

U.S. troops escort African-American students from Central High School in 1957.



The Little Rock Nine

Sixty years ago, nine black students walked into an all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas—and into history.

On September 4, 1957, Elizabeth Eckford woke up feeling nervous about her first day of school. This was no typical first day. Elizabeth, then 15 years old, and eight other students had been picked to become the first African-Americans to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The plan was for the Little Rock Nine, as the students came to be known, to travel to school together that day. But Elizabeth's family didn't have a phone, so she didn't get the message.

Words to Know

integrate (IN-tuh-grayt) *verb*. to include or allow people of all races

endured (in-DUHRD) *verb, past tense*. put up with pain or hardship without giving in

When Elizabeth arrived at school, she found herself alone and facing an angry mob. Members of the all-white crowd screamed at her, spit at her, and even threatened to kill her.

“It was absolute terror,” recalls Elizabeth. “These people were on my heels, screaming at me—screaming ugly, ugly things. I was afraid for my life.”

Though she was trembling with fear, Elizabeth continued on to the school's entrance. There, troops armed with rifles blocked her from entering. The eight other black students soon arrived and were also turned away. The photo of Elizabeth walking through the crowd (*shown on the cover of this magazine*) ran in newspapers across the country. Many people,

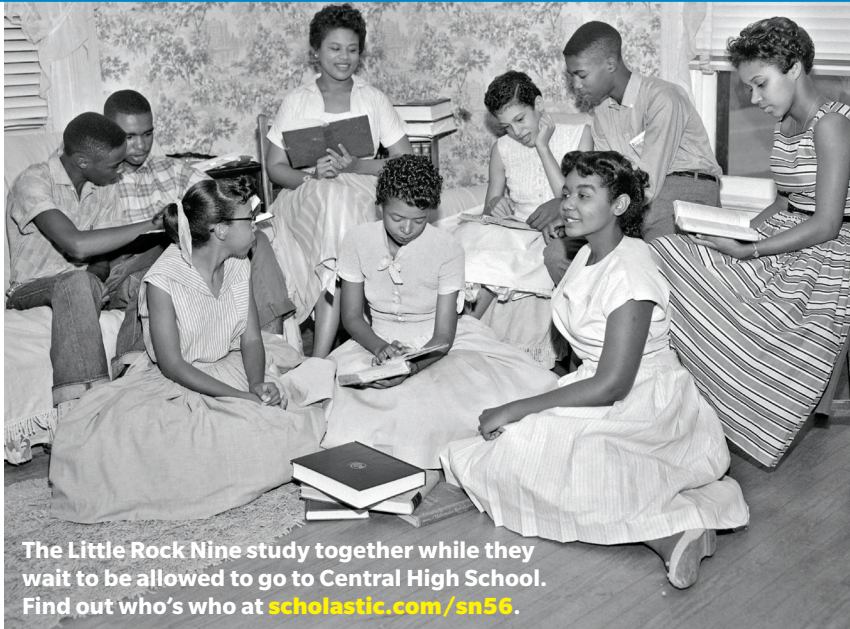


black and white, were outraged by the way the students had been treated. The Little Rock Nine's struggle just to go to school became one of the key events of the civil rights movement.

Separate and Unequal

By the 1950s, segregation had long been a part of life in many Southern cities, including Little Rock. Kids like Elizabeth grew up

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The Little Rock Nine study together while they wait to be allowed to go to Central High School. Find out who's who at scholastic.com/sn56.

with racist laws that kept them apart from white people. They had separate restaurants, bathrooms, and schools. The all-black schools were often run-down and overcrowded, and they lacked the resources that other schools had.

"The white kids always had more courses, more labs, more everything," says Elizabeth.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a case called *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation in public schools was illegal. But many cities were slow to **integrate** their schools.

Facing a Mob

The school board in Little Rock planned to integrate Central High in 1957. Elizabeth applied, believing she would get a better education there. She was one of a small group of black students selected to attend Central High. But Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus had other ideas. He ordered troops from the Arkansas National Guard to prevent those students from entering the building on September 4.

For nearly three weeks after the school year started, the nine

students stayed home and waited. Finally, a judge ruled that Faubus must remove the troops. Still, a riot broke out when the Little Rock Nine returned to school on September 23. The police made the black students leave after only a few hours, fearing for their safety.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower decided to step in, sending more than 1,000 U.S. Army troops to the school to protect the Little Rock Nine. On September 25, the soldiers escorted the nine students into Central High.

A Difficult Year

Once the Little Rock Nine were in school, life didn't get much easier for them. Each of the students was assigned a soldier who escorted him or her between classes. But the nine students had no protection in classrooms, restrooms, or the cafeteria. They were constantly taunted and attacked by white students.

"They knocked us down stairways. One boy tried to throw acid in a girl's face," says Elizabeth.

The black students needed great courage not to fight back. They knew that they might get kicked out of school if they did. One of the nine was expelled for standing up to white students who harassed her.

But Elizabeth and the other seven black students **endured** and finished the school year. Their bravery led to the integration of all public schools in Little Rock within the next few years. Today, they're remembered as heroes in the fight against discrimination.

"In a segregated system, there's no such thing as equality," says Elizabeth.

—by Joe Bubar

A Civil Rights Hero

Many important battles of the civil rights movement were won in courtrooms. And one of the top lawyers in the fight for equality was Thurgood Marshall. He successfully argued to end school segregation in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case. In 1957, Marshall was also part of a team of lawyers that helped convince a judge to order Governor Orval Faubus to withdraw National Guard troops from Central High School.

In 1967, Marshall became the first African-American appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. This year marks the 50th anniversary of that historic event.



Elizabeth Eckford (left) and Thurgood Marshall