

HOW I MADE IT: KEREN TAYLOR

Pen power for teen girls

Megan Kimble, Los Angeles Times

The gig: Keren Taylor is the founder and executive director of WriteGirl, a nonprofit organization that pairs professional women writers in Los Angeles with at-risk teenage girls. Now in its 10th year, WriteGirl serves about 300 girls from 60 high schools throughout Los Angeles. WriteGirl was named California Nonprofit of the Year last year by then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Forging independent women: WriteGirl participants are 13 to 18 years old and come primarily from low-income neighborhoods. Many deal with physical and mental abuse, Taylor said. More than half are Latinas, some with parents who don't speak English. WriteGirl mentors help prepare these young women for college. Most important, she said, the program helps vulnerable kids believe in themselves. "The most powerful mentor you can have is your own self voice," she said.



Mightier than the sword: The ability to write well opens doors, Taylor said, which is why she focused her nonprofit on that craft. "To give young people confidence in that skill set is huge," she said. "And writing is not only an academic and professional skill, it's also a window into the way we understand ourselves as individuals and express who we are to the world."

Reading list: Taylor, 47, grew up in Vancouver, Canada, the youngest of four children. Writing was a big part of her life. She read hundreds of books a year — "Literally, I kept a list," she said. When she was in ninth grade, her English teacher recruited her to join an after-school project to read and assess a summer reading list. "What we found was that the books were all written by male authors and that they were predominately about male characters," Taylor said. "That was an important moment for me in realizing the importance of women's voices being heard by young people."

Boom, bust, boom: After studying international relations at the University of British Columbia, Taylor pursued musical theater in New York. "I wanted to be creative, but I realized musical theater was the most uncreative thing I could do. You're singing someone else's songs and dancing someone else's choreography," she said.

After two years of performing in Las Vegas, Taylor fell into online advertising sales during the dot-com boom. She was transferred to Los Angeles, then was laid off during the bust in 2001. "I was so relieved!" she said. "I got a severance package, so I had a few months to figure out what I really wanted to do."

Write stuff: Inspiration came quickly. In New York, Taylor had helped start a nonprofit literacy program for teenage girls — and loved it. So she whipped up a proposal to do something similar in Los Angeles and quickly landed a grant from the Bresee Community Center in Koreatown. "They opened their doors to me right away," Taylor said. "It's very hard for nonprofits or community groups to develop effective literacy programs for teens. You can get them to play sports or do music, but with poetry, songwriting, journalism, they say, 'I'm not a writer.' To have a fun way to lure teens into writing is what makes us unique."

Growing pains: Thirteen young women came to the first WriteGirl meeting. Today the organization has 150 female volunteers who mentor 300 teenagers. The nonprofit has published nine anthologies that have won 28 national and international book awards. Still, Taylor said, fundraising is a constant challenge. At the award ceremony with Schwarzenegger, Taylor joked to the governor's wife, Maria Shriver, that it would have been nice if the honor had come with a check. (It didn't.) "It's an odd moment: to be nonprofit of the year, to hit our 10-year mark and have our girls be thriving, yet still be struggling for money."

Mom knows best: Taylor attributes her own confidence to her mother, Anne Derewianko, a retired real estate agent who taught her four kids the value of education. It "was her soapbox," Taylor said. "Whenever I confront a challenge, I have a voice in my head that says: You can do this. That voice was put there by my mother," she said. "But I was lucky, that's for sure."