



FREEDOM WRITERS: Left: Erin Gruwell, an English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, CA, moderates a Q&A session with former Freedom Writers. Below: Gruwell poses for a photo with Avenue Scholars, Farhia Mohamed and Nakia Whitelaw



Scholars gain inspiration from Freedom Writers

In 1994, as an idealistic English teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, Erin Gruwell, confronted a room of “unteachable, at-risk” students. She and her students, using the treasured books *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* as their guides, undertook a life-changing odyssey against intolerance and misunderstanding.

They learned to see the parallels in these books to their own lives, recording their thoughts and feelings in diaries and dubbing themselves the “Freedom Writers” in homage to the civil rights activists “The Freedom Riders.”

With powerful entries from the students’ own diaries and a narrative text by Erin Gruwell, a little book called *The Freedom Writers Diary* was produced. The book is an uplifting, unforgettable example of how hard work, courage, and the spirit of determination changed the lives of a teacher and her students.

In November, Avenue Scholars students and advisors had the incredible opportunity to meet the author and

her “Freedom Writers” at a screening of *Freedom Writers: Stories of An Undeclared War*, hosted by Freedom Writers Foundation and the Omaha Freedom Writers Foundation, at the University of Nebraska-Omaha Strauss Performing Arts Center.

“Courtland Olson and I were approached by Laura Geiger of the Omaha Freedom Writers Foundation to partner with Avenue Scholars to let our students attend a special screening of the documentary, to meet Erin Gruwell and four of the original Freedom Writers, and to even get to do a special book signing/meet and greet,” said Emily Christensen, Talent Advisor at Omaha Bryan High School. “Many of our Avenue Scholars have read the *Freedom Writers Diary* as part of their high school curriculum throughout the metro districts and almost all have watched the *Freedom Writers* movie, as it airs on MTV frequently.”

Approximately 85 Avenue Scholars, representing all nine of the Avenue Scholars schools — Omaha Benson, Omaha Bryan, Omaha North, Omaha Northwest, Omaha South, Millard South, Papillion-LaVista, Papil-

lion-LaVista South, and Ralston — attended the event.

Students got to watch the documentary that follows the “after the book/movie” lives of these Freedom Writers. After the screening, the OFWF gave away free books to students so they could have them signed.

The four Freedom Writers got on stage and spoke about powerful experiences they’ve had regarding mental health, dealing with urban violence, finding confidence as a young black female, and being the first to graduate and setting the path for others to follow.

“It was truly the most powerful part of the evening, as the students who attended really connected with the stories, experiences, and advice these role models were giving,” Christensen said.

The event had an inspirational impact on students who attended:

Nakiya Whitelaw, Bryan High School senior: “It was a great experience. I loved the documentary they showed and it moved me so much I cried. Also, they complimented my

(Continued on Page 3)

Spanish, people skills lead Scholar to job at Mercedes

With a new interest in meeting people and her ability to speak Spanish, Cecilia Benitez-Degante was in the right place at the right time when a Mercedes-Benz customer was having difficulty communicating with personnel at the car dealership.

"The person needed translation help, and I was able to help. That sealed the deal," says Benitez-Degante regarding an offer by Mercedes-Benz to come work for them in the customer service department.

The Omaha South junior has discovered early how much difference Avenue Scholars Foundation can make in her life.

"Without this program, I did not think I would have a good opportunity for college," she said.

After attending a leadership conference at UNO recently, she "learned about taking risks. Now, I like to meet and talk to other people. It [ASF] has shown me to find more



JOB SHADOWS: Larry Ortegren, Mercedes Benz Service Manager; Cecilia Benitez, Jonathan Marquez, Vanessa Navarro during a job shadow day at Mercedes-Benz

interests and to take advantage of opportunities."

Benitez-Degante hopes to attend college. She is thinking of some day opening a body shop with her brother, or becoming a business manager. She looks forward to working at Mercedes.

"I like the environment there," she said. "They are good people, and they all get along."

Scholar follows family path in education career



Micka Baker, an Omaha Benson 2014 graduate and now a sophomore at Metropolitan Community College, looks forward to some day becoming an elementary teacher.

"My grandma was a teacher, and a principal at Druid Hill Elementary," Baker said. "She retired when I was a kid."

And Baker's mother is a school bus driver, so a career in education has been an attractive draw. She has considered different levels of the education field.

"I thought about being a high school teacher, but decided I did not

have the right mindset," Baker said. "I decided elementary was a good age [of students] for me."

For now, Baker is focused on earning an Associate Degree at MCC. When not attending classes, she works as a teacher's aide/teacher assistant at Indian Hills Elementary.

Avenue Scholars Career Advisor Bradley Ekwerekwu is always available to support Baker's career goals.

"The assistance from Avenue Scholars has meant a lot," she said. "It's a good support system. Dr. Brad is always texting me to see how everything is going."

Avenue Scholars 'life-changer' for Ralston senior

Three years ago, Ralston senior Hazel Larsen could not envision herself earning a high school diploma.

Now, under the guidance of Talent Advisor Amy Rector, Larsen has two part-time jobs and is on track to graduate a semester early.

"Avenue Scholars changed my life," Larsen says. "My freshman year, I didn't even think I would make it through high school. I was not good in school."

Larsen will be the first in her family to attend college, and she sees her-

self as a role model for two younger sisters, a freshman and sophomore at Ralston, which includes having career goals.

One month ago, Larsen started working at Gallup, where she can gain the prerequisite experience to work on a help hotline. By spring, she plans to hold certificates for nursing assistance and early childhood education.

"I want to try it all out," Larsen said. "My career path fits into teaching or nursing. Somehow, I want to be involved in human services."



Right: A group of Omaha South Scholars pose for a photo with teacher Erin Gruwell and Talent Advisor Juan Cangas. Below: Scholars line up to get their books autographed by the Freedom Writers.



Scholars relate to adversity Freedom Writers faced

(Continued from Page 1) smile and that made me feel good.”

Farhia Mohamed, Bryan High School senior: “It was amazing to see Erin Gruwell because I read the Freedom Writer’s Diary in sixth grade and they’ve been inspiring to me. I’m so happy I got to actually meet them.”

Joseph Conde, Bryan High School junior: “I could relate so much with the problem that happened to the Freedom Writers in the ‘90s because I’m still facing the same ones

today. Not just in Long Beach, California but it’s still happening everywhere.”

Rogelio Rodriguez, Bryan High junior: “I really enjoyed their visit and their wise words. They have inspired me to be more than just some kid...They inspired me to be better and the best I can.”

Elias Ahilon Ortiz, Bryan High junior: “The Freedom Writers that spoke to us after the documentary gave me a special motivation to start focusing in school and in my life.”



Sam Randall



Emily Schirmbeck



Farhia Mohamed



Steven McMorris



Omar Mohamed



Nikki Gnofam

Panel earns respect, appreciation from educators

A panel of Avenue Scholars was rewarded with a standing ovation from a group of teachers and caregivers at a Buffet Early Childhood Conference, held Friday, Dec. 4, at the Kroc Center.

“It means a lot,” said Ralston senior Emily Schirmbeck said. “I wanted to cry. It was so neat that they were there for us.”

In addition to Schirmbeck, five other students participated: Sammy Randall, Millard South; Farhia Mohamed, Omaha Bryan; Steven McMorris, Omaha North; Omar Mohamed, Omaha South; and Nikki Gnofam,

Papillion-LaVista.

Moderated by Laura Miller, Education Services Director at Avenue Scholars Foundation, students spoke to a variety of prompts, including career goals, trust, adversity, motivations, inspirations, advice, cultural influences and relationships with adults, especially educators. The event — a training workshop — was sponsored by the Buffet Early Childhood Institute.

“It (the panel presentation) was really important for us,” Randall said. “It made us feel like our voice was important.”

Urban League honors ASF

On behalf of Avenue Scholars Foundation, CEO Ken Bird accepted a Community Organization Award from the Urban League of Nebraska Dec. 4 at the League’s 2015 Equal Opportunity Day Awards luncheon.

ASF was honored for “your commit-

ment to providing students with a pathway to post-secondary education.” The luncheon was held at the Hilton Omaha.

“Avenue Scholars Foundation would like to thank the Urban League of Nebraska for this recognition and honor,” Bird said.

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“Our mission is to ensure careers for students of hope and need through education and supportive relationships.”

NUTRITIONAL KEYS.

Right and Below: Benson High School juniors Maria Reyes, LaMott Parmer, Destiny A. Montanez, Abrosia Hatcher-Reed and Mario Matthews quiz Rosehill Elementary sixth graders about activities they can engage in other than looking at a television screen or electronic media screen.



NUTRITIONAL KEYS.

Clockwise from Right: Benson juniors lead Rosehill Elementary sixth graders through some physical activities while discussing best choices for a sound nutritional diet and exercising for good overall health.



Benson Scholars become health advocates for day

Benson High School juniors Ambrosia Hatcher-Reed, Destiny A. Martinez, LaMott Parmer, Maria Reyes and Mario Matthews became teachers for a day at Rosehill Elementary Wednesday, Nov. 18.

The event was the result of career explorations provided by Avenue Scholars Foundation. An organization called gonebraskakids.org provided the opportunity.

“It came about through Avenue Scholars and a job shadowing assignment,” Montanez said. “We saw that it was a paid internship and that it was about being healthy and active, which is something we are all interested in.”

Avenue Scholars provided lessons on nutrition to Rosehill students in three, half-hour assemblies: K-1st graders, 2nd-3rd graders, and 4th-6th graders. Arli Boustead of Alegent Health, who works with GoNebraska-Kids, prepared Scholars for the event.

“We train teams to be health advocates; we planned the assembly,” Boustead said. “These students are role models.”