

my life was kickin' it with my friends.

My ninth grade English teacher, Ms. Gruwell, changed all that. She took an interest in me, asking where I'd been if I missed class and telling me I could be the first one in my family to finish high school.

I thought she was crazy. I thought she didn't know who she was talking to. I wasn't used to people being so nice to me. When you're in a gang, you think that nobody cares about you.

I told Ms. Gruwell to stay out of my business. But she kept at it. In grade ten, her words started to sink in. I began to see that there were other things out there besides gang life – that I could have a future, that I could graduate. I started thinking about getting out of the gang.

For Ms. Gruwell's class, I had to read Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, the story of a teenage girl hiding from the Nazis during World War Two. Anne's words had a big impact on me. I came across the line: "I feel like a bird in a cage and I wish I had the wings to fly away." I couldn't believe it. She expressed exactly how I felt – I wanted to get out of the gang, but they don't let people out. They kill people who want out.

That book really changed my point of view. Before I read Anne Frank, I was prejudiced against anybody I didn't know. I thought if you didn't look like me, you didn't understand me. But here was Anne, who was so different from me – she was Jewish and she lived 50 years before me – yet we felt the same.

I remained a "bird in a cage" until the day of the trial in 1994.

When I was called to the stand, I said, "Paco did it." I said it for myself, to get out of my cage. I said it for my mother, and for Ms. Gruwell. I said it to end the horrible cycle of violence in my life.

Paco looked at me in shock. As they took him away to serve his 25- year sentence, he said, 'Of all the people in the gang, you're the last person I thought would betray me.'

#6 I feel guilty to this day. I feel guilty that Paco is in a jail cell because of what I said, even though I know telling the truth was the right thing to do.

After I testified, I left the gang. I got death threats. But no one came after me. I think they didn't kill me for what I did and for leaving because I have family in the gang.

Name: _____

#7 My mother doesn't cry for me or my dad anymore – my dad got out, too. My mom's very religious, and she thanks God for Ms. Gruwell everyday.

Today, I am a freshman at a college in California. I plan to major in English and then get my Ph.D. in education. I want to be the Secretary of Education and change the way kids get labelled in school as a "dropout" or a "slow learner."

If gang members could see that they have different choices and that it's never too late to change, maybe they'd get out too. I'm not a miracle. Anybody can get out.

#8