The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History

University of Arkansas
365 N. McIlroy Ave.
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Event Transcript

Little Rock Nine News Conference

Clinton School of Public Service

September 23, 2007

Little Rock, Arkansas

Event Description

As part of a series commemorating 50 years of integration at Little Rock Central High School, Deborah Mathis moderated a news conference at the Clinton School of Public Service featuring the Little Rock Nine. Minnijean Brown Trickey, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed Wair, Melba Patillo Beals, Carlotta Walls Lanier, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Terrence Roberts, and Jefferson Thomas spoke about their struggles and friendships, the mentorship of Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the support of the 101st Airborne Division. They also discussed the status of the civil rights movement, considering Hurricane Katrina and Barack Obama's presidential run.

Transcript:

[00:00:00]

[*Introductory music*]

[*Camera clicks*]

[00:00:24] Deborah Mathis: Well, good afternoon everybody. Thanks for being here, my fellow journalists. We thank you. I want to first of all say that I—kudos to you and your news organizations for recognizing the significance of this event. [*Telephone rings*] There are other things going on in the world, but I'm glad that you and your organizations realize that this is a very important one as well. So thanks for being here. I'm Deborah Mathis, and I owe my—the launch of my thirty-six-year journalism career in part to these nine wonderful people because of the doors they opened for me at Central High, where I was the first Black editor in 1970, [19]71. So that was a little while ago, too. Understandably, there's been a lot of demand—a deluge of requests for interviews with the Little Rock Nine, and we appreciate that. But you also know that this has been a very busy time, so I'd like to thank several people for accommodating media for this because otherwise it would have been a real mess, everybody trying to track somebody down. Obviously, the—your numbers outnumber them, and their schedules are

very busy, so Flowers Communication Group of Chicago is to be thanked with Adorn Lewis-Mitchell, Ronald Childs, and Thelma Walker; the University of Arkansas School of Public Service and especially Dean Skip Rutherford; the Clinton Presidential Center and the Clinton Foundation with Lena Moore; and the Little Rock Nine Foundation. So thank you for thinking of us—fitting us into this schedule. [00:02:06] Because of the time—as a White House correspondent, I always hated rules and, of course, there's no bigger herd than that one. But [*camera clicks*] we know that there have to be rules because we're limited on time. So if you will just adhere to a few. First and foremost, cell phones off or on—what do you call it—vibrate. [*Laughs*] Secondly, if you would limit your—your questions—you know, we don't have to do a lot of background stuff to give the questions—just get straight to the question—make it short—one part to the question, if you don't mind, so we can accommodate as many people as possible in the one hour that we have. And also if you do not mind giving your name and your news organization—I promise you that this is intelligence gathering of the most benign order. [*Terrence Roberts laughs*] I mean, we only want this for the historical record because a lot of the Nine want to know who's here, and we'd like to maybe have you on mailing lists for

future events or something. So that really is that—there is not anything involving the Patriot Act. [*Audience laughs*] Okay, without further ado—as I said, I would love to introduce you to these spectacular people. I hope—does everybody have bios of all the nine? Good. And if you don't, we'll get that to you after the news conference. But if you would just raise your hand, you may—I will—I'll acknowledge you. We'll get a microphone over to you so, again, we can have this, and everybody can hear. And you may direct your question to any of the Little Rock Nine as you so choose. First question? Also, one other rule. Please only media asking question. Only credentialed media. We know a lot of other people might want to, but this is really the only opportunity that media is getting. So please—thank you.

[00:04:07] Jonathan Wilson: My name's Jonathan Wilson. I'm from KARK, Channel 4, here in Little Rock. A question for anybody who wants to address it. Is there—fifty years later, is there a myth about that day or—or those weeks that you guys find yourselves continually having to dispel? Any surprise at that or anything that you feel that you have to continually go back on and correct the record on or misconceptions about?

[00:04:31] Elizabeth Eckford: The local paper always uses a line that we attended school under [*camera clicks*] the protection of

federal troops. Yes, the federal troops were our guards in the hallways. They didn't go into any classes, but they—they also didn't prevent any attacks on us, and we were assaulted every day.

[00:04:51] Melba Pattillo Beals: I think one of the other myths would be that we were paid—that we were selected—highly selected and that we were paid. I, myself, never got a dime. I don't think any of these other people did. Had they gotten a dime, they would've shared it with me. [*Audience laughs*] The other thing was because we always share. Listen. The other thing was that, you know, nothing happened. There—there were many—many myths going around. One was that Mrs. Daisy Bates trained us languagewise—taught us to wear good clothes—et cetera. [*Camera clicks*] In my case, my mother was an English—English professor and started training to me to speak the English language when I was, like, born. And the second thing is that all the parents of the Little Rock Nine were people who were intelligent, educated, church-going people who observed the rules of tradition, and they knew what they were doing. So a lot of the myths that floated around were, in some ways, wounding to our parents who had done an extraordinary

job in preparing us to face this challenge that we didn't know would be this great, but, certainly, it would come to be that way.

[00:05:42] Carlotta Walls LaNier: Another one was the fact that we were—had been be brought in from the North—some of us—and it was pretty obvious that anyone could check the records and know that we were born and raised here in Little Rock. The other myth was [*camera clicks*] the—that all of the students in the mob weren't members at Little Rock Central High School, and that's strictly incorrect. So . . .

[00:06:14] DM: That was a great question, by the way, and that's one of my old places where I used to work. Of course, everybody who's not from Arkansas should know I've worked everywhere in Arkansas. [*Audience laughs*] I've worked at all the media in Arkansas, so that's not saying much. But great question. Anyone else? Next? Yes, please.

[00:06:28] Sandra Kirk: Sandra Kirk, Fox 16. This message is for Elizabeth Eckford. You were recently quoted in *Newsweek* as saying you'd be the only one who wouldn't do it again. Can you explain that?

[00:06:36] EE: That's correct. In 1957, [*camera clicks*] I was a very shy, meek child, [*camera clicks*] but my experience taught me to

find my own voice. I'm an assertive person, and an assertive person could not be quiet and suffer as we were expected to.

[00:06:56] DM: Question? Let me go here first. Thank you.

[00:07:03] Steve Brauner: Steve Brauner, *Christian Science Monitor*. Specifically to the ones who still live in Little Rock right now, how would you compare life in Little Rock to fifty years ago? Has there been progress both in terms of integration and in terms of just life in general for African Americans?

[00:07:17] EE: I've been here since 1974, and I noticed for a long time that I did not hear from students in—in Little Rock, whereas students all over the country could find me, and it was because the subject was not taught in the—in the schools. It is being taught now, so I am hearing from Central High students and students in other schools in the Little Rock district. But for a long time, they sought to change the conversation and not address the subject. And it wasn't until 1996 that there was a local effort [*camera clicks*] to build a small museum. And that was a very, very difficult thing to [*camera clicks*] do locally, but it was achieved.

[00:07:59] Thelma Mothershed Ware: I came back to Little Rock in 2003, and I find that the people have changed a lot. I go to UAMS—go to the ?Spine? Center where I have to go to get

therapy. The people there are very, very friendly and they just accept me. Some lady told me—said, "I was in a class with you in Central," [*camera clicks*] and—but I didn't know her then because she never told me her name then. We never exchanged phone numbers or telephone numbers but—or addresses. [*Camera clicks*] But she said that she knew me at Central, and they—the people here seem to be a lot nicer than they were—look like a little more accepting than they were in [19]57. Seem to be.

[00:08:31] EE: For a long time, the only people we met were people who said, "It wasn't me." [*Audience laughs*]

[00:08:41] DM: Another question from media, please.

[00:08:47] Crystal Park: Crystal Park from Soldiers Radio and Television. Do you remember of any of your first impressions or lasting memories of the soldiers who were there for you?

[00:08:56] EE: Yes, I remember the 101st Airborne Division. I remember the contrast between them and the National Guard. [*Camera clicks*] At that time, the National Guard was not very well-trained. When the guard duty was turned over to the Arkansas National Guard, the students laughed at them at first, and so the 101st had to come back and give them some training. I remember the helicopters over—over—overhead, the armed

sentries on the roof, and [*camera clicks*] we didn't learn until 1997 that they did not have ammunition in their guns.

[*Audience laughs*]

[00:09:29] MB: I remember the fact that they were crisply dressed. My grandmother always said, "You can look at a—at the mirror of a man's shoes to see their souls." And she always made me shine and polish my saddle shoes. And I remember these gentlemen had crisp creases in the front of their trousers, and their clothes were beautifully done. And I remember the first day that we met them, we—we tried—Minnijean and I, particularly, used to be quiet devilish, so we tried to distract them. They would be standing at attention, and we would go up and sort of wave our fingers in their eyes. And I remember that as time went on, how they did become a—a comfort to us in terms of their conversation. I—I want to certainly say that the young gentleman who—who was my personal bodyguard—there were several perimeters, but they did become colleagues, and they did teach us the difference between being a—a whining person trying to achieve something and a warrior. I write about that process in my book, and I call it *Warriors Don't Cry* because one of the things they taught me was the difference between just being somebody frightened and somebody who makes plans

for what they do and somebody who doesn't roll on the floor when they're hit but instead looks behind you and goes forward. So I do remember them as the reason I'm alive. And there is one in San Francisco who called me up—his name is Marty Salmon. And he called me up one day, and he says, "Hey, you know what? Slavery is over, but I really own you because I'm the reason you're living." And I said, "Absolutely. You do. Let's have dinner." And we've had—been friends every since then. And he was in charge of all the guards of the first floor.

[00:10:53] EE: I—I always say to students that's there some debts that can never, never be repaid, but for the 101st, they always must be acknowledged.

[00:11:06] DM: Another question? Yes, sir. [*Someone coughs*]

[00:11:10] Robert Marus: I would stand up, but I have a computer in my lap. I'm Robert Marus from Associated Baptist Press. I'm also a Central High graduate, and my question is about America in 2007, which seems to [*camera clicks*] be resegregating in a lot of ways. When I was in high school at Central, one of the best things about it was not only ethnic integration but socioeconomic integration. Now do you think America is re-segregating with further growth of the suburbs and exurbs, and, if so, what do you attribute that to?

[00:11:36] EE: Racism is taught at home. It was taught at home then, and it's still taught at home. And it's also institutionalized. That has not changed about America.

[00:11:47] Ernest Green: Well, I—I would add that you also are looking at not only education but housing and employment, [*camera clicks*] and these are issues that this country still struggles with. [*Camera clicks*] I think that to look at education in isolation, you—you're not looking at the entire picture concerning America. Is America resegregating? In many ways they are, and that's why I think all of you are here. Hopefully, one of the outcomes from this recognition is "what are the efforts we're going to do to try to move away from that?" So, hopefully, you carry message, and you transmit it.

[00:12:29] MB: Also, don't equate segregation and integration with what we're after here. Understand that the exchange of that word is access to opportunity. What we really stand for as the Little Rock Nine is access to opportunity. How many times in our lives are we asked, "Why did you want to go to Central High School? Did you want to go sit by the white folks?" No. Nothing magic happens when you sit by white people. Coins don't jingle in your pocket. You don't automatically get a degree. But what we're looking for here is access to

opportunity, and so if segregation is an indication that the access to opportunity is being reduced, we are quite concerned about that, and we want to work to look at where is the opportunity for every American to claim their own personal freedom. We have to be educated in order to do so.

[00:13:14] Minnijean Brown Tricky: If segregation is a symptom, we're a sick nation. I think that's where we stand. That's what we have to look at. And if the Little Rock Nine just fifty years later [*camera clicks*] can be a catalyst for social change, we'll take that responsibility just as we were in 1957, which gave the United States a view of itself that it might not have known. And so we want this honest view to occur starting now, if possible, so that we can be catalysts for change for the future.

[00:13:56] CL: I've always felt that *Brown versus Board of Education* was really the catalyst for change for education, and that the Little Rock Nine, per se, became the designated drivers, not that we had asked for that. The—the bit [*camera clicks*] that we need to—*Brown* not only did—just to piggyback off of what one of the others have said is that not only the—the change in education because of *Brown v. Board*, but the Housing Act, the Civil Rights Act, the Votings Right Act—all of that came from—from Brown. And so, you know, that piece—we just happened to

be that—that group that helped [*camera clicks*] as a vehicle of change for—for *Brown v. Board*.

[00:14:51] DM: We have a question right here, I believe. Sir?

[00:14:56] Ron Bernthal: Hi, I'm Ron Bernthal from NPR affiliate WJFF in New York. I was in the high school today—this morning—for the first time, and I know you all have been in there, some as recently as today. And I was just wondering if there were—your first day fifty years ago when you went into the building—if there were any classrooms or teachers or anyone once you got into the building itself that you remember with either very fond memories or not-so-good memories—people you met—you know, teachers or classrooms in the school itself.

[00:15:28] EE: I remember that for about—for about two weeks, there were friendly overtures from students, but that very quickly ended, and I'm still puzzled as to why they gave up so quickly. Among the nine of us, there are perhaps five people that we remember who were kind to us. The majority of students turned their backs, and the message that it seemed to be was [*camera clicks*] that they didn't really care about what was happening to us. There was an organized group that followed us from class to class and attacked us and had coordinated plans. Some records indicate there were about a

hundred and seventy-five students of that group. But the majority turned their backs and didn't acknowledge what was going on. Today some of those people say that they were kind to us and that they were welcoming to us. I—I—I think that they want to be seen as good people. I understand that. But it's very, very annoying for them even today to not acknowledge our pain.

[00:16:36] Gloria Ray Karlmark: I would like to acknowledge two teachers—perhaps even point out a third teacher—but I did have teachers that I appreciated for their stand in the classroom. One was the teacher of trigonometry who said from the beginning, "When you enter this room, there's a lot going on in the school, but in this room it's all about trigonometry." And it was a teacher that I thought treated me fairly. I got the grade that I earned. [*Cameras click*] Did—if I did well, I—I got a good—a—a—a—a score that reflected it. It I did less well, it reflected that. I really appreciated that. My biology teacher was the same. She said, "It's a question of performance in here. You will get your assignments, and you're expected to do them. Those of you who do well will continue to do well. And those who—of you who do not do well will have to do it over." That was fair. The third teacher, however—she told me—or told our class—incidentally,

in case some of you are wondering, I never shared a classroom with any other Black student. I was always alone in my classes. The third teacher—she told the class that she didn't appreciate having me in it. She didn't agree with what was going on in this school, and she wanted us all to know from the get-go. That set the tone for what happened in that classroom for the entire year. Having said that, it was in that very same class that the one person who befriended me in Central High School—she actually sat in that teacher's class across the aisle-way from me, and we would write notes to each other. She pointed out when I wrote a note to her, saying, "Becky"—her name was Becky Holtin—I said, "I see you in the hallway. Do you want me to say hello to you?" And she wrote back, "Oh, no, please don't. The White Citizens' Council will see it, and they will ostracize my—my family, and I don't want my family subjected to that danger." [00:18:44] She was one [*someone coughs*] of the majority who was at least not silent in the classroom. And you cannot imagine what it meant to have one—one class—one time during a day where you knew there would be someone that you could—could communicate with. It meant a lot. I say to today's students that are seeing other kids being bullied, to—to not let it happen,

that they—just a simple smile or [*someone clears throat*] warm greeting can make all the difference . . .

Unidentified female panelist: Difference.

[00:19:18] GK: . . . in the world to that poor student that's being bullied.

[00:19:22] CL: I—I had a—a contrast of—of two teachers there at Central I—I think of often. One was my Spanish teacher; the other was my biology teacher. The Spanish teacher should've retired before I got there. [*Audience laughs*] Her son taught me biology but had seen the world through the Korean War. I have always stated that a child is not born a racist. They learn that at home. It is magnified at school [*camera clicks*] and—and on the playgrounds and—and those sorts of environments in our society. And I'm sure that he learned certain things at the dinner table as he was growing up. But once he left Little Rock and saw the world, he came back and taught at Little Rock Central High School. And he was one of my—one of the—the best teachers that I had that protected me in—in any way possible that he could. And it—that just shows the difference from [*camera clicks*] growing up in one particular household, being exposed to other people, and then coming back and realizing that what I learned as a child, I—you know, I take the

best from my parents, and then I'll move on from there. And—and he was one of those, and I—I give him credit for that. Then I also had a chemistry teacher that I later found out twenty years later was one of the—who I knew did not want me in his class and had—had a few problems in there, but I knew how to circumvent some of the problems. And I later found out that he had been dismissed because they knew—the investigations that took place [*camera clicks*]—he was one who was helping the harassers to make dynamite and so forth. So we've had the good and the bad there at Central. Most were there just to teach and—but, you know, in any society you're going to run into this.

[00:21:44] DM: I think it's remarkable how vivid your memories are which, I think, tells us all how dramatic or traumatic . . .

Unidentified female panelist: Mh-hmm.

DM: . . . some of those events [*someone clears throat*] were because they really etched themselves onto your—your memories. And we appreciate that. You had a question, sir?

[00:21:58;17] Scott Lunsford: Yes, I'm Scott Lunsford from the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History [*panel members laugh*]—Fayetteville, Arkansas, at the University of Arkansas.

GK: Oh.

SL: I'm interested in a memory—any memories that you may have outside of the school—in time spent with Christopher Columbus Mercer and the car rides going [*cameras click*] to and from the school.

[00:22:24] GK: I have plenty of memories about the car rides going to and from the school, but I don't recognize the name of the [*camera clicks*] gentlemen you said. My father drove me back and forth to school, together with Ernest and with Jefferson Thomas.

[00:22:37] EE: I do . . .

[00:22:38] GK: I have memories of that because my father—a man at that point who was sixty-seven years old—a retired man with a bad heart and asthma—he—he was subjected to people spitting on his windshield and spitting at him and all of the harassment of a nigger being—driving the nigger kids to the school. It didn't give him a heart attack because he, too, was determined to see the thing through.

[00:23:04] EE: I remember Mr. Mercer. He was the only attorney that talked to us. There were some very famous attorneys—Thurgood Marshall, who I had a crush on . .

Unidentified female panelist: We all . . . [*Audience laughs*]

[00:23:18] EE: And he was—he—he talked very frankly and very candidly to Daisy Bates. He's the only person who [*laughs*]—who [*microphone feedback*] would stand up to her. [*Laughter*] [*Microphone feedback*]

DM: What is that? Sorry, I don't think we know what that is. [*Audience laughs*]

SL: Is it down at the end?

[00:23:37] EE: It's something he's touching over here. [*Audience laughs*]

DM: Poor guy. You! [*Laughter*] No, I think it's okay.

CL: It is you.

DM: Okay, I think we can go ahead. We can proceed. [*Laughs*]

[00:23:54] EG: I have memories of Chris, and he has—he served—one of the few African-American attorneys who was practicing, and he was obviously very close to the Bateses. He was involved with the NAACP. I think, you know, fifty years later, all of the memories of that car ride, mainly you were thinking through how you were going to survive the day and where would you [*camera clicks*] encounter someone who was either trying to trip you up, spit on you, and curse you—and in addition to that, try to figure out how to do the schoolwork. So we learned multitasking very [*DM laughs*] early in our lives. [*Camera clicks*]

But Chris was someone who—who was there from time to time and did drive us to school.

[00:24:55] CL: I remember him well, and he—he lived in the neighborhood—in my neighborhood. So—and I—I know the struggles he had prior to becoming a—an attorney, and he was quite involved in—in—during our time, and he was somewhat of an assistant, I would think, to Wiley Branton at the time, so—who—who was also one that we—at least I think well of, so—along with Thurgood Marshall. So if you wanted to just, you know, categorize them on a—you know, it started out with Marshall, then was Branton—Branton and—and then Mercer.

[00:25:34] EE: You may be surprised to learn that Chris Mercer still is practicing law.

CL: Yes, I heard.

[00:25:38] EE: I see him in the courthouse occasionally. [*CL laughs*] He—he was one—among the first non-whites to attend the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville Law School. The first was Silas Hunt, and he died shortly after that of—of tuberculosis, and then there were three others, Chris Mercer, Wiley Branton, and Alex Hayley's brother.

EG: George.

Unidentified female panelist: George.

EE: George Haley.

Unidentified female panelist: George Haley. [*Panel members speak unclear words*]

[00:26:03] EE: And Chris Mercer graduated later than—than—than they did, but he graduated at the top of his class.

CL: Right.

[00:26:10] EG: Well, one of the things—and I think the point about the—the early graduations of the Ark—University of Arkansas Law School and the medical school—Edith Irby Jones was the—and that was early [19]50s. So we grew up in a time period in which other institutions had accepted African Americans—the law school, the med school had admitted a number of—a few Black students. The buses, the library, the public park was all integrated. So the spring of [19]57 at least for me—when they said, "Did you want a transfer?"—here was the Little Rock school system complying with the fifty—even though they were sued by the NAA, they were one of the first Southern cities complying with the Supreme Court decision. And we had every reason to believe that the local government and the state government were going to be supportive of our efforts. And, lo and behold, you know, voila! [*CL laughs*] Faubus plays the race card and calls out the troops, and nobody expected that . . .

GK: No, no.

[00:27:24] EG: . . . I'm sure. The leadership didn't. And our biggest shock was that here we are with paratroop—with guardsmen who are barring us and letting white students in.

[00:27:40] MB I think—you know, you talked about the ride to and from school. It's important to note that those were periods of therapy. And our leader here, Ernie Green, who was the oldest at the time [*someone laughs*]—I remember the fact that in—in the car, sometimes we would get in and be very silent for a long time, whether or not we were riding in the Jeep of the—of the soldiers or we were riding in the cars of our parents—sometimes we'd be very silent. And usually what'd break that silence, it'd be Ernie saying something like, "Well, I guess you didn't see the welcome wagon today, guys, did they? They didn't put the welcome wagon out for you." [*Audience laughs*] Or Terry would say something really flippant, and so the—the riding back and forth together became for me a therapeutic period in which we compared some notes. Sometimes we said nothing. We talked about other things. But it was a—it—it was certainly a time in which, you know, our—our brother and sister who had grew—are bonding because no one's been where we've been. No one could know what we'd endured that day, and no one could give us a

reason why or tell us that it was all going to be all right because we knew that it wasn't going to be all right. And, in fact, daily, in some cases, it got much worse. And so those car rides that—you bring them up—were very significant for me and, I think, for the others as well because it was a time of a soul-mending, and what whispers and inklings of promise we got came from each other and the inspiration we got from holding hands, being together. [*Cameras click*]

[00:29:01] GK: I think you should also know that there is a difference in the car rides. In the beginning, of course, the 101st transported us to and from school, but that only went on for so long. And after that period, then we—the nine of us were split up into different cars that were transported by different people to and from school for the rest of the year. [*Cameras click*]

[00:29:23] DM: We have a question here from . . .

[00:29:25] Charles Crowson: Yes, I'm Charles Crowson with KTHV here in Little Rock. An HBO documentary will be airing Tuesday night where two Little Rock natives have returned to Central High. It's fifty years later. And the premise of this documentary is to tell the story of Central High fifty years later through the voices and eyes of those who walk the halls today.

They do say racism still exists in some capacity in the—in the school but also contending that it's almost a microcosm of urban schools across the country today.

DM?: Urban—yes, of . . .

[00:29:58] CC: Have you seen the documentary and your thoughts on it in its accuracy?

[00:30:04] MT: I have not . . .

Unidentified female panelist: Well . . .

MT: . . . seen it. [*Clears throat*] [*Cameras click*]

DM: Go ahead, Minnijean.

[00:30:08] MT: You're right, it's—it's an indictment of the nation. That's because it actually [*camera clicks*] talks about what children's experiences are. And I—I don't think I really want to talk about the documentary [*camera clicks*] particularly because it hasn't been released here. But, in fact, we do have a crisis in our society. We have segregation, of course, language, culture, class—we—we can do that really well. If it's not race this year, it can be something else. So we—we do segregation very well in the US. And our children are telling us this, and I guess that's what we were telling the nation fifty years ago. We need to hear them and respond to them. We should not claim to be the most powerful and the most—and the richest nation in the world and

have a substandard, many-tiered [*cameras click*] educational—education system. So I think if I were to—open my mouth and [*audience laughs*]—that the—the documentary speaks to the nation, and I would hope that we get a chance to listen and pay attention.

[00:31:32] DM: Anyone else about that particular thing? All right. Thank you. Yes, please.

[00:31:37] Annette Brieger: Hi. My name is Annette Brieger, and I'm with the German television. We're here today to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of your high school event—fifty years ago. At the same time, we're reading in the papers about Jena and the events there that are happening. And I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about where that leaves us in the process of the—the goals of the civil rights movement.

[00:31:59] MB: The civil rights movement is an evolving process. It's an evolution, and it—it moves forward. Someone asked, "Can we ever go back to where we were?" And the—and the—and the answer to that question is no. Some people say, "Well, okay, do you feel as the Little Rock Nine that the sacrifices you made were for naught?" The answer is no. We're not ever going back to where we were prior to going to Central High School. We changed the playing field. Before then, it was

"Please, will you—?" Had we waited until now for Central High School people to welcome us and say, "Please, come on, honey—come to class with us," we would be ?beard? and seniors as we are now and still in the high schools we were in. And so, yes, there have been changes. Are we unhappy about what's happening in Jena? Yeah, we were unhappy. Were we unhappy about Katrina? Were we unhappy that all those Black people were allowed to float in that water? I praised Wolf Blitzer. I wrote him a note, saying, "Thank you, sir, for saying it: 'If their faces had been white, we would never, ever have let it sit that way—let them sit in their own water with their own dead around them.'" And so we are not happy, but does that mean that we don't think there's been cro—progress? Absolutely, there's been progress, and we are pleased about that progress, and we must take the flakes of that progress as fuel for how we will move ahead. There is no question as to whether we're moving ahead—it's just how we're going to do it. We're moving forward. Supreme Court decisions diluting Brown or not—I don't know a—a person on the planet, minority or not, in this great tapestry of humanity that is willing to stand back and say, "Oh, well, you know, let me relinquish my equal rights to you. Why don't you use them today?" Not happening, so we're going to move

forward. The issue is how to move forward in a way that is inclusive rather than exclusive. And so, no, we're not a hundred percent happy, but that just means we've got to get off our butts and work harder. That means we're going to be doing something. We're going to be urging other people to help and join in what we see is a necessary journey for this nation if we are all to survive. We have other battles to fight—the warming of the planet, for example—and so we've got to get it together on this one. We can't keep fighting the same thing over and over.

[00:34:12] MT: I think . . .

Jefferson Thomas: I . . .

MT: . . . one of the—no, you, please. [*Laughter*]

JT: I think what we need to realize is that we're not really fighting, say, segregation; we're fighting the idea and the principles of the people who enforce and believe in segregation. In 1957-[19]58, you had a governor that, rather than see Blacks and whites go to school together, closed all schools to all students. In ?Jenava?, rather than have Blacks and whites sit under a tree together, you cut the tree down.

Unknown female panelist: Mh-hmm.

[00:34:48] JT: Now nobody can do—you can't deny something to everybody just to keep a few people from having the benefits of equal access to the shade of a tree or equal access to the learning in a classroom. And that's what we have to realize, that you—you're so bent on denying things to a maj—minority of your—your population that you actually denying it to the majority. You can't keep us separated like that. If "separate but equal" was okay, you would never be in the fix you're in today. But you never had equal education. You had them separate. They were never equal. And now it's a big fuss about us having equal access to the education, all children being the same. So you got to admit that, that it's not a—a matter of integration or mixing of the races; it's a matter you've got to admit that you've denied certain people these rights, and you've got to fess up and be willing to open up your hearts and minds to what's right in America according to the Constitution. [*Cameras click*] [*Conversations in audience*] Okay.

[00:36:06] Dana Bradley: Well, good afternoon. My name is Dana Bradley, and I work with KARN news radio. You-all endured a lot of physical and verbal abuse from the students, from the town, and every—everything. Was there ever a time that you wanted to just quit—drop out of school? And if there was, did Daisy

Bates ever say anything to you to try to encourage you and say, "Don't give up"? [*Panel members laugh*]

[00:36:26] EE: There were many times when it was difficult to finish a class, stay—make yourself go to the next class. There was one class that I felt comfortable in and actually felt part of the class. Ironically, it was a speech class for a—and I was a shy person. It was because of the atmosphere that the teacher created. In all classes I was a—at the end of a row, but in all the other classes, it was the one farthest away from the door. In this class, I was the end—at the end of the first row, and there were two students who—who engaged me every day in a friendly way, and that—that made a tremendous difference for me to feel totally alone all day and enter the speech class and be part of the class.

Unidentified female panel member: Hmm.

[00:37:18] MB: I should say it was also was not about Daisy Bates; it was about what our parents told us. It was our parents to whom we asked for comfort, and we should really—not enough has been said about the parents of the Little Rock Nine. These were people who, day on, after—hour after hour when we came home with—with wounds—and—and wounds to our hearts and wounds to our bodies, said, "You know, you're going to have to

make up your mind what you're going to do here." And so it was important for us to have these particular parents backing us up. These were incredible people who had some foresight about the benefits of what we were doing because we as children certainly didn't have those foresights. I will also recall for you an incident in which Martin Luther King came to Mrs. Bates's basement to visit us once. And I was in a whiny, whiny mood. I mean, I was really moaning about this, that, and the other. Somebody had recently put acid in my eyes, and so I was a whiny pot. [00:38:06] And he said to me—words that I would first regret and then love and then understand, which was, "Melba, don't be selfish. You are not doing this for yourself but for generations yet unborn." And I would learn to loathe that statement, but then as I got older, I would understand what he meant. And so, yeah, there many times when I thought suicide—I thought anything. "I will do anything not to go back," because the essence of the pain of Central High School is not one incident today. The essence is the continuum on which we had to tread, knowing that "This is happening to me, and it hurts now. It's going to happen again and again and again. And to whom will I turn to stop it? It is not going to stop." And so that

was—that was the real—that was the real treadmill that we walked of pain.

[00:38:50] GK: I never thought of stopping. I lived to go into that school the next day. That was my definition of the quality of life was the right to, according to the American Constitution, attend that school.

[00:39:04] EG: I think one of the things that you should glean from this discussion is that this is a group of people that had fortitude and—[*GK laughs*]—and one of the things I figured out early on, that the best revenge against my tormenters was to remain there.

GK: Yeah. [*Laughter*]

Unidentified female panelist: Absolutely.

[00:39:25] EG: That if I really wanted to drive them crazy was to stay there because their goal was to drive us out and our goal—and we were committed to finish our work and try to finish out that year. And so in many ways, we supported each other. One of us was down, the—it was the responsibility of one or some of the others to try to get you through that day. And to this day, I think we've [*camera clicks*] all figured that out. We—we revert back to being sixteen and fifteen [*unidentified female panelists laugh*] whenever we're together.

Unidentified female panelist: We do.

[00:40:04] EG: But we have learned over the years and that year, the proverbial meaning—the word covering one's back [*GK laughs*]—we learned how to do to that very well, and it really helped us all survive that year.

CL: [*Unclear words*].

[00:40:21] TW: There were a lot of mornings I did not want to go to school again because I knew that I would be ignored all the day long. A junior wants to be accepted—wants to be smiled at and ?sat with?, but we just saw each other at eight thirty, sometimes at lunch time, and at three thirty. The school was so large, we saw—we didn't even see each other in the hallway, except I had the pleasure of having biology with Jefferson Thomas. He and I had a class together. Other than that, we didn't see any Black kids in the class. So it was a hard time, but we just stuck and stayed. We stayed with each other.

[00:40:52] CL: That's true. And, you know, I was taught to complete a—a project or when you commit yourself to something, you see it through. Now I saw it through that first year, and I really didn't have to go back. Then the governor, you know, closes the schools, and—and that is—is a challenge in itself, that you've got to determine how you're going to complete

your education when the schools are now closed. You find a way. I found a way through University of Arkansas correspondence courses and also in the summers, going to other summer schools. People ask me today, "Then why—you know, why didn't you just stay at one of those, such as going to school in Chicago one summer?" Because I needed that diploma to validate what I had gone through in 1957-[19]58, so it—it—it—it was a—a commitment, and I—and I—I—I felt I—I did that that year, and no one was going to turn me away. I was going to continue to—to do what I needed to do or—or—or die trying, really. And then the—the final—final bit to this whole goal-oriented activity that we went through [*laughs*] was to get that diploma, and I feel good about that. [*Camera clicks*]

[00:42:23] MT: Dr. Roberts, would you tell the story of [*GK and CL laugh*] Jim Lawson at the Museum [*camera clicks*] of Tolerance with the three of us—the—the story about nonviolence? Do you mind?

[00:42:37] Terrence Roberts: I don't remember.

MT: Okay. [*Laughter*] Okay. We're—we're—we were at the Museum of Tolerance, and Jim Lawson, who studied in India or who was—worked with Dr. King, asked us when we thought he came to teach us nonviolence. And Dr. Roberts said he thought

it was in October. And he said, "No, it wasn't until the new year, but when I got there, I saw that you all had the skills of nonviolent resistance." And I thought that was the greatest compliment I ever had.

TR: Wow, I like that. [*Laughter*] I love that story.

CL: Well, it was on-job training as far as I was concerned. I didn't have that [*laughs*] . . .

DM: Question, sir?

[00:43:34] Hezekiah Brown: Yes. My name is Hezekiah Brown from Brown, Brown, and Associates. I am one of the Black soldiers who came here fifty years ago.

CL: Oh.

[00:43:43] HB: This is the very first time I ever been in your presence. We came to guard and protect you at the same time.

CL: Mh-hmm.

[00:43:50] HB: But we were prevented from doing that and can . . .

CL: That's right.

[00:43:52] HB: . . . moved out to Camp Robinson.

CL: Mh-hmm.

[00:43:53] HB: So I am just—this have made my life just to be able to see all of you here [*cameras click*] who we were supposed to be protecting during that period of time.

[00:44:03] CL: And we thank you.

HB: Of course, we [*unclear words*].

TR: Thank you very much.

GK: In fact, we talked about you today.

HB: But, in any event, I am glad to meet you. This is the closest I ever been to you, but we were supposed to be trying to protect you. [*TR laughs*]

CL?: I remember seeing . . .

DM?: Oh, thank you.

[*Panelists and audience applaud*]

DM?: That's amazing.

[00:44:14] GK: But . . .

DM?: That is amazing.

GK: . . . I—I can tell you that we talked about you on the—in the car on the—over . . .

MT: On the way.

CL: Mh-hmm.

GK: . . . coming over here—that we never saw a Black soldier at the school. So we . . .

EE: We . . .

GK: . . . missed you. [*Laughter*]

[00:44:29] EE: I do remember seeing some Black soldiers the first day but not after that.

GK: That's right.

EE: And so I know that the military accommodated the local racists because then they would not have to take orders from Black soldiers.

[00:44:46] CL: And I understand, also, the Hispanics in the group were held back. I—it—it's a full circle for me. I did not—I'm now on the board of trustees of University of Northern Colorado, and once I was—been in—went before the committee to be accepted, the person that is already on the board needed to re-up as well, and he waited till the last to speak to the committee, and I found out that he was a part of the 101st, and he was held back because of his Hispanic background.

TR: Hmm.

[00:45:23] CL: And so nine—you know, forty-eight years ago, he was supposed to be there to protect me, and now the two of us are hoping to protect students at University of Northern Colorado.

[00:45:37] DM: It's amazing. We have time for a couple of more questions because of the schedule.

[00:45:42] Doc Lawrence: Yes.

DM: Go ahead, sir.

DL: Thank you. My name is Doc Lawrence. I'm with *The Piedmont Review* in Atlanta, and thank you for all you've done for our country. My question as a Southerner and as someone that knows that along with governors, mayors, county commissioners, and sheriffs, that the Christian churches of Southern towns have always been part of the power structure and a very important part—particularly, the white Christian churches. Did the white clergy of Little Rock come to your defense? Did they speak out? Did they exhort their congregations to defend you and to teach their children, or did they fail you? And do you see any role for the churches of the Deep South today in eliminating racism? Thank you.

[00:46:31] EE: I remember . . .

Unidentified female panelist: Well . . .

EE: . . . watching television after a tornado had torn up a town in rural Alabama, and there were Mennonites there to help rebuild. A man in his nineties said that was the first time he'd ever seen Black people and white people work together, and he'd lived there all his life. In Little Rock there were some few clergy who spoke out and said things like the—the congregations had to obey the law. Those few white clergy who spoke out—who said

what sounds like tepid state—statements today—were—were event—eventually lost their congregations.

MT: I . . .

[00:47:15] TW: ?One of the first? was there still there—excuse me.

MT: Go ahead.

[00:47:18] TW: We were walking down the hall with my guard. A white girl game up to me. She says, "Do you have a sister who sings?" I say, "Yes, I do." She said, "Oh. Well, she came to our church this summer. We belong to First Christian Church in Little Rock, and she has a lovely voice. We—we really did enjoy your sister." [*TR laughs*] I said, "Well, thank you very much. We are proud of her voice." So this girl came up to me to tell me—to compli—compliment my sister. That gave me some pleasure. She was the only person who ever came up to me to say anything kind during that year, to say my sister sang at their church. Christian church.

[00:47:51] EG: There is a—I think a book coming out—the son of a—a white minister who did—was with us that first day, and as Elizabeth indicated, his outcome was that they eventually—his—his congregation took away his pulpit. And so that—that the experience in [19]57 was that the majority churches were silent—that what church leadership occurred came from a very

few—Black church leadership, for the most part, but they were like Richard Nixon's silent majority.

Unidentified female panelist: Mh-hmm.

[00:48:44] EG: And they sort of stayed on the sides and tried to avoid it. And it's, like, you can't avoid it. The change is coming and, you know, the great "what if" in history—if Orval Faubus had [*camera clicks*] been a statesman and not the segregationist that he became, he probably would've changed the course of school desegregation throughout the country—advanced it ten years or better. But, you know, that was the card that we were dealt with, and we played it the best way we knew how.

[00:49:20] EE: The leadership of the organized segregations—the leadership of the White Citizens' Council were local ministers and attorneys who were repeating the—the statements prior to the Civil War's, that the—that a state could interpose itself between the government and—the federal government and—and itself. They were talking about nullification. And all Southern senators except one signed the Southern Manifesto, even though many of them were attorneys. The—most people did not know that federal law is supreme over state law.

[00:50:05] MT: I guess we have to look at the learn—letter from a Birmingham jail by Dr. King. You want to find out what the

churches did? Read his letter. And the other thing is the language that was used during that period—which cracks me up because I've heard it recently [*CL laughs*]—that integration is an abomination against God, and if it happens, it will be—break—break down our society as we know it.

Unidentified male panelist: Yes.

[00:50:35] MT: And—and so the rhetoric was hateful, and it was coming from pulpits. And many of the—well, we know the symbol of the KKK is a cross, so we don't need to ask that question because we know the answer, and we know how the churches behave right now.

Unidentified female panelist: Yes.

[00:50:56] MT: And when we have complex issues that we're trying to interrogate and look at in an—a—in a way. So we—we don't—all we have to do is look at ourselves now, and we'll know.

TR: Mh-hmm.

[00:51:10] JT: We say integration will break down our society as we know it. How do we know our society? What is it in our society that integration can dismantle?

Unidentified female panelist: Hmm.

[00:51:23] JT: I don't know. Does anybody know—because I would like to know? I've been hearing it a long time [*laughter*] that

integration is a bad thing, and I want to know what it's going to do. What is it in society that we have that's good that integration will change? Does anybody know? [*Audience laughs*]

CL: Do you have an answer out there?

[00:51:41] JT: Okay, now, I'm going [*audience laughs*] to tell you about Christianity—not from the pulpit, but being a—a layman myself, and I grew up in the—the Baptist church [*microphone feedback*] right here in Little Rock. I always believed in the principles of the Bible and nonviolence. I believe that we should be good to your neighbor—all these things that I heard from the pulpit. And I really [*microphone feedback*] thought that when I got to Central, I would be treated fairly [*camera clicks*] because I was going to be inside the school with the teenagers. I knew that mob outside didn't like me or care for me, but they were grownups, and they weren't as smart and intelligent as the teenagers inside. [*Panelists laugh*] So I thought when I got inside, everything would be fine. I got inside, and it was not. And it was just cruel the way we were treated. You know, I'd go home and pray at night wondering what I had done wrong to deserve such mean, hateful treatment. And about a couple of weeks into the school, this young boy—white student—came to

me in the midst of a confrontation and told the other kids to back off and leave me alone. And he was very nice and said that, you know, everybody wasn't, you know, mean and stupid like that, and he wanted me to know that I had at least one friend in the school. [00:53:09] And we talked. You know, I—I got to trust him. I had one class with him and we—you know, on communications back and forth—and I asked him—I said, "You know, you're just such a good Christian young man." Everything that I've been taught about how to treat your fellow man—this was what he was doing to me. I asked him why I—I had not seen him in the before-school chapel there at Central, and he said, "Oh, I don't go there. I'm an Agnostic." And I looked, and I said, "Oh, well, that's all right. We have some Jewish boys. [*Audience laughs*] We have some that are, you know, Catholic." I said, "Everybody"—you know, I'm thinking that he's something other than Baptist because [*audience laughs*]—and, you know, he told me—he said, "No, you don't understand. I'm an Atheist. I don't believe in God at all." And that hurt me so [*TR laughs*] bad to my heart . . .

TR: I've heard this story.

[00:54:14] JT: . . . that the only decent person in that school [*TR laughs*] was a nonbeliever. So [*audience laughs*] that's what,

you know, I got to say about Christianity and Christians. You got to practice what we've been teaching, or . . .

Unidentified female panelist: Although . . .

JT: . . . maybe there's something in the white church that I—I missed. [*Audience laughs*] But this guy didn't believe in God. And he said that, you know, a god like we've been studying would not allow that to happen. So, therefore, he didn't believe in God. I thought that was sad. I had to really convince myself that he should not be ostracized because of his belief and continued to be his friend. He gave me his phone number. He would call and talk to me in the evenings. We would chat on the telephones, you know, for maybe an hour—like high school teenagers, you know. But it always bothered me that the non-Christian was the only person in Central that treated me in a Christianly manner.

TR: Hmm.

[00:55:15] MB: Well, I don't—I don't think we can leave unless we—we do make note of the fact—you know, like, Reverend Ogden—I think his son's coming out with a book. There were some—some rabbis and some priests who did march with us—stand with us. And at one point the Quakers came down. And I remember their teaching us to stop, drop, and roll. They did a lot of—of—of

training with us about nonviolence response. And so there were a few people who stepped forward—a few ministers, for example. I believe one of the parents lost his job, and they were instrumental in getting the—that father or mother jobs within the community—mowing grass—doing very small tasks but tasks which sustained them. So there were a few soldiers for the cross that stepped forward, but by and large, I believe had there been a community-wide crusade by the religious leaders at that time, we could have forestalled or at least maybe bypassed the incredible conundrum that we found ourselves in.

[00:56:11] DM: Words I am loathe . . .

CL: And . . .

DM: I apologize.

CL: Sorry.

DM: Sorry. Mmm.

[00:56:16] CL: I—oh—no, I was just going to say on that first day, it—it—that they were organized. It was the Little Rock Ministerial Alliance that walked with us . . .

MB: Exactly.

[00:56:27] CL: . . . to that corner to hear that we were denied the opportunity to go in, and that was the September 4—the first day. So the Little Rock Ministerial Alliance was—was very

involved, especially that first day. And I—I appreciate that. In fact, I just mentioned it earlier today that my mother just dropped me off at the corner because she saw some ministers that she knew.

MB: Mh-hmm.

[00:56:52] CL: She knew I was, you know, [*someone laughs*] . . .

Unidentified female panelist: [*Unclear words*].

CL: . . . walking with the ministers or the angels of God, I guess, or—anyway . . .

Unidentified female panelist: [*Unclear words*]

[00:57:01] DM: Well, I hate saying these words, but because they have promises to keep—a three . . .

TR: Yeah.

DM: . . . o'clock appointment precisely—last question. [*Laughs*] Go ahead.

[00:57:11] Unidentified female newsperson: [*Unclear words*] television. We have—we have—have situations like Jena going on right now, but we also have Senator Barack Obama having actually a good run and a good chance to take over the presidency next year. How do you feel about the chance of Senator Barack Obama being president of the United States, and what would it mean for the country as a whole?

[00:57:36] MT: Why are we still talking about it like that? That tells us who we are more than anything else. We're still calling him an African American. We're still talking about Hillary Crin—Clinton being a woman. We're in 2007. If we haven't gotten over that—if we haven't transcended [*camera clicks*] that, who really are we? So that's what's disturbing to me, that we are still calling [*claps hands*] him about his color. And we're still calling her, regarding her gender. Haven't we grown up yet?

TR: Hmm. [*Audience applauds*]

[00:58:18] TR: And on that word . . .

[00:58:20] DM: These folks know how to talk in sound bites, don't they? [*Audience laughs*] Boy, I mean, fifty years—they've had fifty years of real practice in—in answering these great questions, by the way. And we thank them for their time because they have had such a schedule, but, boy, what soldiers they remain. And I think one thing that we can all agree is that had [19]57 not happened for all the trials and tribulations of it, the world might've overlooked some mighty amazing people. I think we—we all see here just—just beauty right here in front of us and intelligence and wonder. And I thank you all for giving us . . .

[00:59:00] EG: Thank you.

DM: . . . the media this time.

CL: Thank you.

DM: And thank you all for coming. Peace to you.

[*Applause*]

[*Silence*]

[End of transcript 00:59:26]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]