



Ernesto Elizarraraz/Daily News

Academy Award-winning screenwriter Diablo Cody answers questions from students during lunch at a Writegirl workshop Saturday at the American Film Institute. The group helps girls realize that dreams of writing for films or TV just might come true with effort.

Own lives stuff of movies, girls learn

SCREENWRITING: Teens hear from pros at workshop.

By **Connie Llanos**
Staff Writer

HOLLYWOOD — Jessica Reben has stories to tell.

The 15-year-old could talk about being a Chinese immigrant growing up in Chatsworth, being raised by her adoptive single mother and having an adoptive cousin who also happens to be a blood relative from her native Chang Ziao.

But Reben doesn't want to talk about her life. She wants to write about it.

"I love to write poetry and short stories," Reben said.

"It helps to keep me focused."

Joined by about 75 other girls from across Los Angeles, Reben got tips on writing, grammar and even life from professionals as she took part in a Writegirl workshop Saturday at the American Film Institute.

Writegirl's founder, Keren Taylor, started the nonprofit writing and mentoring program in 2001. The freelance

journalist, screenwriter and songwriter had just been laid off from a dot-com that went bust, and she wanted to re-enter the working world with a mission.

Taylor had mentored girls in her hometown of New York City and knew writing could be a positive way for young girls to express themselves.

"It really helps a girl's development, her self-confidence, to get a chance to work on her creative and communication skills," Taylor said.

The Writegirl program focuses on pairing young girls with working writers. The mentors are responsible for having weekly meetings with their protégés, and every month Taylor and her team set up workshops with a different genre of writing as a focus.

Saturday's event was all about character development and screenwriting.

"Today is about percolating ideas, letting your pen flow, getting inspired," Taylor said.

Heavy-hitters like Robin Swicord, screenwriter for "Memoirs of a Geisha," and Rita Hsiao, writer of "Mulan" and "Enchanted," shared their writing secrets with the aspiring authors.

Oscar winner Diablo Cody, of "Juno" fame, was greeted by enthusiastic hoots and hollers from the young audience when she was introduced.

But she said that Saturday's experience was probably just as enriching for her as it was for the girls.

"It would have been awesome to have something like this as a kid," Cody said. "I didn't grow up in an environment where it was OK to be an artist when you grew up."

As they sat surrounded by a group of girls, Hsiao and Cody said much of their writing still stems from their own experiences.

"I still find myself tapping into that emotion I had when I was a young girl," Hsiao said.

Cody chimed in: "Teenagers are all I write about. They're my muse."

Muse or not, Reben said hearing the women talk about their successful writing careers was inspiring.

"It shows me that, no matter who you are, you can write a film, write a television show," Reben said.

"It makes me think I can do it, too."

connie.llanos@dailynews.com
818-713-3634