



LEADERCAST

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SPEAKER Q&A: ERIN GRUWELL

Who has influenced you the most in your life? Why? Describe the relationship.

The person who has influenced me the most is Miep Gies, the humble and courageous woman who hid Anne Frank in the attic for two years. When she visited my students, the Freedom Writers, she told them, "I simply did what I had to do, because it was the right thing to do." It is my sincere hope, that in the face of adversity, that I too can "simply do what I have to do because it is the right thing to do."

What has been a defining moment in your role as a leader?

The most defining moment for me as a leader was when I realized that the "best teachers" need to be humble enough to learn from their students. When my students won the "The Spirit of Anne Frank Award," I reveled in the fact that our roles were now reversed – and as a leader, it was now my turn to follow in the footsteps of the Freedom Writers.

What are you most passionate about?

I am passionate about the way education can truly transcend even the worst kind of adversity – and equalize a very unfair playing field.

How did you get to where you are today? What advice would you give to other leaders who are working towards their goals?

I believe that a good leader has to have the ability to be flexible, know when to follow, and most importantly, empower others to lead. I have lived that credo firsthand when I was able to watch students who were destined to drop out of school in the 9th grade pursue their PhD's. As a leader, I helped them take their "PhD from the streets" and turn into a PhD in the halls of academia.

Define leadership.

I recall witnessing Maria Reyes (the student who originally came to Room 203 on the first day of school with an ankle bracelet around her leg and a probation officer) stand on stage in front of 10,000 educators, with 5-inch stilettos, a college degree, and a message of hope! Although her address was on the heels of President Bill Clinton, it was clear that every single one of those administrators, superintendents and school board members were more inspired by her words, than any speaker who had come before her. As 10,000 people stood on their feet, and gave her a roaring standing ovation, I knew what "leadership" was...

What are some ways for Chick-fil-A Leadercast attendees to apply your talk to their professional life?

Our philosophy at the Freedom Writers Foundation has always been to "teach one to teach another." Every year we have Freedom Writer Teacher Institutes that help educators across the world become leaders in their own classroom and community. So in the spirit of this conference on leadership, may each of us "lead one to lead another!"

To learn more about the Freedom Writers story, please visit our website www.freedomwritersfoundation.org.

Or read one of our books:

The Freedom Writers Diary

Teach With Your Heart

Teaching Hope: Stories from the Freedom Writer Teachers

Or rent our film:

Freedom Writers