

■ This piece tells of the ordeal faced by the nine Negro students at the Central High School, Little Rock

Nine Courageous Students*

By Clarence A. Laws

I INVITE you to consider the Little Rock school crisis and what you can do about it. It is your problem, too, you know. I should like also to touch upon the fight against the NAACP in the South and to indicate our responsibility here, likewise.

During the month of September 1957, you, like law abiding citizens everywhere, must have been shocked by the naked defiance of law and the total disregard of human rights by Arkansas' Governor Orval E. Faubus and the unrestrained mobs at Little Rock.

With the advent of federal troops and almost total blackout of news from Little Rock on the Central High School situation you no doubt felt that all was going well with the nine courageous students who are enrolled at the school. Of course the incidents involving one of the

students, Minnijean Brown, must have quickly dispelled any such idea.

I could tell you what has happened to Minnijean Brown and the other eight students since September. However, I think you might find it more interesting to pretend for a few minutes that you yourselves are Negro students at Central High at Little Rock, Arkansas.

As a Negro student you have a right to attend Central High by virtue of (1) the U. S. Supreme Court decision of May 17, 1954, outlawing segregation in public education, (2) the implementing decision of May 31, 1955, (3) an anemic integration plan of the Little Rock school district — a plan opposed by the NAACP but sustained by the courts, and (4) you are one of some 200 Negro high school students who live in the attendance area served by Central High School. You represent less than one half of one percent of the school enrollment, or 9 to 1900 plus.

* Originally an address delivered by Mr. Laws, NAACP field secretary, at Colorado Springs, Colorado, State Conference public meeting on March 9, 1958.

SCHOOL DAY BEGINS

Today as every school day you arrive at school between the hour of eight and eight-thirty. You arrive by private vehicle, along with two or more other students like yourself. You do this for security reasons, even though it might be more convenient to go by public conveyance or even to walk.

As you leave your automobile to walk toward the school, you are again struck by its stately beauty and its well-kept grounds. What impresses you most, however, is the fact that this school is rated as one of the "top" 33 public high schools in the entire nation. This enviable rating is based upon the continuing high achievement by Central students in national tests. That alone is enough to make the school a most desirable objective, you think.

The members of the federalized National Guard who patrolled the school grounds and halls a few weeks ago have been removed, you recall. As you approach the entrance you look deep into the halls to ascertain if a gang of students is lurking there. You also survey the windows just above the entrance to see if there are students bent upon showering you with water or hand lotion.

You turn and smile as you wave to the driver of your car—he still waits . . . just in case. Then entering the building you make straight for your homeroom. You consider it unusual if there is not a "welcoming party" to revile you with names. Maybe the name callers have moved into your homeroom, you think.

You walk some 350 odd yards

toward your homeroom through the seemingly endless halls of this 3,000-student capacity school. As you do so, the impressionable events at Central High kaleidoscope before you like some breath-taking Cinerama. You see in fleeting moments: Negro students being blocked by the National Guard and jeered at by a howling mob as they attempt, without success, to enter school September 4 . . . students being escorted into school through mob blockades, but later being forced to withdraw to safety, September 23 . . . the President of the United States acting to restore law and order at Central High School, September 24 . . . the 101st Airborne Division taking over and your going to school under military escort, September 25 . . . segregationists staging an unsuccessful walkout . . . segregationists intensifying harassment against Negro students and whites who are friendly to them . . . the Governor and other politicians keeping the school situation in a state of confusion and ferment . . . school officials refusing to take stern action against those harrasing Negro students . . . Minnijean Brown being expelled and departing for school in New York . . . the Little Rock school district officials asking the United States District Court for a stay of integration order . . . encouragement, letters, cards, gifts, honors and awards coming to students, their parents and Mrs. Daisy Bates, their leader, from people the world over. . . .

All of these school-related events flash through your mind before you turn into your homeroom. Briskly you step to your desk, but you do

not sit down before scanning it to see if you have had a visitor who placed a tack on your desk seat or smeared it with almost invisible glue. It has happened before, you know. As you begin to review the lesson for a subsequent class, some boy or girl begins calling you names—unprintable names—and threatening you. But you pretend not to hear. Apparently the teacher does not.

ALERT FOR TROUBLE

As you leave for class, someone informs you, casual like: "There is ink on your clothes." You know that someone has done it again—deliberately spilled ink on you. But while you may be a seething caldron within, outwardly you are a picture of calm. You say to yourself. "They'll not have the pleasure of knowing they have angered me."

As you walk through the halls with your head high, you are alert to anyone who might try to push, crowd, elbow, kick, or trip you. It happens almost daily; some days many times. When you enter your classroom, you take the same precautions which were taken when you went to your seat in your home-room. The precautions, which are repeated throughout the day, do not annoy you very much now. You take them subconsciously.

Now it's time to go to "gym" class, which always presents its peculiar hazards. You leave your clothes and books in your locker. You wonder if you will return to find your locker smashed and your things stolen, or merely scattered over the floor. Maybe they will be soaking wet as a result of water having been squirted through the locker vents.

Or maybe everything will be left intact, who knows?

On the "gym" floor there could be intentional bumping, pushing, or tripping. Or maybe a half dozen fellow classmates will decide that it's your turn to catch the ball. They all throw at you simultaneously. Of course, to some instructors and students this is a mere coincidence. You know otherwise, for it has happened before. Yet you try to forget it.

The "gym" class is over. You rush to the shower room. This could be an uneventful day here. Then again someone might decide to turn on the hot water in your shower stall, or to steam up the place and pelt you with wet towels. Who knows what thoughts lurk in the minds of those who have been told to torment you until you withdraw from school?

Refreshed, you go to the cafeteria for lunch. You remember the good days there, as well as the bad days. It is quiet today. If you were Minnijean, before February 20, you remembered that you dropped a tray of food on two students when a chair was pushed against your body making it impossible for you to move. As Minnijean you would also have remembered how two bowls of soup, subsequently, were dumped upon you without provocation.

But I should hope you were not Minnijean on that day, for if you were, you would have had many more unpleasant memories to reflect upon. You might remember among other things, how you were hit in the face with a rock, how you were kicked by boys on several occasions. How you were verbally

harassed, in the vilest manner, countless times. You would remember how, after rehearsing daily for more than a month, you were told that you could not sing Christmas carols with the Glee Club. This occurred just one week before the scheduled event. You are a Negro and the school officials had feared the reaction of the segregationists. But what had hurt you most was not what the segregationist thought, but what the principal said when you asked for an explanation as to why you were dropped from the Glee Club. Like the playback of a recording, you hear, as clearly as when you were standing before the principal, and again the words are equally unbelievable: "Minnijeane, there is still some differences of opinion between the federal government and the state of Arkansas as to your right to be here. Until this matter is settled, you Negro students may come to class, but you will not be allowed to participate in extra-curricular activities."

DAILY ORDEAL

That was it. The principal charged that he was misunderstood, but the fact remains that you and other Negro students are still excluded from all non-class activities. This even includes organizations where membership is determined solely on the basis of scholastic excellence.

It should be made crystal clear that it would be a great error to conclude that only Minnijeane was subjected to harassments. If you were Ernest Green, you were struck in the face on January 20; hit with wet towels in the shower room on January 30. This had happened before. If you were Melba Pattillo, you were

roughed up and reviled on October 2, and on January 9 you were pushed down. If you were Gloria Ray, a boy was pushed painfully against you by another on January 21; on February 28 your book and pencil were stolen and you were spat upon; a small nail was driven through a block and placed on your seat, point up, on March 4. Were you Terrance Roberts, you were kicked on October 2; roughed up on December 12; and you were hit while in "gym" class on January 10. Were you Jefferson Thomas, you were kicked on October 2; knocked down from behind on November 12; and on February 12 you were seized around the neck. If you were Carlotta Walls, you were kicked by a boy on February 6; likewise you would have been tripped and spat upon. Were you Thelma Mothershed, you would have had a serious cardiac condition. Nevertheless, you would have been bumped into and struck too; ink would have been spilled on your dress and you would have been verbally abused countless times, as has every other Negro student at Central High. If you were Elizabeth Eckford, a boy would have hit you with his fist on December 18, and you would have been pushed downstairs on January 10. Two days later the incident would have been repeated; you would have been roughed up in the "gym" countless times. If you were Elizabeth, you would have been the brave girl who walked with regal calm before a phalanx of armed and unfriendly National Guardsmen on the memorable morning of September 4. That walk would have made you the symbol in this fight for equal educational

opportunity. That walk would have destined you for history.

To the segregationists, you see, you are no better or no worse than Minnijean. If you are a Negro student at Central High School, you are automatically marked for mischief.

You go through afternoon classes in the same manner as you did the morning ones. At about 3:45 P.M. you depart school as you came—in your private vehicle — along with other students. You know that your parents, Mrs. Bates, and NAACP officials will be anxious to learn what manner of day you had. You tell them.

After a few minutes of relaxation, you begin preparing your homework for the following school day. You hope there will be no telephone threats from segregationists to disturb you this evening. They have, you know, somehow obtained your unlisted number.

Today was a tough, tough one, but it's history now. You hope for a better tomorrow, yet your faith, your determination, and your proud and unflinching courage will sustain you against the worst. That makes you know, without being boastful, that you will be equal to any challenge in this incredible school situation.

In light of the excellent progress being made in a number of formerly segregated schools in the South, the continuing crisis at Little Rock must be puzzling.

NATURE OF PROBLEM

In my opinion, which is shared by many others close to the situation, the problem can be attributed largely to the following:

The failure of the justice department to take action against those involved in mob violence at the school in September;

dismissal of charges or suspension of sentences against mob leaders by the municipal judge;

failure of the school officials to enunciate a firm policy regarding the behavior pattern of white students toward Negroes at Central High;

the false and inflammatory utterances made by Governor Faubus and other segregationists;

the silence of the so-called responsible citizens of the community on the legal and moral aspects of school segregation; and

the apparent feeling on the part of segregationists that the students will withdraw voluntarily if enough pressure is exerted upon them.

In a petition to the United States District Court on February 20, the Little Rock School Board listed some of these same reasons in asking that the court delay its integration order. However, there are many who suspect that time will prove that responsible school officials were the greatest impediment to the success of their own anemic integration plan.

I would not be fair to Little Rock if I did not point out that there are some cases of kindness in the deserts of strife and hate in that city. It is true that the so-called responsible citizens are for the most part silent and inactive. However, there are some who meet to discuss the school problem. There are a few who actually speak out.

Among those who meet to discuss the problem, in an informal way, are ministers and laymen. The group is interracial.

When Minnijean Brown was expelled from Central on February 17, a white woman offered to pay for the cost of her education. When advised that Minnijean had been granted a full scholarship by the New Lincoln High School in New York City, this kind person offered to buy some clothing for the girl. Included were a coat, a half dozen dresses, with accessories, luggage, etc. Scores of telegrams and letters were sent the members of the Little Rock School Board requesting that Minnijean not be expelled.

Following is a letter dealing with the Minnijean incident which appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* of March 3. It reflects, I believe, the thinking of a large number of fair-minded but silent persons at Little Rock:

The offspring of Mother's Leaguers and the like at Central High must feel that the expulsion of Minnijean Brown is an important victory in their war against integration. One can't help feeling a sneaking sympathy for Minnie, who had the wild idea that it was permissible for her to call someone 'white trash' (and with considerable provocation, I might add) as it was for someone to call her 'nigger,' which we all know needs no provocation.

Miss Brown apparently has a low boiling point. This won't do! We're accustomed to patient Negroes here in the South. No allowances are to be made for individual differences in temperament.

'White trash' is, of course, an unattractive figure of speech, but so is 'nigger.' Both terms are contemptuous and insulting in their intent.

Perhaps the remaining eight Negro students can continue to rise above the level of their tormentors and stay at Central High. The dignity, poise, and self-control of such Negro children as these are almost superhuman. What sort of adults do you suppose they will be? Can anyone of us imagine himself behaving as they have behaved in like circumstances?

I can't. It's much easier to imagine reacting like Minnijean Brown. Minnie isn't the stuff of which pioneers are made, but she's quite human.

Little Rock is now the capital of Southern resistance to equal educational opportunities for Negroes. Almost every professional political race hater of note has visited the city during the past eight months.

Having failed in its bold bid to defy the federal government by the force of arms, the South could still claim some measure of victory if even the presence of federal troops cannot secure for Negro children their legal and moral right to the best education in their community or state.

There are those who complain about the three and a half million dollars which the federal government has spent in the Little Rock Central High School crisis since September. This is a paltry sum when one considers the purpose. This purpose goes far beyond school integration. It goes to the heart of the authority and power of the federal judiciary. If this is not worth defending, then our country is not worth defending, because the foundation of this government is based upon unqualified respect for the inalienable rights of all men and duly constituted law.

The South itself is spending mil-
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COURAGEOUS STUDENTS

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lions annually, chiefly in tax-payers money, on an indefensible and lost cause—Segregation. If half as much energy and money had been spent in compliance with the courts' orders as has been dissipated in defiance, school integration would no doubt be an accomplished fact.

The hard core South will continue to be a land of misery and me-

diocrity as long as Southerners are more interested in perpetuating a horrible past than they are in promoting a hopeful future. The South will continue to spread human discord at home and distrust abroad until Southerners and Americans everywhere recognize that tyranny is no better in Birmingham than it is in Budapest, no better in Mississippi than in Moscow. Yes, no better in Little Rock than in Latvia.