

# 1957

by Kathiann M. Kowalski



## Shaking Up CENTRAL HIGH

**E**lizabeth Eckford thought the soldiers at Central High School would protect her. But on September 4, 1957, the soldiers raised their guns and pointed them at Elizabeth. They refused to let the young black girl in.

Like many places in the South, Little Rock, Arkansas, had segregated schools in the 1950s. White children went to one school. Black children went to another. After 1954, it was illegal for local or state governments to segregate public schools by race. Little Rock school superintendent Virgil Blossom decided to try to integrate the schools. He picked a group of black students to attend the all-white Central High School.

But many white people in Little Rock weren't happy with this plan. Some threatened violence. The governor of Arkansas turned the situation into a major political issue. He called out the state's National Guard to Little Rock to stop integration.

As Elizabeth waited at the bus stop to return home, a mob shouted insults and death threats at her. Melba Patillo, another black student, never got to school that day. Angry white people tried to attack her and her mother. The other students arrived with Daisy Bates, who headed the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The soldiers turned them away, too.

The black students who attempted to attend the public high school that day became known as the Little Rock Nine. In addition to Elizabeth and Melba, they included Gloria Ray, Thelma Mothershed, Ernest Green, Terrance Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, Carlotta Walls, and Minnijean Brown. For three weeks, the Arkansas National Guard barred them from entering the school.

Finally, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent soldiers to Little Rock to enforce a court order to integrate the school. He put the Arkansas National Guard under the authority of the federal government. He ordered the guard members and the soldiers to protect the children. On September 25, the soldiers escorted the Little Rock Nine to Central High School.

But getting into school did not stop the children's troubles. "We were assaulted every day in school," said Elizabeth. White students slammed the black students into lockers. They tripped them on the stairs and kicked them. The school did nothing to protect the black

students. One day, Minnijean finally shouted at a girl who had kicked and insulted her. It was Minnijean, not the white girl, who was expelled.

In spite of the terrible situation, the Little Rock Nine all graduated from high school. They all went to college. Elizabeth became a parole officer. Melba went into journalism. Minnijean became a social worker and writer. Gloria did computer science writing. Thelma became a teacher. Ernest worked in government with President Jimmy Carter and then for an investment company. Terrance became a psychologist and college professor.

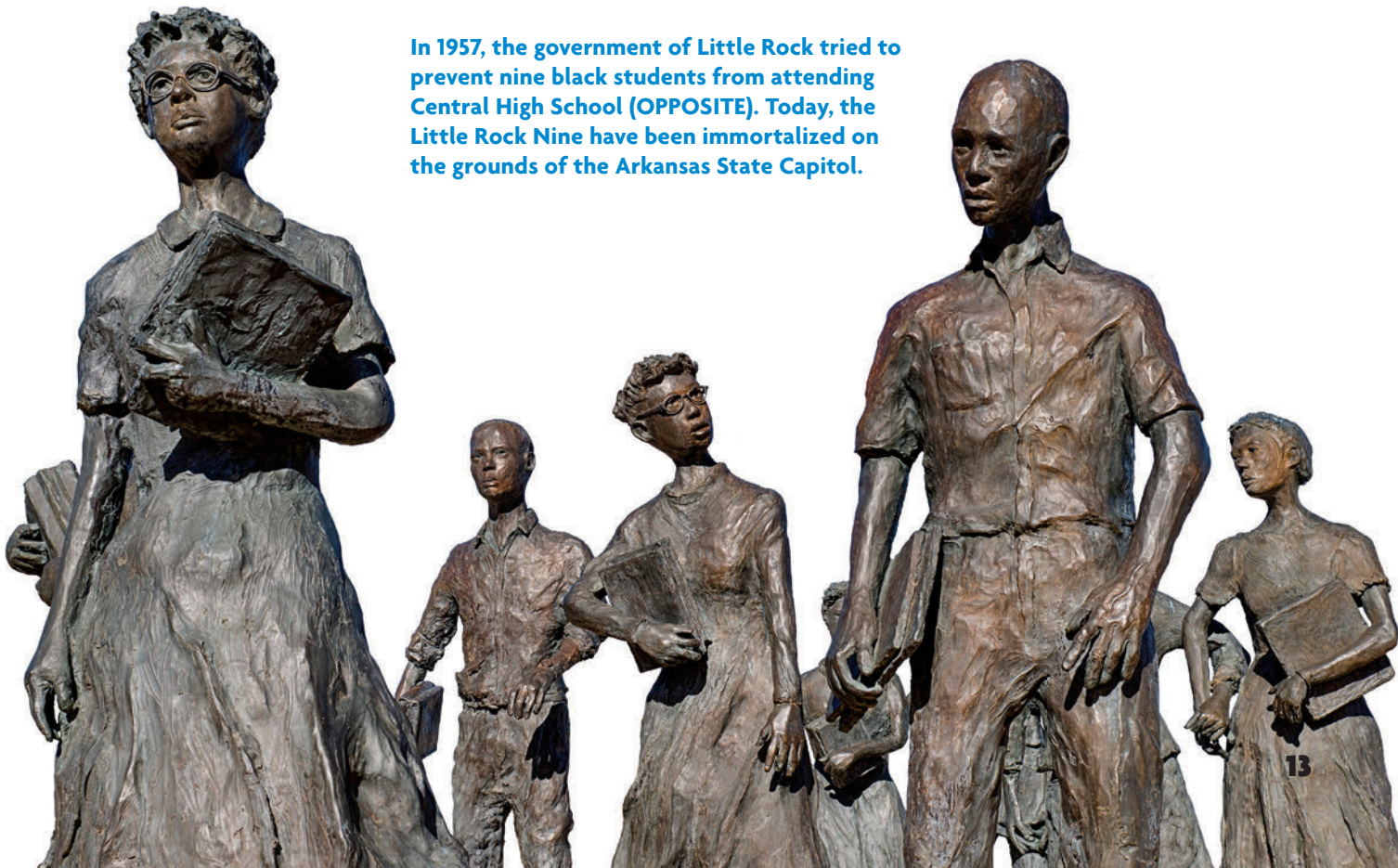
Jefferson worked with the Department of Defense. Carlotta worked in real estate. The courage the Little Rock Nine showed inspired Americans of all ages to make the country a freer place for everyone. 卐



### **FAST FACT**

In 1999, the Little Rock Nine received the Congressional Gold Medal. It is one of the highest awards that can be given to a civilian.

**In 1957, the government of Little Rock tried to prevent nine black students from attending Central High School (OPPOSITE). Today, the Little Rock Nine have been immortalized on the grounds of the Arkansas State Capitol.**



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