In 1957: Protected by 1,200 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division, "The Little Rock Nine" enter segregated Central High School in Little Rock Ark.
In 2005: The group returns for a reunion as adults.

50 YEARS AFTER Little ROCK

A half-century later, a look at nine warriors in the fight against segregation

BY KEVIN CHAPPELL

It was September 1957.

The nation watched as nine Black students from Little Rock, Ark.—amid taunts and jibes of White students and bystanders—displayed courage and conviction well beyond their years. Protected by 1,200 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division, Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls, Minnijean Brown, Gloria Ray, Thelma Mothershed and Melba Pattillo refused to let anyone or anything stop them from walking into segregated Central High School and American history.

Just three weeks earlier, they had been blocked from entering the school by the Arkansas National Guard under orders of Gov. Orval Faubus, who, facing pressure as he campaigned for a third term, pandered to vocal segregationists. Faubus even stood in the door of Central High himself and proclaimed that no Black children would ever enter the school under his watch.

The action defied the city's school board, which had voted to obey the 1954 *Brown* v. *Board of Education* Supreme Court school integration decision. And it was all being played out on the then new medium called television, embarrassing a nation already in a Cold War fight for moral high ground, and serving as a precursor to a decade-long Freedom Movement that would change race relations forever.

Fifty years later, the story of The Little Rock Nine and school integration continues. The members of the historic group are all still alive and well, and eager to share their recollections of a watershed moment in American history and perhaps one of the most important in modern-day African-American history.

While the group has been heralded as heroes, Ernest Green says, during an exclusive interview with EBONY magazine, that at the time none of the nine knew the historical significance of what they were doing. "We all believed that we were going to school, and up until that time, there was really no reason why we shouldn't come to that conclusion," says Green, who is now the managing director of public finance for Lehman Brothers' Washington, D.C., office. "The important thing that we real-

Among the many honors the members of the Little Rock Nine have received, collectively and individually, for their heroism in 1957 is a sculpture of their likenesses on the grounds of the Arkansas State Capitol.

ize the older that we get is how unique it was that a group of teenagers got to participate in this seminal event. For each of us, we had different visions about what was going to happen there, but we all saw Central as a better place to improve our own personal education."

Carlotta Walls LaNier, who along with the other Black students, was forced to leave classes early because of riots, recalls that "the scariest day for me was the first day we entered the school.

"That event made my heart race," she says. "It was what I heard from the policemen. They told me to put my foot to the floor and don't stop for anything... After that, mentally I got above everything. I got to the point that I wasn't going to allow the name-calling and everything to get to me mentally. I was not going to stoop to their level."

To this day, Green, who was the only senior at the time, says that the only conclusion he can draw from the public drama that played out as the lead story each night on televisions across the country is that Faubus was "using us as his whipping boy to get re-elected, when all we wanted to do was go to school." Indeed, the governor even went so far as to close the school system for the entire school year. "We walked into a full-blown constitutional crisis," says Green. "None of us had any inkling that this was going to occur. But it didn't take long for us to figure out that this was something bigger than our own individual courses."

One of the most pervasive images from Central High that day was of 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, walking alone in front of the school, through a taunting, hate-filled mob.

"I was terrified," Eckford says. "I fastened on the idea of getting to the bus stop, where I thought I would be safe. At the point when they threatened to lynch me ... I was scared for my life. They were right on my heels. I couldn't go anywhere."

A few years ago, Eckford, who has a degree in history from Central State University in Ohio and is now a probation officer in Little Rock, met with one of her former tormenters. Together, they attended a 12-week racial healing course with the goal of promoting forgiveness and atonement. Only recently has Eckford started to relive the painful past to share her story with the world.

The same is true for Walls LaNier. While the Little Rock

LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL HIGH

RAY ROBERTS PATTILLO THOMAS WALLS

MOTHERSHED BROWN ECKFORD GREEN

Portraits of the members of the Little Rock Nine as students at Central High School in 1957.

Civil rights activist Daisy Bates, who counseled the Little Rock Nine, the first nine Blacks to integrate the Little Rock public school system at Central High in 1957, watches the Martin Luther King Jr. parade as it makes its way past the Arkansas State Capitol on Monday, Jan. 15, 1996, in Little Rock.

Nine have traveled the world receiving numerous honors, including the Congressional Gold Medal and statues on the grounds of the Arkansas State Capital, she tells EBONY that the events at Central High pained her so much that, "At one time, I didn't want to talk about it. It was that way for 30 years," she says. "But once you have your own kids and certain things happen, you really realize that you still have an obligation to empower these kids with the knowledge of what had taken place before. To help them understand that they have a responsibility."

In 1999, the Little Rock Nine established a foundation to keep their story alive and provide direct financial support and a mentorship program for students. At the 50th Anniversary Scholarship Awards Gala, the Foundation plans to award nine scholarships. Three scholarships will be awarded to students from Arkansas, one at Central High School and the other two from poor-performing schools in Arkansas. The other six will be chosen from poor-performing school districts around the country.

Unfortunately the list of such schools is long and getting longer. In fact, since the rollback of most components of the *Brown* decision, in a 1991Supreme Court decision authorizing an end to forced busing, a key component of integration, there has been widespread "re-segregation" in many school districts across the country.

In a 2004 report, Harvard University's Civil Rights Project found that in many districts where court-ordered desegregation was ended, major re-segregation has thrust the vast majority of intensely segregated minority schools back into conditions of concentrated poverty and unequal educational opportunity.

The Harvard Project listed several ways to reverse re-segregation of public schools, including reviving federal aid programs that helped multiracial schools deal with race-relations issues; using housing subsidy programs more effectively to provide low-income families access to middle-class schools; using magnet and charter schools and vouchers to promote integration, and providing financial incentives to White and Asian suburbs that accept significant numbers of Black students from schools designated as failing in majority-Black locations. But to date, there has been no widespread effort to implement the project's findings.

Little Rock Nine member Minnijean Brown Trickey says that in her "naiveté" as a child, she believed that the problem at Central High School would be solved "if they got to know us, or [we got] to know them." Fifty years later, she realizes the cure to institutional racism is more complicated than that. While she still doesn't have all of the answers, she has come to understand that real progress in race relations will not be made until the country seriously confronts the issue of racism.

"The whole racism thing still doesn't make much sense to me, or even what happened 50 years ago," says Trickey, now a retired teacher. "Yes, what we did in Little Rock was worth it because it helped me come to some understanding. One of the real problems in our society is that we never talk about racism in any honest or rigorous way. We still think of it as these isolated incidents and individual experiences, when, in fact, it is embedded in all aspects of our social relations.

"Things are better now, but we haven't done the deep, investigative, analytical work to dismantle racism, so that's what I consider the American tragedy," she continues. "There's collective amnesia and denial that makes it impossible to dismantle the institutional racism that exists."

Green says that while there is undoubtedly much more work to be done to ensure equal education for all Americans, "The kind of choices that young people have today makes what we did worth it," he says. "That's one of the important things that has come out of what we have done—to get African-American youngsters to really believe in themselves."

Today, as celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the historic event continue with all of the fanfare that the monumental moment deserves, the Little Rock Nine stand taller than ever.

"We all feel blessed that we are all still alive today," Walls LaNier says. "The adversity that we went through 50 years ago, I guess, helped keep us going. If you could get through what we went through, you could get through anything."

Central High School also continues to stand tall. Still functioning as part of the Little Rock School District, it is now a National Historic Site that houses a Civil Rights Museum, and is run by the National Park Service.

Green goes back to Little Rock quite often. "Now when I go back, I can't find anyone there who was against us attending Central," he says with a chuckle. "Everybody was for it." □