

Women as Girls and School Integration V: After the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v Board of Education* decision declared separate but equal education in public schools unconstitutional, enforcement lagged. In 1957, three years after *Brown*, nine courageous black teenagers in the South desegregated Arkansas' Little Rock Central High School. They did so after President Dwight David Eisenhower ordered Federal troops to enforce the new law and ensure their safety from malevolent white mobs and armed Arkansas National Guardsmen who had blocked their entry into the school for three weeks. Once in the school, vicious resistance continued in the halls and classrooms by white students, faculty and staff against the nine black students. After only one year, the all-white Arkansas school district board closed all its public schools in 1958 rather than continue to desegregate.

Two years later in 1960, now six years after *Brown*, school desegregation was weak amid strong white resistance. On May 16 of that year in New Orleans, four years after its school board still failed to meet the deadline of a 1956 District Court's ruling (in *Bush v Orleans Parish School Board*) to develop a desegregation plan to comply with *Brown*, Federal District Court Judge J. Skelly Wright, judge in the *Bush* case, stating segregation in public schools invalid under *Brown*, ordered NOLA's public schools to desegregate in the fall.

In the fall, one little six-year old black girl in the Deep South would desegregate an elementary school. She would do so escorted by U.S. Marshalls sent by President Eisenhower to enforce the law and ensure her safety from crowds of angry whites shouting racial slurs at her to thwart her entrance and keep their school whites-only. And she would do so in the infamous city of New Orleans, Louisiana, where the Homer Plessy case began in 1892 and concluded with the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court *Plessy v Ferguson* decision which upheld the separate but equal doctrine of Jim Crow laws which the *Brown* decision overturned ending fifty-eight years of legalized American apartheid.

This little black girl was immortalized in the 1964 Norman Rockwell painting he titled:
The Problem We All Live With



Ruby Bridges was born into poverty on September 8th, 1954 (the same year as the *Brown* ruling) to Lucille and Abon Bridges, sharecroppers in Tylertown, Mississippi. She was the first born of eight children and was four when her parents moved to New Orleans seeking better opportunities for their family. Her father took a job as a gas station attendant and her mother took night jobs to help support their growing family.

When it came time for Ruby to start school in 1959, she attended a segregated New Orleans kindergarten at the all-black Johnson Lockett Elementary School with the other black students on her block, albeit the nearest school was William Frantz Elementary. But Frantz was whites-only, the black students were not allowed to go there, and had to go to the all-black school much farther away.

The next school year, following Judge Wright's 1960 federal court order to the NOLA district school board to desegregate without further delay, Ruby's parents now faced a decision as to whether she attend first grade at the near-by all-white William Frantz Elementary School. Her father resisted fearing for Ruby's safety; her mother, however, wanted Ruby to have the educational opportunities she and her husband had been denied.

But the NOLA school district continued to move slowly always seeking ways to stall desegregation. This time the Orleans Parish School Board created an entrance exam for black students of which it was understood they had little chance of passing. The exam was to assess whether blacks could compete academically with whites at the all-white schools. Lucille wanted Ruby to take the exam and earnestly reminded Abon that a better education for their children was primary to their move to New Orleans and additionally, that this was an opportunity for all black children. Still harboring concern for his daughter's safety, Abon reluctantly agreed.

The exam was administered to 150 students. Six students passed. Ruby, five years old at the time, was one of them. Two students decided to stay at their school, three were sent to McDonogh 19, Ruby alone was to attend William Frantz. The exam created as a delay, did delay the first day of school to November 14 for the four black students who would be the first blacks to enter white NOLA public schools since Reconstruction (1863-67). Still defiant, a bill was quickly passed declaring November 14 a holiday to which Judge Wright issued an immediate restraining order against it.



On her first day, Ruby and her mother were escorted by U.S. marshals. They walked past white, well-dressed protest crowds screaming vicious slurs at little Ruby who saw one woman holding a black baby doll in a coffin.



Ruby and her mother spent the entire first day in the principal's office, prevented from moving to a classroom due to the chaos as all white parents pulled their children from school and all white teachers, except one, refused to teach if a black child was enrolled.

That evening, a rally of some 5,000 members of the White Citizens Council was held to protest the desegregation at Frantz. Rally speeches stirred up those attending. In the morning, a white mob estimated between one and three thousand marched on city hall, the school board office, and Judge Wright's office. They threw stones and bottles at blacks in buses and cars. That evening black teenagers came out in the streets in response. The police made 250 arrests, mainly of blacks.

The mob, comprised of those being seen, heard, and government supported, did not represent of all New Orleanians. Two white families defied the white boycott and kept their children at Frantz. They also incurred the unleashed wrath of the white mob, as did another white family who returned their children to Frantz the following week. By early December, twenty-three children returned but due to white threats and violence, that number dropped to ten. The federal marshals also escorted and protected the white students that first year as the protests continued throughout the city that year.

However, in direct noncompliance of the *Brown* ruling, these few white students were taught separate from the lone black student. Ruby was alone in her class of one all year taught by Barbara Henry, a white Boston native, the one teacher willing to accept a black student. Mrs. Henry was loving and supportive. She helped Ruby with her studies as well as the difficult experience of being ostracized.

Ruby never missed a day of school that year. She was allowed to eat only the food she brought from home because a woman had threatened to poison her, and she ate her lunch alone. At recess, not allowed to play with the few white children kept separate from her, she sometimes played with her teacher. When Ruby needed to go to the restroom, the federal marshals walked her down the hall. Former United States Deputy Marshal Charles Burks later recalled, "She showed a lot of courage. She never cried. She didn't whimper. She just marched along like a little soldier, and we're all very, very proud of her."

Renowned Harvard child psychiatrist Dr. Robert Coles, Boston born and bred, completed his education at Harvard College, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons; his residency training at the University of Chicago (Pritzker School of Medicine); his psychiatric residencies at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts and the Harvard University Medical School in Cambridge; joined the Air Force in 1958 at the rank of captain to complete his military doctors draft obligation. He was sent to Keesler Air Force base in Biloxi, Mississippi.

As chief of neuropsychiatric service at Keesler, he made frequent trips into New Orleans to attend advanced training in psychoanalysis. During these trips he witnessed racial unrest as never before up north. One day a traffic jam, the street filled with cars stopped and vacated, prevented him from driving into the city. He heard a lot of noise, got out of

his car and walked over to the noise which was at Frantz Elementary School. He would learn the noise was due to the desegregation of a white school by a black student. The date was November 14, 1960. His eyes saw a little black girl being brutally taunted by white adults, but his head and his heart saw more.

He saw in the noise that he could use his training to do something to address his desire to be active one day in the struggle for racial equality. He thought to get involved. Getting involved required official permission. He reached out to Judge Wright who directed him to Thurgood Marshall, lawyer for the plaintiffs in *Bush* as well as in *Brown*, who assuredly welcomed his involvement. Dr. Coles volunteered his counsel to the families during this difficult time and met with Ruby and her family weekly that first year.

Ruby's family suffered for their courage. Abon lost his job, and grocery stores refused to sell to Lucille. Ruby's share-cropping grandparents were evicted from the farm where they had lived for twenty-five years. But others, white as well as black, offered support.

Some families babysat her siblings, some watched her house, some walked behind the federal marshals' car on the way to school, a neighbor provided her father with a new job. Sympathetic citizens from across the country sent the Bridges money and gifts to help. Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt sent a letter of support to Ruby. Years later, Ruby learned that the nice, new clothes she wore those first weeks were supplied by a family member of Dr. Coles, clothes she commented her family never could have afforded.

Attendance the second year for Ruby was easier, although Mrs. Henry's contract was not renewed as she was pregnant and according to law could not be employed as a teacher, the protestors were gone and additional black students were enrolled at Frantz. Ruby completed her elementary education at Frantz and graduated from a desegregated high school. She later graduated from a Kansas City business school with a degree in business and tourism and worked for fifteen years in the travel and tourism profession. She married Malcolm Hall and together they have four sons.

In 1993 she returned to Frantz to enroll her four nieces and experienced some of the same racism she had experienced as a child thirty-three years earlier. Frantz, at which white students no longer were being enrolled, had become an all-black school and, typical of black schools, exhibited signs of deterioration. To improve conditions, she began working as a parent liaison and she established a multicultural after-school art club. Efforts to preserve the school and its historic classroom took root in her at that time.

In September 1995, when she and Dr. Coles were awarded honorary degrees from Connecticut College, they appeared together in public for the first time to accept the awards. In 1996 she was reunited with Mrs. Henry on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and for a time they did speaking engagements together.



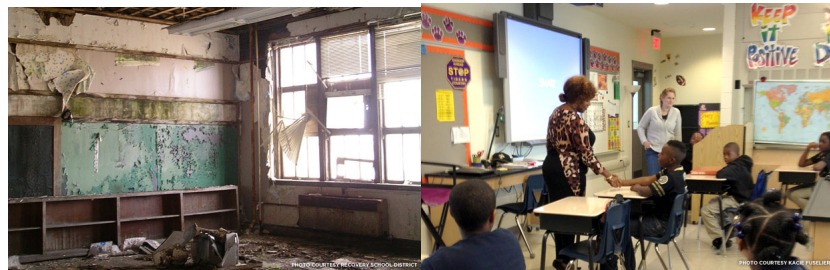
In 1998 the made-for-TV movie, *Ruby Bridges*, portrayed her desegregation experiences at Frantz. In 1999 Lori McKenna wrote the song Ruby's Shoes as part of her son's school oral book report on Ruby Bridges. Lori appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2006, as did Faith Hill, who performed Lori's song.

A lifelong activist for racial equality, Ruby established the Ruby Bridges Foundation in 1999 to promote tolerance, change, conflict management, diversity and unity among schoolchildren through education. That same year, her memoir *Through My Eyes* was released. It won the Carter G. Woodson Book Award in 2000 and in 2009 she wrote her second book: *Ruby Bridges Goes to School: My True Story*.

Bridges speaks about her schoolgirl racial experiences to groups around the country. In 2000, she was made an honorary deputy marshal in a ceremony in Washington, DC, and in 2001, was awarded the Presidential Citizen's Medal by President Bill Clinton.



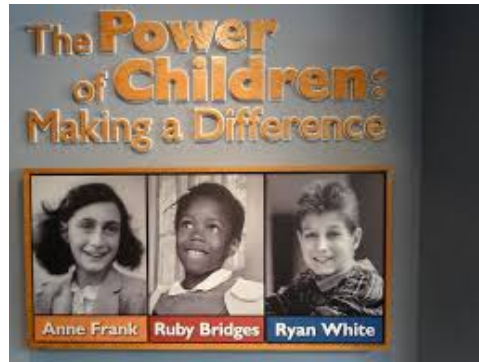
In 2005, despite efforts to preserve Frantz as well as to get it listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the now black school was in danger of being closed. Then, in August of that year, Hurricane Katrina struck and Bridges witnessed extensive damage to the school she had struggled to preserve. As well, Bridges, one of hundreds of thousands, lost her home. But the hurricane provided an opportunity for Frantz's recovery.



By 2013, the original building was fully renovated to house the new Akili Academy, a public open-enrollment charter school. Room 2306, Bridges' first-year classroom, was restored with period-appropriate furniture. Above, Bridges visits students at the renovated William Frantz Elementary School/Akili Academy.

In 2006 the Alameda Unified School District in California named one of its new elementary schools for Bridges and issued a proclamation in her honor. That year, she also was honored as a "Hero Against Racism" at the 12th Anti-Defamation League "Concert Against Hate" with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

In 2007, Ruby was honored by the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, the largest children's museum in the world, when it installed a new permanent exhibit, "The Power of Children: Making a Difference." It documents the impact the three children in the exhibit had on the world. The two children honored along with Ruby Bridges are Anne Frank and Ryan White.



Bridges received an Honorary Degree from Tulane University at their 2012 annual graduation ceremony held at the Superdome. And in 2014, a statue of little Ruby was unveiled in the courtyard of William Frantz Elementary School.



In 2016, San Jose State University honored Bridges' lasting contribution to civil rights awarding the Steinbeck "In the Souls of the People" Award to the then 61-year-old author, activist, and advocate, who has been called the first foot soldier in the modern civil rights movement. John Steinbeck wrote about Ruby and the other girls who integrated the New Orleans schools in his book *Travels with Charley*.

An excerpt from steinbecknow.com

"In *Travels with Charley* Steinbeck wrote in sadness, and occasional shock, at the state of America in 1960 and he chose the South as the last stop on his journey of rediscovery and reconciliation because he recognized racism and civil rights as - the fundamental conflict to be resolved if the country he loved was to survive. Watching grown white women curse the diminutive black girl entering William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans turned his stomach, as it did Americans reading newspaper accounts of the widely reported event. Though Ruby Bridges isn't identified by name, *Travels with Charley* captures her image, braving the kind of mob Steinbeck depicted better than anyone, like a contemporary news photograph:

The big marshals stood her on the curb and a jangle of jeering shrieks went up from behind the barricades. The little girl did not look at the howling crowd but from the side the whites of her eyes showed like those of a frightened fawn. The men turned her around like a doll, and then the

strange procession moved up the broad walk toward the school, and the child was even more a mite because the men were so big. Then the girl made a curious hop, and I think I know what it was. I think in her whole life she had not gone ten steps without skipping, but now in the middle of her first skip the weight bore her down and her little round feet took measured, reluctant steps between the tall guards. Slowly they climbed the steps and entered the school.”

Inspired by selections from Steinbeck’s book, Norman Rockwell created his painting “*The Problem We All Live With*,” which was published in the January 14, 1964 issue of *Look* magazine. It appears on the first page of this column.

Ruby Bridges Hall resides in New Orleans with her husband and their children. She travels the United States as a motivational speaker for racial understanding and love.

In the following videos I strongly recommend, Ruby, Mrs. Henry and Dr. Coles speak poignantly and truthfully from their hearts about the problem we all live with.

Ruby: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvnxYDZ4ymY>

Mrs. Henry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hfc9i9gfsd8>

Dr. Coles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPk3zQM2dHU>

TED TALK 2014 Ruby Bridges: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyRH_LK8v5c

PBS Many Rivers: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/video/ruby-bridges-goes-to-school/>

Ruby offers her last word: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvW10_kvKDA

- Sources:
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- <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ruby-bridges>
- <http://www.steinbecknow.com/2016/01/19/ruby-bridges-steinbeck-award-san-jose-state-university/>
- <https://www.biography.com/activist/ruby-bridges>
- <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/lori-mckenna/rubys-shoes>
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- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/medicine/psychology-and-psychiatry-biographies/robert-coles>
- <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/73974310>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Coles_\(psychiatrist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Coles_(psychiatrist))
 - Robert Coles: “Children Consider Human Conflict” on Vimeo
 - <https://vimeo.com/2713153>