September 1, 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Non-fiction, autobiography
- **Setting:** Long Beach, California
- **Climax:** Ms. Gruwell's students choose to call themselves "Freedom Writers"
- **Antagonist:** Racism; intolerance; violence; the uncaring, unsupportive adults in many students' lives
- **Point of View:** First-person (Ms. Gruwell and the Freedom Writers)

EXTRA CREDIT

The Freedom Writers Foundation. At the Freedom Writers Foundation, Erin Gruwell developed the Freedom Writer Teachers Institute, where educators can receive a five-day intensive training aimed at helping them teach at-risk and vulnerable students, applying the same techniques that Erin initially used with the Freedom Writers.

Darrius Garrett. In *Diary of a Freedom Writer*, Freedom Writer Darrius Garrett shares the entirety of his personal story of violence, poverty, and success, expanding on the entries he first published in *The Freedom Writers Diaries*.



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1994, Erin Gruwell begins her journey as an English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. During this period, racial tensions are at an all-time high. In 1992, officers from the Los Angeles Police Department were acquitted after brutally beating Rodney King, an unarmed black man, and the court's decision was soon followed by six days of violent rioting, as members of the African-American community expressed their long-standing frustration with the discrimination and abuse they suffer at the hands of the police. These riots shook the entire region, heightening racial tensions in the area and convincing a young woman, Erin Gruwell, to devote herself to teaching. She hopes to help young people deal with their pent-up anger in non-violent ways and thus chooses to teach at a school known for its ethnic and socio-economic diversity. While the school itself is not in a dangerous neighborhood, many of the students who attend it come from environments marked by gang violence and drug trafficking.

During her first year as a student teacher, Erin attempts to create a color- and ethnicity-blind environment in the classroom. However, she is soon confronted to the reality of racial tensions when one of her students produces a racist

caricature of Sheraud, an African-American student, depicting him with large, protruding lips. When Ms. Gruwell intercepts this drawing, she loses her temper, telling her students that such stereotyping leads to horrific events such as the Holocaust. However, she soon discovers that most of her students do not know what the Holocaust is. As a result, she decides to use this incident as a teaching opportunity inspiring her to focus her curriculum on the issue of tolerance.

The next year, she is assigned a new group of students: freshmen who have been labeled "at risk," "unteachable," and whom no one else wants. She becomes aware that her primary objective will be to instill self-confidence in these so-called "rejects" who have been abandoned by most of the adults around them, including, often, their very own parents. She also is forced to address the stark ethnic rivalries that divides the classroom, as students form groups according to their appearance, separating into Latinos, Asians, African-Americans, and whites. These divisions reflect the gangs' separation according to ethnicity and reveal the fact that, for many of these students, the choice to remain within the confines of their own ethnic group is an issue of life and death, aimed at ensuring their survival in the "hood" where racially based violence is a constant threat.

In order to make her students more attuned to the similarities they share as a class and to feel engaged with schoolwork, Ms. Gruwell chooses literary works that reflect the students' realities. When she begins to teach her class about the history of ethnic violence around the world, focusing on the stories of Anne Frank in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands and Zlata Filipović in contemporary war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina, her students find themselves identifying with these young girls' experiences as expressed in their diaries. They become aware that ethnic division can lead to horrible wars and genocides. At the same time, when Ms. Gruwell makes them write their own diaries, they become personally acquainted with the powerful effect that diary-writing can have, as it often allows them to cope with the difficult situations of everyday life.

In their diaries, many students describe lives that are strikingly similar to the violent worlds of Anne Frank and Zlata Filipović. Some students believe that they are more likely to be shot before the age of sixteen than to graduate, as gang violence is ubiquitous in their neighborhoods. Others share harrowing stories of domestic abuse, homelessness, and growing up in environments where one parent (or both) has completely abandoned them. These complex realities leave deep marks on the students' psyches, often convincing them that they are destined to fail academically and to live the rest of their lives in a world characterized by poverty, violence, and death.

Over the course of the months, however, thanks to Ms. Gruwell's guidance, they become more academically involved, as they immerse themselves in the study of the Holocaust. Through interactive activities such as collaborative

assignments, field trips to museums, and even meeting Holocaust survivors, the students become committed to promoting Anne Frank's message of ethnic tolerance and peace. Inspired by other people's stories of struggle, they become convinced violence is not always the solution, and that words can have powerful, life-changing effects both on themselves and on other people. The class atmosphere begins to change, as students realize that, despite their ethnic and racial differences, they share a lot of similar experiences. Slowly, they become a more united group, increasingly trusting in the passion and wisdom that their devoted teacher communicates.

Despite her visible success at improving her students' social behavior and academic performance, Erin Gruwell still faces the hostility of some professors, who disapprove of her innovative teaching methods. Throughout her four years at Wilson High School, she is forced to fight members of the school staff to prove to them that she should remain with her group of students, as these adolescents desperately need the stability and comfort that her classroom provides in order to flourish as confident students and human beings. Ultimately, she and her allies succeed in ensuring that she can bring her teaching project to fruition with these previously "unteachable" adolescents, and she succeeds in staying with her class. To finance the students' various field trips and new books, she takes on two additional jobs at Nordstrom and the Marriott Hotel.

Sophomore year marks a turning point in the students' lives. When Ms. Gruwell organizes a "Toast for Change" activity, in which each student gives a toast celebrating their commitment to changing and becoming a better person, the class feels deeply motivated by the thought that they are given a clean slate and can take control of their lives. Most of them actively seize this opportunity to modify their behavior and, most importantly, summon the courage necessary to believe in their own selves—proving wrong, in the process, all the people who ever told them they were bound to fail.

When Ms. Gruwell gives her students the assignment to write letters to Zlata Filipović, her class becomes so excited about the prospect of contacting this young girl that Ms. Gruwell soon finds herself actually sending Zlata these letters and inviting her to come to California. When Zlata accepts, the students are finally able to meet this young writer whom they have read and admire so much. They discover that she is a young girl just like them, who has transformed her difficult circumstances into an opportunity for self-growth and education.

After learning from Zlata about the dangers of ethnic hatred, they are later able to meet Miep Gies, another one of their heroes. Miep was Anne Frank's father's secretary and played an important role in hiding them during the war, as well as ultimately publishing the young girl's diary. When one of Ms.

Gruwell's students tells her that she is his hero, Miep replies that they are all heroes, capable of changing the world in their own way and responsible for promoting Anne Frank's legacy of peace and tolerance. This message impacts Ms. Gruwell's students. They begin to believe that they, too, can change the world.

The next year, Ms. Gruwell's class studies the history of racial injustice and civil rights in the United States. They learn about the Freedom Riders, an interracial group of activists—seven black, six white—who rode buses in the American South in the 1960s to protest the segregation of public buses. While the group was attacked by violent Ku Klux Klan mobs on various occasions, they did not hesitate to put their own lives at risk to fight for what they believed in. Inspired by this courageous example of interracial cooperation, Ms. Gruwell's students decide to call themselves the "Freedom Writers." They commit to devoting their lives to fighting intolerance and discrimination.

After this decisive moment, Ms. Gruwell's group of 150 students becomes even more committed to their academic lives and to the nurturing of a positive group atmosphere. They decide to compile their diary entries into a book, in order to share their stories with the world. The millionaire John Tu gives the class thirty-five computers so that they can achieve this goal and regroup their entries in an anonymous manner. This project gains increased significance when the Freedom Writers successfully organize a trip to Washington, D.C., to share their stories with United States Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

During the Freedom Writers' last year of high school, Ms. Gruwell decides to devote her energy to the group's future. Her goal is for all of her students to go to college. As a result, she organizes college tours and invites specialists to share information about SAT preparation and financial aid, in order to make the application process seem accessible to her students, many of whom are the first of their family to graduate from high school and attend college. The atmosphere during this year is one of hard work and celebration, as these young adults realize with amazement that their dreams might finally be within reach.

At the same time, during this period, the Freedom Writers become a media phenomenon. The students receive the Spirit of Anne Frank award, which rewards people fighting against discrimination and prejudice in their communities, and are invited to travel to New York to receive this prize. In parallel, a local article about the Freedom Writers is republished in the *L.A. Times*, and the students suddenly find themselves overwhelmed with personal responses to the article, as well as with offers from corporate firms who offer to sponsor their projects in various ways.

After the students successfully graduate, Erin Gruwell decides to teach educators about her experience with the Freedom

Writers at National University, Long Beach. She remains present in the Freedom Writers' lives as many of them struggle with their new lives, finding the transition to college difficult, or have to deal with new family responsibilities. After these moments of transition, one year after their graduation, the entire group gathers to go on a trip to Europe. There, they visit symbolic, historical sites, and reaffirm their commitment to the promotion of tolerance and peace.

Demonstrating her lifelong commitment with this project, Erin Gruwell creates the Freedom Writers Foundation, a non-profit organization aimed at helping young people benefit from the Freedom Writers teaching methodologies. This new space provides an alternative to the safe space the Freedom Writers created in their classroom and allows educators to learn about the Freedom Writers teaching strategies so that they can apply them in their own schools. As many Freedom Writers themselves become educators and role models for young people, they confirm their deeply rooted desire to give back to their own community. Through their actions, they hope to inspire young people in difficult circumstances to find the strength and self-confidence necessary to fight for their own success and, more generally, for the collective improvement of their communities.

fight for important social issues such as injustice and discrimination. They adopt the name "Freedom Writers" in homage to the 1960s Freedom Riders activists who fought segregation in the American South. By senior year, they become nationally known as their stories appear in newspaper articles and television shows. After their graduation, a movie is made based on their experiences (*Freedom Writers*), bringing them international fame. Many of the Freedom Writers become educators and role models in their communities, demonstrating their desire to teach their communities what they have learned.

Anne Frank – Anne Frank became known for her diary, **The Diary of Ann Frank**, which recounts the two years she spent hiding with her family during World War II, from 1942 to 1944. As Jews living in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, the Franks were forced to go into hiding in the building where Anne's father worked. Anne and her family were later arrested by the Gestapo (the German secret police) and sent to concentration camps, which only Anne's father survived. In its powerful account of persecution and injustice, as well as in its embrace of hope, Anne's diary has a powerful impact on Ms. Gruwell's students, making them acutely aware of the horrors of the Holocaust and ethnic hatred in general.

Zlata Filipović – Compared to Anne Frank because of her depiction of the horrors of war, twelve-year-old Zlata writes from 1992 to 1993 about the effects of the Bosnian war on her hometown, Sarajevo. Trapped in the middle of a genocidal war, Sarajevo was taken under siege and its inhabitants forced to live lives defined by the daily threat of death. Many of Ms. Gruwell's students, who experience the daily threat of gang-related violence and racial tensions, identify with Zlata's reality. When she comes to Long Beach to meet the Freedom Writers, she impresses the students with her maturity and, at the same time, with her surprising normalcy, as she proves to be an adolescent similar to them in many ways.

Miep Gies – Miep Gies was Anne Frank's father's secretary before the war. She is responsible for hiding Anne Frank's family as well as other Jews in an annex of the building where Anne's father worked. After the Franks are arrested, Gies tries (but fails) to bribe German officers into letting them go—a bold act that could have gotten her killed. She is responsible for finding Anne's **diary** and keeping it until Anne's father returns from the concentration camps. She is characterized by humility and righteousness, as she believes that she should not be seen as a hero for what she did, but, instead, that she only did what she felt was right. She inspires many Freedom Writers to commit to Anne Frank's message of peace and tolerance, and to believe that they, too, can change the world.

John Tu – This millionaire entrepreneur becomes the Freedom Writers' main benefactor. Inspired by the racial diversity in Ms. Gruwell's class, he decides to support their various projects. While he is never given voice through a diary entry, he



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Erin Gruwell – This passionate, idealistic teacher uses her belief in equal opportunities for all to help a group of at-risk students learn to trust in themselves and work hard to achieve their own success. Her dedication to this task leads her to take on two other jobs during her free time in order to finance her students' field trips and new books. Undaunted by the hostility of other members of the high school staff, who look upon her innovative methods with suspicion and perhaps a touch of jealousy over her success, she fights to remain with her students through their four years of high school so that she can continue to shepherd them academically, socially, and emotionally. After her students' graduation, she demonstrates her commitment to the Freedom Writers' cause by creating the Freedom Writers Foundation, a non-profit organization aimed at sharing her teaching methodologies with other educators.

The Freedom Writers – Ms. Gruwell's 150 students are a diverse group of adolescents. Initially divided along lines of race and ethnicity, the students soon discover that they share similar experiences of discrimination, addiction, gang-related violence, and domestic abuse. They find extraordinary support and guidance in Ms. Gruwell's teaching, as she inspires them to believe in themselves and follow their dreams. During the students' four years of high school, they become increasingly emotionally close and academically motivated, committing to

demonstrates his dedication to elevated ideals of justice and cooperation through his actions. He donates money for the Freedom Writers' field trips, offers certain students jobs at his computer company, and donates the thirty-five computers with which the students type their diary entries anonymously. On multiple occasions, he demonstrates his love and care for Ms. Gruwell's students directly, by listening to them attentively and making them feel that their voice matters.

Sharaud – A disciplinary transfer in Ms. Gruwell's first class, when she was still a student teacher, Sharaud is initially known as a tall, imposing, violence-prone student who intimidates his teachers and interrupts classroom teaching as much as he can. When he becomes the subject of a racist caricature, however, he shows his weakness and sensitivity, demonstrating that he is not inured to the insidious power of racism. After Ms. Gruwell rebukes the class for the drawing and spends the rest of the year teaching tolerance, Sharaud's behavior changes dramatically. He becomes a dedicated, successful student, and proves willing, like the rest of the class, to embrace values of cooperation, trust, and dedication to his academic work.

Renee Firestone – This Holocaust survivor impresses the Freedom Writers with her courage and determination. After losing her entire family in the concentration camps, she decides to leave for the United States, arriving in the country with only four dollars in her pocket. Despite her personal history of oppression, she makes a deep impression on the students by insisting that they should never judge groups of people collectively, since that is how the Holocaust started. In this way, she inspires the students to use their own difficult pasts not as an excuse for violence but, rather, as an opportunity to become better people, committed to ideals of peace and tolerance.

Peter Maass – This American journalist reported on the atrocities of the Bosnian war. He shocks the Freedom Writers with his descriptions of genocide and mass rape, forcing them to confront the horrific consequences of ethnic hatred. When a student interrogates him about his moral responsibilities as a journalist, he justifies what some might see as passivity in the face of violence by explaining that it is necessary for journalists to step back from the action and report what they see objectively, in order to share with the rest of the world what is happening. In this way, he demonstrates his deep commitment to truth and justice.

Gerda Seifer – Like Anne Frank, Gerda Seifer is Jewish and is forced to hide from the Nazis during the Holocaust. Like Anne, when faced with the violent hatred of the Nazis, she soon loses her childish innocence. She becomes the only member of her family to survive the war. When she visits the Holocaust museum with the Freedom Writers, she sheds tears at seeing the cattle cars where Nazis put people on their way to concentration camps, revealing the deep scars that the past has left within her.

Hanneli ("Lies") – One of Anne Frank's two best friends, Lies

was sent to Bergen-Belsen, the same concentration camp as Anne. At the camp, she tries to send food to Anne across a barbed wire fence, risking her own life in the process. However, unlike Anne, she is able to survive and tell her story. She impresses the Freedom Writers with her courage and devotion to her friend, demonstrating her willingness to commit to high principles of generosity and care even in the most harrowing circumstances.

Richard Riley – United States Secretary of Education Richard Riley meets the Freedom Writers in Washington, where they are able to share their stories with him. In turn, he shares his own tales of hardship with the students and makes them feel that he truly cares about them and their education. He tells them that they are the leaders of the future, a message that has a strong impact on these students' minds, inspiring them to trust that they, too, can become important people in their society.

Tommy Jefferson – Ms. Gruwell compares her student Tommy to Sharaud, as both are disciplinary transfers who change dramatically during the course of their four years of high school and become committed to achieving academic success. Tommy becomes a voracious reader and writes Zlata a letter in which he compares his own circumstances to hers, saying that he has to suffer through an undeclared war, filled with gang violence and the deaths of his friends. He describes this situation as a state of non-freedom.

Sarah – In Diary 8, one student describes the way in which sorority life separates her from her friend Sarah. After undergoing a grueling interview in which she is interrogated and humiliated about her sexual experiences, Sarah decides to leave the sorority pledging process. This decision proves harmful to her social life, as she loses her friendship with the girls who decide to stay in the sorority. Sarah's story demonstrates the strong, potentially harmful power of social groups organized around popularity and group loyalty.

Paco – In Diary 33, during freshman year, a student writes about her friend Paco, who killed another man in front of her. At the trial for this murder, when she is supposed to testify against an innocent man in order to protect Paco, she realizes that the logic of group loyalty which she has followed all her life feels unjust. She decides to stand up for justice and tell the truth about Paco, to his utter consternation.

Tony – This young Croatian boy, whom the Freedom Writers meet when Zlata comes to Long Beach, was shot at point-blank range by Serbian soldiers. He was able to come to the United States to undergo surgery on his jaw. The student in Diary 48 compares her/his circumstances to Tony's, as s/he explains that s/he, too, carries the scars of war within her/him after fleeing terrorist violence in Peru and adapting to life in the United States.

Cheryl Best – Cheryl Best grew up in the projects, in a world

filled with violence and negativity. After being kidnapped and almost killed, Cheryl decides to use this horrific experience as a motivation to escape the dangers of her neighborhood and set herself on a path to success. She succeeds in attending college and graduating with honors. Her tale of determination, self-confidence, and hard work inspires the Freedom Writers to fight for their own education and professional success.

John Lewis – Congressman John Lewis was a member of the original Freedom Riders activist group in the Civil Rights era. His determination to sacrifice his life in the fight for equal rights makes him a hero and role model to the Freedom Writers. The Freedom Writers are able to meet him before giving a speech at the Capitol, and experience this as a deep honor.

Thomas Keneally – After reading about the way in which Ms. Gruwell's diverse group of students was treated with hostility at a white, upper-class movie theater where they went to see *Schindler's List*, Thomas Keneally, the author of the novel that inspired the movie, invites the class to one of his university seminars. He is impressed by the group's diversity and unity.

O. J. Simpson – In 1994, this former National Football League star was arrested and charged with the murder of his ex-wife. After a widely publicized trial, he is acquitted of all charges. One student refers to this acquittal as the product of Simpson's "Dream Team" group of lawyers, invoking his own innocent brother's condemnation as proof that the justice system is unfair.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jopie – One of Anne Frank's two best friends, Jopie was able to avoid the concentration camps. While not much is said about her own experience during the war, she becomes a model to the Freedom Writers in her devotion to her friend Anne Frank.

Mirna – Zlata's best friend accompanies her to Long Beach, where she is able to meet the Freedom Writers. She reminds the student in Diary 46 about her own interracial friendship with her best friend.

Steven Spielberg – After Thomas Keneally invites Ms. Gruwell's class to his seminar, Steven Spielberg, the famous movie director who created *Schindler's List*, invites them to Universal Studios. He admires their racial and ethnic diversity but, most importantly, their unity as a class and their academic achievements.

Jeremy Strohmeyer – In 1997, this Wilson High School student became infamous for raping and murdering a seven-year-old girl in a casino, a fact that shocks the entire country and inspires the Freedom Writers to organize a peaceful march to protest this horrific crime.

Timothy McVeigh – In 1995, this American domestic terrorist bombed a building in Oklahoma in protest of the federal

government. Ms. Gruwell has her students write a report about this event, aimed at teaching the students that violence is never a solution.

Josef Mengele – This doctor at the Auschwitz concentration camp became infamous for his gruesome experiments on identical twins, where he demonstrated utter lack of concern for his victims' humanity.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



RACE, ETHNICITY, AND TOLERANCE

The students at Wilson High School are used to navigating racial and ethnic divisions. The rivalry between black, Asian, and Latino gangs affect their everyday lives, constantly making them potential victims in a war where only external appearances and group loyalty matter. As a consequence, at school and in their neighborhood, students learn to remain within the confines of their own identity group. However, when Ms. Gruwell begins to teach her class about the historical consequences of ethnic violence around the world, focusing on the stories of Anne Frank in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands and Zlata Filipović in contemporary war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina, her students are forced to confront the horrific consequences of ethnic hatred. Inspired by Anne and Zlata's experiences, Ms. Gruwell's students learn to see beyond the barriers of race and ethnicity, discovering that peace and tolerance are infinitely greater goals than remaining focused on people's different identities. Ultimately, the Freedom Writers commit to focusing only on everyone's inherent humanity, concluding that there is only one race that matters: the united human race.

The students at Wilson High School are immersed in the urban world of Long Beach, where racial tensions and a vicious gang war divide the population along ethnic and racial lines. As a result, one's social identity and appearance determine one's entire life, from one's friend group to one's chances of survival in the street. Erin Gruwell begins to teach in a historical context of racial tensions. Two years earlier, in 1992, officers in the Los Angeles Police Department were filmed brutally beating Rodney King, an unarmed black man, before arresting him. When the police officers were acquitted for this act, six days of violent rioting erupted in Los Angeles, protesting the long-standing discrimination and abuse that the African-American community has suffered from the police. This long stretch of rioting had a severe effect on increasing racial tensions in the

area, and Ms. Gruwell notes that the tension could be felt in the school itself. Later events, such as California's Proposition 187, meant to prohibit illegal immigrants from using various services in California (including health care and public education), only heightened the sense of discrimination and exclusion that many minority communities experienced at the time, in particular Asian and Latino immigrants.

Ethnic and racial communities were also in direct rivalry with each other, as African-American, Asian, and Latino gangs engaged in a ruthless war for power and territory. To remain safe, people generally stayed loyal to their own group, as one could be shot at for the mere fact of having the wrong skin color—regardless of whether or not one actually belonged to a rival gang. At Wilson High School, these divisions are strikingly visible. The school quad is divided according to color and ethnicity, as people mostly make friends with members of their own identity group.

This ethnic hatred and violence affects all students. Most of them have been shot at, have directly witnessed gang-related violence, and have seen their friends die over the course of the years due to gang rivalry. After Ms. Gruwell questions a student about the rivalry between the Latino and Asian gangs, trying to make that student realize that this war is just as senseless as that of the Capulets and Montagues in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the student comes to realize that Ms. Gruwell is probably right. Yet even though he cannot justify the gang's divisions, he still abides by their logic: "[Ms. Gruwell] always tries to corner you into accepting that there's another side, when there really isn't. I don't even remember how the whole thing got started, but it's obvious that if you're from one family, you need to be loyal and try to get some payback."

Through Ms. Gruwell's teaching, the students discover that racial and ethnic tensions have deep historical consequences in other places in the world. Reading the diaries of Anne Frank, who was killed in Nazi Germany for being a Jew, and of Zlata Filipović, a young girl caught in the contemporary Bosnian war, divided among nationalities and religions, allows the students to examine ethnic divisions from a distance. They come to realize that peace and tolerance are much more inspiring messages than ethnic hatred and rivalry.

When, as a student teacher, Erin Gruwell intercepts a racist caricature of an African-American boy in her class, she becomes furious and tells her students that such stereotyping is precisely what led to horrific events such as the Holocaust. She soon realizes that most of her students have never heard of the Holocaust. As a result, she decides to devote her teaching to the promotion of tolerance. When her students discover the stories of two fellow teenagers, Anne Frank and Zlata Filipović, they come to terms with the devastation that ethnic divisions can cause. During World War II, adolescent Anne Frank is forced to hide for years and is ultimately sent to a

concentration camp, where she ultimately dies—all because of the mere fact that she is Jewish. In early-1990s Bosnia and Herzegovina, another young girl, Zlata, is forced to hide in a basement to escape the brutal ethnic war that is tearing her country apart. Ms. Gruwell's students soon note similarities between their own lives and the senseless violence that these two young girls had to endure. Inspired by these young diarists' messages of tolerance, the students become inspired to write their own diaries, chronicling their lives in a world where racial tensions and gang violence are rife.

It is when the students delve into a geographically closer past, that of the United States, that they find the inspiration to make a commitment against racial violence and injustice. They read about the Freedom Riders, a group of civil rights activists—seven black and six white—who rode a bus across the American South in the early 1960s to protest the segregation of public buses. In Alabama, the Freedom Riders were violently beaten by a mob of Ku Klux Klan members. When Ms. Gruwell's students discover that these black and white activists were ready to sacrifice their lives to champion equal rights, they realize that they can use this episode in American history as inspiration in their own fight for diversity and tolerance. Making a pun with the original activists' name, they decide to call themselves the "Freedom Writers."

After long months of studying the historical consequences of racial hatred, the Freedom Riders conclude that dividing people according to their appearance or group identity is absurd and dangerous. They commit to the ideal of unity, based on the premise of recognizing everyone's humanity. The students come to terms with the fact that separating people among racial or ethnic groups can generate injustice and harm. In Diary 33, a student recounts a time when she had to testify in court. After having seen her friend Paco kill another man, she is supposed to defend Paco and lie about his involvement in the murder, so as to defend her fellow Latino "people," her "blood." However, in court, she sees the despair in the eyes of the accused man's mother—who is black—and realizes that this woman reminds her of her own Mexican mom. In this moment, she realizes that both sides of the conflict are affected by the same, senseless violence, and that protecting injustice in the name of her group identity will only tear more families apart. In a courageous move, she decides to tell the truth and accuse Paco of murder, therefore going against her presumed loyalty to Latinos in order to defend a greater ideal of justice. This decision demonstrates her commitment to recognizing everyone's humanity and dignity, regardless of their race or identity.

However courageous and inspiring the Freedom Writers' messages of diversity and tolerance might be, the young students often experience resistance from close-minded adults. When the Freedom Writers invite Zlata to come to the United States, she gives a speech at the Croatian Hall where she talks

about her experience of ethnic hatred in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though she is a direct survivor of severe ethnic violence, some adults still ask her what her ethnicity is: Serbian, Croatian, Muslim? The adults' reaction demonstrates their resistance to conceiving of the world in a color- or ethnicity-blind way. Yet Zlata boldly answers: "I am a human being" and the Freedom Writers stand by her, confirming that people's humanity—and not their nationality, religion, or skin color—should be the only thing that ever matters. In *Diary 17*, a Freedom Writer reiterates this conclusion in her own words: "As long as I know that I am a human being, I don't need to worry about what other people say. In the end, we all are the same!"



EDUCATION AND HEALING

While Wilson High School assigns Ms. Gruwell a group of students that have already been labeled "unteachable" by the rest of the school staff, the new teacher soon discovers that her students are far from a hopeless cause. Instead, these adolescents are merely the reflection of the low expectations that adults have imposed on them all their life. To make her students feel more engaged in academic life, Ms. Gruwell adopts a teaching method in which the students can directly relate what they are learning to their own lives. Her goal is to make education more than a mere transfer of information, using education as a tool for her young students to grow as responsible, humane individuals. Her teaching methods reach their greatest achievement in the diary-writing exercise, where her students are able to develop a voice of their own. Through writing and sharing diary entries, the Freedom Writers discover the true meaning of education: to trust in one's potential and become compassionate, honest human beings, ready to tackle the greatest problems in human life—and, crucially, pass on all the knowledge they have acquired.

As a young teacher, Ms. Gruwell is given the group of kids that no one else wants. Her students are called "at-risk," "rejects," and "basic" by most of the high school staff—including the students themselves. Through her humane approach toward the young men and women she teaches, Ms. Gruwell aims to show that these labels are both misleading and unfair. For Ms. Gruwell, much of what leads these students to lack ambition and academic drive is what they hear from other adults, who constantly put them down. "Although they're a pain, they're just kids. But adults created the system. The system separates them and then they're stereotyped as 'basic,' but in reality, they're anything but basic. [...] It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if you tell kids they're stupid—directly or indirectly—sooner or later they start to believe it."

Ms. Gruwell soon realizes that she is right in trusting in her students' abilities. She discovers that her students' intelligence is far greater than what standard tests of academic

performance generally measure. "Even though their reading scores don't indicate that they're 'smart' in the conventional sense, it's amazing how savvy they are. They're a walking encyclopedia when it comes to pop culture, quoting the lines from their favorite movies verbatim or reciting every lyric from the latest rap CD." She recognizes that the students' capacities have been largely underestimated, as no one has truly tried to understand them on their own terms.

What students need, Ms. Gruwell concludes, is unwavering support. When, during a self-evaluation activity in class, a student writes down that he believes he deserves an "F," Ms. Gruwell's reaction is pure anger: she tells him that he is rejecting himself, as well as everyone who cares about him. Shaken by Ms. Gruwell's speech, the student concludes: "What she showed me today is that a truly self-reliant person takes action, leaving nothing to chance and everything to themselves. She showed me that excuses will not bring about success and that adversity is not something you walk with, but something you leap over. The only obstacles are the ones you allow." Ms. Gruwell aims her students with the trust she has in them, so that they might be moved by feelings of self-worth and learn to fight the low expectations that society has for them. As one student recounts: "Ms. Gruwell told me something that would change my life forever. She told me she believed in me. I have never heard those words from anyone . . . especially a teacher."

In order to make her students feel personally involved in academic learning, Ms. Gruwell always relates schoolwork to real-life situations. Her vision of education involves not only aiming for good grades, but also establishing a connection between oneself and the outside world, so as to lead a healthy, compassionate life. For Ms. Gruwell, becoming a good person and a good student starts with believing in oneself. A turning point in the students' classroom experience takes place during the "Toast for Change." In this activity, the students are all given a "clean slate." They are told that, in this moment, they can forget about who they have been in the past and, instead, decide for themselves who they want to be. After this activity, many students vow to change for the better and show distinct progress. When Ms. Gruwell discovers that one of her most recalcitrant students has already finished reading all the assigned books, she realizes that giving young people the opportunity to change can have a profound effect on their mind.

To make her students feel engaged with class work, Ms. Gruwell adjusts her lesson plans to the students' reality. Instead of reading textbooks about World War II, they personally meet with two Holocaust survivors, Miep Gies and Renee Firestone, so that they might understand the human dimension of this war. Another time, Ms. Gruwell makes the students read *Durango Street*, a book about an African-American teenager involved in gang violence. She asks the students to make a movie about the book, impersonating its

various characters, so that they might relate to its story on a personal level. Throughout her years with the Freedom Writers, hands-on activities and field trips are meant to give the students an emotional tie to what they are learning. This allows them to use school-acquired knowledge in their own life, using them as powerful the tools to fight their own challenges.

Ms. Gruwell's teaching techniques find their deepest expression in the students' diary writing, which allows them to relate what they have learned in the classroom to the most intimate details of their own lives. While some students initially object to the idea of having to write about their personal lives, claiming that the pain they feel is too intimate and too strong, the exercise ultimately proves liberating, capable of bringing solace to those who most need it.

When students are asked to edit each other's diary entries, with the objective of publishing a selection of them as a book, the true impact of what they have achieved comes to light. On various occasions, students are able to empathize with each other because they have lived through similar situations themselves. When a young boy reads about a girl's abortion, he feels more connected to his girlfriend, who also had to undergo an abortion. When a young girl reads about a fellow student's experience of sexual abuse in her family, her own memories of a similar episode come to light. By discovering each other in an anonymous and respectful way, the students learn about each other's greatest challenges. This allows them to put their own experiences in perspective and find comfort in sharing their most intimate stories. Writing and reading other people's stories becomes a healing moment of its own, making the Freedom Writers stronger individually and collectively, as they becomes more connected to their own selves and to the other members of the group.

The impact of these students' stories extends well beyond the group of the Freedom Writers itself. As the class begins to receive attention from the media for the courageous activities they have engaged in, their stories leak beyond the classroom. Later, when they share some diary entries with Secretary of Education Richard Riley, they feel that they have made the rest of the world aware of their hardships and achievements. Throughout the course of the years, the Freedom Writers realize that sharing their personal stories can benefit not only themselves, but also others who are experiencing similar ordeals and who are grateful to know that they are not alone in their situation. After the Freedom Writers Diaries become published and read by people all around the world, they reaffirm their commitment to educating people about the realities they face. Their desire to make the world a better place extends beyond their high school life, as adult Freedom Writers remain active in fostering a community of learning, support, and self-worth through the Freedom Writers Foundation.



FAMILY AND HOME

The family life of Ms. Gruwell's students impacts them well beyond the boundaries of their home.

While some students benefit from strong parent support and feel encouraged to pursue their education, many others struggle with difficult family situations which affect their performance at school. Missing or uncaring parents, domestic abuse, and homelessness all leave a toll on students' well-being, affecting their sense of self-confidence and their motivation to succeed academically. While Ms. Gruwell cannot directly solve the students' problems at home, she succeeds in creating a classroom where all students feel included and loved. As the bonds between the Freedom Writers and their teacher grow, many students find in this group a substitute family, capable of providing them with the support, care, and motivation they so desperately need.

The family situation in which students find themselves plays a crucial role in their health, safety, and sense of self-worth. Positive and negative experiences at home impact their vision of success at school. In the Afterword, where some students recount what has happened to them since high school, the author of Diary 8 explains that his mom has been the most important stabilizing force in his life. As an adolescent, he abruptly left his home, in an act of anger and rebellion, but later repented and returned home, assuring his mother that he had changed for the better. Instead of turning him down, his mother took him in, thus saving him from the perils of homelessness. This served as a turning point in the young boy's life, as he realized that the bond he shares with his mother is unbreakable, and that she will never give up on him. This motivated him to change and become a more responsible son, ready to behave well at home and at school.

Other, less fortunate students find themselves in situations where their family stifles their growth and undermines their self-confidence. Judging from the relatively poor attendance at a "Back to School Night" during Freshman year, Ms. Gruwell notes that some parents seem to have given up on their children's education entirely. Throughout the years, many students' diary entries chronicle their lives at home marked by neglect and various forms of abuse. Some have to deal with fathers who are either uncaring, imprisoned, or have abandoned them. Others are forced to witness the beatings that their mothers suffer at the hands of a boyfriend or husband. Others, finally, are sexually assaulted by family members who had previously seemed worthy of trust. The lack of strong role models leaves them unable to imagine what a successful, healthy life might look like. These experiences take a severe emotional toll on the adolescents, whose instability at home often translates into precarious academic performance. Some students even find themselves without a stable home, and students in extreme situations of poverty and homelessness are often excluded from any kind of comfort,

both at school and outside of school. These situations leave a deep mark in students' psyches, often affecting them for the rest of their life. Many students find themselves without a place to call home. Some are evicted from their homes and forced to live on the floor of a stranger's house or in the street. Others are separated from their siblings and placed in foster homes by social services. These students generally feel that their private lives are so torn apart that they have no stable place to call their own, where they might feel safe and cared for.

School life can heighten their sense of exclusion, as cruel teachers do not hesitate to humiliate their most vulnerable students. In the Afterword, one Freedom Writer recalls living in a mobile home at a gas station and not having enough money to eat anything but Vienna sausages and cheap bread. Instead of finding comfort at school, she feels judged and excluded. A teacher berates the student—who does not have regular access to a shower—by calling her “dirty” in front of the entire class and telling her that she should be able to buy soap. The pain of these experiences remains vivid as an adult, as the former high school student recounts that, even today, “[e]very time I tell my story, I reopen the wound and relive my childhood. What helps me persevere is [...] when I look into the audience and recognize the familiar pain in someone's face as he or she connects to my story.”

To help her students deal with life at school and outside of school, Ms. Gruwell aims for classroom 203 to become a space where students can feel safe and cared for. By encouraging them to share their personal experiences, she helps them reduce the pain and humiliation they might feel. Students with troubled lives at home come to realize that the Freedom Writers provide a family of their own, capable of bringing emotional and academic support to those who might need it.

Ms. Gruwell succeeds in making the Freedom Writers a self-sufficient, powerful support group. She encourages all students to cooperate with each other and, most importantly, to support each other's various endeavors. When, during a field trip, a student who has always suffered from body-image issues takes part in a dancing circle, she finds that she is accepted and cheered on by her fellow Freedom Writers, none of whom judges her for her weight. When a Freedom Writer is elected Senior Class President, she basks in the support of the entire class. Around graduation time, when various Freedom Writers get admitted to the universities they wanted, they are cheered on by the rest of the class. In sum, throughout their time at school, the Freedom Writers constitute a support group where students can feel accepted, regardless of their identity, appearance, or background. It allows everyone to share their academic achievements as well as their deepest emotional problems and insecurities.

As a result, many students come to regard Ms. Gruwell's class as a family, able to complement or replace what is missing from their actual lives outside of school. As one student concludes:

“The Freedom Writers filled this huge hole I had by giving me a safe place where I always knew someone cared. [...] Losing these people would be like losing a part of my family.”



VIOLENCE, WAR, AND DEATH

Violence and death are so present in many of Ms. Gruwell's students' lives that, when they read about Anne Frank and Zlata Filipović's experiences in war-torn countries, many of them feel that they, too, are suffering from an undeclared war—one made of domestic abuse and gang violence, where death can strike at any moment. Through Ms. Gruwell's teaching, though, students become empowered about their capacity to break the cycle of violence. Inspired by the ideal of self-reliance, they realize that transforming themselves can be a powerful tool to reduce the harm around them—as well as the harm they suffer within themselves. While learning to stand up to violence and injustice takes a lot of practice, the Freedom Writers commit to becoming responsible individuals, ready to take a stand against violence in the world.

For many of Ms. Gruwell's students, death and violence are intrinsic aspects of their life. At school and in their neighborhood, they are confronted to a violence over which they seem to have no control. Ms. Gruwell discovers the pervasive environment of death that some of her students are immersed in: “When I asked one of my freshmen if he thought he'd graduate, he said, ‘Graduate? Hell, I don't even know if I'll make it to my sixteenth birthday!’ To some of these kids, death seems more real than a diploma.”

The students soon discover that they are not the only ones in this situation. When they read Anne Frank and Zlata Filipović's diaries, they become aware that what they experience on a daily basis can also be called an undeclared “war.” Their war happens in the streets, through the constant murders of innocent people, as well as at home. Recalling domestic violence in her home, one student explains: “Although not quite like the war Hitler started, the war in my house was also created by ignorance and stupidity. Like all wars, there is an enemy. There are innocent victims, destruction, senseless violence, displacement, and a winner and a loser.”

In Ms. Gruwell's class, the students become empowered to think about breaking cycles of violence in their own, small ways. Learning to trust in their instincts about justice and proving that they are “self-reliant” become important goals. In practice, however, standing up to violence is often difficult to achieve on the first try, as such a courageous action requires not only conviction, but also practice. During a day full of racial tensions and fights at school, one of Ms. Gruwell's students sees a young boy violently beaten by twenty other boys for being Hispanic. Fearful of being beaten up himself, the student finds himself incapable of doing anything to protect the boy. “If Ms. G finds out that I just stood by and did nothing, she'll really be pissed at

me. After all, I wasn't being very 'self-reliant.' I just hope she doesn't find out." Even though Ms. Gruwell has not necessarily prepared her class for all the unpredictable, violent situations in life such as this one, this student's fear that his teacher might find out about his inaction demonstrates the powerful sense of personal accountability that she has instilled in her students.

The students' sense of accountability toward Ms. Gruwell, themselves, and the larger Freedom Writers group increasingly encourages them to reflect on the best behavior they could adopt in the face of adversity. One Freedom Writer, a senior member of a sorority, finds herself appalled at the cruel hazing that young freshmen have to endure. She feels guilty at letting abusive actions take place under her very eyes, while she is herself a member of this sorority. As a Freedom Writer, she feels that she should stand up to defend those who are being humiliated. In the end, while she does not act in the moment of hazing itself, she ultimately decides to leave the sorority, deciding that she will not stand by while other endure injustice and humiliation. The sense of belonging to a worthy cause—the Freedom Writers—gives her the strength and sense of responsibility necessary to act in the name of her ideals.

Therefore, while the students might not be able to eradicate all the violence around them, the Freedom Writers experience allows them to shift their attitude from utter hopelessness to the belief that impacting one's own life can be sufficient to enact change. During freshman year, one of Ms. Gruwell's students says, about gang violence: "so our reasons might be stupid, but it's still going on, and who am I to try to change things?" His view that he, as an isolated individual, could never go against the violence he grew up in, expresses his frustration with the brutal reality he has always known, but also underestimates his own power to change both himself and his community. Indeed, while neither Ms. Gruwell nor her students succeeded in putting an end to gang violence and domestic abuse, they to become leaders in their life and in their community, transmitting the positive transformation they experienced. Ultimately, all Freedom Writers graduated from high school and many of them became successful role models in their community, able to inspire other young students to escape the whirlpool of violence they grew up in—using tolerance, self-trust, and education as the foundation for non-violence.

as [The Diary of Anne Frank](#)) constitutes a turning point in their lives. As they learn about the intense ethnic hatred and brutal war this young girl experienced, they come to identify with Anne Frank, given their own knowledge of gang rivalry and racial tension. Ultimately, like her, they realize that violence is never a solution to one's problems. Instead, they begin to believe in the importance of loving and respecting people regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, and to trust in the power of the written word to effect personal and social change. Frank's diary teaches the Freedom Writers the importance of emotion and subjective experience in education, such that engaging directly with other people, writing first-person diary entries of their own, and showing their own vulnerabilities becomes a crucial part of the Freedom Writers' classroom experience. In this way, the diary becomes a symbol for the Freedom Writers' hope and dedication to writing in the face of violence and injustice.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Broadway Books edition of *The Freedom Writers Diary* published in 2009.

Part I: Entry 1: Ms. Gruwell Quotes

☝ 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.

Related Characters: Erin Gruwell (speaker), Sharaud

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2-3

Explanation and Analysis

During Ms. Gruwell's year as a student teacher, she reacts with shock and anger at one student's racist drawing of Sharaud, an African-American student. She tells her class that this kind of stereotyping is what led to such horrific events as the Holocaust. When she discovers that no one knows what the Holocaust is, she decides that her students should become more engaged with the history of tolerance and racial justice, so that they can apply such values to their



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK

The moment when Ms. Gruwell's students read Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (also known

own lives.

This episode demonstrates that, despite these students' lack of traditional historical knowledge, they have personal experiences that a teacher can draw on in teaching. Indeed, Ms. Gruwell realizes that not knowing about the Holocaust is not the same as not knowing about war, violence, and racial hatred in general, since many of these students are precisely immersed in such a world. In this way, she relates her students' lives to history itself, reminding them that they, too, are makers of history.

This moment becomes the foundation for Ms. Gruwell's entire teaching method, as she decides to use her students' experiences to make them feel engaged with school, instead of ignoring their personal backgrounds or interests. She realizes that the students need to be able to relate what they learn in school to real-life issues in order to become both more respectful people and better students.

☛☛ Celie was violated, tormented, humiliated, degraded; yet through it all, she remained innocent! Out of all this horror, Celie was given courage. Courage to ask for more, to laugh, to love, and finally—to live. Now I'm certain who Celie is. Celie is and always has been me . . . and with this in mind, I will survive.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

After reading *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, this student reflects on her own experience of sexual assault and realizes that she identifies with Celie, the protagonist of the book. She decides to use Celie as a role model, concluding that her own experience with sexual violence should not condemn her to feeling sorry for herself but make her a stronger individual, providing her with an example of what she does *not* want in life. In this way, she can commit to a better present and future, oriented toward appreciating all the joy that life can bring.

The student's mention of innocence reflects the importance for children to enjoy their own freedom, without having to take on adult responsibilities or constraints. Innocence is a state of mind in which one is able to separate the violence of external events such as sexual abuse from one's internal self—and, in particular, from one's personal worth.

Achieving freedom and innocence thus requires believing in

oneself as a person capable of overcoming life's obstacles. This is one of the important values that Ms. Gruwell aims to impart in her students, as she encourages them to work hard in order to overcome the negative influence of their pasts or their environment.

Part I: Diary 3 Quotes

☛☛ My P.O. hasn't realized yet that schools are just like the city and the city is just like prison. All of them are divided into separate sections, depending on race. On the streets, you kick it in different 'hoods, depending on your race, or where you're from. And at school, we separate ourselves from people who are different from us. That's just the way it is, and we all respect that. So when the Asians started trying to claim parts of the 'hood, we had to set them straight.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This student complains about her/his probation officer, who forces her/him to go to school, believing that the gang violence in Long Beach will not affect her/him at Wilson High School. S/he, by contrast, knows that s/he cannot escape gang violence, a belief that proves correct when s/he is attacked by members of a rival gang on the very first day of school.



This student's cynical view about the similarity between school, the city, and prison reflects the belief that racial and ethnic divisions, as well as the hatred and violence that accompany them, are permanent and unchangeable. S/he justifies such rivalries by saying that they allow for personal protection and that they represent a legitimate claim on territory, which must be defended against intruders. Her/his view of gang violence demonstrates her/his embrace of a logic of retaliation and revenge, with no end to violence in sight.

Much of what Ms. Gruwell fights against during her first year as a teacher is such fatalistic views about ethnic or race-related violence. She works hard to make her students reflect on the ethical and historical roots of individual and collective actions, encouraging them to trust in alternatives to gang rivalry and the cycle of revenge.

Part I: Diary 5 Quotes

☝ I'm not afraid of anyone anymore. Now I'm my own gang. I protect myself. I got my own back. I still carry my gun with me just in case I run into some trouble, and now I'm not afraid to use it. Running with gangs and carrying a gun can create some problems, but being of a different race can get you into trouble, too, so I figure I might as well be prepared. Lately, a lot of shit's been going down. All I know is that I'm not gonna be the next one to get killed.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

After being persistently followed and attacked by a group of men after school because of her/his skin color, this student decides to buy a gun and use it as self-defense. One day, s/he successfully uses it to fend her/his attackers off and, from that moment onward, trusts in her/his own right to carry a gun.



The student's attitude is not motivated by the desire to harm or by the gang-related logic of defending her/his own territory. Instead, her/his example demonstrates that, in an atmosphere of extreme racial hatred, everyone is potentially prone to giving in to violence as a form of self-protection. This student thus examines issues such as gang violence and ethnic hatred not from a moral or social perspective, but from the perspective of necessity and survival. Carrying a gun is a decision of last resort, a desperate move to avoid death.

Ms. Gruwell's efforts to make her students trust in non-violent methods does not necessarily account for isolated moments in which violence might actually save a student's life. However, Ms. Gruwell does ultimately succeed in convincing her students that perpetuating violent behavior—by assuming that carrying a gun is always the right solution, for example—makes life worse for everyone. She encourages her students to find other outlets for their fear and anger, so that they might contribute to making the world a less violent place.

Entry 2: Ms. Gruwell Quotes

☝ I don't know if I'm more frustrated with the students or the system. Although they're a pain, they're just kids. But adults created the system. The system separates them and then they're stereotyped as "basic," but in reality, they're anything but basic. In many ways they're extraordinary. [...] It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if you tell kids they're stupid—directly or indirectly—sooner or later they start to believe it.

Related Characters: Erin Gruwell (speaker), The Freedom Writers

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Ms. Gruwell refuses to attribute her students' behavior to ill will or pure stubbornness. Instead, she puts a strong emphasis on the environment the children have grown up in. It is this environment—what she calls the "system"—that has made them the at-risk, difficult students they are today, as they have absorbed the negative opinions that adults have held about them over the years.

This understanding of adolescents' behavior seems deterministic, as it appears that Ms. Gruwell's analysis places more weight on the students' environment—which is difficult to change—than on the students' individual personalities. However, Ms. Gruwell proves the exact opposite. Instead of believing that her students cannot be reformed, she takes it upon herself to create a positive environment for them—one that would be strong enough to counter the negative reinforcement they have received throughout their lives.

It is Ms. Gruwell's boundless trust in her students' intelligence and potential for success that proves so impactful. This teacher demonstrates that giving young people love, respect, and a safe space where they can freely express themselves is infinitely more powerful than punishing or belittling them. When adolescents feel self-confident and safe, they are capable of changing not only themselves, but the world at large.

Part II: Diary 15 Quotes

☝ [I]t's obvious that if you're from a Latino gang you don't get along with the Asian gang, and if you're from the Asian gang, you don't get along with the Latino gang. All this rivalry is more of a tradition. Who cares about the history behind it? Who cares about any kind of history? It's just two sides who tripped on each other way back when and to this day make other people suffer because of their problems. Then I realized she was right, it's exactly like that stupid play. So our reasons might be stupid, but it's still going on, and who am I to try to change things?

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Erin Gruwell

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

This student has conflicted thoughts about gang violence. While he does not want to agree with Ms. Gruwell's belief that gang rivalry cannot be justified by anything but tradition, he ends up grudgingly accepting that gang is, indeed, inherently unjustifiable and "stupid"—just like the rivalry in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. At the same time, his intense questioning, in which he wonders "who cares" about history, reveals his frustration with this conclusion. He prefers to adopt a fatalistic approach, in which he accepts that the violent dynamics that determine his fate are absurd and unjustifiable—but that thinking about this only makes one worse off.

Yet despite this student's apparent embrace of the reality of gang rivalry, it soon becomes clear that he does not consider gang rivalry an elevated mode of life. Instead of glorifying violence and the gangs' fight for territory, he defines gang rivalry only in terms of the harm it inflicts and the fact that innocent people are forced to suffer because of it. In this way, he expresses an implicit frustration with gang violence and a deep awareness of its injustice.

During freshman year, many of Ms. Gruwell's students, like this one, accept that they cannot change the reality they live in. Over time, however, as they learn more about the way in which individuals have been able to impact history—or, at the very least, their own lives—through strong determination and righteous actions, they become more hopeful about their ability to change the world.

Letter to Zlata Quotes

☝ They say America is the "Land of the Free and Home of the Brave," but what's so free about a land where people get killed? [...] I am a fifteen-year-old teenage boy whose life seems to be similar to yours. In your diary you said you watched out for snipers and gunshots. I watch out for gangsters and gunshots. Your friends died of gunshots and my friend Richard, who was fifteen, and my cousin Matthew, who was nineteen, also died of gunshots. The strange thing is . . . my country is not in a war. (Or is it?)

Related Characters: Tommy Jefferson (speaker), Zlata Filipović

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Tommy Jefferson's letter to Zlata questions the relation between violence, war, and freedom. He describes the constant state of terror in which he lives as a situation of un-freedom, thus implicitly identifying a crucial characteristic of freedom: the fact that children and adolescents should be able to enjoy their innocence without constantly being confronted with violence and death.

In questioning his own freedom, Tommy also interrogates his position within the American nation. He identifies a series of gaps between written reality and the reality he experiences every day. First of all, while the American national anthem invokes freedom, he does not feel free. Secondly, while the United States is not officially at war, he personally feels like that he is living through a war. These gaps between the national narrative and his own story highlight his sense of isolation from the nation's ideals and, more pragmatically, from the protection of the state—which, despite its proclaimed principle of freedom, does not succeed in protecting him from harm and ensuring his liberty.


Tommy's reflections relate to a larger, regional and national context of discrimination. In particular, they evoke the anger that led to the Los Angeles Riots in 1992, in which members of the African-American community rioted against brutality at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department, the very institution that is supposed to protect them.

Part IV: Diary 43 Quotes

“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. Miep and Ms. Gruwell had had the same purpose all along. They wanted us to seize the moment. Ms. Gruwell wanted us to realize that we could change the way things were, and Miep wanted to take Anne’s message and share it with the world.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Erin Gruwell, Miep Gies

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

After Ms. Gruwell makes her students read a poem about each person’s capacity to change the world, this student feels that this is a powerful message but that it will never apply to her/his own self. However, when the class meets Holocaust survivor Miep Gies, this student realizes that Miep is sharing exactly the same message: individuals can succeed in changing the world. This message is based on Miep’s own experience, as she played a crucial role in hiding Anne Frank’s family and retrieving the young girl’s diary, therefore allowing for the entire world to feel inspired by her extraordinary story.


This student realizes that, with enough passion and moral commitment, individuals can save other people’s lives and effect social change. Like her/his classmates, s/he feels inspired to take on Anne’s message as her own and to fight for ideals of racial tolerance and respect. In this way, s/he changes her belief about the world, ultimately trusting that the world is not immutable, but that people can be successful in fighting against violence and injustice, and in making the world a better place.

Part IV: Diary 47 Quotes

“I have always been taught to be proud of being Latina, proud of being Mexican, and I was. I was probably more proud of being a ‘label’ than of being a human being, that’s the way most of us were taught. Since the day we enter this world we were a label, a number, a statistic, that’s just the way it is. Now if you ask me what race I am, like Zlata, I’ll simply say, ‘I’m a human being.’”

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Zlata Filipović

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

After Zlata gives a speech about the dangers of prejudice and ethnic hatred, some adult members in the audience still question her about her identity, perhaps trying to figure out which side of the conflict she was on. Irritated by these adults’ inability to see people outside of racial categories, she tells them that she is a human being, thereby provoking them to think beyond narrow categories and labels.

This student reflects on her own experience and concludes that she, too, has been taught to identify closely with her ethnic and cultural roots. However, inspired by Zlata’s story, she decides to abandon a narrow social identity in favor of a much larger, more inclusive one: humanity.

This choice renounces the social pressures of life (the need to identify as one specific group) in order to embrace an idealistic vision of human unity and cooperation. While this vision could be considered idealistic, this student and the rest of the Freedom Writers have experienced its effects first-hand, as the entire group has successfully become a family in which no one cares about anybody else’s appearance or social identity. Like Zlata, this student hopes that humans will one day be able to replicate this inter-racial unity not just in the classroom, but in society as a whole.

Part IV: Diary 48 Quotes

“When Zlata wrote about Bosnian children becoming the ‘soldiers’ and the soldiers becoming ‘children,’ at first I didn’t get her meaning. After hearing Tony’s story, I understood. In war the innocence of a child is lost, and though the soldiers fee theirs is a worthy cause, they behave like children when trying to achieve their goals. Knowing that a grown man entered a child’s bedroom stealing his innocence makes me sad.”

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Tony, Zlata Filipović

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

At the Croatian Hall, where Zlata is invited to speak, this student meets Tony, a young boy who was shot at point-blank range by enemy soldiers. This student, who had to flee terrorism in Peru when s/he was young, understands the loss of innocence that violence can engender, since she experienced it herself after a neighbor's house was bombed by revolutionaries. Following Zlata's interpretation of war, she concludes that violent means never justify the end.



This description of war is also directly relevant to many students' ordinary realities—in particular, the gang violence that many of them confront. In other diary entries, various students refer to themselves as soldiers forced to sacrifice their lives in the gang's fight for territory and power or, simply, to ensure their own survival. In this way, these ordinary students, too, have lost their innocence and are forced to behave like adults. Furthermore, the stories of domestic abuse or lack of caring which many of them recount demonstrate that the adults in their lives often behave like children when faced with their responsibilities as parents and caregivers.

While Ms. Gruwell's students are able to regain some freedom and innocence through diary-writing and feeling part of a caring community of Freedom Writers, it remains unclear how to restore this delicate balance between adults and children—and how to make aloof adults come to terms with their responsibilities.

Part V: Diary 54 Quotes

☝️ When I was born, the doctor must have stamped "National Spokesperson for the Plight of Black People" on my forehead; a stamp visible only to my teachers. The majority of my teachers treat me as if I, and I alone, hold the answers to the mysterious creatures that African Americans are, like I'm the Rosetta Stone of black people. It was like that until I transferred to Ms. Gruwell's class. Up until that point it had always been: "So Joyce, how do black people feel about Affirmative Action?" Poignant looks follow. "Joyce, can you give us the black perspective on *The Color Purple*?"

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Erin Gruwell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

The only black student in her honors class, this student criticizes the fact that, until Ms. Gruwell, her teachers have not seen her as an individual, but as a representative of her race. This attitude is racist, as it is blind to the differences that exist between individuals of the same ethnic group. Only Ms. Gruwell succeeds in proving that one's race or ethnic background has no relation with one's academic performance, as everyone should be free to express their thoughts based on their own opinions or experience, regardless of the way in which society categorizes them.

This student's humor is powerful in revealing her teachers' ignorance. At the same time, it also highlights the reality of racial divisions at school and in society at large. Indeed, her teachers' comments expose their ignorance, since, as the student humorously exaggerates, it seems that they need a language-learning program ("Rosetta Stone") to translate African Americans' words into their own language. This highlights the absence of inter-racial interactions in many people's lives, and the subsequent lack of understanding that results from it.

Part V: Diary 57 Quotes

☝️ What she showed me today is that a truly self-reliant person takes action, leaving nothing to chance and everything to themselves. She showed me that excuses will not bring about success and that adversity is not something you walk with, but something you leap over. The only obstacles are the ones you allow.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Erin Gruwell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This student has had to skip school because of his mother's illness and, as a result, has given Ms. Gruwell a self-evaluation of "F." Ms. Gruwell then gets angry at him, telling him that his pessimistic attitude is an insult to his own potential and to all the people who believe in him.



When he sees Ms. Gruwell's anger, he realizes that she truly cares about him and trusts in his success. This gives him a positive incentive to keep on working hard and on trusting in his own self. He realizes that, however difficult his life might be, he carries within him the strength and determination to persevere. It is by taking control of this

internal strength that he can become a responsible person, accountable for his actions, instead of someone who allows his external environment to define his self-worth.

Part V: Diary 61 Quotes

💬 I think it's about time men start respecting women, instead of degrading women to the point where it's unbearable. I don't know why women allow men to brainwash them and use their bodies as objects instead of cherishing them as if they were treasures. But it's never going to change until women start respecting themselves more.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Erin Gruwell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Ms. Gruwell organizes a debate about misogyny for her students, in which they have to debate the cover of one of Snoop Dogg's albums, in which a female dog is placed below a male dog, who is looking down at her naked behind. The girls in the class interpret this cartoon as a representation of men's sense of superiority and control.

Yet while this student agrees with this characterization, denouncing what she sees as men's typical behavior toward women, she also calls for greater autonomy and self-respect on women's part. She places an emphasis on individual decision-making, arguing that one's behavior is a matter of personal choice, but also recognizes the way in which people are liable to give in to external pressure, such as "brainwash." In so doing, she embraces the idea of holding oneself accountable, as one is directly responsible for the consequences of one's actions—and, in particular, the harm that these actions produce. She trusts that, with sufficient determination and good will, one can successfully change the way in which one treats (or is treated by) the opposite gender.


This activity demonstrates Ms. Gruwell's capacity to make her students reflect on long-standing societal issues by building on their pre-existing knowledge—in this case, hip hop culture and their own experience. She does not couch her teaching in abstract terms but, instead, makes these important issues relate intimately with her students' daily reality.

Entry 6: Ms. Gruwell Quotes

💬 Zlata said writing was her salvation during the war and it kept her sane. She suggested that writing might be one of the best vehicles for some of my students to escape their horrific environments and personal demons. Even though they're not held captive in an attic or dodging bombs in a basement, the violence permeating the streets is just as frightening—and just as real.

Related Characters: Erin Gruwell (speaker), Zlata Filipović

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Ms. Gruwell does not consider historical events separate from her students' current reality. Along with her students, she trusts that they, too, are suffering through a war—even if it is not officially called that in newspapers or in textbooks. This knowledge of her students' violent lives leads her to see them not as victims, but, instead, to trust that they are just as capable as Zlata Filipović or Anne Frank to transform their difficult circumstances into art and emotional relief—and, ultimately, to overcome them.



While Ms. Gruwell's students initially believe that violence must be fought with violence, she works hard to give them alternative outlets for their anger and fear. Writing has the double advantage of giving them the freedom to express themselves and cope with traumatic events, while at the same time giving other people who might one day read what they wrote emotional comfort from knowing they are not alone in their pain or suffering.


Ms. Gruwell's teaching methods are meant to address the problem of violence in society in general. Giving young people the means to make their voices heard in non-violent ways has the potential to avoid brutal explosions of long-suppressed anger, such as the Rodney King riots in 1992.

Part VI: Diary 69 Quotes

💬 Besides gang violence, domestic violence or spousal abuse is common. So common, in fact, that people ignore it, turn the other cheek, or go back to bed. I have watched men pistol-whip their girlfriends or smash their heads through car windows. Damn! I have seen a lot of crazy stuff. Stuff that makes me thankful it's not me. It's easier for me to pretend I don't live where I live or see what I see. [...] Writing about my pain will only make it worse.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker), Erin Gruwell

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

While some students achieve emotional healing by writing about harmful events they have lived through, this student is so overwhelmed by the negative influence of her/his environment that s/he is afraid to write about traumatic events. S/he describes growing up in a neighborhood where violence is so public and so widespread that people have become numb and indifferent to it.



In line with such indifference, this student's approach to violence is marked more by a logic of survival and avoidance than by direct emotional involvement. S/he seems to abide by the idea that confronting this violence emotionally or intellectually will only increase the harm it causes, affecting both the victim and the witness.

However, her/his mention of a few brutal events reveals her/his indignation at what she has seen and the fact that s/he cannot truly show indifference to violence. While s/he claims not to want to talk about it, writing a diary entry about the refusal to write is already a confession of suffering. It can, as such, be seen as the first step in coming to terms with past trauma—and, hopefully, in overcoming these difficult memories.

Part VIII: Diary 116 Quotes

☹☹ I believe that I will never again feel uncomfortable with a person of a different race. When I have my own children someday, the custom I was taught as a child will be broken, because I know it's not right. My children will learn how special it is to bond with another person who looks different but is actually just like them. All these years I knew something was missing in my life, and I am glad that I finally found it.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

During the Freedom Writers' senior-year trip to New York,

this student is forced to share a room with three girls who are each of a different race. While this student feels uncomfortable on the first night, she soon bonds with her roommates and realizes that their differences in skin color or ethnicity have no bearing on how well they are able to get along. She strongly rejects her father's suspicion of other races and commits to sharing with others what she has learned about interracial interactions.


Even though the Freedom Writers have been together for four years, it takes an intensely intimate experience with other students for this student to realize for herself that racial differences do not—and should not—matter at all in how people connect with each other. This reveals that concrete social experiences can have greater power than any classroom activity, as friendship forms bonds that delve deep into people's emotional lives, affecting their very sense of who they are and who they want to be.

Part VIII: Diary 136 Quotes

☹☹ "I know why the caged bird sings." For many people this might sound like a normal poem, but to me it's an analogy of my life. I sometimes feel as if I am a bird without wings and the door on my cage is not open. A bird doesn't sing because it's happy, it sings because it's not free.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

This student quotes American poet Maya Angelou to explain that he, too, "sings" by writing poems and diary entries. He describes the act of writing as an opportunity to escape his violent reality and thus establishes a clear connection between art and unhappiness or lack of freedom. His description of life is reminiscent of Anne Frank's diary, in which she compares her situation of hiding from the Nazis to being locked up in a cage.

However, even though this student claims that it is his lack of freedom that leads him to write, the act of writing itself is a form of freedom. Expressing himself freely and honestly is a courageous act in itself, allowing him to come to terms with his own dissatisfaction—and, perhaps, from this, to dream of bigger, better things.



Ms. Gruwell encourages her students to achieve such

intellectual and emotional freedom. She wants them to trust that they hold within themselves the power to overcome their difficult situations and that the act of writing (or “singing”) is an important step in making their lives richer and less violent.

Epilogue Quotes

Without the comfort of Room 203, they had to adjust to new environments and their newfound freedom. Initially the transition was difficult. Room 203 wasn't just a classroom, it was home, a safe haven. I realized that in order for them to grow, they had to branch out and explore new ground.

Related Characters: Erin Gruwell (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

Ms. Gruwell trusts so much in her students that she does not believe she is a necessary presence in their lives. Rather, she believes that part of her teaching should involve giving them the freedom to make mistakes and struggle with difficult moments so that they can choose a path for themselves that is entirely of their own making.


At the same time, she recognizes that the stability and emotional comfort her classroom provided played a crucial role in allowing her students to grow in the first place. Room 203 thus built the foundation on which they could construct the rest of their lives, applying the knowledge and self-confidence they acquired to any new aspect of their life.

Nevertheless, Ms. Gruwell did not use graduation as an excuse to abandon her students. She remained committed to her students' well-being in their new lives, as well as to the Freedom Writers' social and educational goals. In this way, she demonstrated that a true “home” might change, but never disappears.

Although I'm not an expert on the subject, I've always felt that all kids yearn to rebel. Understanding this rebellious nature, I encouraged the Freedom Writers to use a pen as a means of revolution. Through their writing, they discovered they shared a common identity, which united them into a community that connected them, not separated them from the world. Unfortunately, the young men in Columbine didn't share a community like the Freedom Writers. Instead, they were alone and on the fringe. Their cries for help fell on deaf ears. And rather than picking up a pen and finding a solution, they turned to guns and bombs instead.

Related Characters: Erin Gruwell (speaker), The Freedom Writers

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

Ms. Gruwell provides an explanation of the shooting that happened at Columbine High School, Colorado, in 1999. While she does not defend the shooters' actions, she aims to understand them on a social level. She compares the shooters' anger to the anger that her own students used to harbor, arguing that young people need strong guidance in order to transform their frustration into non-violent actions. In the absence of such guidance, violence is bound to emerge.


Ms. Gruwell identifies social isolation as a crucial factor. Her own students were separated from each other along racial lines and, often, isolated within their own families. In the absence of a stable support system and a mode of self-expression, they felt lost and were at risk of harming both themselves and others. Ms. Gruwell gave her students a tool through which to handle these various issues, so that they could express their emotions constructively, through diary-writing, instead of as violent explosions of anger.

In sum, Ms. Gruwell attempts to explain individual actions in terms of students' larger environments, and highlights the need for no student to be left uncared for—at school, in their family, and in society at large.

Afterword: Diary 1 Quotes

☝ I have faith in the system. I will continue to fight for change alongside students, teachers, and immigrants. And I will continue to write letters, attend political rallies, volunteer for campaigns, and collect voter registration forms, because that's how the Freedom Riders enacted change—not just by challenging the system, but by working with it.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

This Freedom Writer has encountered many obstacles throughout her life because of her status as an undocumented migrant. However, this legal constraint, which has caused her much suffering, does not lead her to lose faith in the possibility for the world to change. She trusts that, in the same way the Freedom Writers were inspired to do good after hearing other people's stories, politicians and law-makers can be inspired to tackle immigration reform if they hear more stories like hers.

Her attitude highlights the deep change that the Freedom Writers have undergone since their first year of high school. Since many of them viewed the law as a system that discriminated against them and failed to help them, they did not hesitate in taking the law into their own hands and using violence to defend themselves or express their anger.

Now, this Freedom Writer emphasizes, she trusts that social change might not happen from one day to the next, but that it can be the result of painstaking, determined commitment. Failing to connect to institutions and, through these institutions, to other people, only increases one's isolation and sense of hopelessness. Instead, one should trust in human compassion and believe that the future can bring progress.

Afterword: Diary 2 Quotes

☝ I hate going back to that place—the past, that is. I tried very hard to leave it behind me. Sometimes, I speak to adults who don't know what it's like; they just like our message. And I do the best I can, but I have to admit, going there hurts. I hate my former, abandoned-fourteen-year-old self, desperately seeking a reassuring hug. But if letting this student know everything is going to be okay means going to that place, it's worth it.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

This Freedom Writer has successfully escaped the poverty, abuse, and violence of his past, but explains that he remains haunted by these memories. In fact, these events are so present in his mind that they still cause him anguish when he thinks about them, as it feels as though he were reliving his childhood.

Part of the purpose in telling his story is to educate adults, making them more empathetic and knowledgeable about the various, potentially invisible social and economic realities that exist around them but that they might never confront in their own lives. This process mirrors Ms. Gruwell's own learning process with her students, as over the course of her teaching she became more aware of the challenges in her students' lives, so different from her own.

Another purpose of storytelling is the exact opposite: to give hope to people who find themselves in a similar situation. While this Freedom Writer resents the despair he felt as a child, he hopes to counter other people's despair with his own story, showing them that it is possible to escape even the most harrowing circumstances. In this way, he perpetuates the cycle of hope from which he benefited in Ms. Gruwell's class.

Afterword: Diary 6 Quotes

☝ In that mirror, I see a well-balanced person, someone who is accountable for his actions, has goals, and stands for something. I am someone my foster father is proud of, someone the Freedom Writers family is proud of, someone my spouse is proud of, someone my mother would be proud of, and, most important, someone I am proud of.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

After a difficult childhood in which this Freedom Writer was ultimately separated from his siblings, he has succeeded in building alternative families for himself. He draws motivation from wanting to make other people proud, and from knowing that he is a reliable person, capable of taking



responsibility for his actions.

However, his most important achievement remains separate from the rest of his environment, as he considers that what matters most is his own sense of self-worth. Without this, he would never be able to feel proud or to realize that many people around him appreciate and admire him. Only through his own self-confidence can he make sense of his actions, see them in a positive light, and strive to make himself accountable to his own high standards.

Afterword: Diary 7 Quotes

☝☝ So today when the bell rings, I'll think about the Freedom Writers and I'll tell my students, "I know class is tough and so is life, but I'm a tough teacher who molds tough students." Tough times don't last; tough people do.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

After a childhood immersed in gang violence, this Freedom Writer has become a teacher himself, knowledgeable about the challenges that his students face, as well as, most importantly, about their capacity to overcome them—even though they might not even be aware of such a possibility.

He aims neither to ignore his students' difficult lives outside of school nor to solve all their problems but, rather, to give them the power they need to survive and thrive in the face of adversity. Since life is made up of good and bad moments, one must learn to adapt to both. The key to this attitude is maintaining a strong sense of self, as well as a deep-seated hope in the future and awareness that hard times come and

go. He aims to inspire in them such resistance to hardship, giving them the tools they need to succeed.

Afterword: Diary 8 Quotes

☝☝ As I got older, people who heard my story would ask me how I dealt with the idea of death and dying. I would think about it for a minute and reply, "See, being poor, black, and living in the ghetto was kind of like a disease that I was born with, sort of like AIDS or cancer." It was nothing I could control.

Related Characters: The Freedom Writers (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

This Freedom Writer underscores the fact that, during his childhood, death and violence were not foreign to him. Rather, they were integral parts of everyday life—a fact which this student neither questioned nor felt any power to change.

Ms. Gruwell radically changed this attitude. While she did not put an end to violence in this student's neighborhood, she showed him that one's social and economic background do not have to be viewed as constraints. In the same way that one can fight AIDS or cancer, one can use one's difficult start in life to become a stronger person, committed to fighting for success, health, and joy.

While this former student and other children like him thus might not be able to control every aspect of their life, the elements they *can* control—their self-confidence and hope in the future—can make them more resistant to life's unpredictable events.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART I: ENTRY 1: MS. GRUWELL

The day before starting the school year as an English teacher at Wilson High School, Erin Gruwell reflects on the expectations she has of her job. Although Long Beach, where the school is located, has the reputation of being a hot spot for gang- and drug-related violence, Wilson is located in a safe neighborhood, and students who live in the so-called “hood” have to take multiple buses to get to school. Erin is excited about the socio-economic and cultural diversity of students that attend this school. At the same time, she notes that, since the Rodney King Riots, racial tension has been palpable in the school.

Erin recounts the previous year, when she was still a student teacher. Despite her efforts to make the classroom a color-blind space where differences between Asians, Latinos and African Americans (the majority of the student body) would not matter, she is soon forced to confront racial animosity inside the classroom. One day, one of her students draws a racist caricature of Sharaud, a black student, portraying him with large, protruding lips. Sharaud—a disciplinary transfer who was particularly intimidating and tough—is so upset when he sees the drawing that he breaks into tears.

When Ms. Gruwell discovers what happened, she becomes furious and tells her students that such stereotyping is unacceptable and that caricatures of this kind lead to such horrific events as the Holocaust. Soon, however, she discovers that most of her students don't know what the Holocaust is. She decides to use this episode as a teaching opportunity, inspiring her to focus her curriculum on tolerance and history. She buys new books and organizes field trips so that her students feel personally engaged in learning world history. In order to finance these activities, she works two extra jobs, at Nordstrom (a department store) and the Marriott Hotel.

On one occasion, when Ms. Gruwell brings her class to see *Schindler's List* at a movie theater where the audience is upper-class and white, the audience reacts with violent hostility to her diverse group of students. One of Ms. Gruwell's neighbors calls black people monkeys and tells her to marry one. The audience's reaction is so extreme that a local newspaper reports the incident.

Erin's excitement at her school's diversity reflects her powerful, idealistic vision of inter-racial and inter-cultural cooperation—an ideal she will work hard to make her entire class achieve. This idealism keeps her from recognizing the full extent of the inequality that characterizes Long Beach's ethnic diversity—both within and outside the school—as students from poor, minority backgrounds are discriminated against and often deeply misunderstood.



Sharaud's emotional reaction to the racist drawing is unexpected, given his background of violence and intimidation. This episode reflects the deep, insidious power that racism can have even on the seemingly toughest individuals. It also reveals the possibility that even the most unruly students can show their vulnerability—and, in that moment, potentially change, opening up to learning something new in the classroom.



Ms. Gruwell's decision to adapt her lesson plans after what happened in the classroom shows that her goal is not to force a rigid curriculum upon her students but, rather to make them feel engaged with the learning process itself, allowing what they learn to relate to their personal experiences. Her dedication to her job expresses itself beyond the classroom as well, as she sacrifices her own free time for her students' benefit, demonstrating courage and self-sacrifice.



Ms. Gruwell has to fight racial hostility outside the classroom as well as within it. The audience's reaction demonstrates many people's prejudicial beliefs about members of another racial group, as they identify Ms. Gruwell's diverse group as a potential threat, automatically linking racial difference with danger and violence.



After the news article is published, Thomas Keneally, the author of the book that inspired the movie *Schindler's List*, invites Ms. Gruwell and her students to one of his university seminars—after which they receive an invitation from Steven Spielberg himself, the director of the movie. Ms. Gruwell recalls that these artists were highly impressed by Ms. Gruwell's class, admiring the students' striking cultural and ethnic diversity as well as their academic achievements.

Despite these obvious successes, the school administration was hostile to these new developments and decided to separate Ms. Gruwell from her students the next year, arguing that Ms. Gruwell didn't yet have seniority to teach whomever she wanted. As a result, she now finds herself getting ready to teach an entirely new group of students: freshmen who have been labeled "at risk" and whom nobody else wants to teach. Inspired by her experience with such a difficult student as Sharaud, however, Ms. Gruwell optimistically trusts that she can teach anyone.

PART I: DIARY 1

In this diary, the student wonders on the first day of school how Ms. Gruwell could have been chosen to teach this class. S/he doubts that this white, upper-class woman will ever succeed in teaching this difficult group of students, in whom no one believes. Despite Ms. Gruwell's initially open and warm attitude, the student concludes that she will ultimately give up on them, just like everybody else. S/he notes that the class seems particularly undisciplined, and that many of the students come to school with guns in their pants.

When s/he notices a white student in the class, s/he sees that he seems completely lost, hoping that he has been assigned the wrong schedule. S/he notes that, for once in his life, this white student is going to have to learn what it means to be the minority. Anticipating boredom and noting that even s/he wants to leave this classroom, s/he sardonically concludes that Ms. Gruwell will last only a month in this class.

PART I: DIARY 2

As the only white person in this class, this student feels distressed and confused, uncomfortable at being stuck with difficult kids who come from bad neighborhoods. He feels that the class is unmanageable and that Ms. Gruwell will probably soon give up on this job. He describes the high school quad as a highly divided area, separated into groups according to race and ethnicity, as rich white kids, Asians, Hispanics, and African Americans each have their separate sections. These divisions are directly reflected in the classroom dynamics.

The interest that these famous artists take in Ms. Gruwell's group shows that not all of society is racist and prejudiced, but that Ms. Gruwell can also count on the support of powerful allies outside the classroom. The two men's positive impression of Ms. Gruwell's class is a testament to the class's success, confirming that Ms. Gruwell's teaching method is bearing fruit.



The school's hostility to Ms. Gruwell's achievements reveals that not all educators are devoted to her vision of innovative learning and cross-cultural solidarity. This is demonstrated in the very fact that the school has given up on some of its students, defining them in terms of their inability to learn and behave in the classroom. However, as Ms. Gruwell learned with Sharaud, teaching difficult students requires finding their weak spots, since these are the very spots where one can begin to break through their shell.



The student's belief that Ms. Gruwell's motivation will soon die out reveals a deep distrust in adults' care and commitment, which seems to be the result of past disappointment. Her/his sharp awareness of the teacher's race and economic status, as well as the violent attitudes with which some students come to class, highlights her/his immersion in a world of racial division and lethal violence.



This student's comments about the white student reflect a desire to see the racial inequality s/he has experienced reversed. Her/his cynical comment suggests resentment at the way in which minorities are usually treated in society, thus evoking an entrenched feeling of racial inequality.



This white student feels uncomfortable not only because of his race, but also because of his socioeconomic status—two characteristics that set him apart from the rest of the class. His feelings of discomfort are not surprising given the ethnic divisions that affect the entire school. Despite studying in the same buildings, it is apparent that the different groups do not interact.



The student decides that he needs to join another class, the Distinguished Scholars, which is predominantly white and where most of his friends are, so that he can safely be with people who look like him. He makes a plan for his counselor to transfer him to the Distinguished Scholars class. Even though he has a learning disability, which would normally prevent him from making such a change, he trusts that the fact that he is white will play in his favor. He believes that, if he stays, he will either get robbed or die of boredom.

This student's desire to join another class has less to do with his academic ability than with his race. This, in addition to the student's trust in the fact that his race will help him transfer away from Ms. Gruwell's class, points to the racial inequalities at play within the school system itself, as it seems that—at least in this student's mind—white students are given an advantage over other students.



PART I: DIARY 3

This student recounts being attacked on her/his first day, right after school, by a group of five people. While s/he is not scared, since s/he is used to this kind of violence, s/he expresses her irritation at her probation officer's decision to make her/him go to school. S/he compares school to the city and the city to prison, all of which obey strict racial divisions. Each racial group defends its territory. S/he explains that this is why, when the Asians started infiltrating certain parts of the Latino neighborhood, the Asians were bound to face violent consequences.

This student explains that the racial and ethnic divisions at school are not mere cultural divisions but, rather, separations established according to gang membership—divisions, then, that can determine one's very safety and survival. This student obeys—and expects others to obey—a simple law of retaliation, according to which any provocation should be violently punished.



When the students are about to beat her/him, she asserts, in a gesture of defiance, that her *barrio* (neighborhood) is the most important thing of all. S/he notes that, ironically, her Asian enemies dress and try to act just like her/him and her/his fellow Latinos. S/he declares a war on all Asians, concluding that the only thing that matters in life is one's appearance, which can get one beaten or killed. In this fight for power and territory, there is no mercy. Ultimately, the Asians will be brutally defeated.

The comparison between the Asian and Latino mode of acting and dressing suggests that, despite their different appearances, they share similar goals, experiences, and methods. In other words, they are more similar than they realize. Once again, the student advocates a strategy of violence and revenge, according to which one group must be crushed for the other to survive and thrive.



PART I: DIARY 4

On the second week of school, this student sees a fight break out, walks closer to the action, and is suddenly hit. S/he decides to hit back but is suddenly hit by a football helmet and loses consciousness. When s/he regains consciousness, everyone is running away from the school staff, which has come to stop the fight. Not wanting to be blamed for what has happened, s/he, too, runs away. S/he finds it unfair that, as a Mexican, s/he often gets blamed for things she hasn't done. Because of what s/he considers a senseless race war, any Mexican is automatically considered guilty, responsible for the actions of the entire group. After today's incident, s/he notes, the violence in Long Beach is bound to escalate.

The student's comment about being Mexican suggests that the fight was between students of different racial groups, as this student trusts that her/his identity will make her/him a potential culprit. Her/his understanding of the consequences of this fight demonstrates once again that violence at school cannot be separated from gang-violence outside of school, as school dynamics reflect pre-existing rivalries. There appears to be no solution in sight, as fighting simply leads to more fighting.



PART I: DIARY 5

This student describes the passing of the days as a nightmare, a series of violent events that end up forming part of ordinary reality. Every day, this student's mom prays s/he will come home safely. On the way back from school, however, s/he is chased by older people, simply because s/he is of a different race. As a result, s/he decides to get a gun, which is easy and relatively cheap to do.

S/he bring a gun to school and, on the way home, when s/he sees the usual aggressors waiting at the bus stop, s/he nervously takes hold of the gun, gets off the bus and starts walking away. Soon, s/he is followed by one of the men. When s/he points the gun at the man's head, he runs away. S/he hopes that this means the men won't cause further trouble. However, even though the men disappear for a few days, one day s/he sees someone following her/him from the other side of the street. The two of them suddenly pull out their guns and start shooting at each other. S/he describes the scene as being like a movie scene, except with real blood. After the enemy runs out of bullets, the two of them run away.

Now, s/he is no longer afraid, as s/he is no longer afraid to use a gun and forms a gang of her/his very own. While being part of a gang brings serious problems, so does being of another race. Therefore, the student concludes, it is better to protect oneself and, in the middle of such widespread violence, to avoid being the next one to die.

PART I: DIARY 6

A few days ago, this student attended the funeral of a friend, where the atmosphere was filled with the sadness of knowing that this is yet another victim of gang violence. At the same time, friends of the victim promises to seek revenge. As the days pass by and everyone's lives go on, the dead friend is slowly forgotten, as though he had never existed.

The student describes seeing his friend die. S/he was in a store when s/he heard gunshots and saw her/his friend run in, seeking shelter but already mortally wounded. Despite having done nothing wrong, the friend quickly died from his wounds. The student reflects that this friend had his whole life ahead of him and that he was just an innocent victim in a war that can affect everyone, at any time.

Race-related violence turns all individuals into potential victims and aggressors, as people are judged not on their actions but, rather, on their appearance. This student's fear and frustration at being involved in the conflict leads her/him not to hide but, rather, to face the conflict head-on.



While this student clearly does not want to be involved in violent conflict, but merely to be protected and walk home safely, the situation forces her/him to turn into a violent person, willing to harm somebody else for self-protection. The comparison of this scene to a movie emphasizes the surreal nature of a world in which life-or-death violence can erupt suddenly on the street on the way home from school. The scene is both real and unbelievable, absurd in the amount of violence and potential harm it contains.



The student's embrace of violence is not based on excitement or a fight for territory, but, rather, on pragmatic considerations of self-defense and survival. The ubiquity of firearms in her/his environment makes her/his choice seem logical.



The mix of sadness and desire for revenge at the funeral highlights the deadly effects of gang violence, with no end in sight: people die and other, potentially innocent people are killed in retaliation, leading to an endless cycle of violence.



The absurdity of this friend's death, which takes place in a seemingly ordinary setting, highlights the senselessness of gang violence, as it affects adults and children, boys and girls, gang members and non-gang members alike. The student denounces this injustice, arguing that it robs people of the chance to grow up and live a full life.



The next day, at school, the student carries a gun. The feeling of it against his/her skin makes him/her uncomfortable. S/he spends the entire day unable to do anything, unable to accept the injustice of this friend's death. S/he calls the violence that took her/his friend's life an undeclared war, endlessly pitting different races against each other and turning promising lives into mere statistics.

Once again, the student's response to pervasive violence is to use violence as self-protection, despite her/his discomfort at carrying a gun. This gang war leads to a loss of innocence, robbing both victims and witnesses of their childhood, as victims die and witnesses are often forced to engage in the violence themselves.



PART I: DIARY 7

This student has also just recently attended a friend's funeral. This event makes her/him realize that s/he needs to recruit more "soldiers" into the gang. A good recruit, s/he explains, should be willing to sacrifice their life to defend the barrio. S/he calls this kind of life a wild, crazy life in which all gang members are bound to kill or get killed, since leaving the gang is not an option.

Once again, this student uses the metaphor of war to describe life in a gang. People are not seen as individuals but as soldiers fighting for their side in a larger, ill-defined conflict.



The student compares "jumping" (i.e., gang recruitment) to baptism: the act of giving one's life to receive a new one. All new members, regardless of gender, receive a violent beating to prove that they are not weak and can be part of the gang. The student recalls being "jumped" and ending up in the hospital for three weeks. S/he concludes that this pain, along with all the life-or-death risks that one takes as part of a gang, is undoubtedly worth it.

Gang members must learn not only to inflict harm, but also to tolerate harm upon themselves. This inevitably normalizes violence, making it an ordinary part of life and of growing up. Pain and violence are seen as a means to an end, but this end remains vague and undefined—suggesting that perhaps there is no real goal besides the propagation of violence itself.



PART I: DIARY 8

This student decides to join a sorority, not—as she tells others—because it is fun or good for the community, but because she wants to fit in. Most of the members of the sorority are white, well-dressed, and upper-class. They are so powerful that people do everything they say.

This student associates being normal and powerful with a particular race and economic status, equating fitting in—abandoning a measure of individuality in the adoption of a group identity—as a form of power and authority.



While, at the beginning, the pledging process seems fun, she and one of her friends, Sarah, soon take part in an interview in which they are interrogated about their sexual experience. While the student herself doesn't have anything to share, her friend Sarah begins to cry when she is asked about her boyfriend. Instead of comforting her, the interviewers ask her more embarrassing, crude questions and show that they had prepared a cap with "slut" written on it. At the end of the interview, Sarah comes out crying and decides to drop out of the sorority. This decision leads the two girls to stop being friends.

As in gang initiations, where violence is physical, the sorority members use verbal and emotional violence to select which members are desperate or resolute enough to join the group. Despite being an all-girl group, the sorority humiliates girls for their sexual experiences, displaying not solidarity but cruel judgment toward their own future members. The fact that Sarah and this student stop being friends highlights the power of such groups to bond as well as alienate people from one another.



Later on, pledge night proves scary, as boys are also involved and everyone is forced to obey their orders. After the girls are told to lie on the ground, the student sees that one of her friends, Shannon, is made to kneel in front of a popular junior boy and move her head back and forth while he holds in front of him something that looks like a bottle. While Shannon is crying hard, the rest of the boys yell insults at her. When one of them sees the girl watching, he calls her a whore and tells her to lie back down.

At the end of the night, the student comes home physically and mentally exhausted, and covered in beer and raw eggs. Her mom is aghast when she sees her daughter's appearance, and the student herself begins to cry, realizing that she cannot get out the sorority since she has already gone through so much and doesn't want to end up friendless like Sarah. She feels relieved, at least, to not have been treated as badly as some other girls. She heard that one of the senior boys peed on one of the girls.

Now that she is in the sorority, though, she is primarily concerned with parties. She feels that, in the end, all the humiliation she had to endure was worth it, since everyone is nice now that pledging is over. She realizes that she probably wouldn't have dropped out even if something really bad had happened during the pledge, because she wanted so strongly to be accepted by the others.

PART I: DIARY 9

This student, who hates writing, is excited by Ms. Gruwell's homework, in which each student has to draw their neighborhood. However, s/he explains that s/he hates his own neighborhood, which is full of drug dealers, gang members, racial tension, and constant violence. S/he feels that s/he cannot hope for anything in life, because every opportunity seems so out of reach. Instead of engaging in violent activities, s/he chooses to tag walls. Even when s/he is at school, s/he writes and paints on walls, since neither the teachers nor her/his parents ever seem to truly want to help her/him or motivate her/him to succeed. Tagging, unlike school, gives this student an opportunity for self-expression, as s/he feels pride in what s/he has created.

The verbal violence displayed earlier in the pledge becomes more explicitly physical and sexual when girls are forced to perform sexual or pseudo-sexual acts for boys. The association of sex with shame and violence continues, affecting girls only, as Shannon is forced to yield to the boys' commands and accept their superiority.



This student's feeling that she cannot leave the sorority mirrors gang members' inability to leave gangs, as they face external dangers as well as the emotional cost of leaving their social group. She considers violence from a personal, self-interested perspective, relieved to not have suffered herself but not morally shocked enough about other people's experiences to do anything about it.



This student's desire for group allegiance proves stronger than her individual sense of self-protection or self-respect, as she is willing to endure pain and humiliation in order to join a larger group—a self-sacrifice strikingly similar to gang initiations.



While still engaging in an illegal activity, this student decides to express her/his frustration in non-violent ways. Violence affects her/him in the same way it affects gang members and victims, as it robs her/him of all hope, making her/him believe that life is an eternal cycle of violence and war. The student's isolation is emphasized by a lack of adult support and role models. Nevertheless, her/his yearning to be heard and seen is evident in her/his tagging, demonstrating a desire for people to pay more attention to her/his artistic self.



PART I: DIARY 10

On the day that Proposition 187 is announced, Latino and African-American students plan a walkout. The police arrive at school, as though a crime were being committed, and arrest a few students, while others gather in a nearby park. This student decides not to walk out but, instead, to express her/his feelings about the Proposition in Ms. Gruwell's class, where s/he feels listened to. The class discusses how the Proposition would affect illegal immigrants. This student, whose mother came to the United States illegally, feels that her/his life chances are being limited by this Proposition. The fact that "187" is the police code for murder makes this Proposition highly symbolic in the student's eyes, representing the symbolic murder of immigrants' opportunities.

Proposition 187 aims to prohibit illegal immigrants from accessing certain services, and is largely interpreted as a discriminatory measure against minorities—as this student describes when s/he feels personally affected by the law, even though s/he has done nothing wrong. This student's sense of safety in Ms. Gruwell's class demonstrates that critical conversation can be extremely powerful—even more so than symbolic protest. This shows the early success of Ms. Gruwell's teaching methods.



PART I: DIARY 11

A dyslexic student recalls his struggles with reading and writing. In particular, he recalls teachers' mocking remarks, as he was often called lazy or stupid for reading too slowly. When he was finally diagnosed with dyslexia, he was able to attend a school for dyslexic children, where he found comfort in the presence of other children like him. He felt that he could finally learn at his own pace.

This student's experience of humiliation suggests that many educators are more interested in punishing low-performing students than in finding ways to adapt the learning process to their pace. It demonstrates the rigidity of a traditional school system, in which students can feel isolated and judged instead of supported and cared for.



When he returned to high school after one year, he joined the baseball team and realized that the same children who used to mock him were now cheering him on. On his first day of school, in Ms. Gruwell's class, he feels that this new teacher understands and listens to him, even succeeding in making reading seem fun. She encourages him in his pursuit of sports, explaining that many dyslexic people compensate for being laughed at in school by performing well in athletics. Now, the student feels that he can succeed in both sports and academics.

This student realizes that success and self-confidence do not need to express themselves only in the classroom, but can be apparent in sports. Despite being an English teacher, Ms. Gruwell encourages her students to find their strengths in any passionate endeavor, as this can lead them to become better human beings and students. Her patience and commitment to this student's learning demonstrates her willingness to adapt to her student's individual needs.



PART I: DIARY 12

When Ms. Gruwell's students read the novel *Durango Street*, about Rufus, an African-American boy who spent time in juvenile hall, most students in the class can relate to the protagonist, since many have experienced jail personally or through family and friends.

Ms. Gruwell attempts to make her students feel personally engaged in the act of learning. Choosing novels where characters look like her students or have shared similar experiences is the first step in this process.



Before reading this book, this student felt ashamed of having gone to jail. During junior year, when he was attacked by a group of boys, he defended himself by hitting back, wildly kicking and hitting one of the attackers until he realized the boy was seriously wounded. When he was sent to the principal's office, no one was home to come pick him up at school, so he was sent to juvenile hall. There, he was treated like a criminal and surrounded by violent inmates who scared him.

He was only able to contact his parents on the third day and ended up staying in prison for five days, which felt endless and unbearable. When he finally got out, he still felt locked up. He had to do some community service and pay compensation to the boy he injured. Since then, however, he has vowed to—and succeeded in—staying out of trouble.

This student's experience with the criminal system seems deeply unfair, as he is punished for defending himself against violence and for having no one at home to come pick him up. This effectively transforms the student's vulnerability into guilt, making him responsible for situations over which he does not have full control.



The time it takes the student to contact his parents signals a relative lack of family support in his life, as it appears that his parents didn't even worry about their son's whereabouts. The student's good will is evident in his decision to avoid violence in the future, suggesting that his imprisonment was not the result of his own malice, but of unfortunate circumstances.



PART I: DIARY 13

This student is amazed at Ms. Gruwell's teaching methods and, in particular, at her activity of making the students turn *Durango Street* into a movie. Both this student and his friend want to play the part of Rufus. This student felt that he was a better choice than his friend, since he lives in the projects and has never known his father. While he was chosen for the part, he later realized that his friend, too, had grown up without a father. This allowed the student to understand why his friend had wanted to play the part of Rufus.

Making the movie allows the students to learn more about the book and about each other. The activity is so successful that students in other classes want to be part of Ms. Gruwell's class. Ms. Gruwell then takes her class to see *Hoop Dreams*, a movie where the characters—boys from the Chicago projects with a passion for baseball—feel strikingly similar to Ms. Gruwell's students. The movie proves that, with enough passion, people can achieve their highest dreams, even if everyone believes they are going to fail.

The students are given an opportunity to express their life outside of school in a school activity, therefore effectively turning an academic assignment into an emotional outlet and an opportunity for self-expression. In addition, it allows this student to learn more about his friend, therefore promoting empathy, team work, and cooperation in and out of the classroom.



Ms. Gruwell transforms an assignment into an opportunity to have fun and to socialize, proving that academic success is intimately tied to a positive atmosphere of cooperation in the classroom. Her goal is to inspire students to find themselves in other people's stories, so that they might come to believe in stories of success—inspiring them to believe in their own success.



PART I: DIARY 14

As Ms. Gruwell makes the students read "The Last Spin" by Evan Hunter, a story about rival gang members, this student feels excited about reading something that finally relates to his/her life. The protagonists in the story play Russian Roulette in order to decide which one of them should die. During the course of the game, they end up realizing that they share many things in common and that their rivalry is stupid. As a result, they decide to shoot their last round and end the game, but one of them dies during this final round.

The student's excitement at reading this story suggests her/his acquaintance with a world in which violent rivalry is the norm. The senselessness of the character's death in the short story evokes the senselessness of gang rivalry.



The student recalls a similar story s/he experienced. A group of boys from his/her neighborhood had just bought a gun and, while they were all looking at it, one of them accidentally pulled the trigger and shot himself. Everybody left after making the scene look like a suicide. When the dead boy's parents discovered what had happened, they did not believe their son had committed suicide. The student recalls that the boy had been a bully who used to intimidate him and pick fights with smaller children, but that he still didn't deserve to die, since he had just been playing innocently.

This boy's death demonstrates the gap between the serious, life-and-death consequences of firearms and the nonchalance with which these young people use them. It highlights the unintended consequences of a war that affects adults and children alike, where children die without even taking part in fighting.



ENTRY 2: MS. GRUWELL

Ms. Gruwell expresses her frustration with the various ordeals that happened last semester. She concludes that, instead of being frustrated with her students, she is actually angry at the adults, who have created a system in which these adolescents are automatically labeled stupid and incapable of learning. She finds the students' stubbornness amusing and describes their lack of commitment to homework. Because of the stigma associated with being a dedicated student, one student turns in his assignments wrinkled into a ball so that no one will know that it is homework.

Ms. Gruwell criticizes the education system's lack of trust in its students. She also recognizes that students' environments outside of school discourage learning. In sum, she identifies the strong, external pressures that her students have to face as the primary explanations for their low performance.



Despite the fact that most people have given up on them, including, often, their own parents, Ms. Gruwell decides not to give up on her students. She explains that, while they do not perform well on standardized tests, their intelligence expresses itself in other ways—for instance, through their knowledge of pop culture and their memorization of rap lyrics. She concludes that the best strategy is to focus on relating the classroom to their own life, using books and movies that tell stories with which they can identify. In this way, the student become passionate and engaged with the material they are discovering.

Ms. Gruwell understands that knowledge is not limited to what one learns in school but, rather, that passion and creativity can take myriad forms. Instead of ignoring her students' interest in pop culture, she works with this interest, using it as a foundation for their learning. This demonstrates respect for her students' intelligence, as well as the belief that passion and excitement lead to better learning. It also shows that intelligence is traditionally conceived of in culturally-specific terms, as certain books or works of art are revered above others, such as rap.



She plans to take them to see a movie about racial issues which is coming out at the end of the semester. She does not know if she would be able to manage the students outside of the classroom, but explains that she has the support of a millionaire, John Tu, who has been impressed by Ms. Gruwell's teaching strategies and past achievements. In the meantime, she plans on trying to make Shakespeare attractive to her students, focusing on the gang-rivalry plot in [Romeo and Juliet](#).

Despite Ms. Gruwell's occasional sense of isolation in the school system, where many educators do not share her innovative strategies, she counts on external support, proving that not everyone is blind to her success. Ms. Gruwell works hard to make complex, historical works of literature appeal to her students, using them as catalysts for thinking about real-life issues such as gang violence.



PART II: DIARY 15

When Ms. Gruwell compares the Capulets and the Montagues in *Romeo and Juliet* to the Asian and Latino gangs her students know, this student loudly expresses her/his opinion that the family feud in *Romeo and Juliet* is stupid. When Ms. Gruwell names the Long Beach gangs, the student is taken aback, since s/he believed that Ms. Gruwell would know nothing about gang life.

Ms. Gruwell then proceeds to ask the student if s/he believes that the Asian-Latino rivalry is stupid, too. S/he reacts by saying that it is an entirely different situation than that found in Shakespeare and expresses her/his frustration at Ms. Gruwell's stubborn effort to question everything. However, as the student thinks about it, s/he realizes that the rivalry between Latinos and Asians is indeed pointless, since s/he doesn't even remember how it all started. Nevertheless, s/he concludes that, even if the gang war only depends on tradition, people should still stick to their own sides. S/he feels that, however stupid the reasons for their fighting might be, there is nothing s/he can do to change it.

By making her students read about literary situations similar to their own, Ms. Gruwell forces her students to see their own reality from a distance and reflect critically on its dynamics. At the same time, Ms. Gruwell aims to show the class that she takes their reality seriously and is willing to educate herself about it.



The student's reaction to Ms. Gruwell's questioning is defensive, as s/he refuses to believe that the forces that drive her/his life are absurd. The student concludes that one should still abide by the rules of gang violence—probably because going against these rules can get her/him killed. Students' lack of trust in their own potential to affect history will change over the months, as they learn more about individuals who fought for what was morally right.



PART II: DIARY 16

When this student reads about Juliet killing herself for Romeo, she realizes that she would never do the same for her own boyfriend. She compares her story to Juliet's. Both she and Juliet had to hide their relationships from their parents. However, her own parents soon found her with her boyfriend. While her mother felt ashamed, her father was angry and punched her in the eye. She was violently dragged away from her boyfriend's house and told never to see him again.

Her parents made her change schools so that she would be farther away from him. When they discovered that she was still seeing him, they told her that, if she wanted to be with him, she had to wait until she was fifteen (the traditional age of maturity in her culture). Both she and her boyfriend decided to wait and stop seeing each other. In the end, she realizes that her parents were right, since she feels that she didn't even really know her boyfriend well.

*The parents' reaction to what they perceive as their daughter's misbehavior is violent. Instead of trying to understand her point of view and reason with her so that she might understand theirs, they use force to punish her, thereby failing to solve the root of the problem—similar to the situation in *Romeo and Juliet*, where strict prohibition led to the characters' deaths.*



This time, the parents use a cultural argument that the student can understand in order to modify her behavior. This method is infinitely more successful, as the student decides to stop seeing her boyfriend and, in retrospect, realizes that it was the right decision. This anecdote suggests that honest conversation is often more powerful than blind punishment.



PART II: DIARY 17

Ms. Gruwell makes her class play the “Peanut Game,” in which students have to describe the differences between the inside and the outside of a peanut. This student feels that this exercise relates to her own feelings about her weight. She remembers being called fat by other students, and even being viciously hit on the bus by a group of girls yelling insults at her. She did not understand why her friends didn’t help her. When she got off the bus, the girls spat at her from the window. She felt hurt and disgusted.

After the peanut game, she realizes that one cannot judge a peanut by its shell. In the same way, she feels that her own humanity connects her to everybody else, so that what other people say about her appearance ultimately doesn’t matter.

This student recalls being violently attacked and humiliated for the way she looks. The episode she recounts demonstrates the force of peer pressure, which makes everyone so desperate to fit in that they do not take the measures necessary to defend what is right—such as, in this case, helping out a friend who is being hurt.



This student finds comfort in the thought of her own similarity to everyone else, despite appearances—an important thought that will appear time and again throughout Ms. Gruwell’s teaching.

**PART II: DIARY 18**

While this student initially finds the “Peanut Game” obscure and irrelevant, s/he ultimately understands its message: that one should not care about the shape of a peanut, nor kill someone because of their skin color. After reflecting on the injustice and discrimination s/he has witnessed her/himself, s/he concludes that an obstacle to world peace is the fact that people cannot see through the shell and allow everyone to simply be peanuts by focusing on a person’s beliefs and worth instead of on the color of their skin.

This student establishes a direct connection between violence and appearances, suggesting that violence only attacks what is superficial in people, instead of seeing their true essence. She concludes that racial tensions and rivalries are absurd, since they reflect a misguided focus on appearances.

**PART II: DIARY 19**

This student expresses her indignation at a violent mass murder that happened in Oklahoma, in which a man, Timothy McVeigh, bombed a building to protest against the government. Ms. Gruwell makes her class write a report about this event and this student realizes that people are prone to violence, but that violence and fights only make matters worse. S/he concludes that everyone can be a potential Timothy McVeigh, but that instead of giving in to violence we should recognize that we are all human.

This student learns to separate emotions and opinions from actions, arguing that everyone is prone to violence, since everyone can feel anger and want to protest, but that one should examine the best way in which to express that anger carefully, so as to cause as little harm as possible. She believes that violence would stop if people recognized their essential similarity as human beings, worthy of respect and life.

**PART II: DIARY 20**

Ms. Gruwell takes her class on a field trip to see a movie, *Higher Learning*, about discrimination and prejudice. After the movie, they are able to talk to panelists who have become successful after overcoming many obstacles. This student recalls her favorite panelist, a Japanese man whose family immigrated to the United States but who, after Pearl Harbor, was sent to a Japanese internment camp.

Ms. Gruwell organizes an activity in which students can learn important principles and historical facts through direct contact with people. One of her strategies is for interpersonal communication to be the motor of learning, as her students learn and are inspired by other people’s experiences, which can remain vivid in their mind.



Similar to this panelist, this student was forced to live in an internment camp during the war in Cambodia. The living conditions were harrowing, as they had to endure health problems and often lacked sufficient food. The camp also destroyed her family, as it ended up turning her father into an abusive, uncaring man who has lost his dignity and self-worth. Like the Japanese panelist who, at ten years old, was considered an enemy, this student concludes that war destroys people's mental and physical well-being, simply because of prejudice.

This student explains that mistreatment can lead to lifelong trauma and turn victims such as her father into aggressors. Wars waged over issues of nationality or ethnicity have no other result, it seems, than to harm innocent people. It is this student's confrontation with a story similar to her own that leads her to recount hers, allowing her to fully understand and cope with the injustice she has suffered.



PART II: DIARY 21

After a panel on diversity, this student reflects on the extraordinary lives of the panelists, who were often discriminated against because of their nationality, economic background, or sexual orientation, but who were able to become successful individuals. The person who impressed this student most is Renee Firestone, a Holocaust survivor who later became a clothing designer in the United States. Renee's family was cruelly killed in Auschwitz, sent to die in the gas chambers. After Renee survived the camp, she left for the United States, arriving in the new country with only four dollars in her pocket. She concludes her presentation with the important injunction to never judge people collectively, since that is precisely what gave way to such a horrific event as the Holocaust.

Other people's success stories serve as inspiration for Ms. Gruwell's students, who realize that it is possible for individuals to overcome even the most difficult circumstances—presenting a narrative of individual success that they might not be used to. Renee demonstrates that one can be both successful and extraordinarily resilient without giving up one's values. She shows that one can draw useful lessons from difficult moments in the past and learn from them in order not to perpetuate the harm that one has suffered. Revenge, she concludes, is not the solution.



After the panel, the students are able to dine with the panelists at the Century City Marriott, where Ms. Gruwell has special advantages since she works there on the weekend. At dinner, Renee shows the student the tattoo she was given to identify her during the holocaust and tells the story of a person whose doctor told her to suck the ink out of her tattoo because her number was going to be called that day. This student realizes that everything s/he experienced today is connected to what they have been learning in class, and feels deeply inspired by the people she has met, who make the books they have read come to life.

Renee's story about the doctor demonstrates that not everyone working for the Nazis was an evil person. Her injunction never to judge a group of people collectively thus applies to the victims as well as the perpetrators of crimes during World War II. This student realizes that hands-on experiences such as this one, in which historical events come to life, is an important complement to school, making classroom work more convincing and memorable.



PART II: DIARY 22

This student is amazed by the fancy dinner she was able to enjoy with her classmates at the Marriott. She describes with detail the decorations, the food they were served, and even the soft paper towel in the bathrooms. When the millionaire John Tu sits at her table and wants to let the students talk, she is amazed that he is actually paying attention to her, when no one else in her life ever seems to. She feels that John Tu treated her better during this dinner than her dad ever has in her entire life. When she returns home, she realizes that she feels something lacking from her life, more important than any material thing: love and care from her dad.

While the student is amazed by the material riches and refinement displayed at the Marriott, she ultimately realizes that this is not what has truly made her evening enjoyable. Rather, what she appreciated most was feeling listened to. This demonstrates the intense need children have for adults to hear and respect them, and the important responsibility that adults have toward children. Throughout the book, many students express a similar sense of being abandoned by adults.

**PART II: DIARY 23**

This student realizes that she has changed enormously since the beginning of freshman year. When she returned from a three-week period of not going to school, Ms. Gruwell interrogated her about why she had been gone for so long. The student, who felt powerful after avoiding school, was afraid that Ms. Gruwell might contact her parents. Her mother has always encouraged her to go to school because no one else in her family has had that opportunity.

This student's rebellious behavior demonstrates that receiving strong parental support to pursue one's education is not always a strong enough motivation for one to perform well at school. Negative incentives (in this case, fear of her parents) were apparently not sufficient for her to want to attend school.



Once, when she was caught smoking at a friend's place, the police came and she was sent to juvenile hall. When she called her mom, she lied to her, so that her mom would not know the details of what happened. When Ms. Gruwell tells this student that, despite her very low GPA, she believes in her, the student is deeply moved, realizing that no one has ever told her that. Ever since Ms. Gruwell has showed that she cared for this student, this student, too, has started caring for herself, has stopped skipping class, and has even begun to enjoy school. She is excited to spend next year with Ms. Gruwell again.

Ms. Gruwell demonstrates the power of positive incentives. This student feels more motivated to work hard at school by Ms. Gruwell's positive words of trust and encouragement than by any form of punishment. In saying these words, Ms. Gruwell gives the student the opportunity to believe in her own worth and to work hard not merely to please others, but to honor her own self. The transformation this student has undergone highlights the power of such self-confidence.

**ENTRY 3: MS. GRUWELL**

Despite Erin Gruwell's striking success with her difficult group of students, she feels criticized, envied, and ridiculed by the other teachers, who make fun of her upper-class appearance, thus labeling her without knowing her in exactly the same way they labeled her students. When Erin discovers that a fellow teacher has looked into her private e-mail, she decides that she wants to leave Wilson High.

The other teachers' hostility to Erin's teaching methods suggests that many teachers are more concerned with other issues than the well-being of students at school, demonstrating childish intolerance toward what they do not like or understand.



When Erin tells the principal that she is planning to leave, he is shocked and tells her that her students will be disappointed. At that moment, Erin realizes that she has been hypocritical and that she, too, has stereotyped all teachers into one category when, in fact, several teachers have been supportive of what she has done with her class. She also realizes that, if she leaves Wilson, her children will be the ones to suffer the most and will conclude that she, too, like so many adults around them, has given up on them.

Erin decides to stay at Wilson and, in addition to her original class, is given new groups of students whom no one else wants to teach. She realizes that what many of these students lack is hope, as some of them even believe that they are more likely to die before they are sixteen than to graduate.

Adapting herself to her students' life stories and interests, Erin plans a curriculum that will keep them engaged. She chooses the diaries of two adolescent girls of the same age as her students, Anne Frank and Zlata Filipović, because she believes her students will be able to relate to their stories of survival in brutal wars filled with ethnic hatred, given their own knowledge of racial divisions and gang violence.

Erin applies her own teaching to herself, realizing that she has failed to notice the subtle differences among individuals. Erin decides to stay out of a sense of moral and social responsibility toward her job and her students, realizing that her professional decisions affect many people besides herself.



Erin once again trusts that students do not misbehave or perform poorly out of malice but, rather, that they are the reflection of their environment, which does not give them trust and self-confidence but, rather, fear and hopelessness.



Erin once again adapts her teaching to her students' lives and interests, making sure to choose works that will interest them on a personal level and, as such, allow them to remain intellectually and emotionally engaged in classwork. In doing so, she trusts that her students will benefit from reading classic works of literature such as Anne Frank's diary.



PART III: DIARY 24

This student wakes up at five in the morning and, when s/he hits her alarm clock, realizes that s/he is sleeping on the floor. S/he goes to the bathroom and begins to cry in the shower. S/he goes on to explain that, during the summer, her/his mom and s/he were evicted from their home, because she did not have enough money to pay for the rent. The two of them were taken in by one of their pastor's friends.

As s/he waits for the bus to go to school, s/he sees flashbacks of these events and feels that it must somehow be her/his fault, because s/he always asked for expensive gifts at Christmas. By the time s/he is on the second bus in her/his journey, s/he wonders why s/he is even going to school, since s/he cannot even tell her/his friends what happened over the summer. Unlike everybody else, s/he has no new outfit or haircut to show her/his friends, and feels ashamed.

This student describes the emotional toll that poverty and homelessness can inflict. Despite somebody else's kind gesture to take them in, it remains obvious that the student and her/his mother long to have a home of their own.



This student's sense of guilt about her/his family's economic situation reflects the sadness and shame s/he feels from having lost their home. These thoughts reflect the adult responsibilities that have been placed on her/his shoulders because of these difficult circumstances. These adult concerns contrast sharply with the adolescent's worry about not fitting in at school, showing the gap between her/his life in and outside of school.



By the time s/he reaches the classroom, extremely nervous, s/he realizes that her friends are still friendly and kind, and that s/he feels welcomed. S/he realizes that Ms. Gruwell gives her/him hope about the future and that being in her classroom makes her/him forget about all her/his problems and feel at home.

Ms. Gruwell's class gives this student a sense of comfort and acceptance that s/he had not expected, proving that what happens in school can affect her/his general state of mind and happiness, making her/him more confident about the future.



PART III: DIARY 25

This student, who has a lung disease, cystic fibrosis, is forced to spend a few weeks in the hospital, even though school has just started. He is waiting for a lung transplant, without which he would only have a few years left to live. He says that she will miss his friends and Ms. Gruwell, who have been very supportive, and that school is one of the few things he loves.

This student is forced to face death in a completely different way from others, as the threat of death comes from within him, not from the unfair violence of the streets. As a result, this student's attitude is much more serene, as he proves grateful for the joys that life brings him.



PART III: DIARY 26

This student who has just been transferred to Ms. Gruwell's class feels resentful and excluded from the rest of the other students, who already know each other. S/he is happy to escape being called on to participate in a role-play based on [Twelve Angry Men](#). S/he wonders why Ms. Gruwell makes her students participate actively in the classroom and why she can't be boring like all the other teachers.

This student's lack of enthusiasm demonstrates her/his fear of not fitting in and having to participate in activities with a group of people s/he doesn't know. At the same time, it also highlights Ms. Gruwell's achievements, as this student notes that this classroom feels unlike any other s/he has been in, in terms of both camaraderie and intellectual stimulation.



PART III: DIARY 27

This student feels that murder is everywhere s/he looks: on the television, through the O. J. Simpson trial, and in the classroom, through the play [Twelve Angry Men](#). Her/his brother is undergoing a similar experience, as he is being judged for murder.

This student realizes that what happens at school cannot be divorced from "the real world," thus implicitly demonstrating Ms. Gruwell's success at addressing her students' daily experiences in the classroom.



The student expresses anger at what happened. Even though her/his brother was innocent, the friend he was with confessed his crime to a person who did not have the legal ability to record the confession. As a result, unlike in the case of O. J. Simpson or in [Twelve Angry Men](#), the student's innocent brother ended up being condemned for murder, proving that justice does not actually succeed in defending the innocent.

This student's resentment demonstrates the complexity and unfairness of reality when compared to fiction or to a highly sensationalized trial. Her/his view of justice is entirely colored by her/his own experience, proving the effect that personal experience on shaping opinion—a mechanism that Ms. Gruwell tries to exploit in positive ways in the classroom.



PART III: DIARY 28

This student has been in a program for gifted children ever since s/he has been at school. However, when s/he joined the highest program in her/his district, s/he felt overwhelmed by the workload and unable to truly learn at her/his own pace. When s/he transferred to the Distinguished Scholars program at Wilson High School, s/he still felt uncomfortable—this time, because the teachers and students all believed they were superior to the rest, because they were white, wealthy, and took difficult classes. Despite sharing the same characteristics as the other students, this student still felt uncomfortable.

When s/he discovered, through a friend, that Ms. Gruwell was making her students put on plays to make what they read come to life, s/he asked to change classes. Since then, s/he feels included in an exciting learning process, where the teacher actually cares about her students and speaks to them as equals, without adopting an air of superiority.

This student is dissatisfied with the education system, in which talent is rewarded by unmanageable amounts of work, instead of fun, engaging activities. In addition, s/he demonstrates humility and, despite not being personally discriminated against, a strong awareness of racial injustice. S/he believes that education should not focus only on grades, but also on a classroom atmosphere of cooperation and modesty.



Ms. Gruwell gives this student what other classes haven't: passion and enthusiasm for learning, as well as a feeling of equality among students and between students and teacher. These elements cannot be directly quantified like grades, but play an essential role in the student's learning experience.



PART III: DIARY 29

When Ms. Gruwell decides to make her students more excited about the legend of King Arthur by telling them that those who pass the final exam will attend a field trip to a medieval-themed restaurant, this student and his classmates feel incentivized to work hard. However, over time, he realizes that the learning process itself becomes more interesting than the reward, and feels proud to be able to understand a great work of literature.

When he and his classmates pass the test, he feels immensely proud of his accomplishments. However, before the field trip, another teacher tells this student and one of his friends that they will have to wear a tie and not look like gangsters to be accepted at the restaurant. The student feels that he is being discriminated against because of his race but still decides to dress up, despite not owning a tie. However, on the day of the field trip, the teacher tells his friend and him they cannot get on the bus, and the two of them leave, deeply disappointed to be excluded from this event simply because of their appearance.

When Ms. Gruwell learns what happened, she gets angry at the other teacher and recognizes the injustice that the student felt. The other teacher ends up apologizing but the student still feels that he cannot forget what happened. He still feels disgusted about being judged for his appearance.

Ms. Gruwell's reward system proves successful, demonstrating not only that it can be good to give students positive incentives to work hard, but also that, once they begin to work hard on something, passion naturally follows—thus proving to students that they are capable of finding complex literature interesting and intelligible.



This teacher once again demonstrates that some educators care more about their students' appearance than their academic merit. The fact that such discrimination happens at school only emphasizes the students' feelings of exclusion and inequality. This episode makes it easy to understand how students can be discouraged from investing their energy in schoolwork.



Ms. Gruwell's defense of her students demonstrates her courage to stand up for what is right instead of letting adults mistreat children. The sense of injustice that the student still feels highlights the long-lasting effects of racism on one's trust and self-confidence.



PART III: DIARY 30

This student has heard other students make mean comments about her bad eyesight. One day, she decides that she cannot accept such comments anymore and answers back when a girl makes fun of her. As the two girls fight, the student slaps her, furious, and has to be separated from the other girl. When she tells Ms. Gruwell about the incident, Ms. Gruwell tells her that finding a racist caricature of one of her students ultimately made her become a better teacher. This student hopes that this episode, too, can make her a better person.

This student's reaction to a girl's mean comments reflects both a positive desire to defend herself and show self-respect, and a negative embrace of violence as a means of doing so. Ms. Gruwell, however, does not condemn the student for what she did, instead telling her that one can learn from difficult episodes, transforming them into opportunities for growth and change.

**PART III: DIARY 31**

When Ms. Gruwell organizes a special “Toast for Change” event for her students, encouraging them to find a way to change and become a better person, this student notices that everyone else is crying but does not understand why. Ms. Gruwell then distributes copies of the books the class will read over the course of the semester, and this student is moved by the fact that these books are brand new. Ms. Gruwell explains that these books are about adolescents like them who go through difficult times and try to succeed.

The students' emotion at being given a second chance and at receiving new books shows that Ms. Gruwell is doing something unprecedented in their lives: giving them the opportunity and the tools to believe in themselves, trusting that they are worthy of being taken seriously—both by themselves and by the people around them.



This student understands that Ms. Gruwell is giving her students an opportunity to turn their lives around for the better, committing to becoming the people they want to be. This student feels extremely grateful for this opportunity, and vows to become neither a drug addict nor to get pregnant at an early age and drop out of school—the very expectations that many people have of her.

This opportunity for change allows the students to trust in their own selves instead of what others say they are (or are not) capable of. The fact that these teenagers are so moved by this opportunity to change reflects the way in which their environments have corroded their highest hopes and dreams.

**PART III: DIARY 32**

It has been a year since this student's two best friends died, killed while trying to commit a robbery. When he realizes that, in the time since these deaths, the younger children in the barrio have come to look up to him and his friend as role models, he realizes that he wants to be a positive model to other people and help his community. His neighbors now adore him, but he still feels sadness at knowing that it took two people's deaths for him to change so drastically. He realizes that he is lucky to have been given the opportunity to change.

Despite the negative influence of the violence in his neighborhood, this student is buoyed by the expectation that he be a role model to young children. This demonstrates this student's ability to learn from the past in order not to repeat others' mistakes—precisely the message that Holocaust survivor Renee Firestone has sought to spread.



PART III: DIARY 33

This student recalls having to participate in a trial as a witness and being told that she should protect her own group, her “blood.” She knows that she has to lie to protect Paco, her friend, who killed a man to protect her—in the same way that she is expected to give her own life to protect anyone in her group. In the courtroom, all her family and friends have come to support her and protect her from what the other side might do to her after the trial. She realizes, though, that she is not afraid of her rivals sitting on the other side, since she has already had to confront them violently in the past.

When she sees the accused boy’s mother in the audience, who looks desperate, is crying, and holds a little girl on her lap, she realizes that this black mother is just like her Mexican mother, and that she could be that little girl. She remembers herself as a child, desperate at not being able to get her father out of prison. The similarity of these two situations makes her feel pity and compassion for this woman, whose son could be unjustly condemned and sent to prison for years.

When the lawyer asks her who shot the man, she looks at Paco and sees the trust on his face, as he knows that she is going to lie for him. However, she begins to cry and Paco’s confidence falters. She remembers her mother’s words, when she told her that she was in the same position as the man who sent her innocent father to prison, and feels the courage to tell the truth. She looks Paco in the eyes and tells the lawyer that Paco is the true murderer.

This student proves relatively invulnerable to the threat of violence. She is not scared but, instead, is busy considering issues of group loyalty and self-sacrifice. The logic of loyalty to family and friends is not based on the moral content of their actions, but on the simple logic of protection and revenge—a logic that does not conform to the ideal of justice that she is supposed to respect in the courtroom.



This student discovers her own concept of fairness and justice not through abstract theories, but by seeing the direct consequences of harm on another family. Her ability to identify with this black mother reflects her knowledge that, despite their different ethnicities, members of rival gangs share the same experiences—and that it is this experience, not the color of their skin, that should be honored and respected.



This student finds that her compassion for a family that has been wronged proves stronger than the need to protect her own group. Whereas group loyalty is often based on the negative emotion of fear (since she would not want to be seen as betraying her own people), her courageous action to tell the truth is based on a positive emotion: the trust in justice and morality.



PART III: DIARY 34

This student feels disappointed in herself, explaining that while everyone, including Ms. Gruwell, sees her as a good student, she knows that she is unable to change her bad behavior—unlike everybody else in class who, since the “Toast for Change,” has been changing for the better. She explains that she is a secret alcoholic, unable to tell anyone about her drinking problem or to stop drinking, out of fear that people will not like her when she’s sober.

She describes her day, during which she pours vodka in her orange juice. She chews gum to keep anyone from noticing that she is drunk, and neither Ms. G nor her best friend notice. One day, she almost drowned in the swimming pool because she was drunk. When Ms. G’s class started reading books about change, she felt guilty and hypocritical. She compares her situation to that of Anne Frank, except that she is the one hurting herself. She wonders if she will ever manage to be free.

This student’s idealized view of everyone’s change in the class highlights her sense of isolation, but also demonstrates her feeling of being accountable to an entity greater than her: her teacher and the entire class. Despite her fear of telling people, she is already writing about it in her diary, therefore demonstrating her desire to at least acknowledge her problem.



Unlike other students’ interactions with violence in the street, this student’s violence is oriented toward her own self. Her ability to find parallel stories in the literary world and to compare her experience to others might make her feel bad, but it nevertheless forces her to address the complexity and danger of her problem, which might well constitute the first step in trying to solve it.



PART III: DIARY 35

After reading [The Wave](#) by Todd Strasser, in which an influential student convinces others to behave like Nazis, this student reflects on her own experience with peer pressure and her desire to fit in. Once, when she heard her friends talking about shoplifting, she felt that she, too, had to shoplift to be cool. She went to the supermarket with her parents and was caught stealing make-up by the security guard. The experience left her shocked and deeply humiliated. She felt that she was being treated as a criminal.

As she left the supermarket, she realized that trying to impress her friends was silly, since her friends weren't even there to see her and she could get anything she wanted from her parents. At home, her parents talked with her and made her feel upset. She realized that she had disappointed them, and that she had behaved like someone she was not. She vowed never to do anything like that again.

Once again, Ms. Gruwell's choice of literature proves particularly impactful for her class, since this student uses a book to reflect on her own actions. This student evokes the difficult balance between fitting in, adopting a group identity, and remaining true to her own self. This tension is evident in the humiliation she feels when she tries to blindly imitate her friends' actions.



Her parents force her to realize that she is accountable both to herself and to them. However negative her experience might have been, she finds positive inspiration in the knowledge that she must remain true to herself and not act according to other people's actions or beliefs.



PART III: DIARY 36

This student expresses frustration at Ms. Gruwell for having to read books about people who do not look like him/her and with which s/he has nothing in common. Ms. Gruwell tells the student that s/he cannot judge a book s/he hasn't even read. In the end, after reading Anne Frank's diary, the student concludes that Ms. Gruwell was right. S/he was indeed capable of identifying with the protagonist, as s/he too has experienced the pain of discrimination and the feeling of being locked up in a cage.

This student realizes that superficial differences such as people's skin color, nationality, or the historical period they live in have no bearing on one's capacity to empathize with—and learn from—other people. This student thus comes to terms with the fact that human beings share many similar emotional experiences, which the act of sharing stories can bring to light.



PART III: DIARY 37

This student reflects that she has a lot in common with Anne Frank and Zlata Filipović. Like these two young girls, she feels trapped in a cage: her house, where her father is uncaring and tyrannical. She compares the war in her home to Hitler's reign in its blind embrace of stupidity, hatred, and violence. While this student does not live in a concentration camp, she has seen her father almost beat her mother to death, leaving her face unrecognizable, and sell their belongings for drugs.

This student uses what she has read as a tool to understand and describe her own reality. Her comparison of World War II to domestic violence—two completely different situations—highlights the fact that violence, fear, and injustice are universal elements of human experience, however differently they might express themselves in one situation or the other.



She ironically comments that it is to this brutal, ignorant man that she is traditionally supposed to turn for advice. She trusts that her mother has the strength within her to leave her father, and vows never to tolerate such abuse herself in her life. She tells herself she will wait for the end of the war but will remain strong and not let herself die or be abused.

This student compares her situation to a war, but does not lose trust in her and her mother's ability to find the strength within themselves to survive and escape the violence. She holds her father accountable for his actions and thus rejects the traditional idea of family relations and its hierarchy between child and parent.



PART III: DIARY 38

As Ms. Gruwell's class compares Zlata Filipović's experience of war in Bosnia with Anne Frank's life during the Holocaust, this student realizes that, like Zlata, s/he too saw her city under siege during the Los Angeles Riots. After the policemen accused of beating Rodney King were acquitted, people reacted violently in protest, destroying property, setting off bombs, and shooting each other based on the color of their skin. Like Zlata, this student lost her innocence when she was forced to hide from such intense hatred and violence. Even though the National Guard ultimately put an end to the riot—like the UN's intervention in Bosnia—the ethnic hatred is still palpable, and the intolerance has not gone away.

This student realizes that extreme, race-related violence can be motivated by hatred (as in the case of the Holocaust and the Bosnian war) and anger (as in the case of the 1992 Rodney King riots). This student's comparison of her/his situation with important historical events shows a growing awareness that s/he, too, is a historical actor, whose story should be taken seriously and whose dignity should be preserved.

**PART III: DIARY 39**

When this student reads journalist Peter Maass's article about the rape of Bosnian women during the war, she expresses her fury and indignation at the fact that so many women around the world experience sexual assault. Her memory returns to her own experience: when she was six, a friend of her father's molested her in his home. She has never been able to share with anyone, but merely thinking about that experience gives her chills.

Once again, what students read in class impacts them emotionally, making them more receptive to the information they read and to the content of their own lives. This student's reckoning with a memory of abuse constitutes a first step toward healing—and potentially, toward helping both herself and others.



Looking around her, she realizes that many women probably share such stories. She feels grateful to Maass to have written this article, so that more people know about these problems and people who have experienced sexual assault might feel less alone. Thinking about the war in Bosnia and the Holocaust, she realizes sadly that history does indeed repeat itself.

This student realizes the social and emotional power that storytelling can have on people: on the Bosnian women who find their experiences brought to public attention, on herself, and on all the other women like her who might find comfort in knowing that they are not the only ones to have experienced sexual violence.

**PART III: DIARY 40**

This student has just transferred into Ms. Gruwell's class and doesn't understand the conversations students are having about Zlata, nor their confidence that they can understand what it feels like to live through a war. When s/he realizes that many of the students are indeed living through an undeclared war, s/he begins to understand that society doesn't care about these children, who are bound to grow up in an atmosphere of violence and hatred.

This student's surprise at hearing about her classmates' violent environments demonstrates the huge gap that exists even between people who go to the same school and live in the same city, but whose social and economic situations are vastly different. S/he is angered at the injustice inherent in the media's focus on one type of experience over others, which makes certain people's lives invisible.



Ms. Gruwell gives the students an assignment to write a letter to Zlata inviting her to come to Long Beach. The student is shocked to note that when someone asked if Zlata was actually going to come, Ms. Gruwell actually takes the question seriously and discusses logistical issues that would come up. Ms. Gruwell reminds her students that she has never let them down, and this student feels hope at the thought that Zlata might actually come.

This episode demonstrates yet another moment in which Ms. Gruwell adapts to and learns from her students, taking their intellectual interests and personal desires seriously, instead of immediately writing them off as unfeasible. Her considerations about inviting Zlata reflect her optimistic belief that all ideas are potentially feasible, through hard work and passion.



LETTER TO ZLATA

Student Tommy Jefferson's letter to Zlata begins by stating that, despite the United States' pretension to freedom, this country is not free at all. He compares his life to Zlata's, explaining that he too is forced to avoid gunshots on a daily basis, and has seen friends and family of his age die from such violence. He concludes that his country almost seems to be in a war.

This student's letter reflects his disillusionment with his own country, which has failed both to protect him from violence and death, and to allow him to enjoy a carefree childhood. He denounces a hypocritical gap between what the United States proclaims as its ideals and the actions it takes (or fails to take) to defend its most vulnerable citizens.



Tommy describes the pain he feels at having seen two close friends die senseless deaths and the fact that these deaths go unnoticed, as the media never reports such events. While he is sometimes moved to take revenge, he knows that this would not solve anything. He tells Zlata that her story has moved him to tears—a rare feat—and that he would like to invite her to the United States to share his own experience of war and lack of freedom.

Tommy notices the injustice that such horrific events as young people's violent deaths are not reported in the media. Nevertheless, despite his sense of isolation and sadness, he has not given in to violence himself, nor lost hope in finding courage and inspiration in life, as his reaction to Zlata's story demonstrates.



ENTRY 4: MS. GRUWELL

Ms. Gruwell describes the startling process of change that her students have undergone since the "Toast for Change." Tommy, in particular, has impressed her by reading all the assigned books. Before then, like Sheraud, he was an intimidating disciplinary transfer who even scared Ms. Gruwell a little. To celebrate Tommy's achievements, Ms. Gruwell gives his father a call, surprising him by delivering good news instead of the bad news he is used to.

The change Ms. Gruwell has noticed in her students is not only one of general attitude or social behavior. Rather, the emotional connection that students have been able to find with certain books has even led them to perform better academically. Ms. Gruwell's phone call to Tommy's father demonstrates her belief in positive reinforcement and making everyone in the students' lives supportive of their achievements.



Cheered by her class's enthusiasm, Ms. Gruwell ends up typing her students' letters to Zlata and considers sending them to her. She agrees with her students, concluding that there is indeed a war taking place in Long Beach—one that makes her students feel that their lives are tragic and that the violence cannot be stopped. Ms. Gruwell and her students engage in a shared effort to raise money and, when Ms. Gruwell finally finds what might be Zlata's address, she sends the letters to her.

Ms. Gruwell demonstrates her own capacity to learn from others when she accepts her students' descriptions of their environment as a war. At the same time, she refuses to give in to her students' fatalistic attitude, instead trusting that small actions such as raising money for Zlata to come are efforts that promote non-violence and give the students' hope in their capacity to achieve anything.



In the meantime, taking advantage of Holocaust survivor Miep Gies's upcoming trip to California, Ms. Gruwell plans for the historical figure to come meet her students. Gies was Anne Frank's father's secretary and was responsible for finding Anne's diary. To prepare for this visit, Ms. Gruwell invites another Holocaust survivor, Gerda Seifer, to come speak to her class.

Ms. Gruwell demonstrates her commitment to making learning interactive and emotion-filled when she invites Holocaust survivors to come speak to her class. She trusts that these experiences will make the learning process more vivid and significant for her students.



PART IV: DIARY 41

This student feels that Ms. Gruwell's lesson plan on racial tolerance has changed her life. After hearing Gerda Seifer speak about World War II, during which she was forced to hide in a basement and was separated from her family members, all of whom ultimately died in concentration camps, she realizes that Gerda's experience is similar to Anne Frank's, as both girls lost their innocence when they were confronted to the hatred and discrimination that the war brought with it.

This student realizes what s/he learns in the classroom can affect her/him personally and can even teach her/him life lessons, thus proving that school is not separated from the process of living or growing up in general. S/he becomes aware of the deep effects that injustice, ethnic hatred, and violence can have on one's psyche.



This student explains that s/he, too, is used to being afraid of going outside—not because of anti-Semitic Nazis, but because of gang violence. When s/he is outside, s/he tries to act like s/he belongs there, so that s/he will not be attacked. S/he learns directly from Anne and Gerda's survival strategies, as well as from their deep messages of tolerance.

This student's adoption of Holocaust survivors' strategies demonstrates the real threat that violence plays in her own life, and her need to address it as a pressing issue. At the same time, s/he learns to separate herself from this whirlpool of violence by trusting that racial hatred and violence are not the solution.



PART IV: DIARY 42

After meeting Miep Gies, this student concludes that she is her/his new hero. Miep told the students about hiding Anne Frank and her family and, later, trying to bribe the officers into letting them go after they were arrested—a bold move for which she was almost killed. This student's friend cried during the entire session, as these discussions about the Holocaust have reminded him of all the people he has lost to gang violence. Her/his friend then stood up and told Miep that she was his hero, to which she retorted that this group of students are the real heroes. This student feels joy and pride in knowing that they are indeed the generation responsible for transmitting Anne Frank's legacy and messages of peace. S/he concludes that, after this meeting, her/his hero is not a fictional character, but a real person.

Meeting Holocaust survivors does not only teach students about history and the importance of respecting all cultures, but also inspires these young people to live courageous lives in which they are engaged with important social issues. Instead of reading about Anne Frank in a textbook, these students feel personally involved in her story and commit to spreading her positive message. These meetings also provide the students with adult role models on whom they can rely for inspiration and guidance. This allows them to trust, in a very concrete way, that individuals can indeed bring about change.



PART IV: DIARY 43

Ms. Gruwell makes the class read the poem that one of her college friends wrote shortly before he drowned. The poem teaches them that passion can be strong enough to change the world. While this message resonates with this student, s/he and her/his classmates initially feel that they—who have always been looked down upon by the people around them—are not capable of such achievements.

However, after Miep Gies's visit, this student realizes that Miep never considered herself a hero, instead insisting that she merely did what she knew was right. When she tells the students to not let Anne Frank's death be in vain, this student realizes that Miep and Ms. Gruwell are communicating the same idea: that any individual can seize the moment and change the world. This student feels limitless power at the idea that s/he is responsible for Anne Frank's legacy and that s/he, too, can make the world a better, more tolerant place.

This student feels that the negative, external pressures of her environment are stronger than her positive, internal potential to succeed and impact the world. The poem s/he reads thus remains interesting and powerful, but not convincing enough for her/him to believe in its message.



Miep Gies repeats a message similar to the one the student read in the poem, but the fact that this time the message comes from a real person's experience makes it infinitely more powerful. S/he realizes that one's passion and moral instinct—one's sense of what is right and wrong—can truly impact other people's lives and, even, as the widely known story of Anne Frank demonstrates, the entire world.

**PART IV: DIARY 44**

This student expresses uncontained excitement after learning that Zlata is going to come to Long Beach. S/he compares Zlata's life to her/his own experience of escaping war in Nicaragua. When Zlata answered the students personally, saying she would be happy to meet them, this student felt that s/he is going to meet someone that s/he can identify with.

This student's desire to meet Zlata reflects her/his desire to share her story with someone else and see her own experience validated, as she is able to find someone else who has gone through something similar. She longs for the comfort of knowing that someone else can fully understand her.

**PART IV: DIARY 45**

This student describes going with her family to meet Zlata and her best friend Mirna as an unforgettable day. When Zlata arrives at the fancy Marriott Hotel, s/he feels that s/he is meeting a celebrity, and is awed by the fact that a girl of their age has become their role model. The student happily discovers that s/he and Zlata have a lot in common, as they enjoy the same activities and share the same taste in music. S/he revels in the fancy dinner they were served at the Marriott and is excited about future events.

Despite the many differences between Zlata and the students' geographic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, this student realizes that they do share some things in common, showing that humans all over the world can bond over similar interests.



PART IV: DIARY 46

This student finds her friendship with her best friend similar to that of Zlata and Mirna, except that her own family prevents her from seeing her best friend because she is white. Her father gets angry when he hears about his daughter's white friend because he grew up in the South and is overwhelmed by the racism he experienced. This student explains that her friend's skin color is irrelevant to their friendship and that she would never use her as an excuse to hate an entire race.

This student explains that her father's experience with racism has made him intolerant of white people in general. Her father has adopted the opposite attitude to the one that Holocaust survivors preach, in which one's past experiences of adversity should inspire one to adopt a more tolerant outlook toward different peoples, cultures, and ethnicities.

**PART IV: DIARY 47**

This student is surprised to realize that Zlata's story, which seems so distant from her own, has impacted her so deeply. She is amazed at the fact that Zlata is a normal teenage girl, like her, who has similar tastes in clothing and music.

Once again, a student realizes that superficial differences such as nationality do not determine one's character—and that Zlata is a normal teenage girl despite the war she lived through.



When the class goes to the Croatian Hall to hear Zlata speak about her experience in Bosnia, they realize that not everyone relates to their message of ethnic tolerance and peace. After Zlata speaks about the injustice of losing friends to ethnic hatred and violence, most of the students feel that they can personally relate to her. Some adults, however, ask Zlata what her ethnicity is, demonstrating their inability to understand her message of ethnic peace and tolerance. Instead of focusing on her own nationality, Zlata replies that she is a human being.

This episode demonstrates that adults are not necessarily better informed or wiser than a group of adolescents. Here, adults show resistance to Zlata's refusal to categorize herself in ethnic terms. Their insistence on knowing Zlata's nationality demonstrates their inability to see her in the way that the students see her: as an ordinary teenager who happened to live through a particularly dangerous war.



This student feels inspired by Zlata's response. While she herself has been taught to be proud of being Mexican and Latina, she realizes that what matters should not be her race or ethnicity but the fact that, like Zlata and everybody else, she is a human being.

This student realizes that a commitment to peace and tolerance must admit no divisions among human beings, but must be based upon a recognition of everyone's essential humanity.

**PART IV: DIARY 48**

When this student meets Tony, a young boy at the Croatian hall who was shot at point-blank range by Serbian soldiers, s/he feels grateful to have left her/his native Peru. Like Tony who was permanently affected by war, this student's life was overturned by terrorism in Peru. Her/his family had already planned on moving to the United States when, three weeks before they left, terrorists blew up the house next door. The student's family was told that, if all the dynamite had exploded, their house too would have been blown to pieces.

The student describes her/his luck at having escaped a violent death, and her/his knowledge that not everyone is as lucky as her/him, as Tony's situation illustrates. Her/his recollection of this violent moment in her/his life signals that it has left a deep mark on her/his memory, even after having escaped such a dangerous situation.



In the United States, this student felt lost at school until s/he met some Mexican children who talked to her/him in Spanish. Like this student, Tony cannot communicate in English, but he was certainly capable of communicating his pain. After Zlata's speech, in which she said that in war soldiers became children and children soldiers, this student realizes that soldiers do, in fact, behave irresponsibly and immorally, while children are forced to lose their innocence in war.

This student realizes that part of the healing process involved in overcoming a difficult situation must include interactions with other people, who might give one comfort and support. Zlata's inversion of children and adults' roles suggests that wisdom and maturity are not dependent on age, but rather on a sincere commitment to be a good person and behave morally.



PART IV: DIARY 49

When the students visit the Museum of Tolerance, which focuses on the historical consequences of intolerance and prejudice, each student receives a child's passport and can discover, throughout the museum, what happened to that child over the course of World War II. The visit is emotional for the class, leaving many in tears.

The museum uses a teaching technique similar to Ms. Gruwell's methods, as each student is encouraged to see history through other individuals' real lives, not as a series of abstract facts, events, and places.



After the museum, they went to a fancy restaurant, where the upscale decorations and food leave a deep impression on the student. After this, they go see *Schindler's List*, a movie that makes the various books they have read about the Holocaust come to life. It made the student's friend have a flashback of his own experience of seeing one of his friends die, leading them to conclude that such violence also happens in real life. Finally, the students had dinner at the Marriott Hotel, where they met Holocaust survivors who shared their stories with them. The student feels a renewed responsibility to honor and learn from these people's experiences.

This entire day is aimed at relating events that happened in the past with the students' real lives, leading them to develop feelings of compassion, anger, and grief toward people who lived at a different time than them. In this way, they are able to adopt important issues, such as the need to fight against injustice and violence, as their own. It also allows them to realize that they are not alone in their difficult experiences, for many people have lived through painful times before them.



PART IV: DIARY 50

Immediately after Zlata leaves, this student prepares to take some drugs. This habit makes her feel ashamed, as she feels that she is not worthy of the change that Ms. Gruwell's students have all been taking part in. She feels guilty about lying and fears Ms. Gruwell would be disappointed in her. She does not expect Ms. Gruwell to trust in her, because she does not trust in herself, as she often steals money to buy drugs.

This student's expectation that Ms. Gruwell would be disappointed in her is extreme and probably misguided, given Ms. Gruwell's capacity to empathize with her students. However, it reflects this student's sense of low self-esteem and disappointment in herself. Her knowledge that she should be behaving differently meets a powerful obstacle: addiction.



She describes being high in Zlata and Ms. Gruwell's presence but notes that neither of them noticed, since she knows how to control herself. While she is currently in rehab for marijuana, she has now become addicted to speed, and fears that she is becoming an addict, despite her outward appearance as a model student and daughter. She feels that she will not be able to put an end to her drug habit and feels relieved that Zlata has left, because she doesn't feel that she deserved all the attention she and the rest of the class received.

This student's fear and shame about her addiction leads her to feel unworthy of other people's care—a harsh judgment of herself that focuses only on her negative habits, overlooking the positive qualities and achievements she probably does deserve to feel proud of. These thoughts reveal the dark, negative powers of addiction on the mind, as it makes this student feel helpless and isolated.



PART IV: DIARY 51

After Ms. Gruwell and her students organized “Basketball for Bosnia,” a basketball tournament meant to raise money to give supplies to children in Bosnia, this student feels that s/he wants to join Ms. Gruwell’s class, because they act like a real family. S/he is impressed by the fact that no one cares about each other’s appearances, but is merely concerned about the cause they are fighting for.

This makes this student think about her/his own life, as s/he never felt that s/he belonged in her/his honors class. S/he has also always felt rejected by other people, who have made fun of her/his weight. These experiences left this student feeling alone and ashamed. S/he found success at school, where s/he became an excellent student and gained stronger self-esteem. At Basketball for Bosnia, all these insecurities disappeared when s/he joined the crowd of people dancing on the basketball court, cheered on in the center of the line by warm, friendly people who did not care about her/his appearance.

This student shows that what matters most to her at school is in large part her/his sense of belonging to a positive environment, thanks to her/his classmates’ attitudes. The solidarity and cooperation that Ms. Gruwell has fostered strikes her/him as an extraordinary feat, from which s/he can personally benefit.



These reflections confirm that intellectual stimulation and academic success on their own are insufficient in determining a student’s enjoyment of school. What also needs to be fostered is a foundation of respect and collaboration, through which students can unite in order to engage with what they truly care about. S/he realizes that what s/he lacks is self-confidence and a positive environment in which s/he can feel that s/he is truly herself.



ZLATA’S LETTER

Zlata writes Ms. Gruwell’s class a letter in which she thanks them for the warm memories they have given her. She thanks them for their friendship and understanding, telling them they are heroes. She also thanks them for what they are doing for Bosnia, and wishes them well.

As when Ms. Gruwell’s students met Zlata, what has struck Zlata from this meeting is the friendship and sense of shared experience that she has drawn from it. True heroes, she suggests, are those who fight for what they believe in, in a way that is open to listening to other people’s experiences.



PART IV: DIARY 52

This student feels that her/his life is falling apart. S/he recently found a picture of her/his mother in a bathrobe with another man, and realized that her/his mother is cheating on her/his father, which makes her/him feel that the entire family is being torn apart. While s/he expected to be able to rely on Ms. Gruwell’s class as a second family, the students have recently learned that other teachers do not want Ms. Gruwell to continue teaching them, using the excuse of Ms. Gruwell’s lack of seniority. The student concludes that these teachers are merely hiding their jealousy, since Ms. Gruwell’s class has received a lot of media attention and has proved particularly innovative and successful. While this student is scared, s/he trusts that the class will remain strong and cannot be torn apart.

This student’s personal crisis highlights the importance that family stability plays in her/his life, and her/his need for adults to behave in responsible, honest ways with her/him. The student finds such qualities in Ms. Gruwell. Her/his description of the class as a family suggests that love and comfort do not necessarily need to come from within the nuclear family. Rather, any caring, devoted adult can become a role model to children who need it. The student’s trust in Ms. Gruwell and her/his classmate’s bond proves strong, signaling the deep friendship and solidarity that have formed among all of them over the past months.



PART IV: DIARY 53

This student has just learned that they are going to have Ms. Gruwell again next year, and is very excited about it. S/he considers Ms. Gruwell the best teacher s/he has ever had, and says that many people who used to make her/him feel stupid are now showing interest in Ms. Gruwell's class, despite previously labeling it the "Ghetto class" because of the high number of minorities in the class. These same students are now on the waiting list to enter Ms. Gruwell's class and this student hopes that, if they do get in, they will treat the other students with the respect they deserve.

The shift that has taken place at school, as students from other classes want to join Ms. Gruwell's group, highlights the extremely low expectations that had been placed on Ms. Gruwell and her students. The group's success at overturning these expectations is remarkable. It proves that compassion and humility can go hand-in-hand with academic success.



ENTRY 5: MS. GRUWELL

As Ms. Gruwell prepares for another year of teaching, she describes her summer. After giving a seminar at National University on teaching teenagers to read, she is offered a job teaching education classes a couple of times per week. She is able to save up enough money to go visit Zlata and Miep in Europe.

Ms. Gruwell pursues her educational goals in her free time, as she is able to benefit from the connections she has formed by teaching her students. By traveling to Europe, she demonstrates her eagerness to learn more about historical and cultural issues.



In the Netherlands, Erin meets up with Miep and gives her a care package from her students. Miep tells Erin that her students have made a lasting impression on her, and that she has not forgotten them. She also describes her relationship with Anne Frank, much of which demonstrates her own courage and generosity. Ms. Gruwell is impressed by Miep's humility. Despite the importance of what she did for Anne and her family, she uses her example to show that anyone in the world, however humble their status or profession, can make a difference in history.

The emotional and intellectual impact that Miep left on Ms. Gruwell's students is reciprocated, as Miep describes her respect for Ms. Gruwell's group. Once again, Miep confirms that even isolated individuals can make a difference in people's lives, in the same way she made a difference in the lives of Anne and her family—and, ultimately, through the publication of Anne's diary, a change in the minds of people around the world.



When Erin goes to Ireland to visit Zlata and her family, they talk about Sarajevo and Zlata's parents explain that racial tensions are still present and will make the country difficult to re-unify. Erin is impressed by Zlata's maturity and wisdom, which seems greater than that of her own students. The two of them become very close, and Erin cries when she leaves. Now, she thinks about how she is going to bring American literature to life for her students, and wonders what activities they will take part in this year.

The issues that Zlata addresses in her diary prove as relevant as ever, even after the war. This signals that racial tensions do not end with the conclusion of a conflict, but that they require a strong commitment to peace among its citizens, as well as an awareness of the danger of ethnic divisions. Zlata's friendship with Ms. Gruwell demonstrates that maturity and wisdom can be found in children as well as in adults.



PART V: DIARY 54

With dry humor, this student complains about always being called on to represent the black perspective in her classes at school. She decries the absurdity of this situation, since she feels that the only person she can accurately speak for is herself—not for an entire set of people she doesn't even know. She finds it irritating that her teachers seem so intent on pointing out the fact that she is the only black person in her honors classes, which she already notices enough herself.

One day, she asked her teacher why the books they read so strikingly lacked racial diversity. The teacher said that all black literature contained vulgar and sexual moments that were inappropriate in the classroom. When the student tells her mom what happened, her mom is outraged and goes to the principal, bringing with her a list of beautiful books written about and authored by black people.

Unable to stand the idea of being with this teacher any longer, the student decides to change classes and, following a friend's advice, join Ms. Gruwell's group. She is pleased to discover that Ms. Gruwell does not judge her based on her race, but merely listens to her as an individual, allowing her to speak her mind.

This student separates herself from the racial group to which her teachers so insistently try to bind her, characterizing her teachers' behavior as ignorance and discrimination. She denounces the harm and senselessness of considering all members of one social group identical in their beliefs and emotions.



This teacher's blindness to the diversity of works within black literature reveals her ignorance and prejudice. The student's mother demonstrates her commitment to her daughter's education, as well as her desire to make her feel proud of her cultural heritage.



This student's satisfaction at changing classes demonstrates that successful education involves not only reading complex works, but also being treated with respect and fairness. This student finds strength in being able to express her individuality.



PART V: DIARY 55

This student finds inspiration in American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings about self-reliance, realizing that being an independent thinker and not relying on one's circumstances as an excuse are powerful sources of self-worth. This student recalls the tragic circumstances in which her father burned his grandmother to death. Her father was almost attacked by an angry mob who learned what had happened, but was ultimately taken to prison.

From that point on, this student's life was changed forever. She could not understand how her father could have committed such a horrible crime. In these moments, she felt completely alone, feeling that no one understood her confusion, because everybody thought they knew what she felt. When she reads that Emerson equates greatness with being misunderstood, she feels that she can find strength in her own sense of isolation and learn to be self-reliant.

The violent events this student has been through, which have left an indelible mark on her mind, highlight the fact that self-reliance, for her, might prove more difficult than for other students who have not been scarred by violence in their past. Her trust in her capacity to overcome these circumstances thus shows strength and courage.



While this student learns to transform her emotional and intellectual isolation into strength, it is still apparent that she would have enjoyed expressing her thoughts to other people. Throughout the students' years in high school, Ms. Gruwell strives to create a safe space for her students where such sharing and self-expression might be possible.



PART V: DIARY 56

During lunchtime, this student sees a fight break out after someone yells “Fuck Niggers” and manages to stay out of the violent outbreak. The principal suspended an African-American and a Hispanic boy, which, instead of solving the problem, only made tensions between the two groups stronger.

After school, the student sees another fight break out when the bus arrives at the bus stop: African-Americans against Hispanics. In the end, the group of twenty African-American boys is forced to get off the bus and, while they are waiting for the next one, they start beating a Hispanic boy who happened to walk by, unaware of what had just happened. The student watches as the boy is left unconscious and the group of attackers is arrested. He wonders why he didn’t do anything to stop the violence, and realizes that he was too scared of being hit himself. He feels scared that Ms. Gruwell will get mad at him if she finds out he was not self-reliant in this moment, and he hopes she never will.

Despite the principal's attempt to blame no member of a particular ethnicity for the conflict, the school's reaction to racial fighting proves impractical, demonstrating the difficulty of stemming such deep-rooted rivalry and hatred.



The violence here plays out independently of provocation or wrongdoing, as skin color is sufficient to turn someone into the next victim of race-related violence. This student's reckoning with his passivity reveals his sense of accountability toward Ms. Gruwell. While it is unlikely that Ms. Gruwell would actually get mad at him, his fear of such a reaction demonstrates the power of Ms. Gruwell's teaching—as well as, at times, its practical limitations, as she cannot teach her students how to behave morally in all situations.



PART V: DIARY 57

This student explains that, during an activity in which students had to self-evaluate their work, he gave himself an “F.” He has had to skip school to take care of his sick mom, and feels that Ms. Gruwell should punish him for this. When Ms. Gruwell sees what he has written, she becomes furious, takes him aside, and yells at him that his self-evaluation is unacceptable. She sees his answer as a rude dismissal of himself and of everyone who cares about him. She tells him that, until he actually tells her to stop caring about him, she refuses to fail him and will make sure he completes his homework.

The student, shocked and on the verge of tears after Ms. Gruwell’s reaction, finds motivation in his teacher’s speech. He realizes that, to be truly self-reliant, he should stop relying on excuses about his circumstances and, instead, see obstacles as something to defeat, turning his weaknesses into strengths.

The student's answer is not meant as direct provocation but, rather, is an expression of low self-esteem. However, Ms. Gruwell interprets it as an attack against her own teaching. She puts a lot of effort into believing in her students' abilities so that they will believe in themselves.



Ms. Gruwell's angry speech is not meant as a punishment but, instead, as a wake-up call, encouraging the student to trust in his own strength in the same way that she trusts in him. This deep commitment she demonstrates to the student's success is what encourages him to change.



PART V: DIARY 58

When this student reads about a character's suicide in *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, s/he thinks about her/his own struggle with depression, a mental illness that runs in her/his family. Suicide is always on this student's mind and once, after a fight with her/his mother, s/he even tried to cut her/his wrist with a knife. S/he realizes that s/he no longer identifies with that moment, in which s/he felt there was no alternative to her/his situation besides dying.

This student realizes that even the darkest, most dangerous, life-threatening moments in her/his life do not define her/him forever. Rather, s/he trusts that one's circumstances and mindset can change over time until, one day, one finds that the worst moments in one's life belong to the past.

**PART V: DIARY 59**

This student surprises herself by reading the entirety of *Catcher in the Rye*, a book that she originally thought would not interest her at all. She identifies with its protagonist, Holden, who criticizes people in society for being such conformists, and recalls an evening in which she and a group of friends drove to Las Vegas, even though she had just told her mother over the phone that she would be home soon. When her mother discovered what had happened, she was furious. Her daughter insisted on being sent away, because she felt tired of everything, but she was simply sent to her room.

This student's rebellious attitude signifies a deeper dissatisfaction with people and life in general. At the same time, she proves capable of showing interest in something outside herself, through the book's protagonist. Her mother seems intent on holding her daughter accountable for her actions and trying to keep her from harm, however little she might actually understand the root of her behavior.

**PART V: DIARY 60**

This student describes receiving a job offer from John Tu. At one of the big dinner parties that Ms. Gruwell organizes for students' families to get together, this student asks John Tu if he wants to be driven to his car, since he could get robbed in this neighborhood. Tu surprises him by accepting his offer and the student is ashamed to make the millionaire and his wife ride in his old car, which only has one seat in the front after the other one was stolen.

The student fears that John Tu might mock or criticize him for his economic status, since his car is clearly not in pristine condition. However, Tu seemingly shows little concern for such matters, caring only about returning home safely and gratefully accepting the student's thoughtful gesture.



When John Tu tells the student he is impressed with his car, since at his age all he owned was a bicycle, the student realizes that John Tu actually had to work hard to achieve the kind of success and wealth he now enjoys. As he is leaving the car, Tu thanks the student and offers him a job at his computer company, which makes him feel extremely excited, as he feels that his life is taking a new turn.

John Tu goes out of his way to make the student feel comfortable, complimenting him on precisely the thing that had caused the student shame. This demonstrates his willingness to judge no one based on their economic status, and to insist that a humble background should keep no one from attaining success.



PART V: DIARY 61

This student describes a debate Ms. Gruwell organized around the theme of misogyny. The class discussed double standards for men and women, showing that the same behavior will be judged differently according to one's gender. This student expresses her frustration with the lack of respect that men show women, but also with the lack of respect that women have for their own selves. She describes the double standards that exist in her own family, where her male family members are told to use condoms during sex, whereas she is simply told to remain a virgin.

She describes her experience with her boyfriend. After waiting two years before having sex, the actual experience left her completely disillusioned, and she now regrets having had sex with him. She notes the unfairness of being called a "slut" by other people, whereas if she had been a boy she would have been congratulated for what she did.

Ms. Gruwell's academic exercise once again capitalizes on the students' own experiences and opinions, forcing them to use critical thinking in their everyday lives. This student uses her own experience to conclude that members of both genders are accountable for their actions. She considers—as Ms. Gruwell encourages her students to do—that one's environment or cultural upbringing is not an excuse for harmful practices.



The double standards that she describes demonstrate a division between the way in which men and women are judged for their sexual behavior—an injustice that seemingly impedes healthy, informed conversations about sexual practices and equality.



PART V: DIARY 62

After reading [The Color Purple](#) by Alice Walker, this student recalls an episode in which she, like the book's protagonist Celie, was sexually assaulted. She was sleeping in the living room with her uncle Joe, whom she loved dearly, and her younger brothers. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, she felt someone touch her and realized that her uncle was molesting her, making her own body feel dirty. While she wanted to cry, she found herself unable to do anything. When he got up for a glass of water, she moved to the couch and her uncle asked her what was wrong. Even though she wanted to, she could not scream or talk to anyone.

The next day, her uncle babysat her and her younger brothers, but she refused to do anything he said. He hadn't destroyed her own views about herself, but he had destroyed the only thing she believed in: him. When he apologized, she felt that he was sincere in believing that he had done nothing wrong. When her mother came home, she told her what happened and has never had the same relationship with her uncle as she did before. Using Celie as an example, this student realizes that she too will draw courage from the difficult situation she has experienced and will bravely continue to live and find joy in life.

The description of this student's experience of sexual assault captures the way in which such invasive acts often take place in safe environments and are perpetrated by trusted individuals. The seeming normalcy of the action contributes to leaving the student feeling helpless and lost, unable to figure out how to react or where to seek help.



The student shows strength and self-confidence in her capacity to trust that she has done nothing wrong and that nothing that happened should affect her self-worth. While it remains ambiguous whether her uncle will ever learn from this experience, since he seems unable to admit that he did anything wrong, this student's ability to tell her mother about what happened allows her to feel validated in what she experienced.



PART V: DIARY 63

Reading [The Color Purple](#) reminds this student of her abusive relationship with her boyfriend. She describes hiding her feelings and bruises from others, while in the meantime questioning herself about what she had done to make her boyfriend so mad and whether or not she would be able to escape this abuse. At the beginning, when he hurt her, she thought that he was only showing some aggressiveness, but when he started insulting her she became scared and would freeze on the spot.

He would always find something wrong in what she had done and use that as an excuse to hit her, before realizing what he had done and apologizing. He began controlling her, locking her in his house, and pressuring her into having sex. She would get so nervous and scared that even just hearing his voice over the phone would make her feel nauseous. Once, he threatened to kill her with a knife in his hand.

The student concludes that they each gave each other what they needed. She needed love and security, while he needed to vent his anger. In the end, the relationship ended unpredictably, as fast as it started.

This student describes a relation between physical abuse and silence, as she finds herself hiding the signs of violence on her own body—either in an effort to protect her boyfriend or, perhaps, to avoid being judged for what happened.



The student's recounting of terrifying episodes of intimate partner violence reveals her inability to escape the grasp of this emotional and physical abuse. Meanwhile, her body expressed a reflexive aversion to what was happening, as she became nauseous.



The student does not see herself as a mere victim, instead underlining her own role in sustaining the relationship.



PART V: DIARY 64

This student finds reading [The Color Purple](#) uncomfortable because it reminds her/him of her/his alcoholic stepdad beating her/his mother. Whenever he is drunk, he becomes scary and wants to destroy everything.

Last night, after reading the book in class, the student reflects on what s/he can do to help her/his mother. S/he feels the book become reality when an argument in the other room becomes violent, and the student quickly runs in to push the stepdad away from her/his mom. While s/he feels like staying and beating the stepdad, who has been hitting her/his mother, s/he decides to drive her/his mother and little sister away to their aunt's house. Seeing her/his mother's fear makes her/him vow to not let anyone hurt her again. When s/he sees her/his mother's eye turn purple, s/he realizes that "the color purple" has come to life in reality.

Whereas other students have found comfort in comparing their lives with Celie's, this student finds the experience unpleasant, as s/he is still grappling with these difficult issues in the present.



The violence that this student is faced with confirms once again that Ms. Gruwell has succeeded in identifying works of literature that her students will identify with. In turn, this student realizes that literature can accurately mirror reality, and that it can, perhaps, provide some comfort, as literature transforms reality into deep, emotional material. In this case, something as simple as the color purple can give profound meaning to a person's actions, making this student aware of the significance of having saved her/his mother.



PART V: DIARY 65

When Ms. Gruwell invites a few students to participate in a college diversity seminar at National University, this student experiences what she calls an emotional healing. She cannot believe that Ms. Gruwell picked her to talk about her experience with homelessness.

While she hadn't planned on going into detail about her life, she ends up telling her audience all about her father, who makes her mother stand outside with a sign in the street to look for a job, and takes all her money to go buy drugs. He even sells the family's food for drugs. While Ms. Gruwell's student is telling these stories, she realizes that her life is depressing and she begins to cry heavily, telling her audience that all her father cares about are drugs. She explains that her father molested her sister but that her mother didn't do anything about it when she found out, going so far as to doubt her sister's story.

When she finishes, feeling that she has completely exploded, she is left emotionally drained but everyone comforts her, making her feel that these college students are no longer strangers. At the end of the day, she feels shocked at having said everything she felt, but happy to have done it.

This event demonstrates once more the deep connection between education and emotional involvement, showing that personal and collective learning can go hand in hand.



The act of sharing her story proves more powerful than this student thought, showing that she probably needed to share it in order to cope with it. While telling her story to an audience gives her an outlet for some of her emotions, it also allows her to examine her life from a critical distance. Her condemnation of both her parents' behaviors highlights her isolation and her feeling that her family does not protect either her or her sister.



This student learns that sharing her story can bring her comfort, both internally and externally, as she feels satisfied with having told her story and received kind words from her audience.



PART V: DIARY 66

When this student hears classmates tell their stories at a National University seminar, s/he is reminded of her/his little brother Kevin, who died after undergoing surgery for a misdiagnosed tumor. S/he remembers the shock at seeing him wake up, almost unrecognizable, and learning that half of his body was paralyzed. S/he would go to the hospital every day and would run up to the roof to think about Kevin, noting how everyday life seemed to go on normally for everybody else.

Kevin left the hospital after a few months but it became clear that Kevin was going to die. No one knew how much Kevin was aware of what was going on. The day before he died, the student saw him sleeping peacefully at the hospital, and felt that he finally seemed fine. The next day, s/he and his/her mother came to the hospital to find that Kevin was dead, and the student stood there in disbelief, unable to process what had just happened.

Like other students who have seen their friends die of violence, this student is confronted with the injustice of death, as innocent people are forced to suffer while others keep on living, unaware of the pain of the people around them. The description of her/his brother's illness shows how much s/he cared about him, and the difficulty of knowing that a beloved family member is ill.



While the student seems to take comfort in Kevin's tranquility before death, s/he still finds the moment of death difficult to imagine or understand. This disbelief highlights the surreal nature of death as well as the sharp difficulty of accepting that someone who formed such an integral part of her/his life is now gone forever.



ENTRY 6: MS. GRUWELL

Inspired by Zlata, Ms. Gruwell decides to compile a selection of her students' diary entries into a book. Zlata had suggested that writing might be a good outlet for these students to escape the violence and horror of their everyday lives. The students tell Ms. Gruwell that classroom 203 is the only place they feel safe. They often stay late at night at school to do their homework, and Ms. Gruwell then drops them off, horrified at seeing the violent environments they live in, and guilty about living in a secure neighborhood.

Ms. Gruwell decides to compile the entries anonymously, since many students could be punished for writing the truth. She feels the same kind of moral responsibility that Miep Gies described when talking about her involvement with Anne Frank. John Tu donates thirty-five computers to the class so that the entries can be completely anonymous, and Ms. Gruwell decides that the thirty-five students with the best academic performance will receive one at graduation. With the help of a lawyer, she designs an honor code that students will have to sign, ensuring that their entries are their own, unembellished stories. Ms. Gruwell organizes a meeting between her students and Anne Frank's best friends, who survived the war, hoping that this will make the students excited about their new project.

The students' diary-writing serves an individual purpose as a coping mechanism in their lives, as compiling and sharing these diary entries could make their stories heard and thus inform other people about the hardships they face. The students' dedication to their academic work is striking, and shows that school is starting to play an increasingly important role in their life.



Despite the fact that no one is yet talking about broad scale publication, Ms. Gruwell takes her task seriously. The moral responsibility she feels reflects the important nature of this task, as it can allow her students to finally express their voices in the world. Meeting Anne Frank's friends establishes a direct comparison between Anne Frank and the students, emphasizing the moral as well as the personal nature of what they are doing. The students are not only recounting their lives, but also promoting important messages of peace and tolerance.



PART VI: DIARY 67

When the class meets Anne Frank's best friends, Jopie and Lies, this student feels guilty for not having volunteered to sing a song for them, even though she can sing and Anne Frank means so much to her. Jopie and Lies tell the students about their intimate friendship with Anne. When Lies ended up at the same concentration camp as Anne, she tried to send Anne food across the barbed-wire fence because Anne was starving, even though she could have gotten killed for doing that. In the end, someone else grabbed the bag of food and ran away, and Anne died a few days later.

When this student hears Jopie and Lies's stories of courage and friendship, she feels guilty for not having dared to sing to them. She concludes that staying silent is always bad, for silence allows for abuse to happen unpunished. During World War II, it allowed the Nazis to kill people with impunity. Speaking up can keep tragedies from happening, and this student vows that she will not remain silent again.

This student feels guilty for not openly sharing, through singing, her emotions and thoughts with the class and their important guests. The concentration camps where Lies and Anne found themselves stripped many people of basic humanity. However, even in this terrible environment, Lies's love for and loyalty to her friend led her to sacrifice her own food and risk her own life for Anne.



This student realizes that she has a moral responsibility to speak up and say how she feels, as this can demonstrate her courage and inspire others—just like Jopie and Lies have done. Her sense of accountability to herself and the rest of the world leads her to commit to truth and honesty.



PART VI: DIARY 68

This student has just recently transferred into Ms. Gruwell's class and feels intimidated by the other students' writing skills. Ms. Gruwell asks for students to pick their favorite diary entries so that they can be arranged into a book, but this student finds her/his most significant memory—the death of his/her brother nine months ago—too painful to write, and decides that s/he would rather not remember it.

While some students find comfort in writing, this student is not yet ready to confront his/her most difficult moments. Given the student's recent entry in the class, it is possible that s/he has not yet discovered that sharing emotions and personal experiences is an integral part of Ms. Gruwell's teaching, where it happens in a safe, non-judgmental space.

**PART VI: DIARY 69**

Unlike the rest of the class, this student is not excited about Ms. Gruwell's new writing project, because s/he does not want to write about her/his neighborhood, the projects, which are filled with danger, violence, and filth. Instead, s/he would rather write fiction. In the projects, young children have fun destroying people's property instead of playing peacefully. No one can be a good student, because performing well at school makes one an outsider. Murder, gang violence, and domestic abuse are so common that most people ignore it. This student has seen too many horrific things to count. S/he concludes that s/he would rather pretend that s/he does not live in the projects, and that she does not want to think or write about this pain, for it would only make it worse.

The negative impact of this student's neighborhood on her/his mind is strong, as s/he considers her environment too unsafe and unhealthy to even want to talk about it. It is clear that her/his neighborhood has left her/him traumatized. At the same time, her/his mention of the various problems to which s/he has been confronted constitutes a form of self-expression, allowing her/him to at least express her/his anger and frustration about where s/he lives. This allows her/him to address the very pain s/he claims to be incapable of describing.

**PART VI: DIARY 70**

This student feels that John Tu's computer donation to the class will give her/him even more motivation to keep having good grades. S/he feels that s/he has been given a clean slate. Ms. Gruwell is the only teacher who took her/his dyslexia seriously, unlike other teachers who would mock her/him, call her/him lazy, and give her/him an "F." Despite this student's deep fear of writing an essay, the computer actually helped her/him, because spell check automatically corrected her/his writing. For the first time, s/he feels powerful, free to express all that s/he thinks.

Rewards like the computers not only make students proud of their work, but also serve as a tool to motivate them. Ms. Gruwell's understanding of this student's dyslexia also demonstrates once again her willingness to be patient and adapt to each student's needs. This student's joy at achieving self-expression comes in large part from working in such a safe, encouraging environment.

**PART VI: DIARY 71**

Ms. Gruwell shares with her students a letter that Miep Gies wrote them. This student identifies with Miep because, in the same way that Miep still thinks of Anne, s/he, too, cannot stop thinking about one of her/his friends who died, and wants to write about it so that this friend's death will not be in vain.

While death can be deeply unjust, it can also give its witnesses the strength and motivation to denounce injustice, taking on the moral responsibility to change the world so that such catastrophes never happen again.



PART VI: DIARY 72

When this student is given another student's diary entry to edit, she is shocked to realize that she has been through a similar experience of sexual assault. She decides to leave the story unedited, as she finds that the words carry enormous power as they are. When Ms. Gruwell reads the story aloud, some girls leave the room, too upset to keep listening, but this student stays in the classroom. Despite the discomfort that this editing process entails, she feels grateful that other people might find comfort in her own story, and that she herself feels less alone after having read this one.

As students share their stories, they realize that part of the benefit they draw from making their emotions public comes from connecting to other people more intensely and realizing that they are not alone in what they have experienced. First-person narratives can be powerful enough to soothe—or, on the contrary, to shock—their listeners, as the audience vividly experiences a segment of the author's life.

**PART VI: DIARY 73**

When he is given another story to edit, this student complains about the assignment but, as he begins to read the diary entry, he realizes that this story about abortion makes him feel more connected to his girlfriend, who also had to undergo an abortion. He feels depressed by the details that the girl relates, and wonders if his girlfriend had the support she needed to help her through that experience.

This student soon realizes that the editing process is not a mere stylistic exercise but, rather, one that can impact him on a deeply personal level, allowing him to gain access to a particular experience he will never be able to experience himself. It makes him more compassionate and aware of what other people besides him have gone through.



He wishes that his girlfriend had shared with him the details of her experience, instead of getting an abortion before he even knew she was pregnant. If he had known beforehand, he would have accompanied her through this process. When he finishes reading the story, he feels less alone, and writes the person a note to say that he feels her pain.

In addition to making him feel more empathetic toward his girlfriend, this story has also allowed him to connect to another student in the class—which, perhaps, might benefit both the author and the reader, who can each draw comfort from this experience.

**PART VI: DIARY 74**

This student feels inspired by her mother's saying that one person can change the world. She relates the story of Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat to a white person on the bus and, in so doing, inspired a successful effort to boycott segregated buses. This student realizes that, if each one of Ms. Gruwell's students were as powerful as Rosa Parks and stood up against injustice, the world would be a much better place.

This student trusts that historical change can come from within, as the actions of strong individuals willing to fight for what they believe in can have ripple effects, inspiring others to act in kind. The student, however, does not yet know that Ms. Gruwell's class is already having a strong effect on injustice, as it is inspiring each student to commit to a lifelong fight for justice.

**PART VI: DIARY 75**

This student feels that learning about Black History has given him a purpose in life. When he learns about the Freedom Riders, an integrated group of activists—six white, seven black—who fought against segregated buses in the American South, he feels inspired by the white man who stepped off the bus first in front of an angry mob of KKK members, ready to sacrifice his life in the name of this noble cause.

This student realizes that history can provide a model for ideal behavior, inspiring people in the present to trust that their actions can have positive consequences. It also demonstrates that, despite strong racial tensions and injustice, people of both races can unite for a common goal: equality for all.



As the only white student in Ms. Gruwell's class at the beginning, this student feels that he, too, has involuntarily stood up for tolerance. While he recalls feeling scared by the racial divisions at school, he has now become a staunch supporter of integration at school, trusting in the power of relationships across racial and ethnic lines. After learning about the story of the Freedom Riders, the class decides to call themselves the "Freedom Writers," using this historic name to promote their fight against injustice and intolerance. Inspired by history, this student commits to this cause, trusting that he is not alone.

This student realizes that committing to a greater cause can happen slowly and naturally, as becoming personally acquainted with members of another race or ethnic group transforms an elevated ideal (e.g., equality across racial lines) into a more personal desire (e.g., for one's friends to feel safe and respected). The class demonstrates its unity and solidarity by adopting a common name, allowing everyone to work together toward a noble cause.



PART VI: DIARY 76

After reading an intimate account of a student cleaning his or her mother's blood off the walls after her boyfriend hit her, this student concludes that Ms. Gruwell's class is taking their writing project very seriously, writing freely about their personal lives. The students title their compilation "An American Diary . . . Voices from an Undeclared War" (after agreeing that they did not want to be called "victims" of a war) and want to send it to someone who could listen to them. They decide to share their stories with United States Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, and want to find a way to go to meet Riley in person in Washington, D.C., where the Freedom Riders themselves started their journey.

This student realizes that Ms. Gruwell has succeeded in creating a safe space where every student feels free to discuss any issue, including even the most personal details about difficult moments at home. Instead of seeing this project as an opportunity for other people to pity them, the students are presenting it as a form of empowerment, allowing them to share their stories with adults who might actually be able to influence their situation or that of other young adults like them.



Since the students united under the name Freedom Writers, students have stayed late at school to work on homework. One night, they are almost arrested after climbing out the window so that the after-school alarms wouldn't go off. When policemen see them, they cannot believe that Ms. Gruwell—who is wearing one of the student's pieces of clothing and looks very young—is the group's teacher. That incident makes the entire group closer, as they realize their teacher is willing to risk being arrested so that they can finish their reading assignments.

Ms. Gruwell's extraordinary devotion to teaching comes to light in this episode, as she is willing to sacrifice precious hours of her own free time in order to help her students with their homework. The moment in which they are almost arrested illustrates that Ms. Gruwell is fully part of the Freedom Writers group: she is not merely a teacher, intent on supervising and controlling students, but a full member—showing solidarity, not superiority, with her students.



PART VI: DIARY 77

This student shares his/her excitement about a concert they are organizing to raise money for the trip to Washington. The concert includes cross-cultural shows, meant to showcase the Freedom Writers' diversity and involve the rest of the community.

The students' excitement about their field trip leads them to spend their own free time in a school-related activity, aimed at sharing their story and goals with others.



PART VI: DIARY 78

At the Freedom Writers' concert, one of the students reads a poem he wrote about growing up without a father, being immersed in a murder-filled world, and living in the street, before finding hope and innocence again through his involvement with the Freedom Writers in Ms. Gruwell's class.

This student identifies joining Ms. Gruwell's class as a turning point in his life, giving him the strength necessary to overcome his difficult life circumstances. The Freedom Writers, it appears, gave him the support he needed to trust in himself.



PART VI: DIARY 79

This student feels lucky at having a secure life filled with love, but feels solidarity with her/his classmates, many of whom have harrowing life stories to tell. S/he hopes that they can follow the Freedom Riders' path and show their passion for tolerance and diversity by going to meet Richard Riley in Washington, D.C. S/he hopes that, by speaking out, they can make adults aware of their pain, and convince people of the validity of their message.

This student demonstrates that the Freedom Writers group is more than the sum of its parts, as the bonds that the students have formed among each other encourage them to stand up for the entire group and, more generally, for the good of society.



PART VI: DIARY 80

This student shares her excitement at being in Washington, D.C. Her father is very strict and has forbidden her from taking part in any Freedom Writers field trips. At home, she is not even allowed to talk to people on the phone. When her father suddenly left for Mexico a few days before the trip to Washington, however, she asked her mom if she could go and was surprised to hear her mom agree. Despite her fear of her husband, her mother decided to let her take part in a trip that she felt she deserved.

This student's family situation demonstrates that hard work and perseverance are not the only obstacles Freedom Writers face, since their very own families can prevent them from expressing themselves and finding their freedom. At the same time, students can also realize that they have unexpected allies in difficult situations—such as, in this case, this student's mother.



Having never left her mother for more than a day before, she feels nervous and excited. On the day she leaves, all her relatives are there to wish her well. Her mother tells her to take advantage of this opportunity and that she is proud of her, which makes the student feel immensely motivated. She feels excited and plans to share with her mother everything she experiences.

The student's personal journey of discovery cannot be seen as an isolated event. Rather, in the same way that she is traveling to Washington to share her story with the world, she is also able to share her story with her own family, thereby changing her life in more ways than one.



PART VI: DIARY 81

This student feels deeply moved by the sight of soldiers' graves at the Arlington Cemetery in Washington. S/he is reminded that s/he, too, has seen countless friends die, like soldiers. S/he decides not to enter the cemetery because s/he feels overwhelmed by emotions. S/he recalls her/his dad dying of AIDS when s/he was twelve, yet never having a headstone to be remembered by. S/he feels sad that the media only focuses on the deaths of famous people, letting the life of her father and friends pass away unnoticed, despite their inspiring potential.

This student denounces the injustice that certain people's lives are given visibility, while others remain unknown. S/he realizes that history only provides a partial pictures of each era, as certain stories (such as military operations) are given prominence, while violence or illness in everyday life, which can affect just as many people, remains an obscure, unsensational reality.

**PART VI: DIARY 82**

This student feels that this trip to Washington, D.C., is life-changing. When they reach the Lincoln Memorial and the famous statue of Abraham Lincoln, everyone is reading passages on the monument and trying to figure out their meaning. Ms. Gruwell then makes them stand outside in the rain, holding hands, facing the city, on the same spot that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., recited his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, about racial peace and cooperation. The student looks around at the Freedom Writers and realizes that they are Martin Luther King's dream come true.

From uninspired students who did not believe in their own potential to be successful students, the Freedom Writers have now become confident and ambitious enough to trust that not only can they change the world—in fact, they already have. They see themselves as historical actors in line with some of the greatest figures in American history, ready to tackle nationwide social issues.

**PART VI: DIARY 83**

As this student is walking around Washington, feeling that s/he has finally escaped the violence in Long Beach, s/he suddenly sees a swastika, the Nazi symbol, on the wall, and realizes that violence is everywhere. This student, who also used to write on walls (though never to inspire hatred), decides to cover up the swastika with a Freedom Writers logo s/he and her/his friend invent. They ask the hotel concierge to make copies of it and cover the swastikas with the pieces of paper. Everyone feels excited about seeing the swastika disappear, and this student feels safe again.

While the students do not find themselves in a situation of direct violence, they have learned enough about how hatred can spread in history to feel strongly about what certain symbols represent. Their decision to cover the swastikas demonstrates their commitment to creating a non-violent world, in terms of both physical violence (such as what they live through in Long Beach) and verbal or symbolic aggression (such as the swastika).

**PART VI: DIARY 84**

At the Holocaust museum, this student is reminded of being beaten by a group of older boys who attacked her and yelled racial slurs at her, simply for having the wrong skin color. After being viciously attacked, she loses consciousness and, when she comes back to her senses, walks back home alone. On the way, no one offers to help her.

The student's experience with racial violence allows her to understand the normalcy of the violence and hatred that defined World War II. In the war, as in her neighborhood, people do not offer to help her—perhaps out of fear or disinterest—in the same way that Jews could be arrested and killed without provoking public indignation.



When she reaches home, she goes to sleep on her bed but wakes up suddenly, smelling something burning. She opens the door to her house and sees a group of people clad in white robes, burning a cross on her aunt's lawn. She tries closing and opening her eyes to get rid of this nightmare, but soon realizes it is nothing other than reality. She notices that these are the same people who beat her earlier, returning, this time, to harass her emotionally.

This image of a cross burning, typical of the KKK, reveals that racial hatred can be perpetuated over time, as history seems to repeat itself generation after generation. The nightmarish quality of this scene emphasizes the absurdity of the KKK's beliefs and actions, as their gratuitous hatred is impossible to understand rationally.



When a classmate wakes her up from this reverie, she realizes that everything is tied together: the Jews, her own experience, and the graffiti they saw earlier. She concludes that some things never change.

This student realizes that whatever the division might be—between Jews and non-Jews, blacks and non-blacks, etc.—humans will always find reasons to hate and hurt each other, however illogical this hatred might seem.



PART VI: DIARY 85

When the students visit the Holocaust museum, accompanied by Renee Firestone and Gerda Seifer, this student is horrified to see images of thousands of bodies buried in a single grave. She wonders how people could have let these horrors happen. She realizes that people tend to only stand up to defend what affects them personally, and that the result of public indifference can be tragedies such as those seen in concentration camps.

This student comes to terms with a problem of collective action: how can so many people stand by without doing anything when they know that others are being hurt? This is a problem that affects all wars, genocides, and inequalities, as people are often unwilling to sacrifice their own well-being or lives to save others.



When she and Gerda see the cattle cars, Gerda starts to cry, as she remembers the impossible quantities of people who were forced inside them. Gerda and the student have to cross a cattle car to access the next room, and Gerda feels scared, imagining her own family in one of them. After this experience, this student realizes that she will no longer watch passively as other people get hurt, even if it doesn't affect her personally. Instead, she commits to standing up to injustice whenever she sees it.

Gerda's fear at seeing the cattle car reveals the emotional hold that the past still has on her. Seeing Gerda's reaction makes the student feel personally involved in the situation, and this empathy moves her to want to defend her, as well as others who might be experiencing such violence. Witnessing other people's pain, it appears, is a strong motivator for fighting against injustice.



PART VI: DIARY 86

This student feels horrified at the pictures of dead bodies in the Holocaust museum, and is particularly shocked by the experiments that Dr. Mengele performed on twins. Since she also has a twin, she feels that she can imagine herself as one of Mengele's victims, and wonders what she would have done if she had been in that situation. She wonders if she would have tried to fight, run away, or save others. She is shocked by Mengele's cruelty and lack of respect for innocent human lives.

This student takes a humble approach to the past, wondering if she would have been courageous or not. She realizes that, until one finds oneself in such a horrible situation, it is difficult to predict what one's behavior might be. Nevertheless, with enough historical distance to view this situation critically, she is fully aware of the indignation it inspires in her.



This episode makes her grateful for her twin sister, who is always by her side, despite the difficult periods they may go through. When she sees the bodies of these dead twins, she realizes that she is lucky to have the opportunity to fulfill her dreams and change for the better.

This student realizes that, despite the difficulties she might face, she lives in a freer historical period, which allows her to avoid certain horrors of the past. She realizes that her own life is filled with hope and love.



PART VI: DIARY 87

This student describes the momentous event of their meeting with Richard Riley. While she was afraid it might be a boring evening, filled with speeches for adults, she is captivated by what Riley has to say when he calls the Freedom Writers future leaders. She is impressed by his own tales of struggle and is proud to see that he seems impressed by their achievements. She realizes that education lays the path for success, and that even she could become an important person like him.

Despite not getting to know Riley on a personal level, this student feels inspired by this speaker's words. The fact that such an important man as Riley found their stories interesting highlights their uniqueness and the fact that they could truly have a positive impact on other people—and that, in the future as well as in the present, the Freedom Writers are already leaders in their own right.



PART VI: DIARY 88

This student transcribes the poem s/he read at the dinner with Richard Riley. This poem celebrates the diversity of skin colors and activities that humans engage in, concluding that everyone should be proud to be exactly who they are.

This student recognizes the importance of individual self-confidence, while understanding that feeling proud of oneself does not involve separating oneself from the rest of humanity on a racial or ethnic basis.



PART VI: DIARY 89

When this student sees Richard Riley at the dinner in Washington, D.C., he immediately notices their sharp differences in race, culture, and socio-economic status, but soon realizes that Riley seems deeply committed to education and the future of children in the United States.

While Riley is completely different from this student in various ways, the politician's beliefs allow him to find common ground with this student in terms of goals and ideals, if not in terms of appearance or culture.



When he hears Riley talk about fighting discrimination in the South, he is reminded of the night his brother was shot simply for being black. He, his brother, and a couple of friends were driving innocently when a car full of Mexicans started shooting at them. His brother was wounded and couldn't drive anymore, so this student quickly took the wheel and drove to a gas station to call the police. He noticed that the car was so damaged it looked like it had been in a war. After being taken to the nearest hospital, his brother went into surgery for six hours, luckily emerging alive. The doctors told the student that he was a hero, because he got his brother into the hospital soon enough, thus saving him from death.

In this student's life, racial and ethnic discrimination is so extreme that it affects one's very survival. At the same time, actions motivated by racial hatred seem completely senseless, since they often affect innocent people the attackers do not even know. The student's mention of war, as well as the fact that the doctor calls him a hero, emphasize the extreme situation of violence in which this student finds himself, as ordinary activities such as driving one's car can have life-and-death consequences.



The student wants Riley to read his story so that he can see that the shooters merely shot his brother because of racial hatred and ignorance. He hopes that people like these shooters can be educated so that they learn to see beyond racial differences.

This student believes in education as a means of reforming people immersed in violence, trusting that racial hatred is not necessarily the result of malice but of ignorance.



PART VI: DIARY 91

After giving a copy of their book to Richard Riley, the Freedom Writers hold a candlelight vigil for all the victims of violence they knew. Everyone walks in a chain toward the Washington Monument, holding up traffic in the process. This student feels that, in trying to communicate their message to others, they are actively working to change the world.

This student begins to trust in the power of symbolic actions. Even though the group is not actively stopping violence by holding hands, the emotional weight of this action has the power to inspire each individual to fight for a collective goal.



When everyone begins to sing around the monument, in honor of everyone who died, this student does not cry, as s/he does not want to relive the pain of losing so many friends to violence. When they return to the hotel, though, all that pain comes back and makes the student feel completely overwhelmed. S/he realizes that s/he could have easily been one of the victims they commemorated. Overcome with these memories of near-death experiences, s/he finds the strength to keep on fighting and surviving.

This student's emotional reaction to the moment of collective remembrance demonstrates the importance of coming to terms with difficult moments in life. Even though they are often difficult to bear and to remember, they can serve as powerful catalysts to find individual strength, overcome one's past, and, in so doing, potentially impact the rest of the community.



On the way home from Washington, D.C., this student reflects on the fact that this trip led him to ride an airplane for the first time in his life and, more generally, that Ms. Gruwell has changed his life. He describes his mother's violent boyfriend, who used to abuse the student and use all the money his mother earned to buy drugs, once even locking the student into the trunk of his car for over a day. When he finally got out, his mother could only wash his urine- and engine-oil-soaked pants with cold water, because they didn't have enough money for soap or hot water.

This student's experience with extreme, violent abuse demonstrates the precarious family situation he finds himself in, as no one in his family is able to protect him and make him feel safe. Ms. Gruwell has created an alternative environment in which students can feel safe and protected outside of their homes. This has given many students the emotional and intellectual comfort they need to cope with their difficult situations.



His mom then went to the hospital to deliver her baby, and the student was stuck at home with his mother's violent boyfriend, who hit him all the time. When his mother came home, they were evicted from the house, because the boyfriend had sold all their possessions to buy drugs. For two years, they lived in a garage. When they finally could afford an actual house, the mother's boyfriend slept in the bedroom while everybody else slept in the living room. After living in these conditions for so long, the student began believing the boyfriend in thinking that he wouldn't never succeed at anything in life. However, Ms. Gruwell proved the contrary and assured him that nothing that happened to his mother was his fault.

In this student's experience, verbal and physical abuse combine with poverty to make him feel pessimistic and depressed about his own opportunities—even though none of what he is having to live through is the result of his own actions. Ms. Gruwell succeeds in making the student see that he does not bear any responsibility for what happens in his family. Rather, if he trusts in himself and works hard, he can succeed in escaping the difficult circumstances he has been forced to endure.



PART VI: DIARY 92

This student feels happy to have experienced his first real vacation, since he has always had to go to summer school. When the group gets off the bus, this student is surprised to see that his parents are there to greet him, since they always think he is bad and gets himself in trouble. They drive home and he realizes that everyone he knows has come to his house to hear his stories about the trip, congratulating him and visibly happy to see him. He describes the various activities they took part in and is proud to hear people compliment him and say he is a role model for both his family and the world.

The change in this student's parents' attitude demonstrates the real-life impact that Ms. Gruwell's teaching has on the community as a whole, in addition to the students themselves. His family's enthusiasm demonstrates that people can recognize positive change and feel inspired by one person's transformation. This enthusiasm, in turn, could inspire them to change—in the same way that the Freedom Writers' role models have led the students to trust in their potential to do good.

**PART VI: DIARY 93**

When this student goes back to school after the Washington trip and sees commotion, he assumes that the media is there to report on the Freedom Writers. However, he soon learns that a student at Wilson High, Jeremy Strohmeyer, has been arrested for raping and murdering a little girl at a casino. This student feels shocked and confused at what has happened, since Jeremy is an acquaintance of his. He believes that Jeremy had a dark personality that was exacerbated by possession of child pornography and drugs.

Despite the Freedom Writers' achievements, the students are still forced to face the senseless brutality of other people's violent actions. This highlights the fact that a commitment to peace and justice is never-ending, as new challenges arise constantly, requiring one to adapt to fight new circumstances as they emerge. It also suggests that there are limits to any social effort, as it is impossible to prevent people from becoming violent.



At the same time, he feels sad that the media has focused only on this terrible event, instead of reporting the much more positive news about the Freedom Writers' trip to Washington. He feels that the media stereotypes young people in a narrow way.

Since the Freedom Writers have found so much inspiration in positive role models, this student realizes that showing only negative information in the media could keep young people from engaging in positive, inspiring actions themselves.

**PART VI: DIARY 94**

This student discovers that David, a friend of Jeremy Strohmeyer's, saw what Jeremy was doing and simply walked away. S/he does not understand how David could have ignored what was going on and refused to stand up to such horrific violence. S/he condemns David for refusing to acknowledge tragedy, just like the many people who ignored the horrors happening in Nazi concentration camps.

This student is confronted with the problem of apathy and indifference to evil. S/he realizes that refusing to stand up to evil is just as harmful as committing the evil act oneself, since the combination of both attitudes is ultimately what makes it possible for the violent act to take place.



PART VI: DIARY 95

When the Freedom Writers meet on the morning that the news about Jeremy Strohmeier's crime breaks, they decide to organize a peace march, similar to the one they led in Washington. They want to unite in a positive way to show the media that they are thinking about the poor little girl who was killed. However, the school administration tells the students that it will not support this march, so as not to draw even more attention to what has happened. The students still decide to march, determined to show that their school should not be judged based on the actions of a single student.

Many students in the school finally walk out together, holding hands, but the media does not acknowledge their presence. That night, in the news, they only show the sensationalist, violent side of the situation, refusing to show the students' positive display of unity and non-violence.

While the students' attitude toward Stohmeyer's crime is idealistic, the school's concerns are purely pragmatic. Instead of following the Freedom Writers' positive motivation, the school is moved by fear of ruining their reputation. This reveals the gap between the Freedom Writers' passionate mode of thinking and the school's apprehensive, cautious approach.



The media's lack of attention to the students' actions reveals its lack of objectivity, as it is only concerned with showing one side of the story. This injustice demonstrates the way in which the media can manipulate the truth to influence viewers' reactions.



PART VI: DIARY 96

As junior year is coming to an end, this student feels determined to become very active during her senior year. After Ms. Gruwell fuels this motivation, she decides to run for Senior Class President. She begins to campaign and knows that she can count on her fellow Freedom Writers' full support. After long days of campaigning, the results are finally announced and this student is voted Senior Class President. She feels cheered on by everyone and so excited that she wonders if she might also want to try out for the cheerleading team.

This student's achievement reveals the deep change that Ms. Gruwell's students have undergone, as they have transformed from low-achieving, low-performing students no one else wanted to teach, into passionate students who are leaders in their own school—and, on a larger scale, in their community. It also demonstrates the power of group engagement, as all the Freedom Writers unite behind a common cause.



PART VI: DIARY 97

When the Freedom Writers are at risk of being separated next year, this student feels that her/his life is falling apart. Her/his entire childhood has been completely uncontrolled, as her/his mother would send her/him away for days because she said she was tired of being a mother. The extreme freedom this student was given has resulted in a complete lack of guidance and sense of self-worth, as s/he has felt abandoned by her/his family. Alone and depressed, s/he feels that the Freedom Writers has been able to compensate for that sense of a lost family and provide her/him with people who actually care and listen. S/he feels that s/he could not afford losing a family again.

While some students suffer in their families because their lives are too controlled and they yearn to be free, this student suffers from the opposite problem: lack of parental engagement. Her/his attitude toward the Freedom Writers demonstrates that this group is not only important in school activities, but that it plays a crucial role in students' private lives, giving them the emotional support they need to thrive in and outside of school.



PART VI: DIARY 98

This student has just learned that the Freedom Writers are going to stay together for senior year after all, and feels grateful that the group she considers a family is going to remain intact. After this student's mother left her family without warning, she found herself alone with her father and her sisters. When her father remarried and had new children, he soon abandoned his older children to focus on his new family. Therefore, this student and her sister moved in with their aunt, who also ended up abandoning the two girls. As a result, the two sisters had to separate, and this student is now living at a cousin's house.

The Freedom Writers' persistent presence and support has proven stronger than her biological family ties, and she feels that Ms. Gruwell has played the role of a substitute mother. She feels that, overall, the Freedom Writers have helped her become stronger.

This student has experienced persistent lack of caring and stability in her family life, as she has moved from adult to adult in the hope that one of them would actually commit to becoming a long-term presence in her life. By accompanying her throughout her years of high school, the Freedom Writers have provided this measure of stability and reliability that is so visibly lacking in other aspects of her life.



The fact that this student considers Ms. Gruwell a mother figure reveals the deep love and trust that they share, as Ms. Gruwell makes her feel protected and cared for.



ENTRY 7: MS. GRUWELL

Despite many members of the school staff's opposition to Ms. Gruwell staying with her students yet another year, she receives support from the principal, Dr. Cohn, and the president of the Board of Education, Karin Polacheck, to keep on teaching the Freedom Writers. Dr. Cohn and Ms. Polacheck even accompany the students on their trip to Washington, D. C.

Erin's focus this year is on the future. She wants all of her students to go to college and think about their future career plans. Since many of these students come from families where no one has gone to college, Erin knows she has to find ways to help them with the SATs, college applications, and funding. She also plans on taking them on college tours and making them meet with specialists who could give them information about financial aid. She does not want them to feel overwhelmed by this difficult process.

Erin comes up with the idea of pairing her graduate students at National University with a couple of her high school students, so that the graduate students might see them as case studies and, in turn, give them crucial information about higher education. Ms. Gruwell also helped create a non-profit organization to which people can donate to help finance the students' tuition—the greatest obstacle most of them face.

The support of high-status members of the education system demonstrates that people who have enough critical distance from the Freedom Writers are able to recognize their achievements as truly extraordinary.



Ms. Gruwell is conscious of the fact that one's family situation—and one's environment in general—can affect one's views about one's own future. Indeed, in the absence of adults who have attended college themselves, the mere idea of going to college can seem inconceivable, and the lengthy admission process daunting. Ms. Gruwell concludes that she will need to give her students specific guidance.



Ms. Gruwell's strategies often involve learning by connecting with others. Here she applies this philosophy trusting that the educational experience can benefit both sides involved: the students receiving information and those giving it. Ms. Gruwell also does not let her ideals blind her to practical issues such as the need for financial aid.



PART VII: DIARY 99

This student describes her sense of alienation and fear from living in the projects. She explains that she always knew she was poor and would probably never escape her environment of constant violence. She finds the idea of college terrifying, since her family barely has the money to survive and she doesn't know anyone else from the "hood" who went to college.

When she meets Cheryl Best, these thoughts change drastically. This woman, who also grew up in the projects, decided that she wanted to leave this negative environment. She survived a terrible experience: being kidnapped, raped, and left to die in the desert with acid poured all over her body. Instead of letting herself die, she realized that there were still many things she wanted to achieve in life and forced herself to walk toward the highway, where she was finally rescued.

After surviving this ordeal, Cheryl went to college, where she graduated with honors. This student feels deeply inspired by Cheryl's courage and, after hearing her story, knows that she too can go to college, trust in herself, and not give up on her future.

Because of the lack of role models in her life, this student has lacked knowledge about how she could possibly escape her dangerous environment. As a result, the very idea of leaving the projects is scary for her, since it equates with entering an entirely new, unknown world.



This woman's story is particularly impactful because of the uncommonly horrific experiences she has undergone and, at the same time, because of her extraordinary motivation to survive and believe in herself. This woman's success in overcoming tremendous obstacles serves as inspiration to this student, demonstrating that a single positive example can make a huge difference in young people's lives.



Cheryl not only survived, but also pushed herself to make the best of her life and succeed academically. This makes the prospect of college less frightening for this student, who finds comfort in knowing that someone else has already gone through this experience.



PART VII: DIARY 100

As senior year begins, this student sees an eviction notice on his house and knows s/he will have to move out in a week. S/he cannot believe that this is happening to her during her last year of high school, when s/he needs to study hard and prepare for college. S/he realizes that s/he will probably have to find a part-time job to help her/his mother.

The last time they were evicted, the building manager knocked on their door and gave them five minutes to leave. They ended up living in hotels and then in the street, where the student was constantly afraid that they might be attacked. This student wonders if s/he should drop out of school and study for the GED, or get a full-time job. S/he plans to go look for nearby homeless shelters and hopes that Ms. Gruwell might be able to help in some way.

This student's private life becomes a direct obstacle to life at school, demonstrating that students' performance at school cannot be understood in isolation from their lives as a whole. Even the most passionate students can be confronted with circumstances beyond their control.



Despite the severity of what is happening, this student does not lose all hope. S/he does not use this sudden event as an excuse to put an end to her/his education, but, instead, thinks creatively about other ways to pursue it. Her/his trust in Ms. Gruwell shows that this teacher's powers are not limited to school, but can directly influence the students' well-being outside of class.



PART VII: DIARY 101

Since this student's cousin has been murdered and her/his parents have left the country, s/he has been in charge of the entire household, working and baby-sitting for money, paying for the rent, and taking care of her/his little sister. Since s/he's discovered that s/he still needs a lot of money to pay for the rent and, in addition, that s/he is failing one of her/his classes, s/he feels completely lost. S/he has always been a model student but hasn't been able to attend classes regularly, which has only attracted teachers' disapproval, despite her/his explanation of the situation.

While this year is supposed to be her/his best year, s/he feels that this has been the worst period of her/his life. When s/he confides in Ms. Gruwell and her fellow Freedom Writers, though, they are extremely understanding and make her/him feel better. S/he has decided not to quit school but, instead, to keep on being strong and to graduate, with the help of her Freedom Writers family.

PART VII: DIARY 102

As all the other students are talking about their college application essays, this student feels that s/he cannot write about her status as an illegal immigrant, nor share the moment when her family immigrated to the United States—the most significant event in her/his life. S/he describes her/his mother's decision to leave her/his abusive father and allow her children to have an education. This student feels that, despite having come to the United States, s/he is still being deprived of an education because of her/his illegal status. Nevertheless, s/he still believes that s/he can overcome her/his obstacles. S/he recalls the various sensations of her/his journey to this country, at the age of four, when s/he was carried across a dangerous river in the process of reaching the USA.

When s/he discovered that there were many legal obstacles to going to school, having a job, and attending college as an illegal immigrant, s/he blamed her/his mom for bringing them here. However, s/he realizes this was a mistake, as her/his mom truly believed that there were more opportunities for them in the U.S. This student still doesn't know what will become of her/him, or whether s/he will be able to fulfill her/his dream of becoming an educator and helping other children in her/his situation.

Once again, it becomes apparent that some of Ms. Gruwell's students experience academic problems not because of lack of motivation, but because of their family situation. The need to take on an adult role has kept this student from fulfilling her/his goals as a student. Her/his teachers' lack of understanding is unfair, as they prove incapable of accepting that this student's lower performance is the result of circumstances beyond her/his control.



Even though the Freedom Writers have solved none of this student's actual problems, they have lightened her mood, allowing her to be optimistic and trust in the future. This demonstrates the huge power that love and care can have, as it can motivate individuals to fight against difficult situations and make them feel less alone.



Once again, it becomes apparent that the Freedom Writers' academic success does not always depend on forces within their control, since their legal status can impact their opportunity to pursue an education. This student expresses the injustice of being denied such an opportunity because of her/his family's situation and not because of the quality of her/his own work. At the same time, the student trusts that s/he can derive strength from difficult moments in the past instead of simply seeing them as an obstacle and a burden.



This student becomes convinced that her/his family wants the best for her/him, and that whatever difficulties s/he is facing in the U.S. are not her/his family's fault but legal restrictions beyond anyone's control—the price this student's mother paid for her child to be able to follow her/his dreams. Instead of giving in to despair, this student decides to persevere, just like her/his mother did.



PART VII: DIARY 103

This student always believed that she would either get pregnant or drop out of school, but since she has been exposed to Ms. Gruwell's relentless trust in her students, insisting that they can do anything in life, she has begun to trust that she, too, can become someone important. When she hears all the Freedom Writers share their dreams for the future, she surprises herself by saying that she wants to be the first Latina Secretary of Education, instead of her original thought that she would become a teacher. She writes a poem about the gap between what society expects of her and what she feels she can achieve, and looks forward to sharing it with the rest of the class.

This student realizes that the Freedom Writers' enthusiasm and ambition are contagious, and that they are capable of motivating her to expand her horizons, forcing her to step out of her comfort zone and aim for elevated goals. This demonstrates the power of peer pressure, which can have positive or negative consequences. In this case, the inclusive, idealistic, passion-driven Freedom Writers exert a positive influence.

**PART VII: DIARY 104**

When Ms. Gruwell makes her students describe their dream jobs, this student describes his dream, but when he mentions that he would realistically do something else, Ms. Gruwell stops him and tells him to do what he loves. He then realizes that she is right, and that he has always wanted to be a filmmaker. He feels that, with the support of the Freedom Writers, he can do anything.

This student is encouraged to trust in his dreams more than in the obstacles that he faces. Ms. Gruwell aims to convince her students that, with enough passion and hard work, one can make even the most seemingly impossible feats a reality.

**PART VII: DIARY 105**

This student rejects the idea that history repeats itself by stating that s/he will be the first of her/his family to graduate from high school and go to college. In Mexico, her/his dad was considered too poor to receive an education and was instead told to do manual labor, while her/his mother did not receive an education because she was a woman. This made her/his parents particularly strict when it came to education, forcing her/him to read and study every day, from an early age.

This student's family demonstrates the power of high expectations, as the parents' trust in their child—and the strong discipline that accompanied their beliefs—has led her/him to believe wholeheartedly in her/his success. Her/his parents' attitude also highlights the fact that people can overcome the negative environments they grew up in by trusting that their children deserve something better.



This student feels that Ms. Gruwell is acting in the same way, emphasizing the importance of college and planning trips to various kinds of universities for the students to get a broad picture of their different options. This student concludes that s/he wants to attend a small community college, where interactions with professors are more intimate. S/he compares her-/himself to the traveler in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," saying s/he is taking the less-traveled road by going to college, thereby making a decision that is better in the long run and becoming an example to her/his younger sisters.

This student is given the chance to make an informed choice about the future and benefit from opportunities that her/his own parents were never given. In the same way, s/he wants to make the future more open for her/his own siblings, thereby perpetuating a cycle of high expectations for education in her/his family. As such, her/his own education does not benefit only her-/himself, but has the potential to impact an entire community.



PART VII: DIARY 106

This student describes Ms. Gruwell's focus on team work to overcome obstacles. S/he describes her pairing with a graduate student from National University, from whom s/he receives guidance and with whom s/he shares her/his knowledge about diversity. Since this student wants to be an aeronautical engineer, her/his mentor, Sara, took her/him to the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena. There, s/he met with an engineer who showed her/him things that are not usually shown on tours, and s/he felt excited by what s/he saw, motivated by the prospect that s/he too could be an engineer in a few years. S/he feels grateful for having such a committed mentor.

Ms. Gruwell's teamwork strategies demonstrate that, in a learning experience, both sides inevitably end up learning from each other: the mentee from the mentor, and vice-versa. Here, mentorship is accompanied by concrete actions to encourage Ms. Gruwell's students not only to dream and have high ambitions for themselves, but to acquire all the information they need to turn their dreams into reality. This makes students' ideals seem more concrete and achievable.



PART VII: DIARY 107

The Freedom Writers go to Butler Elementary School to mentor children themselves. Located in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Long Beach, this school teaches children who are used to witnessing violence from a very early age. When the teachers there learned about the Freedom Writers, they wanted Ms. Gruwell's students to share their success stories with the children. The Freedom Writers are unaccompanied by Ms. Gruwell and given the freedom to serve as educators themselves.

The Freedom Writers are given the opportunity to impact their community in a very direct way and share with others what they have learned about self-confidence, non-violence, and ethnic diversity. This allows them to perpetuate learning, creating a potential cycle of mentorship in which the people mentored later want to use their experience to mentor others.



They play a game in which students have to step on a line if they respond affirmatively to a question that the Freedom Writers have asked. The questions are initially trivial but soon become centered on issues of violence, forcing all the students to realize that, despite their cultural and ethnic differences, they share many similar experiences. The Freedom Writers then share their stories of hardship, after which the children themselves feel inclined to share their own tales of suffering and violence.

The Freedom Writers use the teaching techniques they know best: the ones that Ms. Gruwell used on them. The goal of this exercise is to make everyone feel comfortable with sharing personal stories, providing the emotional outlet they need, and to further unite the entire group, as it identifies shared experiences that transcend visible characteristics such as skin color.



By the end of the day, with the Freedom Writers' mentorship, the children feel confident enough to assert their dreams and career desires, trusting that this life of violence is not what they want for themselves. The Freedom Writers feel proud to be considered role models, heroes in their own right.

By being given the opportunity to share the difficult experiences they have lived through, these children are able to adopt a critical distance toward their environment and realize, in this way, that they are capable of escaping it.



PART VII: DIARY 108

This student shares how difficult writing is, as it goes through stages and stages of editing. S/he describes an article Nancy Wride, a journalist, wrote about the Freedom Writers, which she worked hard to make as close to the truth as possible. After the publication of the article, the students received so many calls and letters that they had to designate one student the receptionist each class period. They have received notes from people, including people in prison and children, who have encouraged them, thanked them, and congratulated them on their educational achievements.

The large number of responses that the article about the Freedom Writers has elicited emphasizes the uniqueness of these students' success. It also highlights these young people's potential to change the world around them, educating readers about the lives they lead and the difficulties they face. This has the added advantage of potentially inspiring other adolescents like them to identify with their challenges and trust in their own future.

**PART VII: DIARY 109**

This student is used to receiving letters from prison, since her father was in prison during most of her childhood. When she receives a letter from a prisoner in West Virginia who read the article about the Freedom Writers, however, she becomes emotional and is reminded of the way she was raised.

This student realizes that, while she thought she had developed emotional resistance to a certain event, the past can be powerful enough to still affect her in the present, reminding her of past pain and suffering.



Leonard, the prisoner, is only eighteen and is condemned for life for a crime he didn't commit, leaving behind an eight-month old daughter who will grow up without him. Leonard ended up in prison because, like this student's father, he was raised not to betray his friends, and accepted being punished in their place. This student plans to write a letter back telling Leonard he should do what is right and tell the truth, so that he can be present for his daughter.

This student uses her own experience to assert her vision of justice, arguing that one has a greater responsibility toward one's children than toward any given social group. As such, agreeing to be condemned in someone else's place is not an act of courage and solidarity, but a deep betrayal of one's duties toward one's own family.



When Leonard quotes a phrase from Anne Frank about being trapped in a cage—which was quoted in the Freedom Writers article—this student is amazed at the power of the media to reach people everywhere.

This student realizes that the Freedom Writers are successfully spreading Anne Frank's message and impacting others in the same way that Anne's diary has caused them to learn and grow.

**PART VII: DIARY 110**

This student has grown up without his father, whom he believes left his mother because he didn't have the money to take care of their baby. Based on information from his father's friends, this student believes that his father is probably a bad person, focused on alcohol and drugs, and unable to motivate himself to work. When Ms. Gruwell gives the Freedom Writers an assignment to interview other students about their family heritage and culture, this student realizes that he knows nothing about his family roots. He interviews other Latino students to try to find out about his own past.

Ms. Gruwell's assignment shows that, while the Freedom Writers trust in equality for all, they are also able to recognize the distinct cultural traits that make up everybody's life. Learning about other people's cultures allows the students to be more aware of the diverse world around them, and treat other cultures with respect. This student's longing to discover his own cultural background reveals his desire to feel a stronger sense of personal identity.



Finally, he asks his mother if they can go find his father, and his mother ends up agreeing. He is simultaneously excited and nervous about meeting his father, which he has wanted to do since he was a child. When they finally find his house, where he is living with his own mother, the student's grandmother tells them his father is sick and cannot see him. Despite the student's efforts, she remains persistent in keeping them from seeing him. On his way back home, he feels deeply disappointed and realizes that his father is a coward who can't even face his own son. The student concludes that he will never be like him.

The student's desire to meet his father suggests that it is important for him to feel a sense of belonging and know his own past. The father and grandmother's refusal to grant him this opportunity inspires him to transform this disappointment into a future commitment. This demonstrates a quality that Ms. Gruwell has emphasized throughout her teaching: the ability to transform adversity into an opportunity for growth.



PART VII: DIARY 111

This student describes her sorority's hazing process. She finds herself watching the most popular boys at school yell sexual insults at the freshmen girls and tell them to touch their balls. This student remembers her own process of joining the sorority. Out of sheer luck, she was able to avoid many of the pledge nights, where the freshmen girls were forced to sing to the senior boys' exposed genitals, sit on the boys' laps, and kiss them. At the time, she hadn't realized how humiliating and degrading this entire process was.

Now older than she was when she first entered the sorority, this student is able to adopt a critical attitude toward her own group, and realizes that much of what is normalized within the sorority is nothing other than sexual violence, aimed at making girls submit to the boys' orders. She realizes that the pledging process inspires in her discomfort and disgust.



Now that she is supposedly "popular" and watches the process herself, she sees the violence and contempt with which the boys treat the girls, without any interference on the part of the sorority girls. This student doesn't understand why she did not stand up to this injustice, which she calls a torture. As a Freedom Writer, she feels ashamed to have let this happen. She decides to leave the sorority. She concludes that the concept of popularity is meaningless and that she does not want to be part of a group that actively humiliates other people.

The pledging process involves violence not only on the boys' part, but also on the part of the sorority members, whose lack of intervention makes indifference to harm and humiliation seem like a normal attitude. This student realizes that such behavior is, in fact, immoral and unfair. At the same time, her own inability to react at the moment that the pledge is taking place reveals the difficulty of standing up to injustice—and to an entire group of people—alone.



PART VII: DIARY 112

This student is excited about getting together with her dad for Christmas. She feels lucky to have him and recalls the moment when she learned he was shot. When her mother told her what had happened, she felt that she might die from the pain of thinking that she could lose her father. In the hospital, she was afraid her dad might be unrecognizable and, when she finally saw him, he was in a terrible state. She began to cry and yell at him to wake up.

This student's experience gives the ubiquity of gun violence in Ms. Gruwell's students' lives a highly personal quality, as she describes in detail the various emotions that she went through when she learned about her dad being shot. This gives a deeply human dimension to the social problem of insecurity and violence, showing how it affects entire families.



Her father had to endure a long, complicated recovery and, to this day, he still has trouble speaking, as well as seizures and memory loss. This experience allows this student to empathize with anyone who has lost a parent, because she knows the fear of losing a family member. She is aware, though, that while her father and she remain scarred by this experience, she is extremely lucky that he is alive and present in her life.

This student uses her own experience to be more sensitive to other people's ordeals. Instead of focusing on her father's problems, she emphasizes her gratitude for his presence in her life, demonstrating her optimistic outlook on life and her capacity to make the best of what she has.



PART VII: DIARY 113

This student describes having to celebrate Christmas only a few days after her/his mother's death. She was diagnosed with terminal cancer a month earlier but hadn't expected to die so soon, and the student feels overwhelmed by the thought of not celebrating Christmas in their usual way. S/he wonders if s/he should give her/his mother's gifts to her/his sister. Due to the suddenness of her/his mother's death, s/he wasn't even able to say goodbye to her.

S/he feels that s/he has suddenly become an adult, alone, with no guidance. Despite Ms. Gruwell and the Freedom Writers' help, s/he feels unable to share her pain, and does not understand why s/he cannot accept other people's help. S/he concludes that s/he needs to try and open up, so that s/he can accept their comfort as a second family.

While other students are commonly faced with death due to gang-related violence, this student experiences the senseless death from within her/his family. Her/his practical considerations about her/his mother's Christmas gifts suggest that this ordeal has forced her/him to grow up and take on adult responsibilities.



The student feels isolated and lonely from having lost a family member, but is still able to benefit from the love and comfort that the Freedom Writers provide. The group demonstrates that no one should ever be deprived of a family's support, however many adult responsibilities one might have to take on.



ENTRY 8: MS. GRUWELL

At the end of Christmas vacation, Ms. Gruwell receives a call from the Anne Frank Center USA telling her that the Freedom Writers have won the Spirit of Anne Frank Award, honoring people fighting against discrimination and prejudice. While the award isn't usually given to a group of people, Ms. Gruwell insisted that she would not enter her students individually, since they function as a group. After winning, the students have to go pick up their prize in New York.

Erin explains that in November, the *L.A. Times* published the article that had been written about the Freedom Writers and Ms. Gruwell was overwhelmed by offers for her students to appear on TV shows and articles. She decided that she would accept the offer to appear on ABC's *Prime Time Live*. As the group has gotten increasing attention, however, she has been careful to shield her students from potentially disingenuous adults. Nevertheless, she has received an offer from the brand GUESS? to help the students, and she hopes they might be able to help some students go to New York to receive their award.

This prize serves as an external confirmation of the impressive achievements that the Freedom Writers have made. It demonstrates that their fight against intolerance not only takes place in the classroom, but has the power to impact and inspire other people. It also serves as powerful validation that they are successfully spreading Anne Frank's message of peace.



Ms. Gruwell tries to remain level-headed about all the attention the Freedom Writers are receiving, because she does not want her students to lose track of the concrete goals they are pursuing. While publicity is a form of validation, Ms. Gruwell does not accept just any form of publicity, but only those that can benefit the group as a whole, helping her students pursue their academic and social objectives.



PART VIII: DIARY 114

This student is one of the forty-five students chosen to fly to New York, sponsored by the company GUESS?, which explained its decision by explaining that the company's founders are Jewish and were forced to flee Europe during World War II.

The company's desire to sponsor the students demonstrates the founders' desire to use the horrific experience of World War II as a catalyst to make the world a better, more tolerant place.



Despite this student's excitement, she notes that her father does not care at all about her achievements, and has not offered to help in any way. Throughout her life, she feels that her father never delivered on his promises. Receiving help from GUESS? reminds her of her childhood, during which she compensated for the lack of her father's presence by trying to be accepted by her peers. She felt a desperate need to wear the designer clothes that everybody else had. Now that she is part of the Freedom Writers, material things are no longer central to her life, for she has realized that only love makes her truly happy.

This student's search for love has undergone various stages, but the most impactful result of this search has been the Freedom Writers, who have allowed her to focus on what makes her truly happy in life. While she still does not have the one thing she so desperately wants—her father's love—she knows that she does not need it to succeed in life, and that she can rely on her own achievements to feel proud and admired by other people.



PART VIII: DIARY 115

This student explains that s/he has always dreamed of going to New York. To accept the award, the students had to write an essay explaining why they would be good ambassadors for this event. When Ms. Gruwell told her/him that s/he was chosen to go to New York, s/he felt overwhelmed by excitement and surprise, since s/he only joined the class during senior year.

Ms. Gruwell does not choose the lucky students who will go to New York arbitrarily, but relies on a process of essay-writing to select them, thus demonstrating her commitment to fairness and meritocracy.



S/he is impressed by the fact that, unlike other teachers, Ms. Gruwell actually tries to get to know her students. While s/he feared that the other students would reject her/him for arriving late, s/he soon realized that her/his fears were unwarranted, as s/he soon felt part of the Freedom Writers' color-blind family.

Ms. Gruwell does not separate her commitment to her student's academic well-being from their sense of being loved and taken care of. She believes that education is an intellectual and social project, aimed at making everyone feel welcome and included.



PART VIII: DIARY 116

This student is excited to be in New York, and she finds the Marriott Hotel where they are staying, thanks to Ms. Gruwell's status as a staff member, particularly luxurious. She explains that, unlike in Washington, she was not able to choose her roommates. Instead, Ms. Gruwell placed her in a group with three girls of three different races: African American, Caucasian, and Asian. This student has never shared a room with people of a different race, because her father always forbid her to sleepover at the homes of her friends, who were ethnically diverse. She realized her father was prejudiced when he told her sister that if she married her African-American boyfriend, he would not give his blessing.

Despite the fact that this is senior year and the Freedom Writers have worked hard on issues of cultural and racial diversity, this student has not yet had the experience of confronting racial difference in her personal life. Her family experience demonstrates that, even though she can criticize her father for being racially prejudiced, she still experiences discomfort with other races because of his intolerant views, which have kept her from getting accustomed to racial difference.



After feeling uncomfortable changing in front of her roommates on the first day, she soon bonds with them over a shared experience, and they end up sharing various items they brought with them. This experience makes her feel confident that she will never feel uncomfortable with a person of a different race again, and that she will raise her children so that they can choose who they want to be friends with.

This experience shows that close contact with other people can prove more powerful than any classroom activity, as it forces people to reckon with their deepest fears and emotions. In this case, it impacts this student so much that she is convinced it has radically changed her entire vision of racial difference.



PART VIII: DIARY 117

When the Freedom Writers receive their award, stepping on stage after rich and powerful people, they are all crying, overwhelmed by the honor they are receiving. That evening, they become emotional again when they go see a play based on **The Diary of Anne Frank**. The student realizes that she is contributing to making Anne Frank live after her death.

The students' pride is fuelled not only by their feeling that they are on the path toward personal and collective success, but also by the fact that they are honoring their moral commitment to Anne Frank's legacy, as they had promised Holocaust survivors they would.

**PART VIII: DIARY 118**

After three days in New York spent visiting famous monuments and meeting famous people, this student realizes that her/his father is in a similar position of power, but takes advantage of it. S/he describes the physical and verbal abuse that he makes his children suffer through, but explains that during his/her parents' divorce, her/his father was able to bribe court psychologists so that he would be given custody of the children. One weekend, her/his father locked her/his brother in the backyard and didn't give him either food or drink for an entire weekend.

This student realizes that obtaining social and economic power is not a positive objective per se, since power can be used for good and for bad purposes. S/he explains that power often comes with credibility and authority, and that it can hide cruel behavior. S/he describes a legal world in which people are happy to draw profit from situations that benefit them, without caring about the harm done to more vulnerable people.



While psychologists have failed to see her/his father for who he is and he continues to verbally abuse his children, this student has decided that s/he will not let him spoil her/his education and her/his experience as a Freedom Writer. S/he commits to putting an end to similar abuse when s/he becomes powerful.

This depressing situation does not affect this student's capacity to recognize violence for what it is and, more importantly, to trust optimistically in her/his own powers as an individual.

**PART VIII: DIARY 119**

This student describes meeting her/his idol Peter Maass, who reported on the horrific crimes committed in Bosnia against the civilian population. This student finds the courage to ask a question that has been bothering her/him, questioning the journalist about his job, which is often spent watching people suffer and die. Despite people's shock at the question, Maass explains that, as a journalist, he has to keep his distance from the action. Becoming involved in any way could compromise what is happening, as well as endanger his life and that of his crew. He explains that writing about horrific events can hopefully have a stronger impact than acting in the moment they are taking place. After these explanations, the student is satisfied and admires the man's courage even more.

This student shows the impressive capacity to question authority and defend her/his intellectual inquiries. In asking a thought-provoking question, her/his goal is not to discredit the renowned journalist's work, but to examine his work critically. Her/his question is not a personal attack but, rather, an opportunity for him to justify his actions morally and socially, and thus expose the deep complexity of his work. To everyone's surprise, the student thus demonstrates that admiration and critical inquiry can go hand-in-hand.

**PART VIII: DIARY 120**

This student celebrates the Freedom Writers' literary agent Carol for publishing their diaries. Using the term she herself used to describe her job, he congratulates her for being a successful "pimp." She is currently working for them voluntarily, refusing to be paid.

The Freedom Writers' capacity to educate the world about their stories reaches a climax in the publication of their diary entries. Carol's voluntary work highlights the moral value of this enterprise.



PART VIII: DIARY 121

This student announces that the Freedom Writers are getting published. She describes her own dream of being a published writer, a passion that her stepfather actively fueled. When he learned that they were being published by Doubleday, an important publishing company, he was proud that she was entering the list of African-American female writers.

This student sees publication as a dream come true and a means to make society more diverse, as it shows that her voice—as a young African-American student—is just as worthy of being heard as that of other important literary figures published by Doubleday.



PART VIII: DIARY 122

This student compares the experience of getting published to the teamwork involved in playing basketball. He describes an important basketball game in which he and his teammates were so convinced of their superiority that they ended up losing the game. As the team captain, he felt that he had let his teammates down. Later, however, he realized that it wasn't all his fault. Rather, the entire team entered the game with the wrong mentality and did not play well enough. This student understands that this time, too, the Freedom Writers have to work as a team and not depend on Ms. Gruwell for it to work out.

This student realizes that group unity is necessary for everyone to succeed, since no one is capable of leading others to success alone. The most effective means to reach success is through cooperation and equal involvement, so that everyone can feel inspired by everyone else's actions. Publishing a book gives the Freedom Writers the opportunity to demonstrate that they truly have become a unified group, capable of making it on their own.



PART VIII: DIARY 123

While Ms. Gruwell is in New York to meet with the book publisher, the Freedom Writers are taught by a substitute, and this student suddenly let out her/his anger at another student. S/he compares the situation to [Animal Farm](#) by George Orwell, in which, despite an overall atmosphere of equality, not everyone works or cares in the same way about their project. S/he describes her/his anger and noticing that not all Freedom Writers are putting equal effort into the publication of the book, and says that people who do not want to work should leave the group, otherwise it might be destroyed from the inside.

This student realizes that Ms. Gruwell plays an important part in creating a stable classroom atmosphere in which students cooperate with each other. In the absence of such a leader, the Freedom Writers risk becoming more disorganized and allowing tensions to explode. This student explains that the group's unity is not necessarily based on equal work but, rather, that the group's very unity allows for certain people to rely on others to get work done.



PART VIII: DIARY 124

This student describes being kicked out of the basketball team, to which she has passionately devoted all her high school years. She explains that while she brought a lot of strength and motivation to the team, she is also guilty of being sarcastic and talking back. Her coach thought that she was always making fun of her and decided to kick her out.

While this student laments what is happening to her, she is also honest enough to recognize her own role in being kicked off the team. This demonstrates her knowledge that she is accountable for her actions.



Despite this student's repeated efforts to join the team again, her coach has refused to give her a second chance. Basketball was her most important activity, capable of relieving stress and bringing her joy, and she feels that it was her entire life. Nevertheless, she has decided to attend every game and support her team from the sidelines, watching her team win the championship and, paradoxically, hearing her coach motivate the players by telling them they should work as hard as she used to.

This student does not use what happened to her as an excuse to give up on a group of people that means so much to her. She demonstrates her commitment to her teammates and their goals by remaining a stable figure in their lives, capable of bringing them love and support. This serves as proof of her seriousness and reliability, as well as her refusal to reject an entire group based on their leader's actions.



Despite this huge disappointment, which lowered this student's self-esteem, she has been able to invest more time in the Freedom Writers and attend the New York event, in addition to ABC's *Prime Time Live* show. She trusts that negative events in life can lead to positive ones, and has also been working hard to have less of an attitude.

The student proves capable of transforming adversity into an opportunity for change and growth, taking advantage of new events as they arise. At the same time, her negative experience with basketball has forced her to reconsider her behavior and make an effort to avoid repeating her past mistakes.



PART VIII: DIARY 125

This student is amazed to have been chosen to speak in front of Barbara Boxer, their senator. Ms. Gruwell and all the Freedom Writers chose her out of the entire group. She recalls the various rebellious acts she took part in during high school, including piercing her nipple and leaving the house without her parents' consent, skipping school, piercing her tongue, and cutting classes to spend time with her boyfriend. When Ms. Gruwell threatened to kick her out of the class, she suddenly put an end to her rebellious behavior and gave priority to her education and the group of students who have always been there for her. She concludes that she does not want to let the Freedom Writers down.

This student's rebellious past and current achievements demonstrate that one's success is not determined by one's past but, rather, by the passion and hard work that one uses to overcome the past. She realizes that one of the most important things she has drawn from the Freedom Writers is an intense sense of community. Indeed, the mere threat of losing that community was sufficient to make her change her entire behavior and invest herself in her studies. Her sense of accountability to the group plays an important role in motivating her to succeed.



PART VIII: DIARY 126

This student recalls her/his struggles with ADD, which used to lead her/him to act in uncontrollable, violent ways, but which s/he can now curb by taking medication. As a child, s/he had few friends, as people laughed at her/him a lot, but now feels that s/he makes friends more easily, and that s/he is even able to make intelligent audiences laugh. S/he feels excited to start college to meet equally quirky people who will accept her/him for who s/he is.

While this student recognizes that her/his attention disorder has made social life difficult for her/him at time, s/he sees it as an integral part of her-/himself and her/his personality, trusting that there are other people like her/him in the world whom s/he is only waiting to meet.



PART VIII: DIARY 127

Despite spending her past four years learning about tolerance and acceptance, this student recalls her struggle to find acceptance as a lesbian. After discovering that she and her best friend were in love, she felt confused and scared that other people would judge her for her sexual preferences, and even wondered if her religious school would kick her out for being homosexual. She quickly learned that many of the people she thought were her friends were in fact the first ones to judge and condemn her. The family members she has told have been supportive, but, in light of what happened with her friends, she doesn't know how her parents will react, or if their love will truly hold when she needs it the most.

This student emphasizes the fact that deep growth and learning takes place when one's entire self is involved and, in particular, when the learning process involves one's personal life. She describes accepting and sharing her sexual identity as a process made difficult because of other people's judgment—and her consequent fear of how people might react. However, her decision to tell her family about it demonstrates her courageous willingness to express herself and her desire to be accepted for who she truly is, instead of desperately trying to fit in.



PART VIII: DIARY 128

When this student is elected prom queen, her first reaction is to call her mother. When her mom dressed her for prom, this student saw the pride in her eyes and realized how much she had sacrificed for her family. She explains that her family was very wealthy in their native Nicaragua, but that when communism spread, her father was seen as an enemy of the government and her brothers were likely to be enrolled in the army and brainwashed.

This student realizes that her achievements cannot be understood in isolation, for the person she has become is in large part the result of her family upbringing. Instead of self-absorbedly basking in her own pride, she expresses her gratitude for the sacrifices that other people have made in order to protect her happiness.



The family decided to leave for the United States, leaving everything behind to start a new life. Her pregnant mother had to leave first, on her own, so as not to attract suspicion, and one year later her husband and children joined her in the United States. Although this student's parents have had to adjust to a new culture and give up on material riches, she feels that they are now a united family, stronger than before. On prom night, she realizes that her prom queen crown should go to her mother, who sacrificed her life for her and has supported all of her accomplishments.

In the same way that difficult stories and emotional moments have turned the Freedom Writers into a more united group, this student's family turned a life-threatening situation into an opportunity to unite and overcome external obstacles. This student considers such a bond infinitely greater than material goods—greater, even, than the possibility of seeing her success as something of her own making, detached from her environment.



PART VIII: DIARY 129

When the Freedom Writers receive the Micah Award, given to people who fight injustice (or, as the award explains, people who save the entire world by saving one life), this student feels inspired enough to break her long silence and tell her mother that she was raped nine years ago by her babysitter. After hearing Holocaust survivors describe their sense of guilt, this student realizes that she, too, should not feel guilty and should accept that she was simply an innocent victim.

This student's decision to tell her mother about a traumatic episode of sexual assault shows that positive incentives—in this case, receiving a prize about the importance of speaking the truth and fighting injustice—can be powerful enough to make people behave in courageous ways. She is, in this way, saving her own life, by defending her psychological well-being.



Recently, she asked her cousin if she had ever been sexually abused, and the cousin revealed that her uncle had molested her. This turned out to be the very same person who raped this student. This student finds the confidence to speak out when she realizes that doing so could save another little girl from her rapist. She has decided to report this man so that she can prevent injustice and not simply stand by without doing anything. She trusts that in saving one life, she can change the entire world.

This student realizes that telling the truth—which she thought would only affect her—can actually help others to heal as well. Indeed, instead of remaining silent about her pain, she now has the opportunity to speak up and potentially keep others from experiencing similar pain. Healing oneself can thus have unexpected consequences on other people.



PART VIII: DIARY 130

A few weeks before graduation, this student reflects on the idea that history repeats itself. While he felt that he was finally going to break the cycle in his family by being the first one to graduate from high school, his dad was suddenly diagnosed with a serious illness and his entire life changed. Now, he has had to decline his acceptance to college, as well as the financial aid he received, so that he can devote his time to work and support his family. He has to be strong for his family, even though he feels like crying most of the time.

This student's reaction to such a sudden change in his life highlights his maturity and his dedication to his family, as he is willing to sacrifice his own, well-earned future to take care of the people who need him most. Taking on these adult responsibilities, however, deprives him of the freedom he should be able to enjoy as an adolescent and a student and makes his dream seem more remote.



Even though graduation was supposed to be a happy moment, he now finds himself struggling to pay for his graduation outfit. He is amazed at how quickly life can change, and he is glad to have experienced hope and joy for at least a little while. Now, he is simply waiting to see where life will take him.

While this student is facing a combination of problems—academic, economic, and personal—he does not lose hope in the future, accepting life's ups and downs as an integral part of life, making his future entirely uncertain.



PART VIII: DIARY 131

This student has just received a full scholarship to play football at college. While he always dreamed of playing football, when he was twelve he became addicted to drugs, which kept him from performing well in football and at school. He tried more and more drugs until he joined Ms. Gruwell's class, which gave him motivation and made him feel that he had potential. After working hard at school, he now looks forward to going to college and starting his football career.

This student's self-destructive habit of consuming drugs was, it seems, strongly influenced by his environment, which did not give him a sense of self-confidence. By contrast, the motivation he felt in Ms. Gruwell's class was soon sufficient to make him stop taking drugs and work hard. This demonstrates that ambition and self-respect can be deeply positive forces impacting one's behavior.



PART VIII: DIARY 132

This student describes the surprising high and lows of life. While he began his day by learning that he entered the first round to play professional baseball, his baseball team lost the semifinal round of the championship. He feels a lot of pressure from having to decide whether he wants to play baseball at a prestigious college or to begin a professional career in baseball—which could be compromised if he went to college. Ms. Gruwell has been supportive of this difficult process, and has told him that his choice has Shakespearian dimensions.

This student learns to accept that life is not always a smooth path toward success, but that one must learn to handle adversity with the same strength and enthusiasm with which one embraces success. Ms. Gruwell's supportive attitude toward this student's choice demonstrates once again how seriously she takes her students. She does not try to influence him to pursue his education but, instead, fully accepts that he must make the decision for himself.

**PART VIII: DIARY 133**

When this student learns that she is accepted at UCLA, she is shocked to realize that the students in her honors class, most of whom are white, ask her about her GPA and SAT scores, as though questioning whether she deserves to have gotten in. One girl becomes furious and tells everyone that she only got in because she is black, even though this is the first year of the “anti-Affirmative Action” laws. Even one of her former teachers responds to her acceptance calling it amazing, given that there are no more Affirmative Action laws. This student cannot believe that people think she is simply lucky to have gotten accepted, when she has always been an excellent student.

This student's experience demonstrates that even people who do not seem openly racist might harbor racist assumptions and attitudes which become apparent in times of crisis. She feels the deep injustice of having achieved an impressive goal while simultaneously still having to prove to people that she is smart—even though her acceptance should, in itself, be proof enough.



When she tells the Freedom Writers this good news, everyone is happy for her and congratulates her in a heartfelt way, sharing in her joy like a family and telling her they are proud of her.

The Freedom Writers, in contrast to the rest of the school, celebrate her acceptance on its own terms—as this student's own achievement, not a function of her race.

**PART VIII: DIARY 134**

While the Freedom Writers are happily sharing their college acceptances and talking about post-graduation life, this student feels a deep sense of grief at the idea of separating from them. She recalls the night her father left her house for good, for no reason she could identify, and fears the moment when she will have to accept the Freedom Writers' loss in the same way. She thinks, however, that the Freedom Writers cannot be compared to her father, and that things will probably be all right.

This student's fear at being separated from the Freedom Writers highlights the extraordinary group dynamic the students have succeeded in creating, as many of them turn to this group in the same way they would expect support from a family. This student sees the Freedom Writers as an even more stable entity than a family.



PART VIII: DIARY 135

This student describes the joys of the end of the year, as she enjoys high grades, a positive relationship with her mother, and the prospect of a good summer job, before realizing that she is pregnant. She does not understand what could have happened, since after her previous abortion she took great care to not have unprotected sex, but then remembers that the condom broke one night. She also remembers the depression she endured after her first abortion and decides that she wants to keep this baby. While her boyfriend understands her choice, he fears that they are not yet ready to raise a child.

When she tells her mother about it, her mother warns her that her life will change completely, and that many of the things she had planned to do will no longer be possible. Yet, despite her fears, this student nevertheless decides that she is strong enough to have her baby, start college, and find another job. Overall, she feels blessed at graduating with excellent grades and having such supportive friends and family.

Faced with a difficult choice, this student decides to put her education in jeopardy in order to prioritize her mental health and keep her baby. The fact that this pregnancy is unwanted highlights not only life's constant fluctuations, but also the fact that this young girl could perhaps have benefited from greater sexual education about preventing unwanted pregnancy.



This student's trust in herself is impressive, given the tremendous life changes that await her. She does not believe that she is condemned to an unhappy future but, rather, that she is strong enough to shape her future and lead the life she wants.



PART VIII: DIARY 136

This student quotes a line from one of poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou's works: "I know why the caged bird sings." He explains that he, like this bird, "sings" because he is not free, writing poems and journal entries to escape reality. In his violent, gang-filled neighborhood, he is a minority because he is white, and has always had to run home from school to avoid being beaten up for looking different. For that same reason, he hasn't been able to make any friends.

There are no such tensions in his classroom and his class has been celebrated for their diversity, appearing on television and even receiving financial help from an airline company. He explains that he hopes to become a pilot to escape his suffocating environment. Ironically, though, he is afraid of heights and didn't attend the Freedom Writers' past field trips. He hopes to attend their next trip to Texas in the fall.

This student has experienced the injustice of being attacked because of his skin color, and feels deeply isolated because of this. While he considers art a means of escaping his violent world, it is clear from the simple fact that he is writing this diary entry that it also allows him to share his emotions and express his deepest thoughts, thus allowing him to connect with himself—not only to escape.



The Freedom Writers' classroom provides much-needed respite from the violence and intolerance of the world. This student's desire to be a pilot despite a fear of heights is comical, but also shows that he optimistically believes no obstacle is strong enough to keep him from pursuing his dream.



PART VIII: DIARY 137

This student feels ecstatic at being the last of the thirty-five Freedom Writers called to receive a computer. S/he cannot believe that s/he increased her/his grade point enough to receive one. S/he describes her/his admiration for John Tu, who has inspired her/him to become an entrepreneur and give back to her/his community. John Tu has given some Freedom Writers jobs at his company, giving them hope, as well as the desire to give to others, thereby maintaining a cycle of hope.

The material prize that these students receive for having high grades is not necessarily the true reward in itself, since this student seems equally excited about having improved so much academically as s/he is about receiving a computer. John Tu's financial and emotional support demonstrates that teamwork—an essential feature of Ms. Gruwell's teaching—is indeed a powerful tool for success.



PART VIII: DIARY 138

Upon waking up, this student frantically searches for her/his special necklace before realizing that her/his parents must have stolen from her/him again to buy drugs. Ever since her/his parents have started smoking crack cocaine, they have stopped caring about their child and don't buy food or pay for electricity. When the student was younger, they used to lock her/him up in the closet while they physically fought each other. S/he became so used to it that s/he put snacks and a television in the closet. The closet was a safe haven from which, at the same time, the student yearned to be free.

This student's family situation seems to have reversed the traditional roles. Here, the parents are behaving like children and the child is forced to think as an adult, noticing the lack of food and the need to pay electricity bills. This student's yearning to be free can be understood not only as a desire to exit the confined space of the closet, but also as a more general desire to be given the freedom that s/he deserves as a child and an adolescent.



While graduation is only in a few days, her/his parents are still taking drugs. This student decides that, unlike her/his parents, s/he wants to give to others. Her/his parents, unfortunately, are happy receiving more than they give, and have demonstrated that they care more about drugs than about their child.

This story highlights the deep effect that such drug usage can have on an entire community, as it affects not only its users, but also the people who depend on those users, generating violent abuse and destroying family ties.



PART VIII: DIARY 139

This student is proud and excited to be the first person in her/his family to graduate. While s/he can count with the love of her/his parents, the rest of her/his family is not supportive of her/his academic achievements and seem to actually want her/him to fail. Thanks to her/his parents and the Freedom Writers, though, s/he has always felt that s/he had a family who believe that s/he could make it. When the student realizes that s/he has been chosen to be Graduation Class Speaker, s/he feels that her/his dream is coming true, and that success depends on learning from any kind of event or circumstance—positive or negative—and moving on.

This student has learned to recognize and cherish the people who truly support her/him in life, recognizing that their presence has played an important role in giving her/him self-confidence and leading her/him to success. While the lack of support from her/his extended family was an obstacle, it did not define who s/he is. Instead, this student trusts that success comes from within, since it is only by relying on one's inner strength that one can ever overcome the unpredictability of life.



PART VIII: DIARY 140

This student remembers leaving his house after an argument with his mother and having to live in the street. He became addicted to drugs and was arrested after assaulting someone while under the influence of drugs, but was condemned to one year of rehabilitation, which he recognizes saved his life. In the end, the grueling process of rehabilitation allowed him to find himself and realize that his family loves him.

This student realizes that it is an effort to reform and heal him—not to punish him for his wrongdoings—that succeeded in making him a better person. This example demonstrates that trust and accountability can be infinitely more powerful than mere punishment.



When he finally reintegrated into ordinary society again, he had a new appreciation for the world and his family and, while he struggled with many aspects of life, he was committed to becoming a better person. Now, after maintaining excellent grades and even receiving an award, he is deeply moved by finally graduating. After four years of struggling, he feels that he has finally found that the purpose of living is not drugs, but his own self.

This student has learned to appreciate the external forces in his life, such as his family, as well as his own sense of personal worth. His graduation serves as proof that hard work and commitment pay off, and that difficult times do not necessarily last. Now, he trusts in his potential and knows that he can be the leader of his own future.



PART VIII: DIARY 141

This student has shown the many people who did not believe in him that he would graduate. Diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at the age of four months, he was never expected to live a long life but, nevertheless, has been able to live this far and graduate. These past few years, his health began to deteriorate, which was harrowing for him and his family and made school attendance very difficult. Despite the support of Ms. Gruwell and the Freedom Writers, he had to be home schooled, while still attending Freedom Writers events.

This student sees graduating, which other people might consider an ordinary step in life, as a truly extraordinary feat. He takes nothing for granted, as he remains constantly aware of the fact that he is lucky to be alive. His dedication to the Freedom Writers is all the more impressive, as it shows that his illness has not made him self-centered but, rather, glad to be involved in a communal project.



In June 1997, he received a double lung transplant, for which he had waited two years. He was happy and not afraid of it being a failure, because he had gotten used to the idea that it might not work. However, he soon got better and was able to attend school again, where he received the Most Inspiring Student Award and a scholarship for college.

This student's attitude toward adversity is one of calm acceptance, as he is deeply aware of the constant possibility of death. Yet instead of being content with the mere fact of living, he strives to work hard and engage passionately with school and learning.



PART VIII: DIARY 142

This student reflects back on her/his time in high school and knows that, as a freshman, s/he would have found it incredible to think that Ms. Gruwell would last more than a month in this class. Now, however, some of these very same students are going to attend the most prestigious universities in the country. S/he notes that it is only once the students were able to reject the stereotypes with which the education system had labeled them that they were able to succeed.

This student realizes that what Ms. Gruwell's class needed was to break free from the mold that the education system had placed them into, since negative stereotypes only led them to behave as they were expected to behave: badly. By giving them other standards of behavior, as well as opportunities to dream and be ambitious, Ms. Gruwell reversed this process, encouraging students to have high standards for themselves.



These students were able to overcome their cultural and racial differences and, now, cannot imagine living and working without each other. This student recalls the trust that the Freedom Writers gradually put in education, as they learned that a pen could be more powerful than guns and violence. They used to try to destroy Ms. Gruwell's morale, but she always proved that she was able to overcome their efforts. This student identifies a major turning point as the "Toast for Change" in sophomore year, when each student was given a second chance.

During junior year, they were reading books meant for advanced placement classes. Senior year, they became famous for their achievements. This student realizes that having this class as a family allowed many students to reunite with their original family, changing their behavior so that they would lead a more stable, healthy life. While s/he expresses her sadness at losing classroom 203, s/he wonders what awaits them next, and trusts that Ms. Gruwell will not give up on them.

Ms. Gruwell demonstrated her own inner strength and resilience by avoiding discouragement in the face of her students' provocations. She thus became a model of stability and reliability that her students could emulate, as well as a powerful example of the possibility to embrace education over violence—a goal she exemplified in her classroom, as she always valued conversation and cooperation over punishment.



This student establishes a direct connection between external stability (in the form of the Freedom Writers' support) and internal stability (in the form of self-confidence and strength), emphasizing the way in which one's environment can shape one's behavior. S/he trusts that the stability the Freedom Writers provides is permanent, unable to be affected by events such as graduation.



EPILOGUE

Erin Gruwell recalls that, during the Freedom Writers' trip to Washington, someone suggested that their next step should be to visit Anne Frank's attic. As a result, after graduation, the group makes plans to go to Europe. In the meantime, the Freedom Writers attend colleges all around the United States, an experience that is difficult and that each student adapts to differently, as they are forced to find their own path far from the comforts of classroom 203 and move forward in their lives—while at the same time maintaining the legacy of Anne Frank and helping others along their way.

Erin also takes part in a transition of her own, as she leaves high school and begins teaching about her experience with the Freedom Writers at National University, Long beach, to inspire other educators, while remaining present in the Freedom Writers' lives, supporting them emotionally and intellectually. When the group gathers to meet with Harry Belafonte, a civil rights activist, he encourages the Freedom Writers to see their trip to Europe as a serious endeavor toward understanding history and promoting their message of tolerance.

The Freedom Writers' capacity to transform spur-of-the-moment ideas into reality is characteristic of the group's dynamics and demonstrates how seriously they take their dreams and ambitions. At the same time, the difficulty of transitioning to college shows that even realizing one's dream is not necessarily a smooth process, as one is always forced to grow and confront difficult moments in the process.



Erin demonstrates her commitment to the Freedom Writers' goals by sharing their methods and achievements with others, in the hope that this might lead to a cycle of positive change in her community and the world at large. The Freedom Writers' trip to Europe proves to be an opportunity for them to reconnect with their ideals and continue their learning outside the classroom, and also to renew their commitment to Anne Frank's legacy.



After hearing about the Columbine High School shooting, the Freedom Writers feel lucky at having avoided such tragedy in their own lives, but also understand the shooters' sense of frustration and anger, as many of them have known what it feels like to believe in violence as a solution. Ms. Gruwell understands that she gave her rebellious adolescents a chance to express themselves and connect with the world, whereas the Columbine shooters remained dangerously isolated and alienated from their community. To continue delivering their message of peace, the Freedom Writers begin mentoring high school students.

A few days before their trip to Europe, one of the Freedom Writers passes away. He suffered from cystic fibrosis all his life and died after his body rejected his lung transplant. In life, he realized many of his dreams, getting his driver's license, graduating from high school, and attending college. During their trip to Europe, where they visit historic sites such as Auschwitz, Sarajevo, and Anne Frank's house in Amsterdam, they light a candle for their late friend at every one of their stops.

Erin concludes her account by stating her hope that this book might inspire the reader to join the chain of literary inspiration that links Anne Frank, Zlata Filipović, the Freedom Writers and, finally, the readers themselves.

AFTERWORD

Erin Gruwell describes what has happened to the Freedom Writers since graduation. She explains that, at the end of senior year, she knew that this was not the end of the Freedom Writers experience, but only the beginning. Since graduation, she has remained the students' mentor and confidante, accompanying them as they have gone through college and chosen their careers—at the same time as they, too, have helped her deal with difficult times. The bond they have all formed has proven long-lasting, allowing each of them to draw from the group the strength and confidence needed to face life's obstacles.

The Freedom Writers' reaction to the Columbine shooting demonstrates their capacity to empathize with others, as well as their understanding that violence of this kind does not necessarily happen in isolation, as lack of support and guidance can lead to such harmful behavior. Ms. Gruwell also adapts a pragmatic approach to this event, considering that all young people need to be given outlets to express their emotions, and that social isolation is a recipe for violence.



While this student's death is inevitably sad, the Freedom Writers are also able to celebrate the moments of joy and success that he experienced during his life. They confirm their status as a family, a group whose unity cannot be torn apart, by making their late friend present in their various endeavors.



The Freedom Writers' goal, as always, is to share their stories in order to build deep connections with people and impact not only themselves, but the community as a whole.



Erin's conception of learning as a two-way process, in which the mentor learns from the mentee and vice-versa, proves accurate in her own life, as both she and the Freedom Writers are able to draw emotional support from each other. She emphasizes the group's nature as a family, which neither time, difficult events, nor geographic separation can tear apart.



Ms. Gruwell explains that the Freedom Writers' trip to Europe—and, in particular, to places associated with heinous violence such as Auschwitz—strengthened their desire to fight for tolerance in their own country. The success of their book, *The Freedom Writers Diary*, has led them to take part in a book tour across the United States. While the book has attracted controversy for both its language and content, Erin believes that what makes it unique is its powerful honesty and its message of tolerance. She notes the book's use as a powerful education tool for students, parents, and teachers. She writes that they still receive daily messages from people who have connected with the book in strong ways.

While the Freedom Writers were invited to give nerve-racking speeches to large audiences, Erin taught education at National University and, with her students, devised a "Freedom Writers method," outlining the key elements of the Freedom Writers' success. As a result of a business partnership, Erin was able to secure college tuition for all Freedom Writers and, in exchange, create a Freedom Writers teacher program. Many Freedom Writers have in fact become teachers themselves in an effort to give back what they learned.

In 2000, the Freedom Writers became the subject of a large motion-picture. The Freedom Writers became actively involved in the filmmaking process, choosing actors who actually resembled the original Freedom Writers and who had had similar experiences as the students in classroom 203. Despite the movie's success at capturing the Freedom Writers' story accurately, the group felt inspired to create a documentary of their own, where their actual voices could be heard. This process took years, but when John Tu decided to finance this project, they were able to produce *Voices Unbound: The Stories of the Freedom Writers*.

Erin concludes that the Freedom Writers' goal remains to make sure that everyone can tell their own story and be heard. In going through this process themselves, sharing their lives in intimate, difficult ways, the Freedom Writers have inspired others to use their voices as a tool for empowerment.

The book's controversial critical reception demonstrates the fact that people often judge things superficially, criticizing form or structure instead of being moved by deep and inspiring content. This is precisely what the Freedom Writers fight against: the tendency to focus on appearance instead of on people's essential humanity. This message has proven impactful for many people, who have been inspired by the Freedom Writers' stories in the same way that they were once inspired by Anne and Zlata's.



The Freedom Writers' current pursuits reveal that education is never-ending, since public speaking makes them learn from new events (as they acquire a new skill) and allows them to share what they have learned with new people (as they speak to new audiences). Both Ms. Gruwell and her former students remain committed to sharing their techniques with their communities, so that their goals might come alive through other people besides them.



The variety of methods that the Freedom Writers use to share their message is impressive, as it highlights their need to keep on finding a personal outlet for self-expression, as well as their desire to influence people in as many ways as possible. It also underlines their desire to make art and to keep on taking part in a variety of creative activities, in a similar way that they used to respond to Ms. Gruwell's assignments in the classroom.



The Freedom Writers aim to convince everyone that self-expression is a greater tool than anger or violence, for it has powerful positive effects both on oneself and on other people, despite the fears that being vulnerable can inspire.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 1

When the Freedom Writers are invited to speak to members of Congress as part of their book tour, this student, for the first time, finds herself hesitating. As an undocumented immigrant, she wonders if she will have to show an ID and might risk being deported. Unlike most Freedom Writers, this student always knew she would graduate from high school, because her mother trusted that hard work would lead her far. However, she soon had to deal with the frustration of not being able to attend college, because she needed a social security number to receive financial aid.

After expressing her sadness that, despite her hard work, she is still not a full citizen of this country and doesn't feel that she belongs, her mother reminds her of her accomplishments. She notes that even though she wasn't able to go to college, she is currently enrolled in a community college that she is financing on her own. Her mother's words give her the strength and motivation to choose to go to Washington, D.C. In the end, in the Capitol, no one asks for her ID and she is able to meet Congressman John Lewis, one of the original Freedom Riders. She experiences this as a great honor and wishes the rest of the Freedom Writers group were there.

As she is about to give her speech, she realizes that she is going to talk to a crowd mostly composed of privileged white men, which makes her extremely nervous, but then she reminds herself that these congressmen represent millions of people whose voices cannot be heard. She feels that she is a spokesperson who has been given the responsibility to testify on their behalf. In her speech, she describes her struggles as an undocumented immigrant, invoking her fear of immigration authorities and her deep disappointment at not being able to attend college. She explains that Ms. Gruwell and the Freedom Writers saw beyond her legal status, blindly accepting her into their large family.

After her speech, she feels that she could have said much more to inspire congressmen to fight for immigration reform. However, she concludes that she still trusts in the system, and that she will keep on fighting from within, because the Freedom Writers work within the system as well as challenge it.

This student's life demonstrates that cultural diversity is not only an aspect of everyday social life, but also a possible issue of life and death, as it can be tied to illegality and the threat of deportation—in a similar way that a seemingly innocuous feature such as one's skin color is tied to gang violence in Long Beach. Her immigrant background has influenced her entire life, defining even her educational opportunities.



Her mother reminds her that determination and hard work can help overcome the obstacles one faces. John Lewis exemplifies this idea, as he sacrificed his life for a noble goal, facing hatred, discrimination, and violence head-on in an effort to make the world aware of racial injustice. In turn, this student puts her own life at risk by defending the Freedom Writers' noble goal.



This student does not feel alone. Instead, she knows that speaking up is not a selfish act, but one that has the capacity to affect many people's lives. Her sense of accountability to other people struggling like her and, more generally, to the Freedom Writers' elevated principles of inclusion and tolerance motivate her to use her personal story as an opportunity to effect social change. This reveals her trust in the political process as well as in the power of stories to inspire courageous actions.



The Freedom Writers have long given up their tendency to use violence to express their anger, trusting instead that working patiently and diligently within a given system, however flawed, is the only honorable path for success.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 2

This Freedom Writer recalls a humiliating moment in his childhood when his teacher forced him to take his sweater off to play kick ball. Having had no clean shirts at home, this student had come to school without a shirt. After his teacher tried to publicly humiliate him for not wearing a shirt, he simply had to say that he forgot, thinking that was less embarrassing than saying he was poor and didn't have any clean shirts.

He recalls telling such stories about his childhood to groups of students when he visits schools. While most students ask him questions about violence and wealth, once a student asked him privately if his dad hit his mom. Since everyone used to lie to him when he was growing up, he now always tells the truth. He told this student that his father did used to beat his mother a lot, and felt that the student found hope in the thought that he, too, could survive his childhood and be okay.

He explains that he hates having to mentally return to his childhood, because it still hurts and he hates his younger, desperately insecure self. He tells this student that his father stopped hitting his mother as soon as he was strong enough to beat him up himself. While this is not a happy ending in a traditional sense, he trusts that his story can give people hope.

This teacher's methods rely on public humiliation and punishment, instead of on an effort to understand this young child on his own terms, which would have allowed her to discover that what she was perceiving as rebelliousness and lack of discipline was nothing other than fear.



This student uses his past, in which he felt betrayed by adults who lied to him, as an incentive not to repeat the same mistakes. While the truth is not necessarily uplifting, it has the advantage of connecting people with similar experiences and, hopefully, giving them hope that they will one day succeed in changing or escaping them.



This Freedom Writer's experience demonstrates that, however much one might have overcome one's past, memories can revive past emotions and cause despair in the present. His story demonstrates that, while people like him can embrace non-violent ideals, sometimes violence can be countered pragmatically, through the threat of equal strength.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 3

This Freedom Writer describes leaving college in Boston after a year. After being considered smart all her life, she arrived at university feeling unprepared, realizing that everything felt too difficult for her. She sometimes tried hard to study but would receive low grades, which destroyed her self-esteem. At the same time, she missed her home and her family dearly.

She describes the alienation that she felt in Boston. She recalls entering the subway one day and noticing an old lady step back in fear, as though this student were a threat. Even at her supposedly progressive, prestigious college, she felt labeled as "the black girl." She soon realized that she was depressed and returned to Long Beach in the summer, defeated. She refused to see her friends, even the Freedom Writers, and left college without telling her best friend there. She has only recently begun regaining self-confidence, as she has earned her bachelor's degree, and she feels that she is waging a slow battle against self-doubt.

Without the support of her family, this student found herself struggling to maintain a sense of self-confidence. It appears that it is this factor—not necessarily the mere difficulty of classes—that led her to quit college, as she found herself unmotivated and despondent.



This student's experience reveals that academic prestige and political awareness do not always go hand-in-hand, as the Freedom Writers proved more committed to racial equality than these equally intelligent college students. This student, however, has not given up on her education and trusts that the future will allow her to renew her strength—in the same way, perhaps, that Ms. Gruwell's "Toast for Change" gave students a second chance, allowing them to dramatically alter their life vision.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 4

This Freedom Writer recalls being five months pregnant when she graduated from high school. While she had made a plan to go to college, she soon found that she did not have the time or the resources to combine raising a child with attending college. After having a second child, she looked for jobs for six months, but finally decided to invest in her education again. After attending a local design school for a few months, Ms. Gruwell told her about the possibility of attending a fully funded, custom-built program at California State University, Long Beach. She embraced this opportunity and felt that her dream was within reach again.

While she often felt overwhelmed by her many pressures and responsibilities, at home and at university, she was able to enjoy the college experience she had always wanted. When she received her diploma at graduation, she felt that an entire life of opportunities lay ahead of her.

Despite this student's various ordeals, she remained aware of the importance of education in her life—on a practical level, as something that could lead to a better career, but also on a personal level, as something that fulfills her intellectual needs. Her capacity to embrace the opportunities that arise and to make the best of a difficult family situation highlights both the unpredictability of life, as well as individuals' potential to turn their life around.



This experience shows that optimism and hope are not only adolescent characteristics. Rather, education has the power to inspire in people of all ages and backgrounds a sense of pride and a belief in their own potential.

AFTERWORD: DIARY 5

This Freedom Writer describes visiting Wilson High School after many years. She is part of the jury of the Freedom Writers scholarship, meant to help students who deal with similar problems of violence, poverty, and illegal immigration status that the Freedom Writers experienced. When she and a fellow Freedom Writer visit Room 203, they are disappointed to note that it looks sterile and unwelcoming, but she feels a mix of nostalgic pain and joy as she reflects on her own time there. She remembers trying to follow the students' "Electric Slide" dance from the sidelines, but failing, like Ms. Gruwell, to learn all the steps.

When the two Freedom Writers shut the classroom door, they walk to the meeting to decide who will receive the Freedom Writers scholarship and feel confident that they are giving back to their community. She then drives to the Freedom Writers Foundation, a central place where Freedom Writers can gather, think, and share together, finding comfort in each other's presence as well as organizing events aimed at benefiting the entire community. She feels proud and lucky to know that these high school bonds are still as strong as ever. She also realizes that she is slowly finding her own place in this world, having transformed from an introverted teen to a successful educator herself.

Despite external appearances, the Freedom Writers have succeeded in perpetuating their legacy and allowing children like them to benefit from similar opportunities. The former students' nostalgic remembrance of dancing in the classroom emphasizes the Freedom Writers' nature as a family, committed to learning in a fun atmosphere, where everyone can feel free.



The strength of the Freedom Writers' ties has allowed them to remain a stable group and fight for their goals. In particular, they have remained committed to improving their community. This Freedom Writer realizes that success is never static. Indeed, despite her various accomplishments, she still feels that she is in the process of learning, discovering herself, and becoming a stronger human being, capable of impacting the world around her. This attitude of humility and hard work allows her to look forward to the future.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 6

This Freedom Writer describes the importance that family has played in his life, and his struggles as an adolescent to fit in and feel normal, which he desperately wanted. In the classroom, he kept quiet about his struggles, letting other Freedom Writers discuss their own troubles. However, when Ms. Gruwell invites him to join a retreat at the National Teacher's Institute, he finds himself revealing more than he would have expected about his past.

When they play a debate game in which students have to agree or disagree with certain issues, Ms. Gruwell asks if all suspected abuse should be reported, and this Freedom Writer surprises himself and everybody else by being the only person in the room to disagree. This forces him to finally tell his story, describing his experiences with foster care, violence, and abuse.

He explains that when he was fifteen, a teacher mistakenly believed that his little sister was being abused by their mother, because she had bruises on her legs. When the Child Protection Services came in the middle of the night, the student explained that their mother did not abuse them, but no one listened to him. After this, he was separated from his siblings, for whom he had cared his entire life. The siblings were all separated and sent to anonymous families, never to see each other again. When he finally saw one of his sisters again, he felt intense guilt at having failed to protect her.

While he is crying hard, he finally tells the group that, right before this retreat, his mother died, before he was able to tell her that he loved her and that, despite their many difficulties, she has played an important role in his life. After telling his entire story, he finally feels free from a heavy weight on his shoulders, and is able to receive the comfort that Ms. Gruwell and the other students give him. He realizes that the Freedom Writers group was crucial in raising him and turning him into the person he has become. Now, when he looks at himself in the mirror, he sees himself as someone that other people—and, most importantly, he himself—can be proud of.

AFTERWORD: DIARY 7

This Freedom Writer describes his nervousness at having to teach on the first day of school. The last time he was in this school, he explains, he was condemned for bringing a pistol to school. He felt that educators were never there to help him when he truly needed their help, but only punished and judged him. Abandoned by his own government, he felt that he had the right to protect himself.

This Freedom Writer's experience reveals that, despite the group's intense accomplishments in terms of creating bonds of trust and respect, some individuals never experienced emotional healing for themselves. This emphasizes that the Freedom Writers' goals are never-ending, since progress still remains to be made.



This Freedom Writer confirms that one's personal experiences often influence one's theoretical views, thereby demonstrating that the most effective learning involves full emotional engagement—an aspect that Ms. Gruwell has always promoted.



This Freedom Writer's story reveals the limits of justice and the legal system. Even though the Child Protection Services were well-intentioned in their desire to protect children from harm, their actions ultimately caused more harm to this family, as they failed to take into account the supposed victims' opinions. As a result, they unjustly punished innocent children in a situation where they were not responsible.



This Freedom Writer realizes that telling his story is necessary, as it allows him to confront past wounds and, in so doing, potentially overcome them. Despite the separation of his entire family, he has been able to find love, comfort, and understanding through other means. Paradoxically, this external source of support has given him the strength necessary to not rely only on others for his happiness but, instead, to trust that he can find pride within himself.



This Freedom Writer has not used his negative experience with school and punishment to give up on education. On the contrary, he has drawn from these episodes a desire to be a better educator himself, capable of empathizing directly with children who live in a world of violence.



Now a seasoned teacher, he has learned to love his job because he teaches students who are just like he used to be. He considers the struggles he now faces with his students a kind of poetic justice. He believes that, while he cannot solve everyone's problems, he can show them the right path and give them the tools to solve them themselves. He has successfully helped below-average students reach advanced levels and, every year, feels that they have become his own children. Year after year, he trusts that tough times do not last, but that tough people do, and that he can give his students the strength necessary to overcome their obstacles.

In the same way that the Freedom Writers became a family for each other, this former student wants to establish family-like links with his students, so that he can serve not only as their teacher, but as a mentor and source of emotional support. He does not intend to solve students' problems outside of school but, instead, to empower them so that they can confront them on their own, making informed choices about how best to behave, in the same way that Ms. Gruwell inspired her students to become better citizens.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 8

This student describes his mother as the best thing in his life. As a young, black boy, he felt that he was condemned to poverty and death, bearing his difficult circumstances like a disease, feeling that he was condemned to end up like the friends he had buried over the years. When the Freedom Writers go to see the movie about them, he is proud to see their crowds of fans who appreciate their stories.

This Freedom Writer finds comfort in realizing that his life story has inspired others, instead of condemning him to a life of violence and isolation. He recognizes his mother's importance in his life in order to emphasize that he has not succeeded alone, but that his success is also the product of a loving environment.



When he sees his character in the movie, he is amazed by how similar the actor is to his old self. When he sees the scene in which he returns home to his mother, promising that he has changed, and his mother lets him in, he feels infinitely grateful to his mother for having given him a second chance. He realizes that the bond he shares with his mother is unbreakable, and that she will always be there for him. He feels that he wants to keep on making her proud for the rest of his life.

This Freedom Writer's appreciation for his second chance mirrors the entire group's enthusiasm at Ms. Gruwell's "Toast for Change," in which they were given the opportunity to begin new lives. This demonstrates that true love involves not judging someone on their past, but trusting in their capacity to change in the present and the future.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 9

This Freedom Writer describes being used to telling her story to various audiences, but that telling it in front of the camera for their documentary is a new experience. She describes the pain she feels every time she tells her story, as she is forced to relive the wound of her childhood, but then notes the satisfaction she feels in seeing her own pain reflected in public, as someone identifies with what she has been through.

Like many others, this Freedom Writer explains that the emotional vulnerability involved in recounting her past finds its full meaning when it elicits the same emotional vulnerability in the audience, as it allows others to identify with her story and, hopefully, to draw courage and hope from this process.



When the documentary director asks her how her life was before the Freedom Writers, she is transported to her twelve-year-old self, when she lived in a camper by a gas station. She ate cheap bread and Vienna sausages every day, and since they never had money for pads or tampons, she had to use uncomfortable wads of toilet paper when she had her period. At school, her teacher humiliated her publicly for being dirty and not being able to buy a bar of soap. She felt constant envy at knowing that the other children at school had an actual shower, and, overall, felt deeply alone.

By implying that poverty is both a source of shame and the student's fault, this teacher shows deep ignorance and cruelty, adding emotional pain and social isolation to the student's pre-existing material discomforts and deprivation. This teacher's brutality demonstrates that, unlike Ms. Gruwell, some educators are interested not in helping their students, but in egotistically proving their own superiority.



She is brought back to a moment when she accompanies her mother to a donut store. She describes the vivid sensation of wanting a donut terribly, but making the mental calculations and realizing that they did not have enough money. The director's voice suddenly brings her back to reality and, when she later looks at herself in the mirror, she realizes that she still feels the same pain after seventeen years. However, she finds comfort in being able to share her difficult story.

The vivid nature of this student's memories shows that her feelings of longing and sadness have not disappeared. Her story also suggests that material deprivation can be a source of long-term emotional trauma, on par with violent events such as physical violence or domestic abuse. While telling her story does not heal these wounds, it does allow her to use them for a greater purpose.



AFTERWORD: DIARY 10

This Freedom Writer describes waking up at five in the morning being amazed at seeing himself, his wife, and their baby in the bedroom. He stares at the scene and remembers being homeless at fourteen, experiencing the pain of this memory, which will never go away and is a part of himself. He talks about his pain with his wife, and begins to laugh as he realizes that he married his best friend, a fellow Freedom Writer. He is excited to spend the rest of their lives together, as a family, and to try to be the best he can for the three of them.

This student's current happiness and family stability contrasts starkly with his childhood, revealing the serious obstacles he has managed to overcome. His commitment to the future reveals his trust that this change is permanent. At the same time, he recognizes that his current attitude is shaped by his past, as the past has allowed him to find the motivation necessary to avoid repeating similar mistakes.



He describes the way in which his father abandoned his mother during her pregnancy. It was only when he saw their baby in person that he became accustomed to the idea of having a child and, by the time the baby was three years old, his father was fully present in his life. The romance between his parents, however, had all but disappeared, and they spent a lot of time fighting. In the end, he ended up leaving the family.

The period in which his father abandoned his mother and their nascent family left deep scars on the couple's relationship. It demonstrates the father's lack of commitment to adult responsibilities, such as being accountable to his actions and remaining a stable presence in other people's lives.



This Freedom Writer promises to be there at every step of his son's life, making sure to do the exact opposite of what his own father did. He realizes that his past hardships have made him stronger, allowing him to face the future head-on.

Like many others, this Freedom Writer uses his past as an example of what he does not want to do and as an opportunity to prove that he is stronger than his emotional wounds might suggest.





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