

A Study Guide For

Voices Unbound:

The Story of the Freedom Writers



Prepared for FilmMatters by Susan Starkman B.A., M. ED.

Generously Sponsored By:

**The Ganz Family
Foundation**



**Toronto Jewish
Film Festival**

www.tjff.com

Voices Unbound: The Story of the Freedom Writers

Teacher Resource Package

Prepared by: Susan Starkman, B.A., M.Ed

Synopsis:

Country of Origin: United States

Director:

Runtime: 90 minutes

Themes: Personal biographies; overcoming adversity; inspirational teachers

Voices Unbound is the true story behind the California high school class that inspired the Hollywood film *Freedom Writers* starring Hillary Swank. When teacher Erin Gruwell deviated from the curriculum and assigned *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the voice of a young Jewish hideaway spanned generations and resonated with the disenfranchised inner-city youths. Inspired to record their own thoughts, these students shared powerful stories of hopelessness, broken homes, drug dealing, homicide, abuse and gang violence, and their writing blossomed into the national bestseller *The Freedom Writers Diary*. Featuring interviews with "Ms. G" and the student writers, *Voices Unbound* follows their improbable journey from California to Europe where they visit Auschwitz and the source of their inspiration, the Anne Frank House.

Curriculum Links

Voices Unbound can be used to meet the Writing and Media Studies component of the Ontario English curriculum from Grades 9 through to Grade 12.

Related Websites:

The Freedom Writers Foundation

http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/site/c.kqIXL2PFJtH/b.2260047/k.C70C/Calendar/apps/cd/content.asp?event_id={9CB20E0E-A135-4542-914B-7F9A9A6D5EA6}&content_id={1BBC28FF-B0CE-45DF-A895-146257F5A065}&seid=

The Freedom Writers Foundation website contains a number of educator resources that teachers can use in their respective school settings to apply Erin Gruwell's teaching strategies to their own classrooms. This resource package is designed to deal with *Voices*

Unbound as a documentary. Teachers who want to learn more about how to become Freedom Writer teachers should consult the Foundation's website.

Ways into the Text: Historical Context

Early in the film, Erin Gruwell cites the 1992 LA riots as the motivating factor in her decision to become a teacher. Most Canadian students will likely be unfamiliar with this chapter in American history and teachers should introduce them to the name Rodney King and ask them to do some research into the police brutality case that sparked six days of rioting, looting, arson and murder. Below is a brief outline of those events and links for students to do further research.

On March 2nd, 1991, Rodney King and two passengers were spotted speeding in the San Fernando Valley of L.A. King was on parole for a robbery conviction and he was afraid that being caught driving under the influence would violate his parole and force him back to jail. He thus refused to pull over, and led the police through a high-speed chase that continued from the highway to a residential area. Several police cars and a helicopter joined the pursuit and after approximately eight miles, the police cornered King's car. When King emerged from the car, police feared that he was armed and, as they attempted to handcuff him, King resisted and hit one of the officers in the chest. Police responded by tasing King. Unbeknownst to the police, a bystander, George Holliday filmed what happened next. His video shows one of the officers, Laurence Powell, striking King in the head with his baton, knocking him to the ground. Even after another police officer demanded that he stop, Powell and another officer, Timothy Wind, continued to hit King with their batons while he was on the ground. After 56 baton blows and six kicks, police swarmed in and restrained King's arms and legs, dragging him on his stomach to the side of the road to await the arrival of a rescue ambulance. (Students can see the footage of the beating at http://www.youtube.com/verify_age?next_url=http%3A//www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DxZDrZDEqeKk although they must verify that they are 18 years of age).

The L.A. district attorney charged four officers (Koon, Powell, Briseno and Wind) with using excessive force. As a result of media frenzy over the case, the judge ordered that the trial be moved from Los Angeles to Ventura County. All of the jurors were from the Ventura County area; 10 were white, one was Latino and one was Asian. The prosecutor was African-American. On April 29, 1992, the jury acquitted three of the officers but could not agree on one of the charges against Powell. Even L.A. mayor, Tom Bradley and President George H W Bush were surprised by the verdict and expressed their opinions that the verdict did not match what was capture on video.

Public reaction to the acquittal was swift and violent. Six days of intense rioting ensued and by the time the police, U.S. Army, the Marines and the National Guard restored order, 53 people had been killed and 2,383 injured. More than 7,000 incidents of arson damaged over 3000 businesses and the financial loss was close to one billion dollars. On May 1,

1992, Rodney King appeared in public before the media to appeal for an end to the violence. Students can see footage of King's address at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgiR04ey7-M>.

In the aftermath of the riots, pressure mounted for a retrial of the officers who had been acquitted and federal charges of civil rights violations were brought against them. Two of the officers (Koon and Powell) were found guilty and Briesno and Wind were acquitted. All four officers have since quit or have been fired from the police force. King was awarded \$3.8 million in damages from the City of Los Angeles, where he lives today.

Students should do more research on the Rodney King beating and the ensuing riots. After learning more about it, the class should come together to discuss whether they think something like that could happen again, providing evidence to support their opinion. Teachers should also ask students whether or not they think a similar incident could occur in Canada.

Websites Relating to Rodney King and the 1992 Riots

CBS News Report

<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=1344797n>

Time Magazine (15 Years after Rodney King)

http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/la_riot/article/0,28804,1614117_1614084,00.html

Good Magazine (20 Years after the Rodney King)

<http://www.good.is/post/the-20th-anniversary-of-rodney-king-s-beating-reflections-of-everyday-angelenos/>

Huffington Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/03/rodney-king-anniversary-b_n_831165.html

Related Lesson Plans for Teachers

Yale-New Haven Teachers' Institute: Black Skin, White Justice

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1996/1/96.01.10.x.html>

L.A. Youth

<http://www.layouth.com/how-do-we-form-our-opinions-by-examining-our-views-of-police-we-learn-how-our-opinions-are-shaped/>

High School Journalism (HSJ.org): Media Manipulation: Women and Race

http://www.hsj.org/modules/lesson_plans/detail.cfm?LessonPlanId=150&menu_id=6&submenu_id=&module_id=2

Constitutional Rights Foundation: Does the Criminal Justice System Discriminate against African-Americans?

<http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-9-1-c.html>

Extension Activity

The 1992 L.A. riots were not the first instance of large scale rioting in that city. Students could research the Watts riot that brought the city to a standstill for six days in 1965. After learning more about that riot, they could compare contrast the two events.

Websites Relating to the Watts Riot

Civil Rights Digital Library

http://crdl.usg.edu/events/watts_riots/?Welcome

University of Southern California

<http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/cityinstress/mccone/part4.html>

Webquest: Achievements in the Civil Rights Movement

<http://www.webquestdirect.com.au/webquest.asp?id=195&page=1500>

Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/13/AR2005081300103.html>

Ways into the Text: Fact vs. Fiction

Before the documentary *Voices Unbound*, the Hollywood, fictionalised film version of Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers was brought to the screen. Released in 2007 and called *Freedom Writers*, it starred Hilary Swank and Patrick Dempsey (see related website at <http://www.freedomwriters.com/>). Many students will be familiar with this film and teachers could ask students to compare the two films using the questions below as a basis for discussion.

1. Compare the real Erin Gruwell to the Hilary Swank version. How accurate do you think Swank's portrayal of her is to the real Erin Gruwell, both physically and in terms of her personality? Do you think that Hilary Swank was a good choice to play Erin? Why/why not? Who would you cast in the role?
2. What characters in *Voices Unbound* appear in fictionalised form in *Freedom Writers*? Compare the fictional students to the real students who appear in the documentary. Are they realistic? Do they confirm or defy stereotypes?
3. Why do you think that the fictional version of the story included the characters of Erin's husband and the head of the history department who constantly tries to undermine Erin?
4. Why do you think that *Freedom Writers* ends after sophomore year even though Erin taught the students until they graduated?
5. List the events that are highlighted in the documentary and left out of *Freedom Writers*. Why do you think that these events weren't included in the fictional version? Do you agree with the decision to leave them out? Why/why not?
6. List the events that occur in *Freedom Writers* that do not appear in the documentary. Do you think that they are true? If so, why do you think they were left out of the documentary version? If not, why do you think they were added?
7. What film did you find to more effective on the whole, *Voices Unbound* or *Freedom Writers*? Why?
8. Write a film review comparing *Voices Unbound* and *Freedom Writers*.

Voices Unbound: Genre Study

On the most obvious level, *Voices Unbound* is a film that follows the conventions of documentary filmmaking. However, the film can also be seen in the context of films about inspirational educators that have been popular in Hollywood since Glenn Ford played an inner city teacher in *The Blackboard Jungle* in 1955. Teachers using *Voices Unbound* in their classrooms could study the film exclusively as a documentary or they can extend their exploration of the film by comparing it to some of the feature films that focus on maverick teachers, many of which are based on real life characters.

Questions about Documentary Techniques

1. The film opens with images of a printing press publishing *The Freedom Writers Diary* juxtaposed with images of students in an inner city school going through metal detectors and being frisked by security guards. Why do you think that the director chose these contrasting images?
2. How do the students interviewed challenge the stereotype of gang members and tough, inner city kids? What techniques does the director use to convey them in a sympathetic light?
3. What effect is the use of archival footage of the 1992 L.A. riots designed to have on the viewer?
4. The director intercuts scenes of the Freedom Writers with scenes of students in Atlanta reading from the Freedom Writers Diary. Why do you think he does this?
5. One of the students claims that he feels like he lives in an "undeclared war zone." How does the director visually reinforce this idea?
6. Why does the director include footage of the Freedom Writers touring famous tourist sites in Washington?
7. Do you think that the director's depiction of Erin Gruwell is a balanced one or too good to be true? Provide examples to support your response.
8. The film could have ended with the publication of the Freedom Writers Diary. Why do you think the director included footage from the students' trip to Europe? What are their reactions to travelling to and hearing about real war zones?
9. The director divides the film into chapters according to years and gives them names such as Our Story, Freedom and Bearing Witness. Why does he do this? Discuss the chapter titles and their significance to the meaning of the film.
10. How does the director convey to the viewer the lasting impact that Erin Gruwell had on her students years after they graduated?
11. Erin begins to tell the story of the "toast for change" that she held for her students. Midway through telling it, Ramon picks up the story thread and continues to recount

what happens. Why do you think the director chooses to have that story told from both points of view?

General Discussion Questions/Activities

1. The film features a number of students from Erin Gruwell's class. Choose 4 students from the film and write a paragraph on how each of them was affected by the Freedom Writers project. What were their initial reactions to Erin Gruwell? What made them learn to trust in her? How did the diary affect their lives?
2. After Erin screens *Romeo and Juliet in Sarajevo* for her students, one of them claims that he feels that living in Long Beach is like living in an "undeclared war zone." After visiting Bosnia, he changes his mind. Why? Do you think that his initial comparison was a fair one? Why/why not?
3. Why did the students call themselves the Freedom Writers? Who were the Freedom Riders on whom they based their names? Research the history of the Freedom Riders and report your findings to the class.
4. Read one of the books that Erin Gruwell assigned to her students and write a book review of it. What other books would you suggest for a class reading list?
5. Write a letter to one of the Freedom Writers telling them how his/her story affected you. Alternatively, write your own Freedom Writer journal entry.
6. What were some of the difficulties that the students faced when confronted with the task of writing their life stories? How did they overcome them?
7. One of the students compared the way they never did anything to stop the violence in their own neighbourhoods to the way that the Polish people ignored the extermination of Jews in their own villages. Explore the idea of "bystander apathy" (also known as the bystander effect). What does the term mean? How can it be prevented? (See Appendix for lesson plan dealing with this topic)
8. Do you think that Erin Gruwell fostered enough of a sense of independence in her students or do you think that they became too dependent on her ongoing presence in their lives? Provide reasons to support your point of view.
9. Do you think that students reading the Freedom Writers Diary gain the same benefits as the students who wrote the diary? Why/why not?
10. One of the Freedom Writers claimed that "books were an escape but, at the end of the day, life still sucked and books were just fiction." Do you think that literature can make a substantial difference in a person's life or is it ultimately nothing more than a brief diversion? Provide reasons to support your point of view.

Appendix: Bystander Apathy Lesson

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

This quote, generally attributed to the 18th Century political philosopher, Edmund Burke, is an effective springboard to a class discussion about social responsibility and the consequences of standing idly by while crimes are being committed. Ask students what they think the quote means and write down their responses. Then ask them how they think that the quote relates to the film.

When the Freedom Writers visit the Poland and hear one of the older residents recount how the local villagers all heard the screams of the Jewish residents being killed by the Nazis but did nothing to stop it, they are horrified. One of the students then compares their own reluctance to stop the violence in their own neighbourhoods to the Polish people failing to protect the Jews. Knowing that people are being deliberately harmed and not doing anything about it is referred to as bystander apathy. Students should have some understanding of what this term means and think about ways they can prevent it from happening.

Psychologists first used the term bystander apathy or bystander effect in the early 1960s. The phrase was used to describe what happened in 1964 when 19 year old Kitty Genovese was attacked and killed outside her New York apartment building while dozens of her neighbours who heard her screams failed to come to her aid or call the police even though the attack went on for over half an hour. Since most people believe that a situation must be an emergency before action is taken, the fact that no single person acted to help Kitty Genovese lulled the collective group of neighbours into viewing the situation as a non-emergency that did not require intervention. This is what is known as pluralistic ignorance.

By relating the concept of bystander apathy to the students' own experiences, they will be better able to understand it and think about ways to prevent it. The activity listed below is designed to get students thinking about ways that they can take action against bullying.

Related Activity

Divide the class into 4 groups. Each group should be given one of the following scenarios:

1. Emma creates an “I hate Julia” blog, asking people to list reasons why they dislike Julia.
2. Daniel is sitting with a group of people at lunch and invites everyone at the table except Stuart to go to a movie with him after school. When Stuart asks if he can join them, Daniel tells him that he doesn't want ugly geeks to ruin their fun. Stuart looks upset and walks away.
3. Cheryl is a new girl at school who has recently moved from the country to the city. On her first day at school, Helen makes loud comments to the other students about Cheryl looking and dressing like “a hick”.

4. Brian keeps making sexual jokes around Claire. He also makes comments about her appearance around other boys that are sexually harassing.

Have each group imagine they are watching these events happening at their own school and get them to brainstorm different ways (both directly and indirectly) that they could intervene to stop the bullying. For example, a direct way to confront the behaviour is to report it to a teacher or challenge the bully's behaviour on the spot. An indirect way would be to not attend an event that someone has been excluded from. Students should come up with a list of possible interventions and share them with the class. Choose a few to act out and have students watch and then reflect from the perspective of both the bully and the person being bullied about how this action would affect these individuals. Students should also come up with a list of factors that they would influence them in their decision on whether or not to intervene.

Websites Cited (all websites cited are from April, 2011)

The Freedom Writers Foundation

http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/site/c.kqIXL2PFJtH/b.2260047/k.C70C/Calendar/apps/cd/content.asp?event_id={9CB20E0E-A135-4542-914B-7F9A9A6D5EA6}&content_id={1BBC28FF-B0CE-45DF-A895-146257F5A065}&seid

Rodney King beating

http://www.youtube.com/verify_age?next_url=http%3A//www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DxZDrZDEqeKk

CBS News Report

<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=1344797n>

Time Magazine (15 Years after Rodney King)

http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/la_riot/article/0,28804,1614117_1614084,00.html

Good Magazine (20 Years after the Rodney King)

<http://www.good.is/post/the-20th-anniversary-of-rodney-king-s-beating-reflections-of-everyday-angelenos/>

Huffington Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/03/rodney-king-anniversary-b_n_831165.html

Yale-New Haven Teachers' Institute: Black Skin, White Justice

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1996/1/96.01.10.x.html>

L.A. Youth

<http://www.layouth.com/how-do-we-form-our-opinions-by-examining-our-views-of-police-we-learn-how-our-opinions-are-shaped/>

High School Journalism (HSJ.org): Media Manipulation: Women and Race

http://www.hsj.org/modules/lesson_plans/detail.cfm?LessonPlanId=150&menu_id=6&submenu_id=&module_id=2

Constitutional Rights Foundation: Does the Criminal Justice System Discriminate against African-Americans?

<http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-9-1-c.html>

Civil Rights Digital Library

http://crdl.usg.edu/events/watts_riots/?Welcome

University of Southern California

<http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/cityinstress/mccone/part4.html>

Webquest: Achievements in the Civil Rights Movement

<http://www.webquestdirect.com.au/webquest.asp?id=195&page=1500>

Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/13/AR2005081300103.html>

Freedom Writers (film) website

<http://www.freedomwriters.com>