

# PAGES

## The Magazine For People Who Love Books

### Finding Their Voices

Untangling girls' lives through the written word

**T**he city of Los Angeles brims with almost four million people, a quarter of those teenagers. It's not difficult to imagine that many do not get what they need—especially when the drop-out rate among L.A. high school students hovers at 50 percent. What teenage girls, in particular, were getting very much occupied Keren Taylor's thoughts as she drove to her dot.com job in 2001 past a high school with 4,000-plus students. She wondered about the girls and decided that they must be lacking in attention they so deserved.

So when she was laid off from her job in the fall of that year, it only took two weeks to decide what she wanted to do. She would start WriteGirl, a not-for-profit mentoring program that joins professional writers with at-risk teen girls from inner-city high schools.

Within 30 days, Taylor found a location and 30 women—journalists, novelists, and poets, as well as TV and film writers, songwriters, marketing executives—to serve as mentors and volunteers and by the end of January of 2002, the group held its first workshop for 20 girls. Mentors meet weekly in one-on-one sessions and during monthly creative writing workshops. Five months later, they published their first anthology, *Threads*.

All this for no pay. "For two years, I worked round-the-clock as a volunteer, and I thank my darling husband for supporting me!" says Taylor, a poet, visual artist, and former musical performer. "Now it's my fulltime job and I have two other employees. Four and a half years later, and four anthologies later, we have seen hundreds of girls come through the program, with 100 percent of our senior girls not only graduating from high school, but also going on to college. It's amazing and wonderful."

Nearly all the girls are the first in their family to go to college. Allison Deegan, WriteGirl's associate director, works with each girl to guide them through the process. Many receive full scholarships.

"My mentee, Lovely, just began at Reed College on a full scholarship," says Deegan. "One alumni mentee, Jeanine, left this week to spend a semester in China—she is a sophomore at Pitzer College on a full scholarship. Another alumni, Glenda,

just returned for her second year at Dickinson College in

Pennsylvania, also on a full scholarship. A mentee from two seasons ago attends UC Santa Barbara on a scholarship and another is at Bard College in New York on a scholarship. The strength of their college admissions

success, and ultimately, we hope, their academic success, is the confidence they all have in expressing themselves in writing, and their ability to present themselves in a creative, interesting way during the application process (especially through their accomplished essays and their records as published authors)."

WriteGirl's anthologies receive critical acclaim. Of their latest anthology, *Untangled: Stories & Poetry from the Women and Girls of WriteGirl*, which will be published in December 2006, *The Atlantic* editor Benjamin Schwarz says, "The writing here, always moving and sometimes painful, displays freshness, an exuberant inventiveness, and—surprisingly—a hard-won wisdom."

WriteGirl's third anthology, *Pieces of Me* (2004), was a finalist for the 2005

Independent Publisher Award, anthology category. Not too shabby.

WriteGirl is funded by corporations, foundations, and individual donors and has more than 100 volunteers who help support WriteGirl with everything from event planning to PR and whatever else needs doing.

I'm not sure I would encourage anyone to start an organization without some significant startup funding, but I don't regret one minute of my adventure," says Taylor. "What gets me up every morning is knowing the impact that WriteGirl has on the lives of girls. It sounds lofty, but WriteGirl changes girls' lives—and those of women too. I love working with women, and this community of women writers is exciting, unusual, and sometimes provocative. There are a lot of personalities within the organization, and somehow we all work together very well, since we share the common goal of helping girls find their voices." More information at [www.writegirl.org](http://www.writegirl.org).—Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

