

# YOUNG ACTS OF COURAGE

Told by Melba Pattillo Beals

Adapted from the book *Warriors Don't Cry*

**My grandmother India** always said God had pointed a finger at our family, asking of us just a bit more discipline, more praying, and more hard work because He had blessed us with good health and good brains. My mother was one of the first few blacks to integrate the University of Arkansas, graduating in 1954. Three years later, I was one of nine black teenagers who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

It was not yet eight o'clock in the morning when Mama and I parked at the curb just outside Mrs. Bates's home. Everybody spoke in whispers. I was ushered through the crowd and into the living room, where radio and news reports about the integration held everyone's attention.

As we filed silently out of the house, I waved good-bye to my mother. I wanted to hug her, but I didn't want everyone to think I was a baby. Other parents milled about, looking as if we were being carted off to be hanged. As we started to walk to the cars, they clutched at us as though they weren't completely certain we'd be coming back.

When we arrived at the school, the driver urged us to get out quickly. The white hand of a uniformed officer reached out toward the car, opened the door, and pulled me toward him as his urgent voice ordered me to hurry. The roar coming from the front of the building made me glance to my right. Only half a block away, I saw hundreds of white

people, their bodies in motion, their mouths wide open as they shouted their anger. “The niggers! Keep the niggers out!” The shouts came closer. The roar swelled, as though their frenzy had been fired up by something. It took a moment to digest the fact that it was the sight of us that had upset them.

“The principal’s office is this way,” whispered a petite woman with dark hair and glasses. “Hurry, now, hurry.” We were shoved into an office where a row of white people, mostly women, stood staring at us as though we were the world’s eighth wonder. “Here are your class schedules and home-room assignments. Wait for your guides,” said Mrs. Huckaby, the vice-principal. Each of us was assigned to a different home room. “Why can’t any of us be in the same home room or take classes together?” I asked. From behind the long desk, a man spoke in an unkind, booming voice. “You wanted integration . . . you got integration.”

I turned to see the hallway swallow up my friends. None of us had an opportunity to say a real good-bye or make plans to meet. I was alone, in a daze, following a white woman up the stairs. Frightened does not describe my state of mind at the time; I had moved on to being terrified. I had fantasized about how wonderful it would be to get inside the huge, beautiful castle I knew as Central High School. But the reality was so much bigger, darker, and more treacherous than I had imagined.

Suddenly I felt the sting of a hand slapping the side of my cheek, and then warm, slimy saliva on my face, dropping to the collar of my blouse. It was the first time I had ever been spat upon. I felt hurt, embarrassed. I wondered if I’d catch her germs. Before I could wipe it off, my guide’s

harsh command summoned me to move. “Get going. Now. Do you hear me? Move! Now!” I brushed the saliva off my nose with my hand, and stumbled after her.

As I entered a classroom, a hush fell over the students. The guide pointed me to an empty seat, and I walked toward it. Students sitting nearby quickly moved away. I sat down surrounded by empty seats, feeling unbearably self-conscious. One of the boys kept shouting ugly words at me throughout the class. I waited for the teacher to speak up, but she said nothing. My heart was weeping, but I squeezed back the tears. I squared my shoulders and tried to remember what Grandma had said: “God loves you, child. No matter what, He sees you as His precious idea.”

Walking the gauntlet to my next class was even more harrowing. “You’d better watch yourself,” the guide warned as we moved at high speed through the hostile students. The next class was gym. Out on the playing field, groups of girls were tossing a volleyball. It took me a moment to realize it was whizzing awfully close to my head. I ducked, but they hit me real hard, shouting and cheering as they found their target. And even as I was struggling to escape their cruelty, I was at the same time more terrified by the sound of the angry crowd approaching in the distance. Suddenly things got out of control. “Get inside, Melba. Now!” The face of the gym teacher showed both compassion and alarm as she quietly pointed to a group of women jumping over the rear fence as they shouted obscenities at me.

I was in tears, ready to give up, paralyzed by my fear. Suddenly Grandma’s voice came into my head: “God never loses one of His

flock.” *Shepherd, show me how to go*, I said. I stood still and repeated those words over and over again until I gained some composure.

“I’ve been looking for you.” My stocky guide’s voice was angry, but I was so glad to see her that I almost forgot myself and reached to hug her. “Let’s go to the shorthand class.” She didn’t know it, but she was the answer to my prayer. I looked over my shoulder to see the group of mothers standing still, obviously unwilling to come after me with a school official at my side. I choked back tears and speeded my steps.

As I headed for the last row of empty seats by the window, my shorthand teacher called out to me, “Melba, stay away from the window.” Her voice was sympathetic, as though she really cared what happened to me. The ocean of people outside stretched farther than I could see—waves of people ebbing and flowing, shoving the sawhorses and the policemen who were trying to keep them in place. From my seat I could hear the crowd shouting, “Get the niggers,” and “Two, four, six, eight, we ain’t gonna integrate.”

I looked up from my notes to see my guide entering the classroom. “Come with me now. To the principal’s office,” she called out nervously. I heard her frantic tone of voice, heard someone say the mob was out of control, that they would have to call for help. “There must be a thousand people out there, armed and coming this way.” “Some of these patrolmen are throwing down their badges,” another breathless voice said. “We gotta get these children out of here.”

I heard footsteps coming closer. A tall, dark-haired man came toward us. “I’m Gene Smith, from the Little Rock Police Department. It’s time for you to leave for today. Come with me now.” Right away, I had a

good feeling about him. He urged us to move faster, and acted as though it mattered to him whether or not we got out. I decided to remember this man forever in my prayers.

Outside, two cars were sitting with engines running, lights on, hoods pointing toward the door. “Hurry, now. Get in,” Smith said as he held open one of the doors. Their expressions told me we were in a kind of trouble I hadn’t even imagined before. “Hold on and keep your heads down,” the driver shouted. The deafening noise of the mob engulfed us. That’s when the car really began moving fast, faster than I’d ever ridden before. Finally there were fewer hands and faces on the car windows, and the noises subsided. I took a deep breath. I wanted to say, “Thanks for risking your life to save mine.” It was an awkward moment with a stranger, a decent white man. He took me home, dropping me off right at my door. “Get in the house now—go,” he said, pausing for an instant, then gunning his engine and pulling away. He was the second white man I would pray for God to protect.

That night in my diary I wrote, “There seems to be no space for me at Central High. I don’t want integration to be like the merry-go-round. Please, God, make space for me.”

Speaking from the White House that night on national television, President Eisenhower said he’d sent troops because “mob rule in Little Rock menaces the very safety of the United States and the free world.” That night a man handed my mother an envelope from the president and said to her, “Let your daughter go back to school, and she will be protected.” The next morning I saw them, about fifty uniformed soldiers from the 101st Infantry with well-shined boots and rifles at their sides.

There were tears in my mother's eyes as she whispered good-bye. "Make this day the best you can," she said.

For the next several months I got up every morning, polished my saddle shoes, and went off to war. I entered Central High School, a building I remember only as a hellish torture chamber—a place that was meant to nourish us and prepare us for adulthood. Instead, it was like being a soldier on a battlefield.

I had always imagined that my last day of the term at Central High School would be marked by a grand ceremony, with a massive choir singing "Hallelujah," or perhaps some wonderful award from my community—a parade maybe. But it was the same as any other day. "It's over," my brother Conrad said. "You don't have to integrate anymore."

The next September we waited in vain to return to Central High. But Governor Faubus closed all of Little Rock's high schools. Segregationists were squeezing the life out of the NAACP, the Bateses' newspaper, and the state press. Our people continued to lose their jobs, their businesses, and their homes to force us into withdrawing voluntarily from Central High. In despair, NAACP officials sent an announcement to chapters across the country, asking for families that would volunteer to give us safe harbor and support us in finishing our education. I was fortunate enough to go to the Santa Rosa, California, home of Dr. George McCabe and his wife, Ruth, and their four children. They were a family of politically conscious Quakers committed to racial equality. More than their guidance, it was their unconditional love that taught me the true meaning of equality. Their love helped to heal my wounds and inspired me to launch a new life for myself.

Inspired by those journalists I had met during the integration, I followed my dream and became a news reporter. I always remembered it was the truth told by those reporters who came to Little Rock that kept me alive. Later, as an NBC television reporter, I would take special care to look into those unexposed corners where otherwise invisible people are forced to hide as their truth is ignored.

Forty years later, Little Rock's Central High School is peacefully integrated. I look back on my Little Rock integration experience as a positive force that ultimately shaped the course of my life. Because we dared to challenge the Southern tradition of segregation, this school became, instead, a furnace that consumed our youth and forged us into reluctant warriors for civil rights. As Grandma India had promised, it taught me to have courage and patience.

*I for one am grateful for the courage of youth.*

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To learn more about the Little Rock Nine, visit [www.centralhigh57.org](http://www.centralhigh57.org).

Smile at a neighbor. Help a stranger. Be grateful for your blessings, share them with others. Every child deserves a loving home. Join with Melba and those who work with **Aid to Adoption of Special Kids**, who have placed eleven thousand special children in caring homes over the last twenty years. Call 510-451-1748 or visit <https://www.aask-az.org>.