

Education: A Process Transcending Academia

Ben Pickering

While the media today bombards the American public with images and updates on the Iraq war and global warming, one of the most pervasive and pressing issues masked by society is that of public education. Public schooling remains a critical issue in communities around the country, with its shortcomings most manifest in metropolitan areas. In Gus Van Sant and Richard LaGravenese's respective films, *Finding Forrester* and *Freedom Writers*, such urban settings are depicted in which flawed education systems create unfavorable learning environments. Despite schooling's aim to nurture a student's progress, these two films illustrate societal hindrances to the progression of one's learning, conveying how education is a process encompassing more than just the academic realm. From these obstacles, however, certain educators are able to experience invaluable success through embracing not only their call to education, but also to mentorship.

While a lack of educational emphasis is evident among the respective Long Beach and Bronx communities portrayed in *Freedom Writers* and *Finding Forrester*, the films also convey prejudices in educational systems that exacerbate one's learning environment. As teacher Erin Gruwell begins her first day in the classroom in *Freedom Writers*, she meets with department chair Mrs. Campbell, who attempts to acclimate Gruwell to her new position. In doing so, Campbell suggests to Mrs. Gruwell that due to some of the students' troubled history and lengthy commute to and from school, she should not assign "too much of a homework load" (*Freedom Writers*). While the students' learning level may not be up to standard, in instructing Gruwell not to assign a lot of work to her students, Campbell is perpetuating both negative stereotypes and inadequacy in the school system.

Mrs. Gruwell encounters similar opposition with fellow teacher Brian Gelford. After she

proposes the idea of exposing her students to more advanced reading material to which they can personally relate in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Gelford responds, “How dare you compare them to Anne Frank?! They don't hide; they drive around out in the open with automatic weapons. I'm the one living in fear. I can't walk out my door at night” (*Freedom Writers*). As Gelford's comments are a blatant display of racism, his position as a teacher, as one who influences the course of adolescent maturation, only enhances the ruthlessness of his words. Throughout the film, Mrs. Gruwell's efforts in attempting to better her students' situation continues to be met with increasing animosity by Campbell and Gelford, who see the education system as hopelessly unchangeable and view her efforts as personal insults. Not only are Mr. Gelford and Mrs. Campbell apathetic in their potential to create a stable refuge amid Long Beach's dangerous and chaotic environment, they use their role as educators to impose their destructive ideas onto the student body. Accordingly, the prejudices that the two fall victim to serve only to perpetuate the very ills plaguing their community.

Similar to Gelford and Campbell, Professor Crawford in *Finding Forrester* exhibits an intolerance detrimental to the education environment. As Jamal Wallace earns admission to a prestigious Manhattan prep school due to his outstanding test scores, among his new teachers is English Professor Robert Crawford. Due to Jamal's exceptional talent on the basketball court, Professor Crawford, from their initial acquaintance, doubts Jamal's academic success and interest in his education. After Jamal hands in a paper that Professor Crawford deems to be “too good.” Crawford calls a conference with Jamal to discuss his work. In speaking to a fellow professor about his reservations concerning Jamal's writing, Crawford states, “Carl, [Jamal is] a basketball player ... from the Bronx” (*Finding Forrester*). Crawford's inability to recognize both Jamal's athletic and intellectual brilliance illustrates his strong discrimination against those of lesser

status and minority background.

Also embodying this elitist prejudice is John Hartwell, a teammate of Jamal on the prep school basketball team. As the two players compete for playing time, one practice gets heated and results in a scuffle between Jamal and John for which their coach punishes them by making the two shoot free-throws. After the two both make fifty consecutive shots, John coldly passes Jamal, stating, “You may think we're the same. We're not” (*Finding Forrester*). The parallel between the characters of Professor Crawford and John Hartwell is suggested when this comment is directly followed by a scene in which Jamal encounters Crawford. Furthermore, Hartwell's identity as an African-American is used to augment Jamal's victimization at his new school. When Professor Crawford discovers that the title of Jamal's entry piece to the school writing competition is identical to that of an article written by William Forrester decades ago, he uses the commonality as charge of plagiarism, validating his notion of Jamal's inferior capabilities. In their respective roles, Crawford and Hartwell, like Mr. Gelford and Mrs. Campbell, display harmful racist and elitist sentiment, revealing how one's educational experience is subject to external forces.

Overcoming these seemingly impenetrable barriers in the school system appears a daunting task. However, in their simultaneous roles as educator and companion, Erin Gruwell and William Forrester provide profound inspiration to their pupils. A crucial catalyst for the individual successes that Gruwell and Forrester foster is the exercise of writing. In Mrs. Gruwell's introduction to her new school on her first day of teaching, there is a scene of a student spraying graffiti on school property. This image is shortly followed by a display of Gruwell observing her classroom full of desks inscribed with students' writings (*Freedom Writers*). Here, writing is first referenced as a means of empowerment, as students use their marks to create

permanent forms of personal expression.

In *Finding Forrester*, Jamal is led back to Forrester's private flat when he discovers the diary he had left behind in his initial escapade to Forrester's residence had been read and commented on. As it is mentioned prior that Jamal began writing in his notebook after his father left, Forrester's markings do much more than critique a young man's writing, filling a void in Jamal's life and giving him a sense of self-validation. Under William's wing, Jamal is given the proper guidance to excel in his self-expression through writing. Likewise, in *Freedom Writers*, Mrs. Gruwell's purchase of personal diaries for each of her students provides a means for telling their personal stories to one another. In providing these notebooks, Gruwell expresses her compassion for each of her students, giving significance to what many, including themselves, viewed as their inevitably hopeless lives.

Through their guidance, Gruwell and Forrester provide the foundation for the academic blossoming of their students. More importantly, however, is the personal transcendence experienced by each of their pupils, who ultimately provide reciprocal influence on their teachers. Mrs. Gruwell's overwhelming empathy for her students enables them not only to learn, but also to yearn for knowledge, evidenced by her students' proactive efforts to raise money in order to bring Holocaust survivor, Miep Gies, to their school (*Freedom Writers*). Her students also come to accept and embrace the diversity of the classroom and, correspondingly, the outside world. This notion is best embodied by the relationship between students Eva and Cindy, who find friendship at the end of the film, overcoming a hostile ethnic group rivalry (*Freedom Writers*).

In Mrs. Gruwell's immediate introduction into the school, Mrs. Campbell remarks to her, "Those are lovely pearls ... I wouldn't wear them to class" (*Freedom Writers*). Despite this

forewarning, Gruwell continues to wear the pearl necklace, until at the end of the film she is seen without it. Mrs. Gruwell's ceasing to wear these pearls is thus symbolic of the individual inspiration she successfully imparts unto her students. Similarly, as Mrs. Gruwell mentions that the pearls were a gift from her dad, bringing an end to their display indicates her liberation from her father, who is just as dynamic a character as any of Gruwell's students, initially exemplifying intolerance and later coming to express his profound admiration to his daughter for her work (*Freedom Writers*). In immeasurably affecting her students' lives, Gruwell is able to receive, too, her own self-validation and comfort.

In *Finding Forrester*, the talents of Jamal Wallace, like those of Gruwell's students, are exceptional, but, at first, unrecognized. As Jamal and his friends are mystified by the figure that constantly observes their every move on the basketball court from his apartment, Jamal volunteers to sneak into the man's enigmatic quarters. His subsequent climbing of the fire escape to reach Forrester's apartment window becomes representative of Jamal's personal maturation and transcendence of stereotype. In Jamal's regular meetings with William, Forrester's presence is certainly useful in inspiring Jamal's creative genius as a writer. Moreover, Forrester's apartment becomes a place of refuge for Jamal in his exposure to a completely foreign world in his new private school. In time, Jamal learns Forrester's isolation derives from his sudden loss of family over only a year's time. Through his persistence and friendship, Jamal is able to rouse great fortitude in Forrester, while reinventing his disposition.

Most telling of Jamal's effect on William is the role of Forrester's letter opener in the film. Upon his first venture into Forrester's home, Jamal obtains Forrester's letter opener, which shortly thereafter is taken back by William when Jamal leaves his backpack in fleeing the residence. However, at the end of the film, Jamal is shown solemnly finding his way to the

basketball court he knows so well and proceeds to open William's parting letter with his very letter opener (*Finding Forrester*). From the beginning of their relationship, Jamal persistently aims to know more about the man who had watched him play basketball, attempting to pry open William's personal story; yet, he is initially reluctant to embrace the young man. Through Jamal's inspiration and friendship, Forrester is able to realize his potential and find peace before his death, signifying the letter opener to be an invaluable means of exposing William's soul to Jamal.

Teaching, even to educators themselves, can often seem like an impossible undertaking. Negative societal attitudes and prejudices are often perpetuated by school systems, providing for adverse learning environments. However, through openness and perseverance, teachers have the power to become mentors, imparting both knowledge and wisdom on their pupils while receiving a new understanding of their own. Thus, the goal of education is fully realized not only in preparing students for projects and examinations, but also in acclimating them to the outside world.

Works Cited

Finding Forrester. Dir. Gus Van Santo Perf. Sean Connery, Rob Brown, F. Murray Abraham, Anna Paquin, et al. Columbia Pictures, 2000.

Freedom Writers. Dir. Richard LaGravenese. Perf. Hilary Swank, Patrick Dempsey, Scott Glenn, Imelda Staunton, et al. Paramount Pictures, 2007.