

Write On, Girls! By Jerry Lee Davis, Staff Writer



We are unfortunately learning of more and more funding cuts for art and music programs in schools all across the country. In Los Angeles, the public schools are certainly victims of federal, state and local government shortfalls. Who must attend to this dilemma? The public sector and non-profit organizations must. [WriteGirl](#) and Keren Taylor are certainly doing their part to remedy this problem. WriteGirl is a nonprofit organization for high school girls centered on the craft of creative writing and empowerment through self-expression. Through one-

on-one mentoring and monthly workshops, girls are given techniques, insights and hot tips for great writing in all genres from professional women writers. The organization strives to help girls write their way to a more positive future.

Interview with Keren Taylor, Founder and Executive Director of www.WriteGirl.org (excerpts)

Jerry: How do you feel the WriteGirl organization helps teenage girls?

Keren: The organization helps in so many ways and is more powerful than I anticipated. To see these teenage girls express their feelings, opinions and perspectives and get out of their heads for a bit is amazing. To watch the development of their self confidence and to see them bond with other girls is so rewarding. And mostly, I feel that the development of their creative confidence transfers into whatever they will do in their lives. Being able to communicate and articulate their passion and to learn to speak up and object to things that you don't like are necessary skills for succeeding in anything.

Jerry: From where do most of the girls originate?

Keren: In L.A. they are primarily from "at-risk" or "underserved" areas, which are usually low income neighborhoods and areas with large schools and not enough resources. We have many girls who are from first generation immigrant families and English is the first language spoken in their homes. A few of the girls are from more affluent neighborhoods, and they find their way to us. Usually, they, too, are struggling with an inability to express themselves.

Jerry: Was there a certain moment when you knew that the writings of these girls had to be published?

Keren: At the very beginning. We gave them an outlet where they were not graded, and they began to flourish. I remember with this one girl that we had her think about an object at home. She came up with a coin from China, and this unleashed an entire story. We thought other people have to hear this story and the stories of the other girls. The first anthology was published six months after we started.

Jerry: Society has so many mixed messages for women. Be smart but not too smart. Be confident but not too confident. Be thin but not too thin. Be pretty but not too vain. Are most of the young girls in your program aware of these mixed messages?



Keren: Oh, they get way more mixed messages than you realize. In the neighborhoods where many of them live in Compton or Inglewood, there are many billboards with girls with their breasts hanging out surrounded by all these men. With some of our girls, there are cultural issues where a woman's voice is not valued and not allowed to be heard. Personally, I come from a Ukrainian family where women didn't raise their voices, so I understand and relate to how this leads to an inability to fully express yourself. To a certain degree, I think the girls are aware of the mixed messages. The WriteGirl program gives them the skills to see what's coming at them, so they can discern and hopefully understand what is really happening.

Jerry: You're working with a lot of these girls during the Surviving Ophelia years. Do you feel a personal responsibility to help them escape these years with their self-esteem in-tact?

Keren: Without a doubt I do. I couldn't have said it more accurately than you did. I want these girls to know that no matter what the media says, their family says or their culture says that they matter and that they have a voice. Most of the girls come to us with very low self-esteem. They are too afraid of speaking up about what they believe, and they haven't figured out how to articulate their thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Jerry: So, like you, I think Girl Power Rocks. Does the organization encourage the girls to become more politically and socially aware?

Keren: We really leave it up to the girls on how they use their confidence and creativity. We don't promote activism. What we want to do is to have them cultivate their confidence and to develop skills and set goals for themselves.

Jerry: *What have been the greatest achievements of the organization?*

Keren: 100% of the girls in the mentoring program have graduated high-school and gone on to graduate college. I am especially proud of that, since the high-school dropout rate is 55%. We've won 21 book awards, which speaks to the content and quality of the writing. We just won first place in the London Book Awards. I personally get excited when I hear that some of the girls from our earlier years are graduating and opting for a career in the public sector. Seeing them want to give back to the community is quite affirming.

Jerry: *You're always inspiring the mentors and the girls? What inspires you?*

Keren: Good question. I get a lot of inspiration from the girls themselves, seeing them grow in front of my eyes. The mentors inspire me, too. They bring so much joy and creativity to the organization and are so willing to selflessly give of themselves. Oh, and my chocolate lab inspires me, as do certain foods, smells, sights and sounds.

Jerry: *If you had all the power in the world to make any changes necessary to empower young girls more, what changes would you make?*

Keren: That's a huge question, and one I don't know how to answer. Change for me has to be incremental. I don't feel like change can shift everything at once. It has to happen in steps. That said, I'd love to expand this program across the country and internationally.