Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things
Erin Gruwell

Introduction

We are all here for a common purpose, because we believe in kids. We believe in public education, and we believe that anyone given the opportunity can achieve higher standards, meet higher expectations, and be just about anything. I would like to tell you a little about the journey of one public high school classroom in Los Angeles county, and hopefully it can serve as a blueprint for others involved in education to look at and to realize that change is possible. We didn’t have a blueprint; we didn’t have a plan of action. Yet through some cosmic act we were able to have a beautiful, incredible story unfold and a journey that others have been able to walk with us. I hope this story will permeate this room, go back with you into your communities, and be a catalyst for change within your classroom.

Henry

I think that Henry is the greatest testament to our ability to change. But when I began as a first-year educator in 1994, Henry was 13, in danger of falling through the cracks, and being made to feel that his life was already headed toward a dead end. Henry had been given a reading and writing test with a number 2 pencil in one hand and a stopwatch in the other, and they said go. I didn’t know what Henry had for breakfast that day; I didn’t
know what Henry’s testing abilities were, whether he was dyslexic or had some other type of learning disability, or whether he just had a bad day. I only knew that I had a student who scored below the 30th percentile and that he, along with the other students in his class, was sequestered from the rest of the student body. Across the hall sat the other students, the ones who were considered distinguished scholars because they had done very, very well on test day. But for the most part, their families had money. Their parents could hire private tutors if their children’s reading scores dropped below their grade level, or they could send their children to special counselors if they were diagnosed with a learning disability.

Henry and the other students in his class didn’t have those opportunities. Their parents didn’t know there were special schools; they didn’t even realize the importance of giving their children a hearty breakfast before sending them to school on test day. These parents only knew that they wanted their children to be safe; they didn’t want their children to have to be constantly looking over their shoulders while in school. For this reason their children would get up at 4 or 5 o’clock in the morning and take as many as four buses to get to school. But once they arrived at that school, they were sequestered in classrooms with the other kids who rode the same buses, had the same skin tone, and spoke the same language at home. And when they looked across the hall they saw the other kids, the ones who lived on the shore and whose parents dropped them off in BMWs, and they would wonder, “Why? Why are we getting up so early to drive all the way across town when they won’t even let us hang out with those kids? The teachers don’t want us, and the kids don’t want to hang out with us. Did we all score the same score on that test?” That was day one; that’s where our journey began.
The Backdrop of Ideals

My parents had participated in the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and as I was growing up I had heard all of these incredible stories about fighting the good fight, helping the underdog, and doing what was right and just. Subsequently, when I graduated from college, I was idealistic: I thought I was going to change the world. And that was why I got into education. I wanted to fight the good fight, to get in the trenches, roll up my sleeves, and prove to everyone that every single child has the ability to soar if given the opportunity. However, the social climate of Los Angeles in the few years preceding my first teaching job made my task that much more difficult.

In the early 1990s, Los Angeles had experienced heightened racial tension that, along with the Rodney King verdict, escalated into violence and rioting. Kids like Henry witnessed firsthand people picking up weapons and using them to loot. I saw parents with kids on their backs going into stores and running out with televisions and other types of electronic equipment. I also remember that the media really focused on these kids—kids like Henry who were only 11 years old at the time. In the confusion, schools were shut down; Henry didn’t even go outside. Yet with that blanket method the media often uses, Henry and his friends and family were lumped together with all those looters and rioters, and they weren’t even there. The media and their horrible stereotypes were only adding to the problem, saying everyone from Los Angeles was this way or everyone from this particular race was that way.

The next major event to hit Los Angeles before Henry entered my classroom was the O. J. Simpson extravaganza. Once again, the city was suddenly held hostage to a situation that glued everyone to their televisions, and this, too, became a divisive
racial issue. And on top of this, the summer of 1994 saw the homicide rate among teenagers skyrocket to an all-time high, in part because teenagers were retaliating against one another in bouts of gang-related violence. In fact, just a few days before Henry entered his freshman year of high school, he attended the funeral of his best friend.

Meeting Maria

I arrived, syllabus in hand, extremely excited for my first day and assumed my students would be equally excited. But as I passed out the syllabus, I began to notice all the kids in the corners of the room. People tend to gravitate toward their areas of comfort, and there they were—in the corners, surrounded by their friends, all of whom were gang members. Many of these students’ families had fairly recently immigrated to the United States, often risking their lives to escape the threat of, for instance, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. All these parents wanted was for their children to grow up in relative safety. But as Maria’s story illustrates, poverty and pervasive violence make safety difficult to achieve. It, in a sense, has to be fought for.

I had noticed the acronym “ESL” etched on desks, on walls, all over the room. The only acronym ESL I ever knew I learned in graduate school: it stood for English as a Second Language. I soon found out, however, that this ESL had nothing to do with English as a Second Language. Rather, it stood for East Side Longos: the Mexican mafia of Long Beach, of which Maria was a member.

When Maria was 11 years old, she was jumped. She was beaten so severely, in fact, that she had to be hospitalized. To preclude this from happening again, Maria joined a gang. In doing so, she was actually following in the footsteps of her family: her father,
her grandfather, her uncles, her brother, everyone on her street—they all belonged to the Mexican mafia. Soon after joining, Maria was out doing all kinds of things. After starting with grand theft auto, she graduated to bigger crimes, until at age 14 she was facing the possibility of federal prison. At this point, Maria’s parole officer told her, “Maria, you have two choices: either I am going to stick one of those little zappers on your leg and you can start over by getting up early and going across town to a new school, with new teachers; or you can go back to the pen. Make your choice.” I don’t think it was a very scientific choice on Maria’s part; I don’t think she factored in quadratic equations or Shakespeare. No, she probably thought, “Okay, from 7:00 A.M. to 3:15 P.M. I can raise hell, hang out in the bathroom and smoke cigarettes, and etch ‘ESL’ all over the place. I am going to raise a ruckus.” Needless to say, on that first day, she did.

On the other side of the room, across from Maria and her gang, were some kids who belonged to the Crips—one of the two major gangs in the Los Angeles area. Many of them were wearing blue, their gang color. Snoop Doggy Dog is glamorized on television almost everyday, and because he was from Long Beach, was a Crip, and hung out with these kids’ brothers and uncles, what began as an urban type of music became a source of validation for these kids’ lifestyles.

There was only one child in the classroom who was actually looking at the syllabus, or actually, he was pretending to look at the syllabus: he was Caucasian and he was afraid to make eye contact with anyone else. He sat there shaking, and he was there, it turned out, because he was dyslexic and had scored a 20 on his placement test. He looked across the hall into the other freshman English class and noticed that of the 35 students in that class, 34 were Caucasian. In that classroom, the racial demographics
remained the same every period, save that in the first period the odd student was African American and in periods two and three the odd student was Latino. And all these isolated students wondered the same thing, “Why aren’t I over there?” From day one, everyone knew there was a problem: kids were being separated and grouped along largely racial lines. Realizing this, I began to fumble. “Okay,” I thought, “what did my teacher books tell me to do, what was that theory? What would John Dewey do in a situation like this? What would Vygotski do?” And I couldn’t remember. Meanwhile, I began to see syllabi flying past my head in the form of paper airplanes and crumpled up balls; I began hearing words and seeing finger gestures that were out of place. “Oh my god,” I started. “I am completely unprepared to be in this classroom.”

**Building Bridges**

I knew the first thing I had to do was break down everyone’s comfort zones. I had to take those stacks of records on my desk—which documented how many times Henry had been to the principal’s office, how many times Maria had been in and out of juvenile hall, how many different schools these kids had been through—and rather than determine who the really bad kids were or who had the lowest test scores, I had to throw those records away and give everyone a clean slate. Instead of ramming information down their throats and teaching toward a test, I had to teach and learn with them. This couldn’t be a hierarchy: I was different from them, not better; I just knew some different stuff. But in order to teach them, they had to teach me. I needed to know what they were watching on television; what kind of music they were listening to; what their home life was like, or if anyone was even at home with them. Did they have electricity so they could do their homework? Was it safe for them
to carry books under their arms or would those books be taken away, construed as a sign of their selling out, or cause them to get beat up? In order to empower them, to enable them to learn, I had to build a bridge and learn to connect with these children. But how could I tap into Snoop Doggy Dog and his lyrics and juxtapose them with Robert Frost to create some form of validity? How could I take a theme from their favorite movie and juxtapose it with a theme in any of the books we were supposed to read, be it *The Crucible*, *The Scarlet Letter*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*? How could I take situations out on the street and give them some relevance in the classroom?

When we began talking about Shakespeare—this guy who wore funny tights and spoke using “thee” and “thou”—I broke it down to its most basic level: Shakespeare was a common man trying to communicate about civil strife. Civil strife basically means that people don’t get along, whether it be because they have different names or wear different colors. So rather than the Crips and the Longos, we have the Capulets and the Montagues; and rather than gang colors, we have different family shields. But to connect with them even more, I chose books for them written by, about, and for kids. I chose three books about kids in pain: *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* by Zlata Filipovic, and *Night* by Elie Wiesel. These authors may have had different accents, they may have lived in different countries, and they may have lived in different times, but rather than picking up weapons and Molotov cocktails and resorting to violence, they picked up a pen and chronicled what they saw, giving immortality to horrific periods in history.
Unlocking the Cage

Maria, like most of the students in the class, had never read a book from cover to cover. Why should she, what good would it have done her? I remember giving her a definitive copy of Anne Frank’s diary—it was something like 400 pages, and there were no CliffsNotes™ and no photos, all of which made Maria quite upset. She thought, “Why am I going to read a book about some 12-year-old chick who lived in Amsterdam like 50 years ago?” I told her, “Maria, why don’t you just read it? You might find yourself within the pages of this book.” Maria did read it, but with the attitude that she was reading it to prove me wrong; to prove that the words wouldn’t come to life and that she wouldn’t identify with the story; with the attitude, “Yeah right. I’m going to show this lady she is full of it.”

Why Pens Are Made from Quill

As she was reading it, Maria came across the quote: “Sometimes I feel like a bird in a cage and I wish I could fly away.” At that moment, Maria had an epiphany: now when she looked outside her bedroom window, she began to notice the bars on it; and when she went on Sundays to visit her father in jail, she noticed she was talking on a telephone through a piece of glass. Maria had realized that she was a bird in a cage. After that, as she was reading, if Anne began to cry, she began to cry. And when she reached the end of the book and found that Anne had died, Maria said she felt as if a part of her had died as well. But how could Anne Frank, this young innocent child who didn’t retaliate, who didn’t go out into the streets seeking vengeance—how could she die? And why would her English teacher, Maria wondered, who’s trying to open the door to her cage, have her read a book in which the good guy dies and leaves her
devastated? Nevertheless, that book inspired Maria to read Zlata Filipovic’s book and then Elie Wiesel’s; and eventually, she took up a pen and began writing herself. Many of the greatest writers of our time started with angst—they started with what they knew. Maria started with what she saw when she got on the bus everyday, the noises that she heard above her—she wrote about the things that kept her in her cage. Maria found that writing enabled her to fly out of her cage and empowered her to soar to far-off lands.

Miep Gies

In the spring of their sophomore year, Henry, Maria, and the rest of the kids in their class raised enough money to bring Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne Frank in her attic, to their class. Miep Gies told them all the things she did for two years in order to hide, clothe, and feed not only Anne Frank, but seven others as well, in the heart of Nazi-occupied Amsterdam. She also spoke of all the sacrifices she made as an adult, because she was blind to matters of color, religion, celebrity, and, one would have to conjecture, test scores. All she saw in front of her was a group of beautiful children. She told us about the night someone, incredibly for only eight dollars, had turned in those eight people she so courageously harbored; how the Gestapo stormed in, threw her against the wall, and hauled Anne and the others off to a concentration camp.

As she told the story, I looked around the room at the audience of my kids—the same kids who had been segregated from the rest of the student body and who at one point had hated reading and writing—and they looked this beautiful mass of colors, like a box of Crayola® crayons. Everyone was sitting together, holding hands, holding their books, wanting her autograph. Then I
noticed that one of my students was crying. Apparently, as Miep Gies told the story, all that this student had experienced—seeing 35 friends shot and killed, watching his father die of AIDS, being in and out of juvenile hall—came rushing back to him. After hearing her say that even after 50 years not a day goes by that Anne Frank’s memory does not run through her mind, this young man, Darry, stood up and said, “I have never had a hero.” Darry then proceeded to relate a whole litany of his life’s misfortunes: friends who had been buried, nights he had gone to bed without having had dinner, living in a park tree when his family had been evicted. He finished by telling her, “You’re my hero.” But at this she grew angry, pounded her fists on the podium, and said, amazingly, “No. I simply did what I had to do because it was the right thing to do. No, my friend, you have the potential to be the real hero.” At that moment, it was as if an imaginary pen appeared from nowhere, and she took the pen and passed it to the students, saying, “Please, make sure that Anne Frank’s death was not in vain.”

The Face of Tragedy

Right before the publication of our book and after all 150 of these kids had graduated and had completed their first year of college (most of them the first members of their families to do so), we got on a plane and went to Amsterdam. It was August 4, the same day on which Anne Frank had been captured. When the kids got on those steps, suddenly those words on the page of her book weren’t just words anymore. We looked around and saw the window that Anne had looked out of to tell time; we saw the small space she sat in every night and wrote in her journal; and we saw all the photographs. When we walked back down the stairs, we were greeted by an array of reporters, all wondering who were these kids from California who had written a book
and were now at Anne Frank’s attic? And it was Maria—the same kid who had never read a book, who had scored in the 30th percentile—who stood at the bottom of the stairs, sobbing. When one of the journalists asked her why she was crying, she said, “When I was 11 years old, I joined a gang. And I realize that I was really a bird in a cage and that along came this teacher who opened the door to my cage. But at 14 years old, I didn’t know what to do because my wings were not used to flying.”

The Faces of Possibility

We as educators are also in a position to do the right thing. In our school systems, we have our own Anne Franks in the form of kids like Darry, Maria, and Henry, who are oftentimes obscured under the label of “inner city,” “minority,” or “the 30th percentile”—whatever label the politically correct deem appropriate to give these children. For many of us, when we think about the death of 12 million people, it’s very overwhelming; we can’t process that many people. But for many of us, when we envision the death of 12 million people, we envision the beautiful face of a child: we envision Anne Frank and somehow that gives life to this horrific situation. Likewise, we can give life to this amorphous mass of obscured children by showing Henry’s or Maria’s or Darry’s face and saying, “These are our children—look at where they were; but more importantly, look at who they are. They broke the cycle; when given the opportunity to rise to the occasion, they rose. When given the opportunity to give back, they’ve given.”

Because I didn’t give up on Henry or Maria, because I refuse to give up on any of my students, they have all flown their cages, and now, they’re all going back, trying to unlock the cages of children all over this country. I fundamentally believe, as do all
of you, that you can flash numbers, you can flash data, you can flash all kinds of charts—but in order to succeed, in order to effect change, we have to get into the hearts and souls of these children to make them realize, “Yes. You can do it; you can achieve. Change is possible.”