

Roger E. Joseph Prize Acceptance Speech
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Awarded To Erin Gruwell And The The Erin Gruwell Education Project
Hebrew Union College

Long before there was slogans like-- leave no child behind. Or young women-- like Jessica Lynch left behind enemy lines in the Middle East I ventured behind enemy lines on our own soil to try to liberate 150 students who were left behind and/or were missing in action.

When I walked into that classroom, I was not a soldier, I was not a politician. And I definitely was not a five star general. I was simply an idealistic teacher. Armed only with homework, Shakespeare, my love of literature, and the belief that there are universal truths that transcend environment, color, race, creed.

When the bell rang and Darius Garrett (PH) walked in, a 250 pound gang member, he looked at his polka dot wearing, pearl donning teaching, and thought there's no way that this woman can teach me anything about how to get from Point A to Point B. A young man who had seen murdered. Had witnessed senseless drive by shootings. And when he raised his hand, defiantly said, that he felt like he lived in undeclared war.

I thought of those wars, and I thought war, on our soil? In America? But for Darius Garrett and 149 others, war was real. Darius had lost nearly two dozen friends by the time he was 14 years old. And for him, texts and teachers were no way to liberate this young man. When he made that comment, a young girl-- Montague to his Capulet, Maria Relles (PH) from a rival gang, raised her hand.

And she made a comment that was unbelievably horrifying. This young 14 year old said, "I've been to more funerals than birthday parties". And I thought about that comment. And I thought how could these young people have been stripped of their innocence before they've even gone to high school.

Maria Relles at five years old, on her way to kindergarten, armed with crayons and hopes and dreams, witnessed her first murder. And how is a five year old supposed to go off and learn about ABCs and 123s as she's processing-- post traumatic stress disorder.

Shortly thereafter, this same five year old whose dreams had been shattered watched as her father was handcuffed by the FBI and taken off to a maximum security prison. At the age of five, her sights were set not on Stanford, but on San Quentin. Jail. Not Yale.

When I passed out my syllabus, homework, Shakespeare, sonnets, and epic journeys, he quickly made it into an airplane, threw it back at me. And defiantly said, why do I have to read books by

dead white guys in tights? And sure enough I looked at that syllabi and I realized that there was a disconnect, that somehow I needed to build a bridge to teach these students the importance of picking up a pen rather than a spray can. Rather than their fist. Rather than a gun.

And perpetuating this horrific cycle of violence. I thought about teachers. I thought about a fearless leader. And so I thought about Anne Frank. And I realized-- that this young woman-- who had lived in a real war, had felt pain, experienced discrimination, and she would be our muse.

When I passed out the diary of Anne Frank to 150 14 year olds who had never read a book from cover to cover, Maria Relles looked at the cover and said I don't look like her. She comes from a country I don't even know where it's located on the map. And she prays to a different God. But I said to her-- Maria-- try it-- open up this book and maybe the words will come to life before your eyes.

She defiantly took that book, went home, and the small apartment with twelve people. A one bedroom. She sat in her bed and opened the book. All the lights had been turned off. Electricity had been cut off. So she got a little flashlight and she began to read Anne Frank.

There was one sentence that Anne wrote that was this-- epiphany-- a light bulb went off. And Anne simply wrote in her attic, 50 odd years ago, sometimes I feel like a bird in a cage and I wish I could fly away. And at that moment Maria Relles felt that Anne Frank had written that line for her. Metaphorically, she was that bird. Her environment was that cage.

And what happens when a teacher, a young Jewish girl in Amsterdam, opens her door? What does a young woman who has never tasted freedom, sensed compassion, known empathy. Known tolerance and truly felt acceptance. What was she to do? This young bird had never left that cage and her wings were not used to flying.

So she came back to class and wanted to know more. She wanted to know about the tales of the Holocaust. She wanted to meet survivors. She wanted to know if this young woman warrior was going to survive.

And when she found out that Anne didn't make it, she realized that when Anne wrote so poignantly that-- in spite of everything-- I still believe that people are truly good at heart, that she needed to put down that gun, that spray can, pick up a baton in the form of a pen, and start chronicling everything that she knew, everything that she saw, and to write the wrongs. Maria Relles, armed with that pen, forward by 149 other students, began to write just as Anne Frank did.

And Elie Weisel and other predecessors. She began to write the wrongs and slowly those wings took flight. In the ten years that I have known these amazing students, they have gone on to write a book. Called the Freedom Writers Diary. They have taken their lessons of tolerance and

acceptance and flown to places like Anne Frank's attic.

Went there the day that Anne Frank was captured to prove to the world that her death was not in vain. They walked on those same railroad tracks that we'd seen in a darkened theatre. In Auschwitz, Birkenau, to prove that it's not ever going to be repeated. Never again. And to prove that evil prevails when good people do nothing. So here was 150 good people who were destined and determined to do something.

When they came back with their diplomas in hand, the first in their families to graduate from high school, it wasn't enough. They wanted to take those PhDs they'd earned on the streets and convert them into PhDs at the universities and higher learning. And so that's exactly what Maria Relles and her friends did. They entered universities, ivory towers, ivory towers, challenged authority. Questioned their professors.

And when Maria Relles recently stood in front of our entire nation and our capital looking out at congressmen and senators in Washington, DC, she took one look at me, one look at the Capitol and said-- oh my God, there are so many old white men in here. And there are. For Maria Relles knew that things are about to change. Because she is an activist.

She is an advocate for change. And this young catalyst flipped her hair back very defiantly, looked at each and every one of these movers and shakers, these men of glory, these men of stature. And she said that she is going to be the first Latina secretary of education. And then she snapped.

With that snap came this liberation. But it was only a matter of time that she was going to change our world by changing education. Challenging laws of segregation. Using cases like Brown verses Board of Education as her impetus to say that things have changed, but not enough.

So as I stand here before you receiving this incredible honor, every single cent of this incredible, incredible check, is going to help young women like Maria, young men like Darius, reach their goals of being educators. So that when young children walk into their classrooms and look at their teacher, they can say, "I look like them. I talk like them. I came from a place similar to they came from. And I don't have to hit a ball over a fence or slam dunk a ball in a basket or dance on MTV. I can be successful because of education-- because education has given me the tools to liberate myself."

And as I stand before all of these rabbinical students I am so honored and proud and I wanna impart to you lessons of being a teacher. Because in its truest sense, that's what a rabbi is. And the Talmud teaches us that-- who so saves the life-- saves the world entire.

So taking those lessons of Talmud, may you teach one to teach another. May you lead with dignity but have the humility to follow. May you speak extemporaneously with passion and zest.

But be gracious enough to listen. May you hand a Kleenex to those in pain. May you generously give a hug. May you inspire people to new heights. And may you save one to save another. Thank you.