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**A Hero to those who had no Hero**

In Danny Devito’s 2007 film, Freedom Writers, screenplay writer and director Richard LaGravenese creates an image of Erin Gruwell as a hero, which is consistent, in every way, with the real Erin Gruwell. As Erin Gruwell says in her TED talk in describing her journey towards teaching inner city kids: “I not only wanted to teach, I wanted to teach THOSE kids.” According to my research, no additional material is added to the film, the writers merely drew from her real life story to tell the story of a real life hero. Erin is a hero because she gets her students to engage in school work, gets their grades up, gets them to set higher standards for themselves, and gives them hope that they can succeed. The students gain faith in themselves, and they succeed because they persevere through all the challenges that they face. But let me set the stage for this gripping film.

In 1992, in Long Beach California there was a huge increase in crime. Riots broke out in Los Angeles in reaction to the brutal beating of Rodney King by the LA Police. People of color were outraged with the racism that existed in a predominantly white police force. Chaos had emerged as buildings were broken into and robbed, and ­­some burnt to the ground. There were gun fire, fights and riots all throughout southern California. It had a large impact on society.

The film is about a group of students in a high school in Long Beach, California. These kids are in legal trouble, mixed up in gangs, and have grown up in the ghetto. Consequently, they are labeled as “troubled students” by the educational institution, incorrigible and unreachable. The faculty and administration at Woodland Wilson High School found these teenagers to be a threat to their school. Despite the School boards’ efforts to integrate the students, the school administration’s answer to deal with these kids is to separate them from the general population of the other students.

The troubled students had been assigned to a new teacher time and time again. It is assumed they have no need for new books or resources because there is no hope for a future in any of the them advancing to a college education. With their history of destructive behavior and violent outbursts, they had gone through several teachers. Every time one would leave, it would confirm the students’, faculty’s and administration’s belief that there is no hope in educating them. Everyone had lost faith that anything could be done to help them.

In 1993 Erin Gruwell, or “Ms. G” as she comes to be known, is a first-time teacher. She begins working for Woodland Wilson High School. The administration has little confidence that Erin can last with this job. The Principle’s Assistant assigns the class of misfits to Erin while humoring Erin’s apparent enthusiasm for the opportunity.

According to the writers on the Freedom Writers Foundation website: “Many of the students who entered Erin Gruwell’s freshman English class weren’t thinking about how to make it to graduation, but how they could make it to sixteen years old. Racial and gang tension had peaked and a record 126 murders had occurred in Long Beach that year. With the external stresses of a divided city, the students of Room 203 were not concerned with the education system that had already failed them on multiple occasions. Gruwell’s students had been written off as unteachable and below average.” The film-makers follow this story line with precision.

With no experience in teaching, Erin starts the freshmen semester with her class of teenagers that don’t even want to be in school. She pursues this challenge with a fresh and optimistic attitude. Most of them are forced to be in school by probation officers. Erin is faced with several struggles with the class not wanting to be there. They don’t want to engage in any school work, they break out into a fight the first day, they are disrespectful towards her and there are clear racial tensions among the students. During one class, she finds the students laughing about a racist drawing of an African American student with extra-large lips made by one of the students. She draws an analogy to the Nazi’s cartoons of Jews with large noses. We watch her strength come out at she scolds them, relating their gangster behavior to that of the Nazi’s during the Holocaust. She is shocked to learn that none of the students even knew what the Holocaust was, and yet most of them had been shot at, and lived under the threat of gunfire. She then began to realize that she needed to understand them more.

Erin’s process of become their hero begins with humility and her connecting with her students. She created an activity to engage with the students on their level. She places some tape down the middle of the room creating a line. Erin has the kids engage in an activity where she asks questions to the class and has them stand on the line, then stand back for the next question. She gives them the opportunity to become more vulnerable to one another by sharing intimate details about themselves. The questions began with simple questions like who has Snoop Dogs new album? The questions progressed to who’s been to jail, who’s been shot at, who’s had friends died from gang activity? You could watch the shift in the kids’ interactions with each other and with Erin. She really connected with them and created a new flow on her approach on how she teaches them.

The movie shows how Erin interacts and connects with the kids during this activity, when she plays Hip Hop music that has connection with their life styles as gangsters. At one Point the director shows Erin and the kids dancing in the class room to Hip Hop. Erin recognizes each student has a story, and a story they need to tell. She gives each of them a journal to write in. By giving them the power to tell their stories, and ownership of their stories by making it optional that they share them with her, she earns more respect because she allows them to teach her, to be the ones in power. In the film, we watch the students passionately writing about their own stories and choosing to share them with Ms. G.

At this point in the film she has them engaging in academics and wanting to learn. She struggles with an administration that will not provide any books to the class because of the negative labeling. Erin puts her students before her husband, which puts her marriage at risk which ends in divorce (this is verified by writers at the website, chasingthefrog.com). Erin does a heroic move and sacrifices her free time to get two part time jobs to earn extra money to buy books for her students. The kids that once had no interest in being at school are now passionately reading books. Erin finds books that connect with her students’ personal lives

LaGravenese adds special effects to show Erin connecting with the children as she reads their journals. We see footage depicting the details of the narrative as we hear the students’ voices telling their stories as Erin is reading their journals alone. This montage of the violent images of their family lives, their illegal activities, their hunger, their poverty, their families’ desperate actions in desperate times provide ample opportunity for the audience to empathize with the plight of the students, and to watch the rise of Erin Gruwell as their hero. She becomes their hero because she allows them to tell their stories, and then humbly becomes the student of their lives.

One of the books the students read was The Diary of Ann Frank. The students relate this story to their personal lives because they are similar in age to Ann, and face similar issues. One student, Eva begins to get emotionally involved in the story as if it was about her personal life because of Ann’s romantic connection to Peter. When Ann Frank dies in the story, she goes to Erin upset and ask her “What does that mean about me?”, obviously deeply moved by the autobiography.

At the end of the reading assignment Erin has each student write a letter to Miep Geis, who hid Ann Frank, telling her what they thought of the book. The students decide they want to raise money to fly Miep Geis to Long Beach California, and have her come to their High School and share her stories about hiding Ann Frank. This was an impressive accomplishment for Erin, and had a huge effect on the students.

Every time Erin pulled off this kind of action she became more and more of a hero to these students. They began to transition from being hood rats and hoodlum’s in gangs to dedicated students. There is one student that always has a gun. As the movie progresses, the student breaks his gun apart and disposes of the pieces in different places such as dumpsters and the sewer. The scene has no dialogue, but it is moving to watch the student take accountability for his life, and destroy his weapon and lethal connection to gang activity.

Erin’s heroic efforts to go up and beyond the call of duty as a teacher. To raise money for books, raise money for field trips. To get these rebellious students to build resilience, and persevere not giving up. Erin created an atmosphere where the student not only transpired individually but also as a group. This group of individuals that once did not mix because of difference of race and culture developed a relationship with each other that created a family.

The director of the movie shows the changes within several students as the movie goes on, and the kids began to examine their own life’s as they read the books they are given, and as they write their stories in their journals.

A couple examples are 1. With Eva. Eva witness a murder, and because of her culture she is expected by her people to lie on stage. To protect her gang family members, she is to excuse an innocent person. As the movie goes on the film shows how Eva is trying to identify with Ann Franks and do the next right thing. When the movie finally shows Eva on stage she has a change that happens to her. This change is shown to show how she now wants more for herself then just a life of crime. Eva tells the truth online. She becomes a traitor to her people. She cares more about how she is going to get her homework turned in, then she is worried how she looks to the gang members.

A second example is when Marcus goes to see his mother. He waits for her to get home. Standing across the street waiting for her, his mom comes home with groceries. The movies show her with groceries showing her as a nurtures person. A person that can offer Marcus support and nurture. Marcus approaches her and tell her he is tired of the streets. He tells her he wants to change and needs his mom support.

The students became in disarray at the end of their sophomore year. The way the school system was set up they were going to have to move in to general population of school. One of Erin’s heroic moves was that she advocated and challenge her supervisors. Erin went all the way to the director of the Academic Board. Erin presented her case about how well her kids were doing and advocated for them to stay together throughout the next Academic year.

The Directors were so impressed by Erin heroic work and what she did for these students did not only did they agree and approve Erin to teach the group their sophomore year, but also their senior year as well.

Erin became A hero from all her efforts and inspiring ways she made a difference in these kid’s life.

Comparing to most movies that are based off a true story this story is a bit different. There are some movies that are based off a true story that are altered adding a lot of fiction events with the true events of the true story. Directors make these alterations to ad drama to the movie. The goals are to add attraction draw in an audience, and keep the viewers engaged in the movie. The directors aim to make the movie more interesting and exciting.

With the movie, Freedom Writers, the difference is that this story has so much action and drama. It was not necessary to make a lot of changes and alter the story. Chasing the frog .com in their article ‘Chasing after the truth behind movies based on a true story’ states the facts about the movie Freedom Writers.Questioning the Story: the article asks several questions about scenes in the movie, rather they were real or not?

Not only does this article state all the facts about the movie that are part of the true story, but it also includes how much the story and movie are alike. Erin Gruwell was closely involved during the making of the movie to help in keeping her perspective of the story. There were also several original students from the class participating in the movie.

A few months ago, at a conference I attended I was honored to have the opportunity to listen to Erin Gruwell tell her story. Erin shared with compassion and passion about her students and the struggles they went through. Erin spoke in descriptive detail of the incidents that had happened. Erin’s speech at the conference verified that the incidents in the movie were in comparison to facts of her story she told.

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