

## Fighting for the Freedom to Read

**ERIN GRUWELL, AUTHOR OF *THE FREEDOM WRITERS DIARY*, DISCUSSES THE EFFORTS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS AGAINST CENSORSHIP OF HER BOOK**

I have found that the best way to get teenagers to read a book is to ban it. As an English teacher, some of the most provocative books that evoked my students' curiosity were those construed as controversial, or were previously on the "banned" book list. Even though *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Color Purple* were considered risqué to the censorship bureau, they paled in comparison to the obvious references to sexuality, violence, and vulgarity that my students were exposed to through reality television and rap music.

Inspired by the courage of others to share their stories, my students began to chronicle their own lives on paper. Like the classic characters in literature, my students shared Holden Caulfield's teenage angst, Atticus Finch's aversion to racism, and Celie's pain from abuse. My students documented their experiences in gritty and graphic detail. Even though their book was sprinkled with expletives, the brutal reality of racism, and the heart-breaking ramifications of sexual abuse, an underlying message of hope resonated.

When we sent our manuscript, "The Freedom Writers Diary," to Doubleday, we envisioned that some of the grittier stories may be edited, and some of the taboo subjects may be omitted. We were pleasantly surprised when our book was published and all of our stories were left intact. There it was, in black and white, profanity and the effects of racism and sexual abuse. The Freedom Writers and I began to wonder if we would suffer the same fate as J. D. Salinger, Harper Lee, or Alice Walker.

Our first bout of controversy came from a small, rural town in Oregon. A new teacher, armed with *The Freedom Writers Diary*, embarked on a journey of en-

lightenment after a student made intolerant comments in her class. Unfortunately, the lesson took a twist when the student's disgruntled mother sent the radio shock jock Dr. Laura Schlessinger a passage from our book. Without researching the book, and by taking the passage out of context, Dr. Laura went on the air and recommended that the teacher get fired. Suddenly the teacher found herself at the center of a media maelstrom. While the school board rallied to have her removed from the classroom for teaching "pornography," 53 of the 54 students at the high school orchestrated a school walkout. Following in the fashion of the Freedom Writers and free speech, the community chose to stand behind the book, and luckily the teacher kept her job.

Another teacher in Michigan came under attack for using *The Freedom Writers Diary*. Her city had a reputation of white supremacy and once housed the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. She wanted to teach her students lessons of tolerance after swastikas were spotted in the school. Our book was removed from the class, students were forbidden to read it, and it was eventually sent to the FBI, along with Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. To the Freedom Writers and me, to be in the company of such talented and poignant authors was awe-inspiring. Fortunately, the FBI ruled our book was not pornography, and because of the controversy, even more books flew off the shelves and into the hands of eager students.

But even after the FBI ruling, the controversy continued. Recently, a teacher in Indiana experienced the latest bout of censorship pertaining to our book. After teaching twenty-six years in a suburb of Indianapolis, she

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was selected to attend our Freedom Writer Institute and learn from me and some of the original Freedom Writers the intricacies of how to teach our book. She returned to Indiana following the workshop with a renewed sense of purpose to reach her at-risk students. She secured a personal copy of *The Freedom Writers Diary* for each one of her students, but on the day she passed them out, she was removed from her classroom. In a sign of solidarity, when the school board tried to confiscate the books, the students refused to relinquish them.

As was the case with the other teachers who faced controversy for using our book in their classrooms, I flew to her community on a mission to get the book reinstated in the class. Unfortunately, unlike our success in both Oregon and Michigan, the Indiana teacher's fate was far more severe. After a tearful testimony, including students and community members who rallied behind the twenty-seven-year veteran, the lawyer representing the school board had the audacity to compare our book to *Hustler Magazine*, resulting in the suspension of the teacher for eighteen months sans pay for "insubordination."

School board members and legal observers say this is not a free-speech issue. It is a question of insubordination and of the teacher's disregard for her superior's orders. Educators familiar with her story, however, claim the controversy is much bigger. Her situation has a chilling effect on teachers in need of engaging stories for their students.

The severity of the situation triggered teachers everywhere to draw parallels to the Salem Witch Trials,

book burnings, and suppression of free speech. In an era of unfunded political mandates and "teaching to a test," the fear is that "Big Brother" is always watching, and rather than take risks in the classroom, students would be spoon-fed watered-down curriculum.

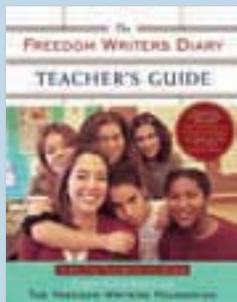
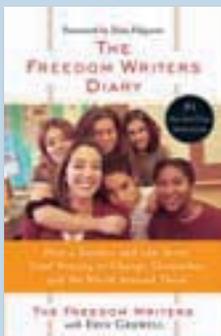
Lamentably, the American Library Association says the number of books banned or challenged at public libraries increases every year. Since we've been thrown into the center of the censorship storm, we have come to realize that banning our book just makes more teenagers apt to read it, but the controversy also makes it more difficult for teachers to integrate it into their curriculum. While book banning piques students' interest, the larger consequences can lead to irrational instances like book burning. Hearing the testimony of Holocaust survivors recounting the horrific sight of watching books go up in flames in Nazi Germany, I'd hope that we would learn from history, so we are not doomed to repeat it. ■

## About the Writer

ERIN GRUWELL, *the Freedom Writers*, and her nonprofit organization, *The Freedom Writers Foundation*, have received many awards, including the prestigious *Spirit of Anne Frank Award*, and have appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Primetime*, *Good Morning America*, and *The View*, to name a few. Gruwell is also a charismatic motivational speaker who spreads her dynamic message to students, teachers, and business people around the world. She lives in southern California.



## Books by Erin Gruwell



**THE FREEDOM WRITERS DIARY:** How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them  
by The Freedom Writers and Erin Gruwell

With powerful entries from the students' own diaries and a narrative text by Erin Gruwell, *The Freedom Writers Diary* is an uplifting, unforgettable example of how hard work, courage, and the spirit of determination changed the lives of a teacher and her students. Broadway, TR, 978-0-385-49422-9, 304pp., \$13.95

**THE FREEDOM WRITERS DIARY TEACHER'S GUIDE**  
by Erin Gruwell and The Freedom Writers

A teacher's companion to the successful *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, this "standards based" guide includes innovative teaching techniques that will engage, empower and enlighten. Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-2696-6, 256pp., \$21.95

**TEACH WITH YOUR HEART**

Lessons I Learned from The Freedom Writers  
by Erin Gruwell  
Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-1584-7, 272pp., \$12.95

