

Women as Girls and School Integration IV: On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v Board of Education Topeka, Kansas*, decision, declared separate but equal education in public schools unconstitutional. Following the *Brown* ruling, in a deeply entrenched 335-year culture of whites dominating blacks since 1619, it would be *children* who would walk into the uncharted territory of staunchly segregated, whites only, public school classrooms to initiate desegregation. Enforcement of *Brown* proved to be difficult.

In compliance with the *Brown* ruling, the Arkansas school board agreed to implement desegregation in their 1957 school year. Little Rock Central High School was designated to be the first to integrate. The school district, however, was gerrymandered to force the majority of black students to attend a different school than whites. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People decided to proceed.

Nine students with excellent grades and attendance records were selected to register at Little Rock Central by newspaper publisher and civil rights activist Daisy Bates, then president of the Arkansas NAACP. Bates would meet regularly with the nine students to advise, support, and prepare them to judiciously react to any resistance.



During the 1940s, Bates' black newspaper the *Arkansas State Press* in Little Rock addressed issues as slums, police brutality, legal injustices, hiring discrimination and, most notably, school desegregation. She often accompanied black children to various white schools to register, and publicly documented their refusal to be admitted. Bates would accompany the nine teenagers to the entrance of Little Rock Central High School.

But on the day before the first day of school, they had been warned of protests and decided to postpone attending. The decision was prudent as on the first day of school a mob of furious whites had assembled to insure the nine would not get in.



However, one student, Elizabeth Eckford, did not learn of the decision, as her family did not have a telephone. She arrived alone at Central High where she was met and surrounded by angry white protestors, protesting her presence.



Some spit directly on her, some called her racial slurs, some shouted she should be hung from a tree, some yelled sing-song slogans as, “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate!” She also was confronted by armed Arkansas National Guardsmen sent by Gov. Orval Faubus to block the black students from entering as they blocked her, alone.



They blocked Elizabeth but not white students. The nine students had been cautioned about counterattacks. But nothing could have prepared Elizabeth for what she experienced that day. Reporters and photojournalists documented this lawlessness for all the world to see.



Not knowing where to go, she walked in front of the school for about two blocks when she spotted a bus bench. She made it to the bench where she sat composed and quiet. But intimidation towards her continued. Several reporters formed a human barrier and stood between her and the angry demonstrators. Eventually, the bus came, she got on it and left.



Several further attempts during the next three weeks for the Nine to enter Central High failed despite a court order. Faubus was cited for contempt. On September 24, President Dwight Eisenhower ordered “all” National Guard units and 1,000 paratroopers of the 101st Airborne to enforce the law. The next day, September 25, the National Guard and 1,000 paratroopers escorted Bates and the nine students into school.



Bates continued to advise and support the students as they attended classes, for they continued to be bullied and terrorized by fellow students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and citizens. The principal would ignore battery reports if not witnessed by an adult. Even with a witness, most reports were ignored anyway.

Most attacks happened in the hallways, something every day, but the Nine could not predict where or when it would happen. They were knocked down stairs, kicked, scalded in gym showers, body-slammed into wall lockers. They were generally knocked about every day. It never ceased. But they overcame by returning to school. “Our being there was a direct affront to white supremacy,” Elizabeth later recalled.

After a year, Little Rock’s School District closed all schools rather than continue to desegregate.

Elizabeth Eckford was born on October 4, 1941, to Oscar and Birdie Eckford, one of six children. Oscar worked nights as a dining car maintenance worker at the Missouri Pacific Railroad’s Little Rock station where he remembered, “men walked around with shotguns, even though it was not hunting season.” Birdie taught at the segregated state school for blind and deaf children instructing them how to wash and iron for themselves.

Unable to graduate from Central High as schools closed her senior year, Elizabeth, however, had enough diploma credits through correspondence and night courses. She attended Knox College in Illinois for a short period, but returned to Little Rock to be near her parents. She later attended Central State University in Ohio and earned a BA in history. In 1958, she moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where she became the first black in St. Louis to work in a bank in a non-janitorial position.

She served in the U.S. Army for five years and was stationed at bases from Indiana to Georgia to Alabama. She served as a pay clerk, an information specialist, and a military reporter writing for the Fort McClellan, Alabama, and the Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, newspapers. After her military service, she worked at several jobs as a waitress, history teacher, welfare worker, unemployment and employment interviewer, and currently, a probation officer in Little Rock where she returned home in 1974 to raise her two sons alone, largely on disability checks.

Ms. Eckford has received the Army Good Conduct Medal, and in 1958, all members of the Little Rock Nine and Daisy Bates were awarded the NAACP's most prestigious award: the Spingarn Medal. In 1999, President Bill Clinton presented the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian award, to the Little Rock Nine. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation awarded Elizabeth the Lincoln Leadership Prize in 2015.



In 2018, she was invited to Knox College to receive an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree in recognition of the courage she exhibited as one of the Little Rock Nine, of her enduring legacy as an icon of the American Civil Rights Movement, and of her inspiration as a role model for past, current, and future human rights activists. After years thinking she was not worthy of being an alumna there, the recognition from Knox made her feel special.



In her opening convocation address, Eckford noted that her desegregation experiences resulted in post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition that went undiagnosed for decades. "Many people think that the worst that happened was on the first attempt to go to school," she said, referring to the day the famous photograph was taken, "but we endured hell every day."

Even so, she commented that she looked forward to her last class of the day, a speech class, “because there were two students in there who reached out to me and spoke to me as an ordinary person—every day.” Being accepted by those two students meant a great deal, she recalled and she urged members of her audience to reach out to anyone who is being harassed because, she said, “a show of support can help them live another day. It’s that important.”

A book she co-authored for young readers, *The Worst First Day: Bullied while Desegregating Central High*, was released in 2018. It received the 2019 Indie Author Legacy Awards top children's book honor.

That same year she received the Community Truth Teller Award from the Arkansas Community Institute and the Elizabeth Eckford Commemorative Bench was dedicated at the corner of Park and 16th streets across from Little Rock Central High School.



Ms. Eckford also was recognized as a Champion of Justice by the Equal Justice Initiative, the organization which created the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. It features her image to represent that period of segregation. She said she was touched and honored by the efforts of Bryan Stenson and the entire Equal Justice Initiative team.

U.S. Army veteran Elizabeth Eckford lives in Little Rock and continues to advocate for all to be active participants in standing up for despised minorities, stating, “true reconciliation can occur when we honestly acknowledge our painful but shared past.”

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