

was going to school. She had no idea that I had been ditching since the first day of class.

My mom has always pushed me to get an education because everyone else in my family has dropped out—everyone except her. The only reason why she graduated was because her mother pressured her. Now my mom is pressuring me to be like her. If Ms. Gruwell called my house and talked to my mom, she would freak. My mom would definitely think I'm a loser if she knew. Being a loser was the least of my problems.

My problems only got worse when I got caught. I remember I was smoking out with my homies when the cops rolled up. Boy, did I take off. I took off running so fast that I didn't even stop to see if my friends were with me. I just wanted to get away. When I got around the corner I noticed that I was alone. That's when I went back and got caught myself. They took me to juvenile hall. That was the worst night of my life. I was in a cell with other girls who wanted to kick my ass. The officer told me I could make a phone call. When I called my mom I lied to her. Of course, if I could lie to my mom, then I could lie to Ms. Gruwell.

So one day when Ms. Gruwell pointed out my 0.5 GPA, but said that I had potential, I felt guilty. Then before I left class, Ms. Gruwell told me something that would change my life forever. She told me she believed in me. I have never heard those words from anyone . . . especially a teacher.

Now you can understand why I am so excited to stay in Ms. Gruwell's class for another year. Since Ms. Gruwell cares about me, I started caring about myself. I even stopped ditching. I hate to admit it, but I'm actually starting to like school. I can't wait till next year to have Ms. Gruwell all over again. You never know what exciting things will happen.

Sophomore Year

Fall 1995

Entry 3 • Ms. Gruwell

Dear Diary,

Ever since I started student teaching at Wilson High, it seemed like some teachers had it in for me. According to them, I was too enthusiastic, too preppy, and my teaching style was too unorthodox. The students they criticized in the teachers' lounge were the same students celebrated in a local newspaper article. And to top it off, when my students received an invitation to meet Steven Spielberg, it put some teachers right over the edge.

After enduring all the rumors during my student teaching, I had been pretty hesitant to return to Wilson last fall. When I was assigned to teach freshmen with below-par reading skills, the head of the English department challenged me, saying, "Let's see what you can do with these kids, hotshot!"

Hotshot? If she only knew how nervous and overwhelmed I really was as a first-year teacher. She never even took the time to get to know me—and yet she was labeling me. Just like the students I defended, I was being stereotyped. Teachers called me a prima donna because I wore suits; I made the other teachers "look bad" because I took my students on field trips; and some had the audacity to say that John Tu was my "sugar daddy." At that moment, I understood why almost half of new teachers leave the profession within the first few years.

I contemplated leaving Wilson after a teacher printed and then distributed a letter I'd written to Spielberg's secretary thanking her for helping with my spring field trip to the Museum of Tolerance. When another teacher brought me a copy of my letter—with certain sections highlighted—I lost it. Why would a teacher, someone who was supposed to be my colleague, access my computer file and print a private letter? And then why would she make copies of it? In my opinion, she invaded my privacy and that's where I drew the line. All my suppressed animosity came to the surface, and I decided it was time for me to leave Wilson.

I interviewed at another high school and was offered a job. I was inches away from a clean getaway, until I made the mistake of telling my principal that I was planning to leave. He was shocked and asked me why.

"All of the teachers are out to get me!" I blurted out.

"But what about your students?" he asked. "Didn't they sign up for your sophomore English class? Won't they be disappointed if you're not here on the first day of school?"

Then my hypocrisy hit me. All year long I had encouraged my students to avoid using labels like "all" and other gross generalizations. I even had people who were the victims of stereotyping describe the dangers of labeling groups of people. Holocaust survivor Renee Firestone reiterated my point by telling my students, "Don't let the actions of a few determine the way you feel about an entire group. Remember, not *all* Germans were Nazis." Now I was stereotyping by saying "all" teachers, when in reality it was only a handful who disliked me. There were actually several teachers who were supportive.

If I let a few other teachers chase me away from Wilson, the kids would be the ultimate losers. They would think that I, like so many others, had bailed on them. I realized I needed to finish what I had started. Besides, I didn't become a teacher to win any

congeniality contests. So I decided to stay at Wilson and devote my energy to teaching literature, rather than perpetuating petty rivalries.

By staying, I'll have the majority of the students I had last year. In addition to them, I'll be getting a whole new crop—the kids nobody else wants! My class has become a dumping ground for disciplinary transfers, kids in rehab or those on probation. But Sharaud, who graduated in June, could turn his life around, there is hope for these new students yet. Ironically, "hope" is one of the few four-letter words not in their vocabulary.

When I asked one of my freshmen if he thought he'd graduate, he said, "Graduate? Hell, I don't even know if I'll make it to my sixteenth birthday!" To some of these kids, death seems more real than a diploma.

Their fatalistic attitude influenced my literature choices for this year. Since the incident with the racist note segued into a unit on tolerance, I'm going to revisit and expand on that theme. I've ordered four books about teens in crisis: *The Wave* by Todd Strasser; *Night* by Elie Wiesel; *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*; and *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. The last two will be the focal point of the curriculum.

It's uncanny how many similarities my students have with Anne and Zlata. Since many of my students are fifteen, and Zlata is fifteen and Anne Frank was fifteen when she died, I think the parallels between age, alienation, and teenage angst will really hit home for them.

Anne Frank's book was a natural choice, but I was really excited to discover the book by the young Bosnian writer, who critics are hailing as a "modern-day Anne Frank." *Scope* magazine's cover story about Zlata Filipovic last spring inspired me to read her diary about war-torn Bosnia. Zlata began keeping a diary when she was ten. She called it "Mimmy"—similar to how Anne Frank called her diary "Kitty." Just as Anne's life changed dra-

matically under the Nazi occupation, so did Zlata's during the war in Sarajevo. Suddenly, Zlata's focus switched from her studies and watching MTV to the closing of her school and the destruction of the national library. As the war progressed, she experienced and chronicled food shortages, artillery shelling, and the death of children.

In 1991, at the age of eleven, as Zlata watched her once peaceful city erupt in war, my students witnessed Los Angeles literally burn in the wake of the Rodney King verdict; as Zlata dodged sniper fire in the streets where she once played, my students dodged stray bullets from drive-by shootings; as Zlata watched her friends killed by the senseless violence of war, my students watched friends get killed by senseless gang violence. In Sarajevo, Zlata described how soldiers used a "black crayon of war" to put an "S" on Serbs, a "C" on Croats, and an "M" on Muslims. I think my students could argue that they, too, have experienced a "black crayon" of sorts, labeling them with a "W" for white, a "B" for black, an "L" for Latino, and an "A" for Asian.

I think my students will be able to identify with the teen protagonists in all of the books I've selected. But since the books won't arrive for a while, I'm going to have them read short stories and plays that they'll be able to relate to. I think they'll be surprised how life mirrors art.

Diary 24

Dear Diary,

5:00 A.M.—The sound of my alarm clock woke me to a dark room this morning. The sun wasn't out yet, so I decided not to get up. My clock saw things differently and kept beeping.

So I thanked my clock by throwing it on the floor. The beeping stopped. As I looked over to see where the clock had landed, I realized I, too, was lying on the floor. Why? Because I don't have a bed. I turned on the lights so I could get started on my day. I walked past the closet mirror in the room to get my clothes. The mirror showed my sleeping space—a thick blanket and a pillow.

The mirror's reflection also revealed that the room does not belong to me. It made me feel sad. Almost at the point of crying, I grabbed my clothes from the closet and walked down the long hallway to the bathroom. During my shower, I cried. Tears mixed with the water streaming down my face, I welcomed the pain that came with the tears. It's the only way I can deal with my current situation. The room, hallway, and bathroom don't belong to me. This is not my home. My mom is down the hall sleeping in a room, but this is still not my home. I don't have a home anymore.

5:30 A.M.—I'm out of the bathroom, done with my shower, and ready to go. I have to remind myself that today is the first day of my tenth-grade year at Wilson High School. I should be happy that I get a chance to see my friends after not seeing them all

summer. But, I wonder if my friends' summer was as bad as mine. That summer was the worst in my short fourteen years of life. It all started with a phone call that I will never forget.

My mom was crying, begging, and pleading; asking for more time as if she were gasping for a last breath of air. Though I never paid attention to "adult matters," this time I was all ears. I never wanted to see my mom cry.

As she hung up the phone, she turned around to see me standing there confused and scared. I didn't know what was wrong. She quickly held me as tight as she could, hugged me, and said that she was sorry. She began to cry again, this time more so than when I walked in. Her tears hit my shirt like bullets. She told me that we were going to be evicted. She kept apologizing to me, saying she failed me as a mother and provider. She was a month behind on the rent. The landlord was already money hungry, so it made the situation worse. I was only fourteen and too young to get a job. The only job I could get in my neighborhood was selling drugs—so I decided to pass.

While kids were having fun enjoying the summer, I was packing my clothes and belongings into boxes and wondering where we were going to end up. My mom didn't know what to do or where to go. We had no family to lean on. No money was coming in. Without a job, my mom didn't have enough money to get another place. What to do? No father to help out, just a single mom and her son.

The night before the sheriff was supposed to pay us a welcome visit, I prayed to God for a way out of this madness. Sad and depressed, I attempted to get some sleep that night in the hope something would happen.

The morning of our eviction, a hard knock on the door woke me. The sheriff was here to do his job. We were moving all our stuff out as fast as we could. I started to look up to the sky, waiting

for something to happen. I looked at my mom to see if she was all right because she was silent moving the stuff out.

Our pastor had a friend who had a nice, big house where he lived by himself. The pastor's friend, who was informed of our situation, welcomed us with open arms. The arms of a stranger were a lot more comfortable than the arms of the sheriff.

6:00 A.M.—I'm waiting for the bus. Flashbacks of this summer pass through my mind like a song repeating itself over and over again. I try to tell myself it could have been worse. Nothing like this has ever happened to me. I started to think the situation was my fault because I always asked for the top video games every Christmas and birthday. I should have asked for something less expensive; something we could afford.

6:45 A.M.—I've ridden one bus to catch another bus that will now take me directly to school. School . . . why bother going to school? What's the use of going if I don't have a place to live? When friends ask how my summer was, what am I going to say? I was evicted from my apartment? I don't think so. I'm not going to tell a soul what happened. I knew everyone would be wearing new clothes, new shoes, and have new haircuts. Me? With outfits from last year, some old shoes, and no new haircut. I feel like it's hopeless to try to feel good and make good grades. There's no point to it.

7:10 A.M.—The bus stops in front of the school. My stomach feels like it's tightening into a tiny little ball. I feel like throwing up. I keep thinking that I'll get laughed at the minute I step off the bus. Instead, I'm greeted by a couple of my friends who were in my English class last year. At that point, it hits me. Ms. Gruwell, my crazy English teacher from last year, is really the only person that made me think of hope for my future. Talking with my friends about our English class and the adventures we had the year before, I began to feel better.

7:45 A.M.—I receive my class schedule and the first teacher on the list is Ms. Gruwell in Room 203. I walk in the room and I feel as though all the problems in my life are not important anymore. I am home.

Diary 25

Dear Diary,

Damn! School just started and I have to go to the hospital again. This time I have to have sinus surgery. The doctors say I will be out of school for a week or two. I hope they are right.

I am frequently hospitalized for a lung disease called cystic fibrosis. CF has been a constant part of my life. My breathing sucks! I have coughing attacks every five to fifteen minutes that last about five minutes each. I lose my concentration and I can't even breathe. The lack of oxygen gives me a migraine. My weight is also a problem. Since I can't digest what I eat, I can't gain weight. I have to take pills to help digest my food and perform breathing treatments. If I don't, I get severe stomachaches. Most of the time I end up losing weight.

I have been on a transplant list for over six months, and I probably only have a few years left to live unless I receive new lungs. It makes me wonder if I will survive this. I know I will, but it's a tough, scary road ahead for me. Anything can happen to me, and hopefully I will be prepared.

I'm sure going to miss school and my friends. I'm really going to miss Ms. G and her class. Last year when I was in the hospital she bought like a two-foot card and everyone in her class signed it. She even came to the hospital to visit me.

I don't know what kind of assignments I'll miss, but I hope it isn't much. I hope the surgery won't keep me out for more than two weeks. I would hate to be out of school longer than that, because school is one of the only things that I love doing.

Diary 26

Dear Diary,

Today I walked into my fifth-period English class and all of the desks were lined up against the wall. On the chalkboard read *Twelve Angry Men* and under it listed the characters in the play. It looks like she wants us to role-play. With my luck I'm probably going to be the first person she picks. Why did I have to be transferred into this class?

Everyone in here seems to know everyone else; just like that TV show *Cheers*, where everybody knows your name. Well, I don't really talk to people and I'm sure nobody knows my name. I would like to keep it that way.

"Oh my God . . . she's going to pick me to be a character, I know she is . . . great, just great, she's looking at me." Now everybody will know my name. I immediately stick my head into my backpack to search for something, anything, to look like I'm distracted. I can't take this; I don't need this kind of stress. Phew, she passed me up, I guess I got lucky this time. I hate talking in front of people, and all this teacher does is talk. She calls on people to answer questions; like they could give a smart answer right off the top of their head. Why can't she talk monotonously through the whole class period? Why couldn't she just be boring like my other teachers?

Diary 27

Dear Diary,

Murder, taking a life, stealing a soul, the one thing you can never repay or apologize for. Lately the word murder has been a shadow hovering over my life. Everywhere I turn, I see the O. J. Simpson trial all over television. Ms. G is having our class read

