Toastmasters International Announces Founder of Freedom Writers Foundation as its 2017 Golden Gavel Recipient

Erin Gruwell to accept organization's most prestigious award

RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA, Calif., May 17, 2017 /PRNewswire/ -- Toastmasters International announced today that world-renowned speaker and educator Erin Gruwell is the recipient of the organization's 2017 Golden Gavel award. The award, presented annually to an individual who exemplifies excellence in the fields of communication and leadership, will be presented to Gruwell during the Toastmasters International Convention, Aug. 23-26, 2017, in Vancouver, Canada.

Gruwell was a high school English teacher in Long Beach, Calif., in the 1990s. At that time, gang violence and racial conflict was rampant and took the students' focus away from learning. Gruwell developed a unique approach to reach her students: She introduced literature written by others who faced similar life challenges.

Her students found they could relate and soon after, Gruwell began to encourage them to write about their own life circumstances. Students recorded their thoughts and feelings in raw and graphic detail on topics such as gangs, the killing of family members and friends, growing up in broken homes, drug use, finding love and other teenage concerns. They called themselves the Freedom Writers after the 1960s American civil rights activists the Freedom Riders.

The powerful essays inspired the best-selling book, *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*. The book was followed by the critically acclaimed movie, *Freedom Writers*, starring actress Hilary Swank as Gruwell.

"The difference Gruwell has made in her students' lives epitomizes the importance and impact of instilling confidence in others," says Toastmasters International President Mike Storkey. "We are thrilled to announce her as this year's Golden Gavel recipient and look forward to her inspiring presentation at the Toastmasters International Convention in Vancouver."

After the *Freedom Writers* movie, Gruwell went on to form a Toastmasters club and create the Freedom Writers Foundation through which she instructs educators on her teaching methods. She's also a motivational speaker who travels the globe sharing her powerful message to vulnerable and at-risk youth.

"Toastmasters was a game-changer for me personally and professionally, and contributed to the growth of the Freedom Writers," says Gruwell. "Being selected as the 2017 Golden Gavel award recipient is an incredible honor and I accept the award on behalf of all of the teachers out there who, every day, go into a classroom and give of themselves so their students can learn to use wings to fly."

Gruwell will accept the award and address attendees during a presentation onFriday, Aug. 25, at the Vancouver Convention Centre. Gruwell joins an illustrious list of Golden Gavel honorees, including Walter Cronkite, Stephen Covey, Anthony Robbins, Muhammad Yunus and Zig Ziglar.

To learn more about the 2017 International Convention, Aug. 23-26, and obtain a complete schedule of events, including the Opening Ceremonies, Education Sessions and the World Championship of Public Speaking, visit http://www.toastmasters.org/Convention. The public is invited to attend.

About Toastmasters International
Toastmasters International is a worldwide nonprofit educational organization that empowers individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders. Headquartered in Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif., the organization's membership exceeds 345,000 in more than 15,900 clubs in 142 countries. Since 1924, Toastmasters International has helped people from diverse backgrounds become more confident speakers, communicators and leaders. For information about local Toastmasters clubs, please visit www.toastmasters.org. Follow @Toastmasters on Twitter.

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