

# Los Angeles Times

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## Wonder what the WriteGirl thinks?

Inner-city teens share their words with the world in a mentor effort just hitting its stride with a fourth anthology.

By GILLIAN FLACCUS  
Associated Press

Lovely Umayam's hands punch the air for emphasis and her waist-length black hair sways rhythmically as she reads from her favorite poem like a practiced beat poet.

A small crowd gathers around the outdoor stage where she recites, and fans hoot and whistle when she finishes. Umayam flashes a broad smile and hops down, melting into a clutch of admirers who fuss over her poem about growing up American with Filipino parents.

At 17, she is one of the most powerful success stories for WriteGirl, a nonprofit organization that pairs professional women writers in the Los Angeles area with at-risk teenage girls. She is also the organization's informal ambassador and one of its fiercest advocates.

"When I came here in 1997, I didn't know any words. I was so scared that people would make fun of me because I had an accent," she says, speaking over the bustle of the West Hollywood Book Fair. "But then I realized it's just words and no matter what your voice sounds like, everyone can understand."



**GO-TO GIRL:** Keren Taylor founded WriteGirl five years ago out of her home.

### STYLE & CULTURE



Photographs by RIC FRANCIS Associated Press

**PARTNERSHIP:** Mentors Amaree Tanawong, left, and Allison Deegan, back, wait with protégées Rayline Rivera, 14, seated, and Lovely Umayam, 17, at the recent West Hollywood Book Fair.

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That philosophy — that every girl has something special to say — has been WriteGirl's mantra since founder Keren Taylor launched the program out of her home five years ago with seven teens and 13 friends.

Now, WriteGirl is preparing for the nationwide launch Saturday of its fourth critically acclaimed anthology, "Nothing Held Back." It has more than 50 volunteer mentors that include journalists, screenwriters, authors, songwriters and technical writers and will expand this month to work with about 30 girls at a home for pregnant and troubled teens in South L.A.

The group has sold several thousand of each of its first three books, which retailed for \$15 to \$20, on Amazon.com and at six independent bookstores in greater Los Angeles, Chicago and Texas.

## Demand exceeds supply

Taylor, a former singer-songwriter, was forced to cap student enrollment at 50 and says she hasn't actively recruited new girls in three years. All the teens in the program — many from the city's most troubled inner-city schools — have gone on to college. The group gets requests every day from teachers, camp directors and nonprofits to expand or start similar programs elsewhere, something WriteGirl hasn't been able to afford yet.

"I can just see how the girls have been transformed in front of our eyes. I can't stand the thought that there will be girls we won't be able to serve," said Taylor, who estimates an annual budget of \$350,000 in donations and grants.

"How do you say to a girl, 'I'm sorry, I'm not going to help you. I'm not going to change your life?'"

Umayam's life has changed so dramatically that she can barely recognize herself in the scared, shy girl who joined WriteGirl at age 14. A high school senior, her English is flawless. She's been published in all four of WriteGirl's anthologies — including "Pieces of Me," a finalist for the Independent Publisher Award — and she's appeared at dozens of book events to read her poems, essays and short fiction.

She plans to apply to Stanford University and the University of California soon, and perhaps some East Coast colleges

such as Yale University and Princeton University.

One of her favorite works chronicles tensions her transformation created in her family.

In the poem "How Do You Say Dichotomy in Tagalog?" Umayam rails against her father for teasing her about being too "Hollywood" and wonders why he can't understand that she's still his daughter despite her American jeans and English slang. Umayam says her father read the poem and finally stopped teasing her. That taught her a lesson about the power of the written word, she says.

"If I told my parents straight out, 'Don't call me Hollywood,' they'd be like, 'Yeah, whatever,'" she said. "But my words were so powerful . . . they actually felt it the way I do."

## Serious subject matter

Allison Deegan, WriteGirl associate director, said most of the girls chronicled their personal evolution and daily struggles in their work. In Los Angeles' inner city, those topics are as varied as love poems and probing pieces about racism, poverty and violence. Others focus on the mystery of family recipes or a grandmother's memories of the old country.

"I think the diversity of Los Angeles gives us a very rich sense of place. A lot of people are writing about cross-cultural places, memories of places where their family came from," said Deegan, an unpublished screenwriter and marketing consultant. "We try to work to the senses, to evoke real images."

Deegan and other mentors say working with the girls has been, in many cases, more rewarding than their professional writing careers.

Some have seen their own writing style change, influenced by the work of their protégées. Others are constantly caught off guard by the seriousness in the girls' writing — a seriousness they don't recall having as teens.

Amaree Tanawong, 25, recalls writing about an elderly couple she and her protégée, 17-year-old Melani Sutedja, spotted at a local mall. Tanawong, a technical writer, wrote that the couple was waiting for their grandchild. Sutedja wrote about how "they were almost dying, it was the last stage of their life," Tanawong recalled.

"She writes a lot more seriously than I do," Tanawong said. "I'll take a step back and look at the characters that I've developed and say, 'Melani would see this in a much different light. Should they be this way?'"

But for most volunteers, the biggest reward is rediscovering the joy of writing — a joy unhindered by deadlines, script rejections and commercial dilution.

"You remember what was so joyful about it, what the world of a story was like, what the world of characters were like and why it is so fun," Deegan said. "That's really what they've given us. It's a joy to share the thing you love the most with a group of kids who love it too."