

DESEGREGATION AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

1957

----- *Melba Pattillo Beals* -----

In September 1957, nine African-American students attempted to enroll at the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. They were denied access to the school, first by members of the Arkansas National Guard and then by angry white mobs. After two weeks, President Eisenhower sent in federal troops to maintain order and ensure safe attendance by all students, black and white. The following is an excerpt of an oral history by one of the nine African-American students who desegregated Central High School.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Motives

Why might Beals have described her decision to attend Central High as an "accident"? Do you think it was?

I wanted to go to Central High School because they had more privileges. They had more equipment, they had five floors of opportunities. I understood education before I understood anything else. From the time I was two, my mother said, "You will go to college. Education is your key to survival," and I understood that. It was a kind of curiosity, not an overwhelming desire to go to this school and integrate this school and change history. Oh no, there was none of that. I just thought it'd be fun to go to this school I ride by every day. I want to know what's in there. I don't necessarily want to be with those people; I assumed that being with those people would be no different than being with people I was already with. My getting into Central High School was somewhat of an accident. I simply raised my hand one day when they said, "Who of you lives in the area of Central High School?" That was two years before, in 1955. And they said, Who had good grades? and I had excellent grades. It was an accident of fate.

In late August, I was sitting in Cincinnati, Ohio, with my mother on a couch, and Walter Cronkite came on television and said that Central High School was going to be integrated in Little Rock, Arkansas, that they were already beginning to have difficulty with the white Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan, and that these were the children who were going, and he mispronounced my name. My mother said, "What did he say?" And that was it, my mother started making phone calls back home. Then we came back to Little Rock and I began to be involved in the preparation that the NAACP was making for us to

go to Central High School. But before that I had no real consciousness that I was going to go.

The first day I was able to enter Central High School, what I felt inside was terrible, wrenching, awful fear. On the car radio I could hear that there was a mob. I knew what a mob meant and I knew that the sounds that came from the crowd were very angry. So we entered the side of the building, very, very fast. Even as we entered there were people running after us, people tripping other people. Once we got into the school, it was very dark; it was like a deep, dark castle. And my eyesight had to adjust to the fact that there were people all around me. We were met by school officials and very quickly dispersed our separate ways. There has never been in my life any stark terror or any fear akin to that...

I'd only been in the school a couple of hours and by that time it was apparent that the mob was just overrunning the school. Policemen were throwing down their badges and the mob was getting past the wooden sawhorses because the police would no longer fight their own in order to protect us. So we were all called into the principal's office, and there was great fear that we would not get out of the building. We were trapped. And I thought, Okay, so I'm going to die here, in school. And I remember thinking back to what I'd been told, to understand the realities of where you are and pray. Even the adults, the school officials, were panicked, feeling like there was no protection. A couple of kids, the black kids, that were with me were crying, and someone made a suggestion that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid, they could then get the rest out. And a gentleman, who I believed to be the police chief, said, "Unh-uh, how are you going to choose? You're going to let them draw straws?" He said, "I'll get them out." And we were taken to the basement of this place. And we were put into two cars, grayish blue Fords. And the man instructed the drivers, he said, "Once you start driving, do not stop." And he told us to put our heads down. This guy revved up his engine and he came up out of the bowels of this building, and as he came up, I could just see hands reaching across this car; I could hear the yelling, I could see guns, and he was told not to stop. "If you hit somebody, you keep rolling, 'cause the kids are dead." And he did just that, and he didn't hit anybody, but he certainly was forceful and aggressive in the way he exited this driveway, because people tried to stop him and he didn't stop. He dropped me off at home. And I remember saying, "Thank you for the ride," and I should've said, "Thank you for my life." ...

I went in not through the side doors, but up the front stairs, and there was a feeling of pride and hope that yes, this is the United States; yes, there is a reason I salute the flag; and it's going to be okay.

The troops were wonderful. There was some fear that they were dating the girls in high school, but I don't care what they were doing: they were wonderful, they were disciplined, they were attentive, they were caring. They didn't baby us, but they were there. So for the first time I began to feel like there

is this slight buffer zone between me and this hell on the other side of this wall. They couldn't be with us everywhere. They couldn't be with us, for example, in the ladies' bathroom, they couldn't be with us in gym. We'd be showering in gym and someone would turn your shower into scalding. You'd be walking out to the volleyball court and someone would break a bottle and trip you on the bottle. I have scars on my right knee from that. After a while, I started saying to myself, Am I less than human? Why did they do this to me? What's wrong with me? And so you go through stages even as a child. First you're in pain, then you're angry, then you try to fight back, and then you just don't care. You just, you can't care; you hope you do die. You hope that there's an end. And then you just mellow out and you just realize that survival is day to day and you start to grasp your own spirit, you start to grasp the depth of the human spirit and you start to understand your own ability to cope no matter what. That is the greatest lesson I learned.

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THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that Beals describes her decision to attend Central High as an "accident of fate" because she was really only interested in attending a better school. These students may add that at the time that Beals expressed interest in attending Central High School, it would have been impossible to know that African Americans' attempt to integrate the school would become a key event in the civil rights movement. Other students may answer that Beals' decision was not such an accident, because adults were recruiting students as part of a deliberate campaign to integrate an all-white public school.