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HELPING YOUNG WOMEN FIND VOICES

Mentor program uses writing for empowerment and to pave way to future

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For Keren Taylor, founder of the mentoring organization WriteGirl, the goal is to be there for girls through thick and thin. “It’s not easy but sure feels good,” she says.

Keren Taylor

Location: Los Angeles **Age:** 53 **Profession:** Community leader **Mission:** To help young women

LOS ANGELES - To Keren Taylor, there’s no greater feeling than hearing an inner voice emerge from a shy young woman reaching into her soul to talk about herself through song lyrics, poetry or dramatic dialogue.

Taylor is the founder of WriteGirl, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that connects teenage girls with mentors with the goal of empowering them to express themselves in whatever genre suits them — poetry, journals, screenwriting, playwriting or another form. In 16 years, WriteGirl has grown to include 300 young women, all paired with mentors.

The goal is to be there for the girls, through thick and thin. “There might be a storm raging, but we are here to be fierce protectors of these young women and their future. It’s not easy but sure feels good,” Taylor says.

She says her mission began when she was working as a singer and songwriter in New York. Invited to speak about her craft in school classroom, she realized that she could connect to youths through different forms of writing in ways that traditional essays never could.

“Kids did not like to write at all. The light bulb came on when they saw they could write a song,” Taylor says.

The focus isn’t necessarily on correct grammar and spelling. Rather, Taylor says she and her mentors focus on content — trying to draw out pent-up feelings so girls can express themselves in a world where often they are overshadowed in classrooms by boys.

“I have great respect for what teachers have to go through, but we are outside of that system,” Taylor says. “We found that students thrive when they write about things they know. ... They are given the freedom without pressure or competition.”

WriteGirl says it has a 100 percent success rate in getting women to apply to college. The program is expanding to include boys and is reaching past schools into correctional facilities. WriteGirl programs are starting in other cities.

What makes Taylor most proud? When program graduates “want to give back. When they graduate from college, they want to be of service.”

Q&A WITH KEREN TAYLOR

What does it mean to you to be an American?

To me, being an American means to be part of a diverse and vast country, as full of possibilities and imperfections as I am. It comes with responsibility, this citizenship of America — a responsibility to uphold and advance the country’s founding principles of equality, justice and freedom. In my own way, I know I am doing my best to do my part on that front, in my own community, with hundreds of volunteers helping and contributing to this organization, WriteGirl, that I started 16 years ago!

What moment motivated you to launch this effort?

Teen girls in Los Angeles and other cities are faced with incredible challenges. ... To give them a place where they are supported by other women, and encouraged and inspired, is really something that lets me sleep at night, to know that we’re helping teen girls feel like their voice matters. So I think the work that I did previously as a songwriter, as a writer, nothing has been as powerful as the kind of work I am doing now.

What gives you hope and what concerns you?

We really help girls write about their families, their neighborhood, their culture, and what they see is that they have much more in common with other teen girls than they realized. And sometimes we have them even reading the work of other girls outside of Los Angeles to get that cross-pollination. I think it's really important that people really look at their own stories and not be only looking outward to a story that's being told to them by others. Because our story is what makes us American, our own personal stories.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

What I love is bringing people together who otherwise might not meet and (giving) them the chance to see the things they have in common. Los Angeles is full of people who are passionate about a lot of different things, so to be able to have that dialogue happen and to be able to bridge their various views and perspectives is really a terrific thing.