

NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Kelly McElroy
Community Relations Director
Street School, Inc.
Desk: 918.833.9821
Cell: 918.695.8922 – 24 hours
Email: mcElrke@tulaschools.org
Website: www.streetschool.org



Published: Friday, September 23, 2011

Photo's available and attached

Press Release

Tulsa Street School students are a hit in Wichita Falls

Wichita Falls, TX. – Street school students drove to Wichita Falls, Texas on Thursday to meet Erin Gruwell, the founder of Freedom Writers. In 1984 Gruwell, an instructor at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, was challenged by a room of students considered to be un-teachable and adapted her curriculum to engage students by using relevant literature and journal writing. Street School English instructor Sheila Jones uses the same methods as Gruwell and considers this opportunity for her students to meet Gruwell an honor.

“Just like Erin, I work with at-risk students all day,” stated Jones. “The impact she has made on uniting students through literature allows my classroom to stay engaged.” Through books such as *The Boy Who Dared* by Susan Campbell-Bartoletti which tells the story of a teenager living in a concentration camp, these high school students can not only relate their struggles to the subject matter, but relate each other.

Gruwell earned an award-winning reputation as an innovative English teacher when she introduced projects into her classroom that helped transform the lives of her 150 high school students. Even her superintendent had so little hope for them that he told her he was hoping they would drop out before the standardized testing began. Her success was so extraordinary that she – and her students – wrote a book, “The Freedom Writers Diary,” that chronicled their experiences. Their book became the 2007 Paramount Pictures movie “Freedom Writers.”

Jones learned of Gruwell's close proximity to Tulsa by participating in the monthly conference call conducted by Gruwell's Freedom Writer Foundation. The foundation connects teachers across the country to use the Freedom Writer methods in their classrooms. Their mission is to change the educational system one classroom at a time by providing educators with

transformative tools to engage, enlighten and empower at-risk students to reach their full potential.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity, Jones went to school administrators to see if funds were available to drive the school van round-trip to Wichita Falls, Texas, pay the \$20 per student ticket fee and attend the event which was sponsored by the North Texas United Way. When Jones, her students and Street School instructor Donna Shelton arrived to the Wichita Falls Country Club, where the event was held, they learned their tab had been paid by a local supporter.

“When we checked in at registration they told us our table had been sponsored by a local. However, there were only 11 seats and I had 13 students. I couldn’t ask two students to not attend after coming so far so we all shared those 11 chairs,” Jones said.

When Gruwell learned that the students had gotten up at 5:30 a.m. to travel to Wichita Falls to hear her speak she couldn’t hold back the tears. “I’m a mess – I’m a hot mess right now,” she said. “I’m feeling emotional because of these beautiful, beautiful, beautiful kids here,” she said. “These could easily be my kids.”

As estimated 2.5 million public high school students drop out every year in America. More than 4,800 in Tulsa County alone contribute to this figure. It is the mission of the Freedom Writers to answer this cry for help in schools by training teachers to engage students and keep them engaged. Most all students who attend Street School have dropped out or were on the verge.

“Before I came here (Street School), I didn’t have any direction. My other school was too busy and I couldn’t relate to what the teachers were trying to teach me. At Street School, teachers relate everything back to the real world,” said Janie Rounds, a junior at Street School.

Just as Gruwell had students who suffered from low test scores, alienation, emotional hostility and labeled by the education system as “delinquents”, Jones can relate. “I have students who suffer from abuse, family dysfunction, poverty and addiction. When they make a connection with a story about teenagers suffering during the holocaust they can relate it to their own situation in 2011. It makes an impact.”

###

Wichita Falls Media Sources

Additional coverage, photos and video on this story, from Wichita Falls can be secured through:

- KFDX 3 News, Mechell Dixon, mechell@kfdx.com or 940-636-5304
- *Times Record News*, Ann Work, 940-767-8341

Other:

- Shelia Jones, English Instructor is available to interview
- Photo opportunities of Jones in classroom with students is available
- Additional photos of students with Gruwell available

About Street School: Street School is a tuition-free dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery program for students in grades 9 through 12 who live in the Tulsa Public Schools district. Services include high school education and therapeutic counseling. Additionally, Street School has a certified drug and alcohol treatment program.

As an alternative school, the Street School program incorporates teaching through real life experiences which reinforce key learning outcomes. With an average of 140 students and a focus on learning that engages the whole person, Street School is a great place to earn a high school diploma.