

# The Little Rock Nine, School Integration

Imagine that it's the night before your first day of High School. You're filled with excitement, fear and tension. You wonder what the school will be like. Will the classes be hard? Will the students like you? Will the teachers be friendly? You want to fit in. Your stomach is full of butterflies as you try to sleep and wonder what tomorrow will be like.

Now imagine that you are a black student in 1957 preparing to go to Little Rock Central High School to attempt what seemed impossible -- the integration of public schools. These students were aware of what the public thought of their entering into a "white" high school. They didn't worry about fitting in. Most whites, including the governor at the time, Orval Faubus, stood against them. Most troubling to the students was the fact that many blacks thought that the integration of Central would cause more trouble for their race than good.



The night before the nine students known as the "Little Rock Nine" were to enter into high school was not a peaceful night of sleep. It was a night filled with hate. Governor Faubus declared that integration was an impossibility in a televised statement and instructed the Arkansas National Guard to surround Central High and keep all blacks out of the school. They did keep them out for that first day of class.

Daisy Bates instructed the students to wait for her on Wednesday, the second day of school, and planned for all nine students and herself to enter the school together. Unfortunately, Elizabeth Eckford, one of the nine, did not have a phone. She never received the message and attempted to enter the school alone through the front entrance. An angry mob met her, threatening to lynch her, as the Arkansas National Guard looked on. Fortunately, two whites stepped forward to aid her and she escaped without injury. The other eight were also denied admittance by the National Guard who were under orders from Governor Faubus.

Soon after this, On September 20, Judge Ronald N. Davies granted NAACP lawyers Thurgood Marshall and Wiley Branton an injunction that prevented Governor Faubus from using the National Guard to deny the nine black students admittance to Central High. Faubus announced that he would comply with the court order but suggested that the nine stay away for their own safety. President Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock to protect the nine students. Each student had their own guard. The students did enter Central High and were protected somewhat, but they were the subject of persecution. Students spat at them, beat them, and yelled insults. White mothers pulled their children out of school, and even blacks told the nine to give up. Why did they stay under such hostile situations? Ernest Green says "We kids did it mainly because we didn't know any better, but our parents were willing to put their careers, and their homes on the line."

One of the girls, Minniejean Brown, was suspended for dumping a bowl of chili on the head of one her persecutors and didn't finish out the school year. The other 8 did finish out the year. Ernest Green graduated that year. He was the first black to ever graduate from Central High.

That was not the end of hostility surrounding the nine. Faubus was set on preventing his schools from integration. The Little Rock School Board was granted an injunction delaying integration until 1961. However, the ruling was overturned by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and integration was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1958. Faubus ignored the ruling and used his power to shut down Little Rock's public schools. During the shutdown, white students attended private schools in the area but black students had no choice but to wait.

Three of the Little Rock Nine students moved away. The remaining five took correspondence courses from the University of Arkansas. When Faubus' actions were declared unconstitutional and the schools reopened in 1959, only two black students were assigned to Central--Jefferson Thompson and Carlotta Walls. They graduated in 1959.

These 9 students, although they didn't realize it then, made huge waves in the civil rights movement. Not only did they show that blacks **COULD** fight for their rights and **WIN**, they also brought the idea of segregation to the forefront of people's minds. They showed the nation what extreme and horrible measures some whites would take to protect segregation. No doubt, the events at Central High inspired many lunch counter sit ins and freedom rides and inspired blacks to take up the cause of Civil Rights. If these nine children could take on the huge task, they could too.

We should honor these nine student's courage and conviction because it is they, and people like them, who have shaped the way we live today. It is people who, living now, share their same ideals and courage that will shape the way we live in the future. Yes, we have come a long way from Central High in 1957 but we still have a long way to go.