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Research Seminar

Dr. Hicks

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The Nine Who Changed Central

Introduction

The Little Rock Central Crisis of 1957 was one that will be remembered forever. The crisis occurred when Little Rock Central High School integrated and became the first school in the south to do so. This event came with much controversy and did not go over well with the white community. Governor Orval Faubus was the leader of the state of Arkansas and did everything he could to try and prevent the integration of Central High. Central High School voluntarily wanted to integrate their school. There were nine students who would enter Central High School on September 23rd. Originally there was eleven, but when the time came close, two withdrew because their parents were worried about what would happen to them at Central with the white kids. What was it like to go to school at Little Rock Central for the nine and the whites? What were the teachers lives like and how did they react to these African American students in their class? What was Governor Faubus role and view of the situation while it was happening? These are all questions that will be answered throughout.

Governor Orval Faubus

To start, looking at Governor Orval Faubus and his political views would be the right place. Orval Faubus started his political career by successfully serving as highway department

commissioner, administrative and highway director¹. This was the start to Faubus' meager political career that would soon be six terms as governor. In 1954 Faubus would run for governor with little experience. Though he did not have much experience, Faubus gained many political supporters while serving as the highway director. This would prove to be a huge help because his opponent, Francis Cherry, was a poor politician who lost him many supporters during his first term.² Faubus and Cherry would both try to grab early interest for the voters, but Faubus would use one that would not be expected. Faubus would make use of the race issue, which in 1954 was coming to a head.³ Desegregation would be the number one issue that would be discussed during this campaign. Faubus took the smart route playing to both the whites and the African Americans saying, "The truth is that Arkansas is not ready for complete and sudden mixing of the races in the public schools".⁴ This was left up to the person to interpret. If you were white you saw that there would be no immediate integration of the schools in Arkansas. If you were African American, this was a sign of hope because one day African Americans would have the same opportunity as the whites. This statement would provide Faubus to six terms in office as governor.

Governor Faubus would get reelected to a second term because he had to gain the trust of the people of Eastern Arkansas that there would be no force of integration. During his time as governor before 1957, Faubus would avoid taking an extreme stand on desegregation, because he did not want to make people of eastern Arkansas mad and did not want to upset the African Americans who had voted for him. During 1957 the Little Rock Central School District voted

¹David Wallace, "Orval Faubus: The Central Figure at Little Rock Central High School" (The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 39, No. 4, Winter 1980) p. 315-316.

² David Wallace, "Orval Faubus: The Central Figure at Little Rock Central High School". p. 316

³ David Wallace, "Orval Faubus: The Central Figure at Little Rock Central High School". p. 316

⁴ David Wallace, "Orval Faubus: The Central Figure at Little Rock Central High School". p. 316

that it would integrate the school. Faubus played a neutral role at the beginning not wanting to interfere in any way since it was voluntary.⁵ Robert Brown would write a letter to Faubus urging him to interfere and make sure that Central High did not desegregate. Faubus would tell him that he would not interfere or illegally intervene because this was something that would be done voluntarily and was not forced. Soon after the letter from Brown, two Georgia politicians came to Arkansas and gave a speech about the desegregation of the schools and would put Faubus in a tough position with the upcoming campaign. All Faubus wanted was to be reelected for the third consecutive term and he was willing to do whatever it needed to be done. As the first day of school neared Faubus would go against his word and intervene in the situation. He would first go to the school board and try to get them to delay the opening of the school but they would not. Faubus next plan was to get the Mothers League of Central High School to file a suit that would delay the start of the school. The suit went to court where Faubus thought that he would win with Judge Miller who was against the desegregation of school.⁶ This strategy would backfire on Faubus when Judge Miller requested that the case be transferred to the Eastern District of Little Rock. Judge Miller was from North Dakota and he would rule in favor of the integration and did not postpone the start of school. The first day of school was one that would be remembered by these nine students for the rest of their lives.

September 3, 1957

⁵ David Wallace, "Orval Faubus: The Central Figure at Little Rock Central High School". p. 322

⁶ David Wallace, "Orval Faubus: The Central Figure at Little Rock Central High School". p. 325-326

The first day of school was the momentous for these nine students. They would be entering a new school but also be in a school full of whites. They were be the first in the state of Arkansas to integrate a school. The nine students would dress very well and wanted to impress their new classmates and teachers that they would be with. They were excited to be able to further their education at the best school in the state. They were expecting to be able to walk in and get the school year started but to their surprise they were not even allowed to walk in the door on the first day. When the students arrived there were crowds awaiting them. They would not let them pass to get to get to the door. The crowds of people are still debated because people do not know if they are from the area or people from out of town there to protest their thoughts.⁷ The Nine students would meet at Daisy Bates' house, the main activist of the NAACP, for the integration of Central High School. As they got to the school, they made a dash for the sixteenth street entrance but the mob had already seen them. These angry white people would yell things at them trying to provoke them and get under their skin. During this same time Two African American people were pulled from their car and beaten in the middle of the street.⁸ The crowd was acting horrifically towards these nine because most were parents who thought that their children were in danger. Governor Faubus said that if the school was integrated the white female students would be in danger to sexual assault by the African American males. He was afraid of the violence that would happen by integrating Central High School. He was right but not on the fact that the African Americans would attack but the violence was whites attacking whites because of the rage. This made no difference to the segregationists. All they saw was that there

⁷ Graeme Cope, "Everybody Says All Those People... Were From out of Town... but They Weren't: A Note on Crowds during the Little Rock Crisis" (The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 67, No. 3 Autumn 2008) p. 248

⁸ Daisy Bates, "A Long Shadow of Little Rock", Fayetteville, The University of Arkansas Press 1986) p. 88-93.

was violence as a result of the African Americans was coming into the school.⁹ Before the first day of school, Governor Faubus called the Arkansas National Guard to be at Central High on the first day of school.¹⁰ Faubus said that he did this to not support the desegregation and also not support the segregationists that wanted this to stop. He says that he used this to try to keep the peace.

National Guard and the Mob

The Arkansas National Guard was there to keep the peace during the first couple of weeks of school. Mobs would meet every day yelling at the nine students and trying to make sure that they would not enter the school. When the nine African American finally did enter the school the school officials would lock the doors behind them. This angered the parents whose kids were in the school. They did not want their kids in the same school as the African Americans. Some students would jump out of windows just to not be in the same school as these nine students.¹¹ Some of the parents withdrew their kids from Central High School just to make sure that their kids were not in the same place and the African Americans.¹² Many parents thought that the African Americans would cause problems at the school or would jeopardize the safety of their children. Some children though believe that if the parents would have stayed out of it that it would have resolved itself.¹³ Some of the students said that they would have minded their own business because they wanted their education and that mattered more than who was in

⁹ Phoebe Godfrey, "Bayonets, Brainwashing, and Bathrooms: The Discourse of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the desegregation of Little Rock Central High", (The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 1, Spring 2003) P. 47

¹⁰ David Wallace, "Orval Faubus: The Central Figure at Little Rock Central High School". p.329

¹¹ Phoebe Godfrey, "Bayonets, Brainwashing, and Bathrooms: The Discourse of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the desegregation of Little Rock Central High". P. 47

¹² Graeme Cope, "Marginal Youngsters and Hoodlums of Both Sexes? Students Segregationist during the Little Rock School Crisis". P. 387-388

¹³ Graeme Cope, "Marginal Youngsters and Hoodlums of Both Sexes? Students Segregationist during the Little Rock School Crisis". P. 387-388

the school with them. Melba Pattillo Beals was one of the nine students who would enter Little Rock Central. In her memoir “Warriors Don’t Cry” she recalls the things that happened to her throughout the school year. She would describe teachers who were rude to her but she never gave the name of the teachers.¹⁴ Every day that she would go to school she would have to hear someone call her the “N” word and try to get under her skin. Though these white students tried to get under their skin, the nine African American Students were warned, by the school board, at the beginning of the year not to do or say anything in retaliation to the white students no matter what happened. This was very trying for the nine students. Earnest Green would be one of the hardest. He was the senior of the group and, if he succeeded, would become the first African American Student to graduate from Central High School. White students did everything that they could to try and provoke Green.

101st Airborne

After a few weeks of letters being sent to the president and he had seen enough of Governor Faubus abuse the use of the Arkansas National Guard. President Eisenhower’s plan was to send the 101st Airborne Division and he would federalize the Arkansas National Guard and order them to move out of Central high School. These were the best the military had to offer that were sent to Little Rock Central to make sure everything went as it was supposed to. Each of the nine had an escort from the 101st Airborne everywhere they went inside the school. These escorts were armed and made sure that nothing was to happen to them while they were at school. This would happen but if one of the nine went to the bathroom or the guard was distracted something could happen to one of the nine. These nine students would get to know their escort and sometimes the guard would become attached. This was until the school was ruled safe and

¹⁴ Melba Pattillo Beals, “Warriors Don’t Cry”, (New York, Washington Square Press, 1994)

the guard was sent back to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. After this the police would take over the duties of the guard.¹⁵

Teachers of Central

Teachers of Little Rock Central were not allowed to speak their opinions on the integration of the school.¹⁶ Teachers could not trust each other during this school year. If the teachers were to talk about the situation, they had to think that the other would tell the superintendent and get them fired. Though, the only way for this to happen is if they supported integration or did not mind the African American Students in their class.¹⁷ Many of the teachers did not try to humiliate or treat the nine African American students different than the white ones. They treated these nine students as if they were “learners and not leapers.”¹⁸ This was good for the African Americans. These nine students came to Central High to further their education. They wanted the best opportunity that they could get and Central was the best. Graduating from Central would help them get into a better college and help them later on in life. The nine students had some teachers who were good to them and they had no problem telling who these teachers were.

This was interesting to me because the ones that were rude and treated the nine different would only be described. They would either describe their physical appearance, they would say the subject that they taught or as Melba Pattillo did refer to them as “the teacher”. This is how

¹⁵ Melba Pattillo Beals, “Warriors Don’t Cry”, Graeme Cope, “Marginal Youngsters and Hoodlums of Both Sexes? Students Segregationist during the Little Rock School Crisis. P. 387-388, Daisy Bates, “A Long Shadow of Little Rock”, Carlotta Walls LaNier, “A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School”

¹⁶ Graeme Cope, “Dedicated People: Little Rock Central High School’s Teachers during the Integration Crisis of 1957-1958”. p. 17

¹⁷ Graeme Cope, “Dedicated People: Little Rock Central High School’s Teachers during the Integration Crisis of 1957-1958”. p. 21

¹⁸ Graeme Cope, “Dedicated People: Little Rock Central High School’s Teachers during the Integration Crisis of 1957-1958”. p. 16-17

that teacher would be referred to whenever they would be brought up.¹⁹ Ira Lipman was a senior who worked evenings at the Arkansas Gazette and was acquainted with Earnest Green, the senior that was one of the nine. He said that if he said anything about staff attitudes and behavior, it did not enter the public arena.²⁰

Daisy Bates and the Nine

Daisy Bates was the leading activist for the NAACP and the Central integration. When we think about the 1957 integration the first person that we think of is Daisy Bates. Every day before and after school the nine students would come to Bates' house and talk. They would discuss what happened during their day and the fears that they had while at school. Bates and her husband came under much criticism and would be treated just as badly as the nine students.²¹ In her Memoir "The Long Shadow of Little Rock" she writes about her experiences and about the nine students. She tells about their physical appearances as well as what happened to them while they were at school. She would include specific things that happened to them.²² Students acted out on the nine just because their parents had that view. They did not for a second think about what this could be doing to those nine African Americans. People of the 1950's were much different than of today. Whites and blacks were not seen as equals. They could not even drink out of the same water fountain.

Minnijean Brown

¹⁹ Melba Pattillo Beals, "Warriors Don't Cry", and Graeme Cope, "Dedicated People: Little Rock Central High School's Teachers during the Integration Crisis of 1957-1958", p. 18

²⁰ Graeme Cope, "Dedicated People: Little Rock Central High School's Teachers during the Integration Crisis of 1957-1958", p. 18

²¹ Daisy Bates, "A Long Shadow of Little Rock".

²² Daisy Bates, "A Long Shadow of Little Rock". Chapter 11

A specific time that one of the white kids acted out on one of the nine was Minnijean Brown. She would tell Daisy Bates that a boy kicked her and threatened to kick all her teeth out if she looked at him like that again. Minnijean was the one of the nine that had anger problems. All of the nine went through similar trials as Minnijean but in December she had had enough. She would warn the students in the cafeteria that if they kept doing what they were doing, they would find something on their heads. They did it one more time and she “spilt” her food over a row of white kids. Minnijean would be suspended six days for this and was the first of the nine to strike back.²³ Later on in the school year Minnijean would let them get to her again and call a girl “white trash” and this would be the final straw. Minnijean would be expelled and this made the segregationist very happy. They would write on a card “One down and eight to go.”²⁴ Minnijean did what almost every kid of today would have done. She had finally had enough and had to say and do something to try and get these kids off her back. Personally, I would have done the same thing. There is only so much a person can take before they explode, though the times are very different today than when she was in school.

Melba Pattillo Beals

Melba Pattillo Beals was a fifteen year old student whose mother was a teacher. Her mother taught her ambition and to go after the things that she wanted. When the time came for the students to sign up to go to Central Melba did not hesitate. She saw this as an opportunity to better her education. She did not expect the integration to be as hard as it was though. She suffered the same amount of abuse as the other nine but never retaliated. She kept to herself and always tried to do the right thing. She said that herself along with the other eight students “paid

²³ Daisy Bates, “A Long Shadow of Little Rock”. p. 117

²⁴ Daisy Bates, “A Long Shadow of Little Rock”. p.120

for the integration with their innocence.”²⁵ She recalled her first day of school as one that she would never forget. Melba tells many stories about how she would be kicked in the back of the leg many of times but had to bite her tongue. She finally lost her temper and yelled at one girl and this would temporarily get the girl to stop messing with her. This did not last long.²⁶ Melba graduated from High School and would go on to write two books about her encounters at Central High. She was one of few who did not do anything to get back at the white people who picked on her. She persevered through the hardships of Central and would make something of herself in life. This is the type of person that you have to respect.

Carlotta Walls LaNier

Carlotta Walls was a fourteen year old tenth grader when she entered Central High School. She was a scared girl when she entered the school and often refers to the first day as “D” day. She saw this as a type of war that she was fighting throughout the school year. Before school started she encountered something that would halfway prepare Carlotta for school at Central. Her first day she said was one of the scariest days of her life. She did not know what was going to happen to her and the people were not letting her in the school. When she did finally get in the school, she could hear the white kids whisper and this made her very nervous. She was with her grandmother, whom she said never got angry, when they ran into one of her grandmother’s white friends. This lady disagreed with the integration and told Carlotta and her grandmother about it. She said that if they would just wait that it would eventually happen but it did not need to happen now. Carlotta recalled seeing her grandmother getting mad for one of the first times that she remembered. Her grandmother told the lady to mind her business and leave it

²⁵ Melba Pattillo Beals, “Warriors Don’t Cry”. Page 2

²⁶ Melba Pattillo Beals, “Warriors Don’t Cry”.

alone. This made Carlotta stronger because she knew that her family was behind her in her decision in going to Little Rock Central.²⁷ Every day she would go through the same things that the other students went through. She went on to say in her memoir that her dad indirectly prepared her for these moments. Her dad had her help him with the outside choirs so that she would learn hard work and perseverance.²⁸ There is one particular moment when a girl was kicking Carlotta in the back the leg and calling her name when she finally snapped. She turned around kicked the girl and called her names. This would put an end to this girl messing with Carlotta and every time Carlotta saw this girl in the hallway, she smiled real big and waved.²⁹ This was the only time during the school year that Carlotta had fought back against someone harassing her. She kept to herself and tried to do the right thing. The girl finally pushed her to her limits and who can blame Carlotta for finally saying something to the girl. I personally like how she always smiled at the girl every time she saw her after that. That showed me that she was not scared anymore.

Earnest Green

Earnest Green was the only senior of the nine. He was the one that all of the whites wanted out first. They did not want Green to graduate and become the first African American to graduate from Little Rock Central. With this, Earnest knew that he could not do anything that would give the principal or the schoolboard a reason to expel him He would take constant abuse from students and could never do anything about it. He was looked up to by the other eight who endured the same amount of abuse as Earnest. Earnest was a natural leader. After the death of his

²⁷ Carlotta Walls LaNier. "A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School"

²⁸ ", Carlotta Walls LaNier, "A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School". Page 45-52

²⁹ ", Carlotta Walls LaNier, "A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School". Page 109

father, he would lead his household and this showed when talking with the other eight students. He showed them strength and if the talks were bad enough with Bates, he would change the subject so that everyone's minds would get off that subject.³⁰ Earnest Green became the First African American to graduate from Little Rock Central High School. At his graduation was one of the biggest leaders in the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His uncle wrote a letter to Martin Luther King because he thought that this was such a big event that the most important figure of the civil rights should witness this historic moment at Central High School. Earnest Green was a natural leader. He showed the other eight students the way to stay strong and helped them in any way that he could. He wanted to stand up for them but knew that he could not. I admire Earnest for this. It takes a lot of strength to turn away from your enemy and walk away but time and time again Earnest proved that he could do that.

The Lost Year and Its Effects

After the 1957-1958 school year is the "Lost Year." This is when school was suspended for a whole year because of the integration during the 1957-1958 school years.³¹ This was drastic because some of these students would not graduate or had to spend their senior year at a different school. The closing of all the Little Rock Schools was ordered by Governor Faubus. He wanted to try to desegregate the schools again and keep what he called peace.³² The "lost year" did more than just shut down the schools for the city of Little Rock. The closing of the schools would tamper with businesses and cause the economy of Little Rock to go down. Businesses were not doing as well because people were moving so their kids could get an education. People, whites

³⁰ Daisy Bates, "A Long Shadow of Little Rock". Page 145-147

³¹ Daisy Bates, "A Long Shadow of Little Rock", Melba Pattillo Beals, "Warriors Don't Cry", Carlotta Walls LaNier, "A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School".

³² ", Carlotta Walls LaNier, "A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School" Page 140-146.

and African Americans, wanted their children to be educated for their futures.³³ Teacher during this year lost their jobs and had to try and find work elsewhere. This caused more people to move leaving the city. The closing of all the schools would last the entire school year but Governor Faubus did not get his way with desegregating the school again. When Central opened back up in 1959 the school allowed African Americans in once again. In 1960 all the schools in Little Rock were integrated from elementary through high school. There was nothing that Faubus could do to stop this.

The Nine Today

All of the nine students would go on to graduate and some even from Little Rock Central. Central High would be integrated in the 1960-1961 school year and would remain open and integrated. Each of the nine African American students did something with their lives. Earnest Green got his PhD, Melba Pattillo Beals wrote two books during and after her time at Central, Carlotta Walls LaNier would write a book about her experience at Central, Jefferson Thomas directed a movie that portrayed the school year of the nine. These are just some of the things that the nine would go on to do with their lives and make it a successful one.

Conclusion

These nine students went through more in one school year than most of us will in our entire lives. They would have to go through mobs, kicked, food spilled on, and being called names and could never say anything back. The nine would be accused of sexual violence before the school year ever started. People feared that these nine would put their children in danger but they proved that they were the ones that caused all of the damage. The nine did nothing to hurt

³³ Gordy, Sondra. "Empty Classrooms, Empty Hearts: Little Rock Secondary Teachers, 1958-1959" (The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 56, No. 4, Winter 1997). Page 427-442.

the school and only wanted to learn. They chose to go to Central to better their education.

Central was known at the time as the best school in America. These nine African Americans wanted to be a part of that. To be a part of that they went through things that we today can only think about. People spitting in their faces, tripping them, constant name calling, always on the lookout for someone who could hurt them, every day being threatened. They did not deserve this. They were people just like you and I. They should have been treated as equals and not as people who are beneath the kids at the school. Are the nine Hero? This is up for debate. Some may look at them as heroes and some may not. I see them as brave teenagers who went against what people thought to make their lives better. They made a difference in America and the World. They changed the school system forever. After this more schools would integrate and equality of blacks and whites would slowly start to happen. This was a giant stepping stone in changing the way man thinks. A walk in their shoes is one that we could never imagine and never want to experience.

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