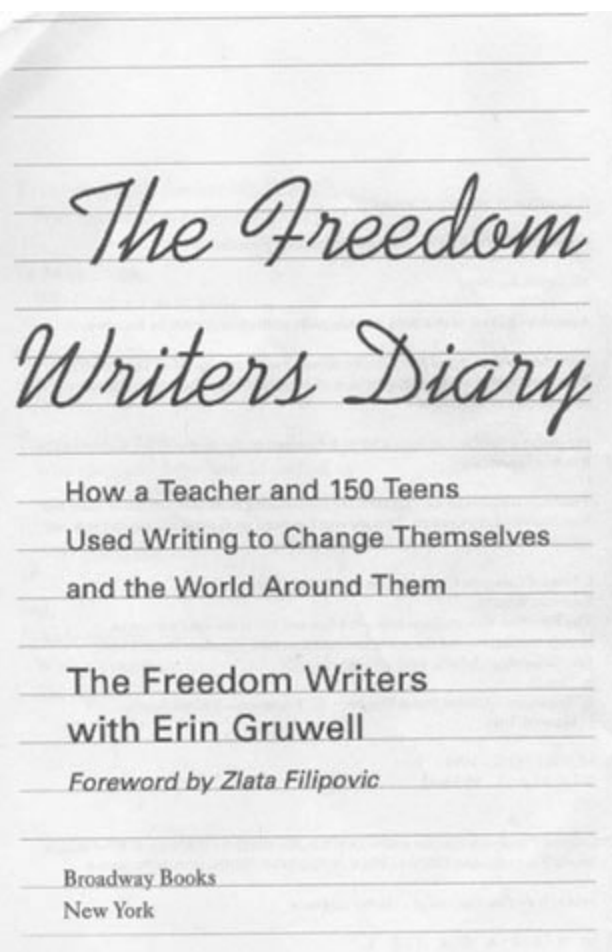


THE FREEDOM WRITERS DIARY

*How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used
Writing to Change Themselves and
the World Around Them*

THE FREEDOM WRITERS
WITH ERIN GRUWELL



Contents

Title Page

Dedication

Foreword by Zlata Filipovic

FRESHMAN YEAR—FALL 1994

I. Ms. GRUWELL'S DIARY ENTRY

First day of school

Racial segregation at school

Getting “jumped”

Race riot on campus

Buying a gun

Death of a friend

Gang initiation

“Rushing” a sorority

Tagging

Proposition 187: Discrimination

Dyslexia

Juvenile hall

The projects

Russian roulette

FRESHMAN YEAR—SPRING 1995

II. Ms. GRUWELL'S DIARY ENTRY

Romeo and Juliet: Gang rivalry.

Teenage love and running away.

Coping with weight

Learning about diversity.

Oklahoma bombing

Farewell to Manzanar: Japanese internment camps

Overcoming adversity panel

John Tu: Father figure vs. absent father

Freshman turnaround

SOPHOMORE YEAR—FALL 1995

III. Ms. GRUWELL'S DIARY ENTRY

Homelessness

Cystic fibrosis

Shyness

Twelve Angry Men

Honors English

Medieval Times

Lesson on tolerance

Toast for change

[Change for the better](#)

[Testifying in murder case](#)

[Teenage alcoholism](#)

[Shoplifting](#)

[Anne Frank's diary](#)

[Teen diarists](#)

[Zlata's Diary](#)[Bosnia vs. L.A. riots](#)

[Peter Maass: Article on Bosnia](#)

[Zlata](#)

[SOPHOMORE YEAR—SPRING 1996](#)

[A Letter to Zlata](#)

[IV. Ms. GRUWELL'S DIARY ENTRY](#)

[Meeting a Holocaust survivor](#)

[The woman who sheltered Anne Frank's family](#)

["Moment"](#)

[Zlata accepts our invitation](#)

[Dinner with Zlata](#)

[Diverse friendships](#)

["I am a human being"](#)

[Terrorism](#)

[Day of tolerance: A field trip](#)

[Doing speed](#)

[Basketball for Bosnia: Weight](#)

[Zlata's Letter](#)

[Divorce](#)

[Friends join class](#)

[Letter from Miep](#)

[PHOTO INSERT](#)

[JUNIOR YEAR—FALL 1996](#)

[V. Ms. GRUWELL'S DIARY ENTRY](#)

[Racist teacher](#)

[A grandmother's death](#)

[Race riot](#)

[Grade accountability](#)

[Suicide](#)

[Running away](#)

[Getting a job](#)

[Misogyny](#)

[Molestation](#)

[Boyfriend abuse](#)

[Domestic violence](#)

[Child abuse](#)

[Death of brother](#)

[JUNIOR YEAR—SPRING 1997](#)

[VI. Ms. GRUWELL'S DIARY ENTRY](#)

[Anne Frank's friends visit](#)

[Masking fears](#)

[Living in the projects](#)

[Dyslexia](#)

[Letter from Miep](#)

[Student editing](#)

[Abortion](#)

[Catalysts for change](#)

[Freedom Riders](#)

[An American Diary](#)[Voices from an Undeclared War](#)

[Fund-raiser concert](#)

[Freedom Writer](#)[poem](#)

[Freedom Writers unite](#)

[Strict father](#)

[Arlington Cemetery.](#)

[Lincoln Memorial: Freedom Writers have a dream](#)

[Covering up the swastika](#)

[Hate crimes](#)

[Holocaust Museum](#)

[Dr. Mengele's experiment with twins](#)

[Dinner with Secretary Riley](#)

["Stand"](#)

[Secretary Riley receives Freedom Writers' diary](#)

[Candlelight vigil](#)

[Departing D.C.](#)

[Returning a family hero](#)

[Jeremy Strohmeyer: Murder](#)

[David Cash](#)

[Peace march for Sherrice Iverson](#)

[Senior Class President](#)

[Separation anxiety](#)

[Staying together](#)

[SENIOR YEAR—FALL 1997](#)

[VII. Ms. GRUWELL'S DIARY ENTRY](#)

[Cheryl Best: Inspiration](#)

[“Eviction Notice”](#)

[Financial problems](#)

[Illegal immigrant](#)

[The first Latina Secretary of Education](#)

[Pursuing filmmaking](#)

[Road not taken: Contemplating college](#)

[Finding a mentor](#)

[Being a mentor](#)

[Los Angeles Times article](#)

[A letter from prison](#)

[Deadbeat dad](#)

[Sorority hazing](#)

[Fear of losing a father](#)

[Death of a mother](#)

[SENIOR YEAR—SPRING 1998](#)

[VIII. Ms. GRUWELL’S DIARY ENTRY](#)

[GUESS? sponsorship](#)

[Spirit of Anne Frank Award](#)

[New York City roommates](#)

[Celebrating Anne Frank](#)

Abuse of power

Peter Maass: The role of a journalist

Book agent

Getting published

Basketball playoffs: Teamwork

A lesson from Animal Farm

Attitude adjustment

Introducing Senator Barbara Boxer

Attention deficit disorder

Homosexuality

Prom queen

“Whoever saves one life saves the world entire”

Breaking the cycle

Football all-American

Baseball dilemma

A college acceptance

Fear of abandonment

Teenage pregnancy

Southwest Airlines

Computers for college!

[The giving tree: Crackhead parents](#)

[Graduation Class Speaker](#)

[From drugs to honors](#)

[Overcoming the odds](#)

[Graduation!](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Preview of Teach with Your Heart](#)

[Also by Erin Gruwell](#)

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To our incredible teacher Ms. Gruwell,

Who taught us to believe in ourselves

To Anne Frank,

Who inspired us to write

To Zlata, our friend,

Who passed us the torch

To our beloved Miep,

Who recognized the hero in each of us

To the Freedom Riders,

Who paved the way

And,

To kids everywhere,

Whose lives were lost to senseless violence but whose spirits live on.

Foreword

Zlata Filipovic

When I was asked to write the foreword to *The Freedom Writers Diary*, I must say I was extremely honored and proud, but at the same time amazed by how many wonderful things can happen in such a short time.

I met the students of Wilson High School in March 1996, when thanks to their dedication, effort and will, they invited my parents, Mirna (my best friend from Bosnia, who was living with me at the time) and myself to come to the city of Long Beach, California. When I met them, I was touched by their warmth and kindness. They were teenagers just like me, and like all young people all over the world, they have an amazing potential to grow into truly great people, leaders, ones who will inspire others.

These students and their teacher, Erin Gruwell, chose to read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, my own book, *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo* (and many other books), and were inspired to start writing their own diaries. They had organized themselves and chose to do something different, something memorable, something powerful and

humane. They chose to rid themselves of doing things the easy way, the way they've always been done, and chose to write, to create, to fight stereotypes and live up to the name of true Freedom Writers. I am immensely proud and happy to have had a chance to meet them and to play some role in their "growth" as human beings.

I started writing my own diary before the war in Bosnia because I wanted to have a place to record my childhood and create something that I could look back on and laugh, cry and reminisce. I wanted to see myself grow through my writing. Some of my older girlfriends had their own diaries, and having read the diaries of Anne Frank and Adrian Mole, I was absolutely certain that writing a diary was the right thing to do. I never imagined that my diary would be published, and certainly didn't expect it to become a war diary. I also never dreamed that my childhood would be cut short. These things seemed too impossible to think about, because it's human nature to always believe that "bad" things happen to other people, not us. But when misfortune comes our way, we find ourselves surprised, confused, scared, angry and sad.

When the Bosnian war started with all its horrors and disrupted my happy and carefree childhood, my diary became more than a place to record daily events. It became a friend, the paper that it was made of was ready

and willing to accept anything and everything I had to say; it could handle my fear, my questions, my sadness. I discovered the beauty of writing—when one can pour oneself onto a great white emptiness and fill it with emotions and thoughts and leave them there forever. And I kept on writing during almost two years of war; it became a type of therapy for dealing with everything that was going on.

I see a parallel between the Freedom Writers and myself because we've all been subjected to things in our surroundings that could have made us feel like victims. Life brings good things and bad things, it makes people sad and happy in their own homes, within their families, in school and on the street. Sometimes we suffer because of many things over which we have no control: the color of our skin, poverty, our religion, our family situation, war. It would be easy to become a victim of our circumstances and continue feeling sad, scared or angry; or instead, we could choose to deal with injustice humanely and break the chains of negative thoughts and energies, and not let ourselves sink into it. Writing about the things that happen to us allows us to look objectively at what's going on around us and turn a negative experience into something positive and useful. This process requires a lot of work, effort and greatness, but it is possible, and the Freedom Writers have proved it—they've chosen a difficult, but powerful,

path.

After I left Bosnia, the war continued, and as we've recently seen, a similar thing happened in Kosovo. People have asked me what I think about this, and all I can say is that it makes me terribly sad. Now, almost all of the young former Yugoslavians know what a bomb sounds like, what a cellar is and what the absence of water, electricity or home feels like. And again, these children and young people had nothing to do with the situation they found themselves in. I just hope that the anger, hate and sadness they have experienced will not remain inside them, and that they will be able to rise above their experiences. Because if they grow up holding on to such terrible feelings, it could lead to another war sometime in the future when the fate of the country is in their hands. This is why I believe that everything the Freedom Writers have overcome and accomplished is very important and must be respected. If they had chosen to stay encapsulated in the anger and hate that surrounded them in their neighborhoods, the seeds of hatred and fear would have grown with them and history would repeat itself with their children in the future. The Freedom Writers chose to break this cycle and make their positive experiences a lesson for generations to come.

And, of course, I will always very highly respect and admire the Freedom Writers' mentor, their friend and teacher, Erin Gruwell, who is also my

friend. She never wants to be congratulated or held responsible for the great things that came out of Room 203 at Wilson High School, but she must be. She was (and still is) much more than a teacher to the Freedom Writers. She was a parent to those who did not have, or could not communicate with, their own; she was an older friend who was fun to be around; but she was also very loyal, someone who cared and fought for each one of her “kids.” She shared her education, tenacity and love with them and made a huge difference in her students’ lives. They could have remained the “underachievers” they’d been labeled before they arrived in her classroom. But in just several years, she made a tremendous difference and created a safe place for them to grow and blossom into amazing people. She made authors and, I dare say, historical figures out of them. Many teachers consider their after-school time to be precious, but Erin gave herself over to her work. She was dedicated to helping her students learn, opening their eyes to injustice and guiding them to the weapons (in this case a pen, knowledge, a measure of faith, and an unyielding determination) with which to fight intolerance. Finally, she taught them how to assume their rightful place in the world. I know her students will remember her the rest of their lives, as well they should. I wish that teachers everywhere were like her—because the world would be a much better place. I always say that the

young people are the future of the world, and if we start with them first, if we educate and develop a sense of tolerance among them, our future, the future of this world, will be in good hands for generations to come.

How many good things can come out of a bad situation? I'm a perfect example. I was a small happy Sarajevan girl whose country was struck by war. Suddenly I was put in the position of having some say and possible influence in the world. I did not want that responsibility, and I wish that my diary had never been published; if not for the war, there would have been no reason to share it with the world. But nonetheless, some good has come out of it.

Anne Frank's diary inspired the world, and good has come out of her tragedy. Her strength kept her going for as long as it could, and subsequently has been recognized by millions of people, young and old. The greatness of those who are no longer with us fortunately remains to lead and inspire those left behind.

My diary partially inspired the Freedom Writers and maybe some other people to start writing their own diaries, and do something about the situations they found themselves in. I have heard people say that it is not what happens to us that matters, but how we deal with it—and the Freedom Writers are a perfect example. They could have chosen to fight racism with

racism, hate with hate, pain with pain. But they did not. If we all do what the Freedom Writers have done, and choose to deal with inhumane situations in a humane way, we can turn the world around and create positive lessons for ourselves and for others.

Unfortunately, I have realized that we cannot completely erase all the evil from the world, but we can change the way we deal with it, we can rise above it and stay strong and true to ourselves. And most important, we can inspire others—this is what makes us human beings, this is what can make us immortal. I hope this book will inspire people to write their own diaries, stories, poems, books, to fight prejudice and to choose to deal with what happens to them in a positive way, to learn new lessons and share them with other people. This is for you, the reader, to consider, and I wish you good luck.

Dublin, July 1999

Freshman Year Fall 1994

Entry 1. Ms. Gruwell

Dear Diary,

Tomorrow morning, my journey as an English teacher officially begins.

Since first impressions are so important, I wonder what my students will think about me. Will they think I'm out of touch or too preppy? Or worse

yet, that I'm too young to be taken seriously? Maybe I'll have them write a journal entry describing what their expectations are of me and the class.

Even though I spent last year as a student teacher at Wilson High School, I'm still learning my way around the city. Long Beach is so different than the gated community I grew up in. Thanks to MTV dubbing Long Beach as the "gangsta-rap capital" with its depiction of guns and graffiti, my friends have a warped perception of the city, or L B C as the rappers refer to it.

They think I should wear a bulletproof vest rather than pearls. Where I live in Newport Beach is a utopia compared to some of neighborhoods seen in a Snoop Doggy Dogg video. Still, TV tends to blow things out of proportion. The school is actually located in a safe neighborhood, just a few miles from the ocean. Its location and reputation make it desirable. So much so that a lot of the students that live in what they call the "'hood" take two or three buses just to get to school every day. Students come in from every corner of the city: Rich kids from the shore sit next to poor kids from the projects...there's every race, religion, and culture within the confines of the quad. But since the Rodney King riots, racial tension has spilled over into the school.

Due to busing and an outbreak in gang activity, Wilson's traditional white, upper-class demographics have changed radically. African

Americans, Latinos, and Asians now make up the majority of the student body.

As a student teacher last year, I was pretty naïve. I wanted to see past color and culture, but I was immediately confronted by it when the first bell rang and a student named Sharaud sauntered in bouncing a basketball. He was a junior, a disciplinary transfer from Wilson's crosstown rival, and his reputation preceded him. Word was that he had threatened his previous English teacher with a gun (which I later found out was only a plastic water gun, but it had all the makings of a dramatic showdown). In those first few minutes, he made it brutally clear that he hated Wilson, he hated English, and he hated me. His sole purpose was to make his "preppy" student teacher cry. Little did he know that within a month, he'd be the one crying. Sharaud became the butt of a bad joke. A classmate got tired of Sharaud's antics and drew a racial caricature of him with huge, exaggerated lips. As the drawing made its way around the class, the other students laughed hysterically. When Sharaud saw it, he looked as if he was going to cry. For the first time, his tough façade began to crack.

When I got a hold of the picture, I went ballistic. "This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust," I yelled. When a student timidly asked me, "What's the Holocaust?" I was shocked.

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. Since I was just a student teacher, I had no budget for my schemes. So, I moonlighted as a concierge at the Marriott Hotel and sold lingerie at Nordstrom. My dad even asked me, “Why can’t you just be a normal teacher?”

Actually, normalcy didn't seem so bad after my first snafu. I took my students to see *Schindler's List* in Newport Beach, at a predominately white, upper-class theater. I was shocked to see women grab their pearls and clutch their purses in fear. A local paper ran a front-page article about the incident, describing how poorly my students were treated, after which I received death threats. One of my disgruntled neighbors had the audacity to say, "If you love black people so much, why don't you just marry a monkey?"

All this drama and I didn't even have my teaching credentials yet.

Luckily, some of my professors from University of California—Irvine read the article and invited my class to a seminar by the author of *Schindler's List*, Thomas Keneally. Keneally was so impressed by my students that a few days later we got an invitation to meet Steven Spielberg at Universal Studios. I couldn't believe it! The famous director wanted to meet the class that I had dubbed "as colorful as a box of Crayola crayons" and their "rookie teacher who was causing waves." He marveled at how far these "unteachable" students had come as a junior class and what a close group they had become. He even asked Sharaud what "we" were planning to do next year as an encore. After all, if a film does well, you make a sequel—if a class surpasses everyone's expectations, you...

...dismantle it! Yep, that's exactly what happened. Upon my return from

Universal, the head of the English department told me, “You’re making us look bad.” Talk about bursting my bubble! How was I making them look bad? After all, these were the same kids that “wouldn’t last a month” or “were too stupid” to read advanced placement books.

She went on to say, “Things are based on seniority around here.” So, in other words, I was lucky to have a job, and keeping Sharaud and his posse another year would be pushing the envelope. Instead, I’d be teaching freshmen—“at risk” freshmen. Hmm...not exactly the assignment I was hoping for.

So, starting tomorrow, it’s back to the drawing board. But I’m convinced that if Sharaud could change, then anyone can. So basically, I should prepare myself for a roomful of Sharauds. If it took a month to win Sharaud over...I wonder how long it’s gonna take a bunch of feisty fourteen-year-olds to come around?

FREEDOM WRITERS’ NOTE

Each teenager played an integral role in developing the diary entries—reading, editing, and encouraging one another. To protect their anonymity and illustrate the universality of their experiences, we decided to number each diary entry rather than attach a name.

The students have shared their life experiences freely, without inhibition.

Diary 1

Dear Diary,

I always thought that “odd” was a three-letter word; but today I found out it has seven, and they spell G-r-u-w-e-l-l. My freshman English teacher is way out there. I wonder how she got this job. The administrators should have known better than to give her this class, but I guess she didn’t know any better than to take it. How is *she* going to handle four classes full of this school’s rejects? Most people at this school doubt that we can even read or write.

She probably drives a new car, lives in a three-story house, and owns like five hundred pairs of shoes. It seems to me that she belongs across the hall with the Distinguished Scholars. Yeah, she would fit in nicely there; she and those supposedly gifted white kids who think they’re better than everybody else. She walked in here on “I’m sweet and I care about you” mode. It’s not going to work. We all know she’s going to treat us like everyone else has. The worst part is, I’m pretty sure she thinks she’s the one who’s going to change us. She alone, the “too young and too white to be working here” teacher is going to reform a group of helpless “sure to drop out” kids from the ’hood.

I can’t deny the fact that this class does seem like a bad rerun of *Cops*,

though, and she has the records to prove it. She'll probably sit us in alphabetical order to try to stop any fights. Right now she's probably deciding who she's going to transfer out. To her, I'm sure we're the "below average" kids no one told her about when she was getting her credentials. I have to admit, though, some of these fools need an attitude adjustment. Most of these niggas come strapped and ready to bust a cap. It's not like they can't get away with it, with their big-ass pants; they could fit me and six of my friends. They could hide a bazooka and no one would notice. I don't even think everyone in this class is supposed to be in here, because there's a white boy in the corner looking down at his schedule, hoping that he's in the wrong room. For his entire life he's always been part of the majority, but as soon as he stepped into this room, he became the minority. Being white in this class is not going to give him the same status that he gets in society. In here, he gets stared down by most of us, and the other people just think that's he's either stupid or must have ditched the day he was supposed to take the assessment test.

Then, there are the other ones, like me, who are in the middle. Not a bad-ass, but definitely not wearing a pocket protector. I wonder how I ended up in this class. I'm not a disciplinary transfer, and even though English is not my first language, I know I don't belong here.

I can already see it: We're going to be stuck with some fat-ass, second-grade English book that will put us to sleep before we can even flip a page. With this class, though, she's probably going to have a fatter stack of referrals. I wonder how long she's going to put up with these punks; even I want to get out of this classroom. I'm sure one of these days she's going to go to principal and ask for her leave, but then again, what else is new? "These kids are going to make this lady quit the first week," my friends were saying. Someone else said, "She'll only last a day." I give her a month.

Diary 2

Dear Diary,

What the hell am I doing in *here*? I'm the only white person in this English class! I'm sitting in the corner of this classroom (if that's what you want to call this chaos), looking at my schedule and thinking, "Is this really where I'm supposed to be?" Okay, I know in high school I'm supposed to meet all kinds of different people, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind. Just my luck, I'm stuck in a classroom full of troubled kids who are bused in from bad neighborhoods. I feel really uncomfortable in here with all these rejects. There aren't even enough seats. My teacher, Ms. Gruwell, is young and determined, but this class is out of control and I bet she won't

last very long.

This school is just asking for trouble when they put all these kids in the same class. It's a disaster waiting to happen.

I had lunch before class in the high school quad and noticed that, like everywhere else, it was really separated by race. Each race has its own section and nobody mixes. Everyone, including me, eats lunch with their own kind, and that's that. There is a section known as "Beverly Hills" or "Disneyland" where all of the rich white kids hang out. Then there's "China Town" where the Asians hang. The Hispanic section is referred to as either "Tijuana Town" or "Run to the Border." The Black section is known as "Da Ghetto." Then there's the freak show in the middle of the quad that's reserved for the druggies, also called "Tweakers," and the kids who are into the Goth scene. From what's going on around me, it's obvious that the divisions in the quad carry into the classroom.

All my friends are across the hall in the Distinguished Scholars class. It's almost all white. The only people I'd have to worry about in that class are the really cool and popular people who think that they're better than everyone else is. Other than that, I'd be safe with my own kind. In here, I already know it's going to be survival of the fittest. I'm just waiting to get jumped.

As soon as possible, I need to get out of this class and into the class across the hall with my friends. Right after the bell rings, I'm going to talk to my counselor and make her move me out of here. I'll lie and insist that there's been a computer error and that I am supposed to be in the Distinguished Scholars class, even though I suck in English and have a learning disability. I know she'll believe me 'cause I'm white.

I can't believe all this noise. I just want out of here. I hope the bell rings soon. I don't want to spend another minute in this room. If I stay in here, one of two things will happen: I'll get jacked or I'll die of boredom.

Diary 3

Dear Diary,

"Fuck!" was the first word that came to mind when I saw those stupid motherfuckers coming toward me today after school. I knew I was going to get my ass kicked because there were three guys and two girls against me. I wasn't afraid or anything. Its not like it was the first time, and I know it sure as hell won't be the last. But why today? It's the first day of school and I don't feel like dealing with this shit!

I knew I didn't wanna come to this school. My probation officer thinks he's slick; he swears he's an expert on gangs. That dumb-ass actually thinks that the problems going on in Long Beach aren't going to affect me at

Wilson. If it was up to me, I wouldn't even be in school, but he threatened me, telling me that it was either Wilson or boot camp. I figure it's less painful to go back to school.

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. We had to let them know who the true OGs (Original Gangsters) were. We're the real O.G.'s And like I said before, everything penetrates through. Soon enough you have little wanna-bes trying to hit you up at school, demanding respect they haven't even earned. That's why they got pissed when they hit me up, 'cause I refused to bow down to them. I looked at them up and down, laughed, paused, and then said, "*Mi barrio es primero.*" As I stood in the middle of the quad, I thought of how much they looked like the people they hated. They dress just like us, they act just like us, and they want the territory we own. For that reason, I have no respect for them or the so-called barrio they're willing to die for. I don't even know why they tried to come up to me, asking me where I was

from. Those fools should know what happens when we get hit up—we get pissed off and all hell breaks loose, and the consequences can be deadly. Latinos killing Asians. Asians killing Latinos. They declared war on the wrong people. Now it all comes down to what you look like. If you look Asian or Latino, you're gonna get blasted on or at least jumped. The war has been declared, now it's a fight for power, money, and territory; we are killing each other over race, pride, and respect. They started the war in our Aztlán, a land that belongs to us by nature, and by nature we will bury them.

They might think they're winning by jumping me now, but soon enough, they're all going down!

Diary 4

Dear Diary,

Damn! It's the second week of school and I'm already getting busted up because of the people I hang with. A fight broke out today. I don't know how it started, it happened so quickly. Rumor has it that a little freshman got punked a couple of days ago and her gang was planning to retaliate. I heard people were even planning to bring bats to school with them. I was hanging out with a couple of friends when the fight broke out, and like every other kid on campus, I wanted to see it up close. I moved closer and

closer until I got too close. Before I could move away, I felt a fist hit me straight in the face. What are you supposed to do when someone swings at you? Swing back.

After what seemed like hours (but I'm sure were only a few minutes), the fight continued to grow. By this point, my nose was bleeding, but other than a few bruises, I was OK, seeing as how I wasn't on the floor getting the shit beat out of me. Then I heard someone say, "Watch out!" Everything from that point on was in slow motion, like a low-budget kung-fu movie with bad voice-overs. A football helmet had nailed me and I blacked out. When I came to, everybody was shouting, "Run, run!" Run? Why? Then I saw half of the school staff running toward the scene of the fight. I wasn't about to stick around and get blamed for starting the fight, so I pulled myself up and ran.

It's kind of sad when you have to run away from something that isn't your fault. Since I'm Mexican and Mexicans were involved in this stupid race war, I figured no one would have listened to what I had to say anyway. I'm not a bad person, but because of my friends, I sometimes get blamed for shit I have nothing to do with.

I really don't know how I made it through the rest of the schoolday; hell, I don't even know how I made it to my next class. I couldn't see straight,

couldn't walk straight. All I know is that after the fight today, the shit's really gonna hit the fan on the streets of Long Beach.

Diary 5

Dear Diary,

For many, it's the start of a new day, but for me, it's the continuation of a nightmare. Every day before I leave my mom *me percina* with the sign of the cross, praying that I come home safely.

Going to school is less of a problem, 'cause that's when the city sleeps, but on my way home, it's a whole other story. I'm fourteen, and people think I should be scared because I'm surrounded by violence, but around here it's an everyday thing. The first thing I see when I get off the bus is graffiti on walls, beer bottles filling trashcans, empty cigarette packs, and syringes.

On the way home, I get chased mostly by older fools with bats and knives. I try going different ways, but they always notice me and chase me anyway. At first I didn't know the reason why they always hunt me down, but then I figured it out, it was simply because I was of a different race.

I figured I had to find a way to protect myself from these fools, and the only way was to get a gun. At school, some of my friends have been talking about a homie being strapped. I asked them where he got it from, and they

told me that some guy sold it to him. With memories of my homies getting smoked and all my problems on the way home, I decided to get one. It's so damn easy to get a gun; it's like getting bubble gum from the corner liquor store. All you need is \$25. All I had to do was ask my parents for money to buy school supplies. It was easy, 'cause in the 'hood, for the price of a backpack, you can get a gun, a couple of rounds, and probably even have some money left over. The next day, I met my friends in the bathroom and I bought a .22 caliber with a clip. I quickly stashed it into my backpack and left.

The whole day at school, I couldn't keep my mind off my new gun. I felt like a little boy with a shining new toy. When school was out, I began my journey home. As I got closer to my stop, I looked out the window and saw the guys were waiting for me. Then I thought to myself, "Damn, here we go again." I got nervous and my hands began to sweat. I opened my backpack, took the gun out, and put it in my waist, then I slowly walked to the back and waited for the door to open.

As I walked off the bus, they began to call me names. "What's up, *ése*?" "Wait up, fool." Fuck them niggas. I kept on walking. I checked out of the corner of my eye, and I saw that one of them was eager to catch up to me. Usually, I would have run, but this time I had a gun. I knew they were

getting closer, so I turned around, reached for my gun, took it out, and pointed the gun at his head. Luckily, he ducked and ran, 'cause I didn't want to smoke him. The others were still after me, but once they saw I had a gun, they also ran. I put the gun back in my waist, and went home. No big deal, just another day in the 'hood.

The next afternoon, when I got off the bus, the guys weren't waiting for me. I didn't see them for the next few days. I didn't know if I had scared them off or not, but I hoped I had.

But my hopes were cut short, when one day, as I was walking home, I saw a guy mad-dogging me from across the street. We locked eyes, reached for our strap, pulled it out, and began shooting at the same time. The only thing between us was a major street and some parked cars. It was just like a movie, except in this movie when the characters bleed, the blood is *real*. I don't remember when I actually pulled the trigger; all I remember is shooting and waiting until I was sure the other guy was out of bullets. After the last shot rang through the air, he disappeared. We both ran, and have never met eye to eye again.

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.

Diary 6

Dear Diary,

A couple of days ago one of my friends was laid to rest.

His funeral was just like any other. Family members were crying.

Someone said, "Not another one," while his friends were swearing that they would get revenge. "An eye for an eye...payback's a bitch."

There were not a lot of people at the funeral, but the friends and family who showed up were very proud of him. We're all going to miss him, but what could we have done to prevent his death? After he was lowered into the ground, our lives went on. His friends didn't talk about him anymore. It was as if he had never existed. When his birthday comes, presents will no longer be given to him. They will be replaced by flowers, which will be put on his grave. That's just the way it is.

I still remember exactly what happened the night my friend died. I was in the liquor store buying some candy. I was having trouble deciding what kind of candy I wanted. Then I heard gunshots. I turned to the door and saw

that two of my friends were running into the store. When the first one came in, he dove to the floor; the other one simply fell. I looked down and saw that one of my friends had blood coming out of his back and mouth.

In a matter of minutes, his sister and mother ran into the store. I stood in front of the candy rack and watched his sister drop to her knees and gather him into her arms. She was crying and calling out his name. His mother stood behind her, watching with her eyes wide open with shock. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she didn't bother to wipe them off. She stood there and didn't make a sound. It was as if she was paralyzed with pain. It broke my heart to see his mother standing there, unable to help her baby.

After the last police car left, the people in my neighborhood were still standing against the yellow police tape, staring at the trace of white chalk. Nobody moved, but everyone was talking about "the young boy," who had been taken away by the paramedics, but there was a lot they didn't know. They didn't know that he was my friend and that he had his whole life ahead of him. He was gunned down for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I didn't pay attention to what they were saying. I just stood there, looking at my friend's blood on the floor. He had never harmed anyone in his entire life. What were his parents going to do? What was *I* going to do?

It was late and I had to go to school the next day. I wasn't sure how the neighborhood was going to handle the death of a kid who was raised in front of everyone's eyes. I know that that night many of my neighbors, like me, went to sleep, thinking, "Another one..." Knowing that it would happen again, probably another drive-by, but when? Anytime, it could happen to me, it happens to everyone.

The next day, I pulled up my shirt and got strapped with a gun that I found in an alley by my house. I hate the cold feeling of the metal next to my body. It makes me shiver, and the shivers remind me of all the lives this gun has claimed, but sometimes it's the only way. I hurried to catch the bus, hoping the gun wouldn't fall out of my waist. I didn't worry about getting caught with the gun, because the only time the school's staff searched the students was the day after the race riot. Now the staff only check every fifteenth student. All I had to do was pay attention and wait for the right time.

At school, I didn't say anything to anyone. I heard people talking about the shooting, but they didn't know the person who had been blasted. They didn't know the whole story. I walked into class just in time to beat the tardy bell. I went straight to my chair and sat down. I couldn't stop reliving the nightmare of my friend's death. I went through the rest of the day just

sitting, not saying a word. I didn't even write down my homework. I kept closing my eyes, and I would see his face. I know he is watching me from wherever he is. And when it's my time to go, I know I'll see him when I get there. All I have to do is wait.

My friend shouldn't have died that night. He should still be here having fun and enjoying life with the rest of us. He's not the first nor will he be the last friend that I lose. I've lost many friends, friends who have died in an undeclared war. A war that has been here for years, but has never been recognized. A war between color and race. A war that will never end. A war that has left family and friends crying for loved ones who have perished. To society, they're just another dead person on the street corner; just another statistic. But to the mothers of all those other statistics, they're more than simple numbers. They represent more lives cut short, more cut flowers. Like the ones once placed on their graves.

Diary 7

Dear Diary,

Once again, flowers on another grave and cigarettes to another friend.

These days, with so many of my soldiers either dying or going to prison, it looks like we're gonna have to start recruiting. We have to be real picky, though. The people have to be down, they have to be willing to take a bullet

or pull the trigger, but it's worth it. Life is easily given up to protect and respect the homies and the barrio we claim...the same barrio that we were born in, raised in, and hopefully, will be buried in. After we put *los tres puntos* on your wrist, it becomes survival of the fittest, kill or be killed. No wonder they call it *mi vida loca*. It's true, it is a crazy-ass life. Once you're in, there's no getting out. Sometimes I wonder if they know what they're getting into.

Every time I jump somebody in and make someone a part of our gang, it's another baptism: They give us their life and we give them a new one. All they have to do is prove they're down. It doesn't matter if you're a guy or a girl, you get your ass kicked, you can't show weakness, and you gotta pass either way. And we don't give a damn if you end up in hospital, 'cause as soon as you come out, you're considered a working soldier.

I remember when I got jumped in and became a member of the gang; I was in the hospital for over three weeks. I only had a broken arm and a broken leg, even though I could've sworn everything was busted. I had scratches and bruises all over my body. My eyes were so swollen, I couldn't even open them all the way, but it was worth it. To the soldiers and me it's all worth it. Risking life, dodging or taking bullets, and pulling triggers. It's *all* worth it.

Diary 8

Dear Diary,

I told my friends I was going to pledge a sorority because it “looked like fun.” I told my mom I was doing it because it was a “community service” sorority, but I don’t think she bought it. I tried to justify it to myself by saying that it was only because my friends were pledging, and I didn’t really care that much about the stupid club. However, I soon realized I was denying the obvious. I wanted to fit in just like every other high school freshman. Who wouldn’t want to be in a prime club like Kappa Zeta? It’s a predominantly white sorority, made up of mostly cheerleaders, rich kids, and the occasional Distinguished Scholar. All of the Kappa Zeta girls dress like they just stepped out of a Gap ad, their nails are perfectly manicured, their hair perfectly curled under at the tips. All of the upper classmen in Kappa Zeta are so elite that when they ask someone to do something, they do it. Even if it means doing something extremely degrading. So, when I received a flyer to attend a Kappa Zeta pledge meeting, I went without hesitation.

At first, pledging was really fun. All of the members were really friendly, and they gave us gifts and sweatshirts with the sorority symbol on it, like they were trying to lure us in. But after the novelty wore off, things started