

Written By

Ms. Write

It was a swanky writers affair atop the AFI mountain on a sunny March Saturday. Robin Swicord was there, as was Rita Hsiao (*Toy Story 2*, *Mulan*), Diablo Cody, and a coterie of press photographers. The crowd mingled on the patio while human sculptures gave everyone something to write about. The open bar was nonalcoholic,

but that could have been because it was only noon, and because the rest of the writers there were all teenage girls.

Welcome to WriteGirl's annual screenwriting workshop.

Keren Taylor, a songwriter and poet, started WriteGirl in late 2001. She had led songwriting workshops in New York and saw what happened when students become inspired to write creatively.

"Suddenly they care about writing, and

then their essays get better, their math gets better, their social studies," she says. "Everything else [in school] goes up because they suddenly figure out that writing is fun."

Inspired by the response, back in Los Angeles she gathered 20 women writers and put on a writing workshop for at-risk girls. That soon evolved into a mentoring program that now matches 75 girls ages 13 to 18 with mentors. Weekly meetings take place

Continued on page 15

Ms. Write, continued from page 12

in coffee shops or libraries throughout town. "We also do [weekly] programs at six schools with seriously, critically at-risk girls who are either pregnant, or teen moms, or on probation, or have other kinds of issues going on," Taylor says.

The mentoring program, once directed only at at-risk youth, is now open to all who are interested. "If you scratch beneath the surface of any teenage girl, chances are you'll find someone that is at risk in some way," Taylor explains. "She's got self-esteem issues, or she's overpressured at school and not doing anything creative and doesn't know how to express herself because she's just all about grades—those girls need this program as well."

Nine monthly workshops cover genres such as poetry, songwriting, fiction, and journalism. And screenwriting, of course. Of the 110 or so women involved in the program, Taylor estimates that 30 are WGA members.

A good assortment of them are volunteering at the AFI event, handing out nametags and setting up chairs. Swicord, Hsiao, and Cody sit on a panel and share writing tips. Swicord then leads the girls in a scene-writing exercise. At the end of the day, some of their scenes are performed

by a crew of actors and actresses.

During a break in the workshop, Guild member Reparata Mazzola sits with her mentee Melissa Castillo, whose interest is poetry.

"When I first got matched, I ran right up to Keren Taylor and I said, 'Oh my God, I have a poet, I'm a screenwriter, what do I do?'" Mazzola recalls. "And I learned a lot about poetry." Adds Castillo, "She has a different area of focus, so she can help me with other things. Like in a poem, she'll show me how to develop my characters more or give them a dialogue in my poetry. It adds a different edge."

Castillo, 17, has been in the mentor program for three years. Soon to graduate, she will be attending Mount St. Mary's College in the fall. (WriteGirls enjoy a remarkable 100 percent graduation and college admission rate.) She's going to take pre-law classes but also plans to write a novel sometime. She lauds WriteGirl, and all the women who volunteer there, for giving her confidence.

"I enjoy writing, but I never thought I was good at it," she says. "I always just considered it as just scribbling stuff down. Being in WriteGirl showed me that what I was doing was writing."

—Lisa Rosen