



LEADERCAST

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Executive Summary

I walked into my classroom in Los Angeles thinking I would change my students with literature. My students had been deeply impacted by the LA riots. I quickly found out they had never read a book from cover to cover. My principal told me I had the lowest 150 kids in the community. They had scored under the 25th percentile on every standardized test. He did not see hope. He rattled off statistics and statistics. He was not a leader.

I started to think, “How can I make a connection with them?”

A 14-year-old girl walked into my classroom with an ankle monitor and a probation officer. She had a black eye and had just come from a juvenile home. I gave my students journals with the hope that they would share their stories with me. The girl wrote, “I hate Erin Gruwell ...”

I wanted to hear their stories. I decided we were going to play a game that wasn’t really a game. I drew a line down the center of my classroom. I said, “Stand on the line if you’re poor.” I said, “Stand on the line if you’ve ever been homeless.” I wanted them to stand up for something. I asked them questions about drugs and alcohol, being bullied, teen suicide, and murder. I quickly learned that each of them had a story.

One student had seen his first overdose at age five. Another student, Calvin, hated teachers because a teacher had sent his sister to Child Protective Services. His parents hit him and his sister. He had been in 40+ foster homes.

I thought, “I can’t change them, but maybe I can give them a voice.” Then maybe they could rewrite their stories.

One boy had said he felt like he was in an undeclared war. I wanted them to read about boys and girls who were at war, like Anne Frank. I went to the chair of my English department and she said they were too stupid to read a book. What happens when we tell kids again and again that they are dumb, stupid, and nothing and they hear it from so many people? They were acting accordingly. I realized I had to stand up. I went out and bought 150 copies of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

My students found themselves in the pages of Anne Frank’s diary. Anne said, “Sometimes I feel like a bird in a cage and sometimes I just want to fly away.” The 14-year-old girl with the ankle monitor identified with Anne.

We began to ask, “Could we follow in the footsteps of someone like Anne Frank? Could we write our own stories?”

We wrote our stories and sent it off. Every publishing house rejected it, except one. It became a phenomenon –150 kids writing the stories of people everywhere. It was published as The Freedom Writers Diary.

I hope these students can teach us all that we can rewrite our endings. They were the first in their families to graduate, to go to college. The girl with the ankle monitor rewrote her ending. She stood in front of Congress and spoke up for everyone who needed a voice. Our job is to pay it forward to every student and to every community.

ACTION ITEMS:

- ❖ What is your current trajectory in your family, in your career, and in your life? How do you want to rewrite your ending? Spend time journaling your answers to these questions.
- ❖ Discuss with your team how you can be a voice of hope as a team: Is there a person or a group who needs a voice? Who can we stand up for? How can we begin to give them a voice?